

Nothing Much You Can Do Polio in Iowa

by Ginalie Swaim

How is the polio scare out there? There are 7 cases in Campustown I hear and two brothers 4 yrs & 2 yrs across the street from us have it, but so far none of the other kids around here have it. Nothing much you can do except watch them."

From her home in Ames in 1949, 26-year-old Barbara Burrell Nichols also shared other news with her relatives in that late summer letter: throwing a birthday party for her eight-year-old Stevie, painting the porch, sewing a pair of pajamas, keeping her toddler Gail out of mischief. Nichols's letter on Tuesday, September 6, mentioned all the fruit she had canned but not the stiff neck and headache she'd had on Monday. On Thursday doctors put the young mother in an iron lung. On Friday she died.

In Mapleton, in 1952, 11 of the 14 children in the

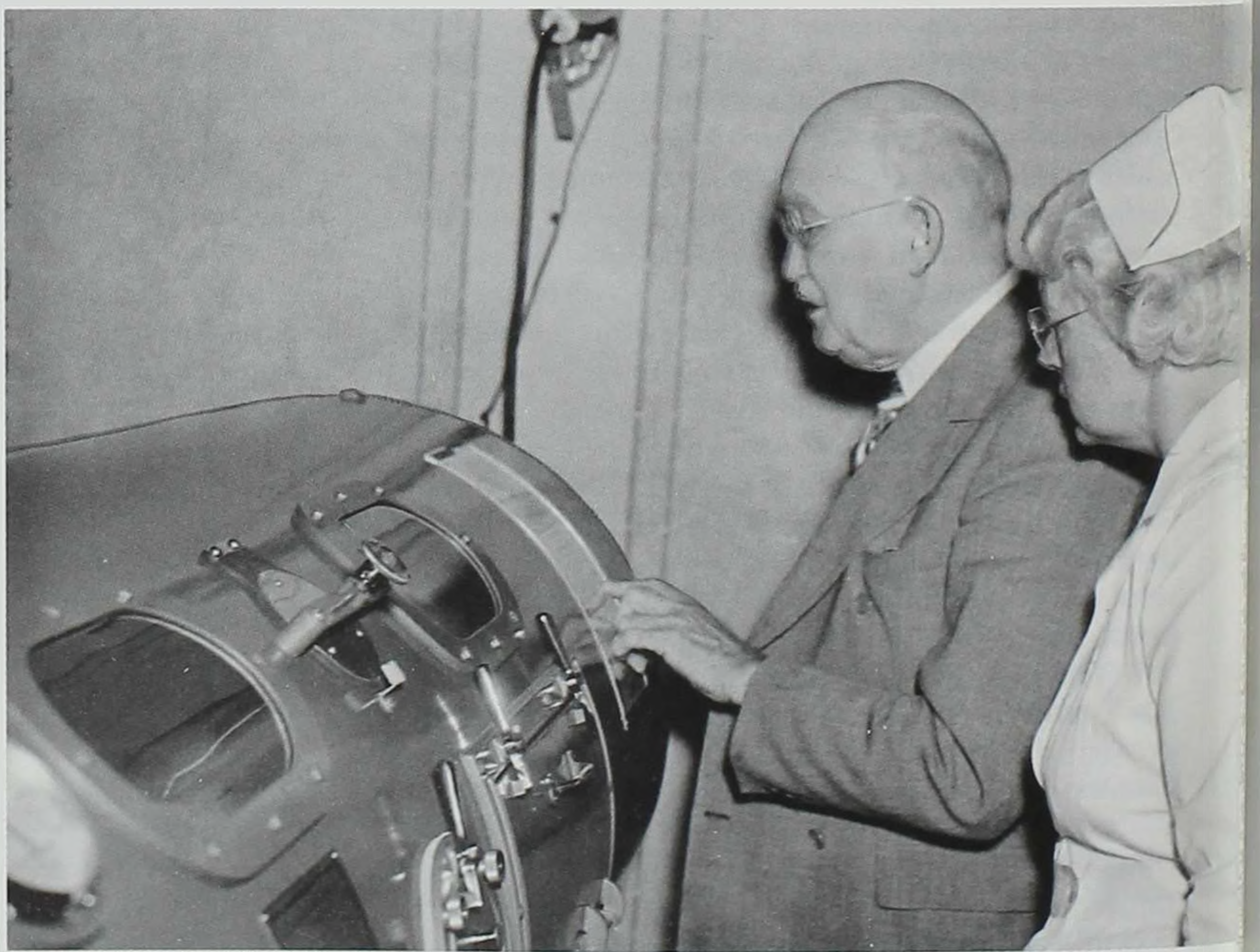
Thiel family fell ill with polio. Two remained paralyzed.

Polio was no stranger to Iowa. As early as 1910, records show 186 cases that year. After public health inspectors investigated 59 cases in Cerro Gordo County, the State Board of Health required that all cases be reported, and recommended quarantine and sanitary measures.

Most often striking children, the poliomyelitis virus attacks nervous systems and impairs muscle groups, sometimes causing temporary paralysis. One percent experience paralytic polio with severe and lasting effects.

Polio reoccurred every few years in Iowa, but in 1940, the number of cases skyrocketed to 927. The period 1948-1950 averaged 1,300 cases yearly, peaking at more than 3,500 in 1952. A quarter of them were in Sioux City. A gamma globulin vaccine was tested on 16,500

September 1937: Walter Biering, Iowa Health Commissioner, and Florence Wesslund, superintendent at Iowa Methodist Hospital, read the directions for an iron lung just received.



ALL THREE PHOTOS: SHSI (DES MOINES) DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE



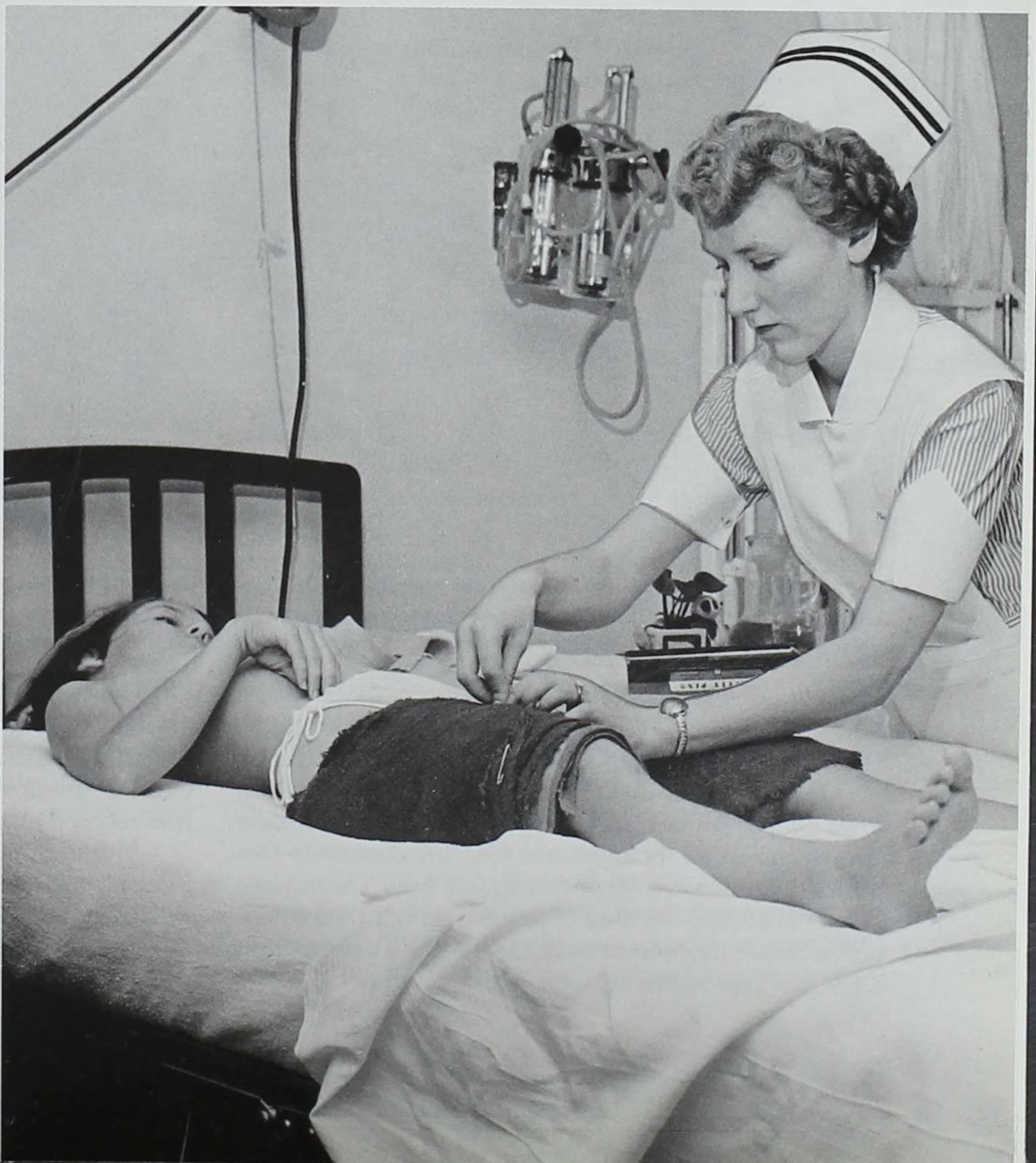
August 1948: At the Fort Des Moines housing project, F. E. Black sprays garbage cans for flies, in the hopes of stopping the spread of polio.

September 1952: Broadlawns Hospital student nurse Anna Burr Getzoff applies a hot pack on a polio patient to help relax and recondition constricted muscles, a treatment pioneered by an Australian nurse, Sister Elizabeth Kenny.

children in Sioux City and the surrounding Woodbury County and in Dakota County in Nebraska, part of a national trial, but the vaccine gave only short-term protection. Iron lungs were flown to Sioux City to assist those whose breathing muscles were impaired, by compressing and expanding the chest, pushing air out and pulling it in.

With no known cure and no way to prevent it, polio terrified most Americans—but not Gladys Talcott Rife, a young mother and farm woman in eastern Iowa, who contracted polio in 1948. In her weekly newspaper column, she wrote appreciatively of hospital nurses, comically of doing housework on crutches, and rationally about the “mass hysteria” polio had caused in the nation. “Keep up the research, yes; keep up the provisions for proper care, yes; but keep up the unreasoning fear, No!”

Hope finally eroded fear when the new Salk vaccine trial was tested successfully on 420,000 children in 1954. A placebo was given to another 200,000, and 1.2 million were observed. In Woodbury, Linn, and





SHSI (DES MOINES) DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE

As 923 polio patients flooded Sioux City hospitals in 1952, the Missouri River flooded its banks, adding to public health challenges for river towns. Sandbags (above) were one way to fight the floodwaters, and vaccine clinics protected citizens from typhoid fever, once a major killer in Iowa. Some feared that the flood would spread polio, already raging in Sioux City.

Scott counties, 13,000 children were part of the trial. The next year the Salk vaccine was available to the public. The Sabin vaccine replaced it in 1962.

Organizations, including the March of Dimes and Iowa's labor unions, assisted with public information efforts and mass inoculations. Charles Harvey, a Des Moines laundry worker, recounted how Dubuque's "medical society decided to join hands with the osteopaths. So we inoculated over 7,000 people there within a 15-hour period, because we had enough doctors."

The number of cases in Iowa plummeted—from 1,445 in 1954, to 580 in 1956, then to only 78 in 1957. In 1979, however, an outbreak occurred in four states, including Iowa, where the Amish in Buchanan County had refused inoculation.

Although polio has been vanquished in the United States, post-polio syndrome began to appear among former polio patients in the 1980s. For the last two decades, international efforts have focused on eradicating polio throughout the world. ❖