

# ✓ Epidemics struck fear in our hearts

**P**OLIO. The word was so frightening that we said "infantile paralysis" hoping to sidestep the disease's power. Polio was mysterious and capricious. It struck at random. I remember that it had something to do with large public gatherings, warm, moist places and swimming pools, but most of all, I remember the sound of word.

We lowered our eyes and whispered the name, trying to be very small so as not to attract its attention. Even when we lined up in the high school gym for the first vaccine-laced sugar cubes, there was no joking and fooling around in line. I don't remember any polio jokes.

Each generation has its epidemic and we can tell a lot about a time and place by how folks respond to the terror of a deadly disease. Science was on the emergence in the 1950s, and following the atomic bomb, there really wasn't anything science could not do. Jonas Salk's discovery was wondrous, but logical. But, we still whispered the word.

There are two epidemics burned across the pages of Santa Cruz County's history following 1850. (During the Mission period there were a number of horrible epidemics which swept through the Ohlone population, most of them smallpox.)

The first was the smallpox epidemic of 1868. Though vaccination was available, many residents of the region were not vaccinated. The disease moved into San Juan Bautista in the summer of 1868, killing people faster than they could be buried. A panic spread westward ahead of the disease, and so many Watsonville residents moved into the remote canyons of the Santa Cruz mountains that the town was almost deserted.

The smallpox struck poorer Hispanic families the hardest, and as the number of cases multiplied each day in Watsonville, Santa Cruz watched fearfully for the appearance of its first case. The Santa Cruz Sentinel assured its readers that vaccination was a "sure preventative," but the smallpox cases continued to spread westward, into the barrio on Whiskey Hill and along the Santa Cruz-Watsonville road.

Some Santa Cruzans fled into the hills, but a small, determined group of public-health guerrillas took matters into their own hands: They destroyed the main bridge across Aptos Creek. There! they said. That ought to take care of it. If people from Watsonville cannot get to Santa Cruz, neither can the smallpox. Of course the smallpox was not deterred by the canyon at

## Hindsight



Sandy Lydon

though not nearly at the rate of Watsonville.

(Watsonville has never forgotten or forgiven the 1868 destruction of the Aptos Creek bridge by hysterical Santa Cruzans, and that event still lingers was one of the unsettled scores between the two towns.)

The smallpox raged across the region through the winter of 1868-69, slowly waning in the spring and leaving behind clusters of tombstones in local cemeteries. If one had to pick a word to characterize the 1868 response to the smallpox it would be "hysteria." The impulse was to flee, and despite the assurances in the press, people ran for their lives.

Though there were sporadic outbreaks of diphtheria, typhoid fever, and flu (la grippe) during the latter part of the 19th century, it was the flu epidemic of 1919 which seared the memories of all who lived through it. Called the "Spanish Influenza" because it originated in Spain (Why is it that epidemics all begin outside the U.S.? There must be a disease that began in Los Angeles, or Atlanta) the flu began in the military units in Europe during World War I and then was mustered out to the United States with the troops.

The flu found a mobilized populace in Santa Cruz. A year of meatless Tuesdays, wheatless Wednesdays, and Liberty Loan drives prepared Santa Cruzans for anything. They had beaten the Kaiser, hadn't they? Then this flu thing should be easy. Even before the first reported case of influenza in Santa Cruz, the newspapers were publishing advice on how to avoid the disease.

Staying away from infected people was the watchword, and large assemblies of people were to be avoided.

On Monday, Oct. 15, 1919, Santa Cruz city schools closed and remained so for five weeks, though there were only four reported cases



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Flu epidemic of 1919 caused the Santa Cruz City Council to make gauze masks mandatory public attire.

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meeting, movie theaters closed and saloons were encouraged to close early.

The primary prophylactic for the 1919 flu epidemic was the gauze mask, and if your family album goes back that far, you may have wondered why those folks were wearing masks. On Oct. 27, the Santa Cruz City Council passed an ordinance requiring everyone to wear a gauze mask. The fine was \$10 or a night in jail and a number of local citizens were arrested and fined during the epidemic.

The county quickly followed suit and finally, in early November, Watsonville also adopted a mask ordinance so that anyone out of doors in Santa Cruz County had to wear a mask or face arrest. The supplies of gauze ran so low that the Red Cross suggested that a handkerchief worn stage-robber-style would suffice, but the local medical officers held out for the surgical gauze mask.

Watsonville was hit hardest by the flu epidemic. One in five Watsonville residents caught the flu and dozens died, while the number of cases in Santa Cruz was much lower. Santa Cruz officials attributed the low number of cases to the

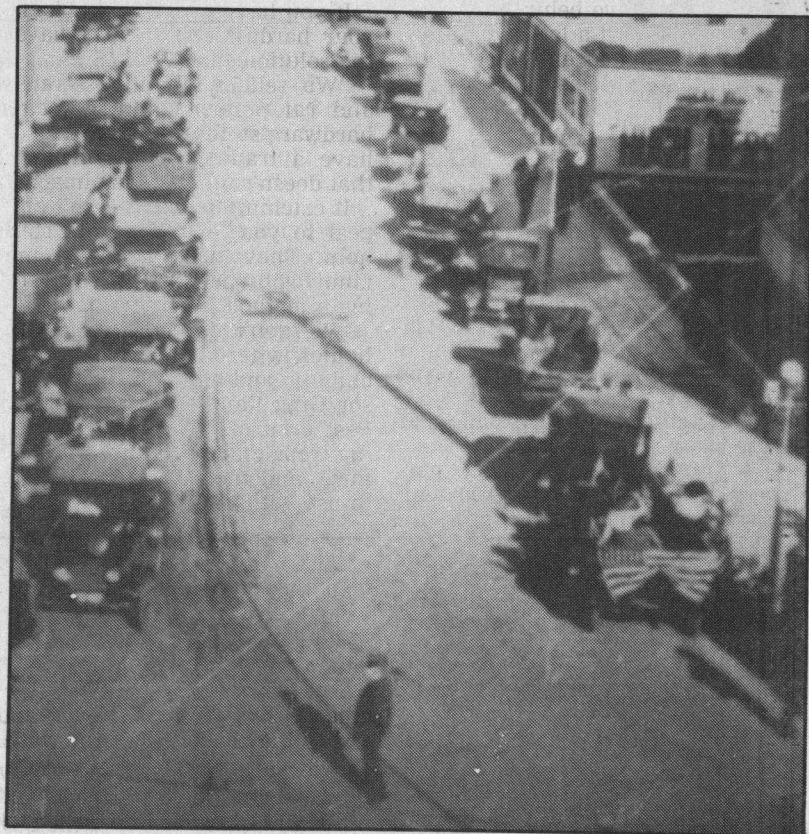
to any of the closures or ordinances because the suppression of dissenting opinions which occurred during the war was still in force. If you questioned the mask ordinance, for example, you were unpatriotic.

The number of flu cases waxed and waned throughout the winter of 1919-1920, and by the spring, the epidemic was over. There are clusters of 1919 flu epidemic victims in all local cemeteries, including an entire family buried in the Catholic cemetery in Aptos.

If there is a word for the response to the 1919 flu epidemic around here, it is "mobilized."

Future historians will measure us by how we responded to our present AIDS epidemic. What words will they use about us?

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Masked policeman directs parade down Water Street.



ward, into the barrio on Whiskey Hill and along the Santa Cruz-Watsonville road.

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hadn't they? Then this flu thing should be easy. Even before the first reported case of influenza in Santa Cruz, the newspapers were publishing advice on how to avoid the disease.

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On Monday, Oct. 15, 1919, Santa Cruz city schools closed and remained so for five weeks, though there were only four reported cases in the city. Churches held services outside, service clubs stopped

doors in Santa Cruz County had to wear a mask or face arrest. The supplies of gauze ran so low that the Red Cross suggested that a handkerchief worn stage-robber-style would suffice, but the local medical officers held out for the surgical gauze mask.

Watsonville was hit hardest by the flu epidemic. One in five Watsonville residents caught the flu and dozens died, while the number of cases in Santa Cruz was much lower. Santa Cruz officials attributed the low number of cases to the quick adoption of a mask ordinance. There was little opposition