

Canceling a Medina County Fair in 2020 is not like 1952

By Representative Steve Hambley

1952 was the last and only time the Medina County Fair was cancelled. The history books and newspaper accounts of Medina all contend it was because of the poliomyelitis (polio) epidemic. Closer review reveals that is only part of the story. According to public statements of Dr. Earl E. Kleinschmidt, the Health Commissioner of Medina and Wayne Counties at the time, both the closure of the fair and the concurrent closure of schools for two weeks was in reaction to public hysteria, not medical precautions.

At the peak of the 1952 epidemic, the 275 cases per 100,000 population for Medina County made it one of the worst in the country. In July of that year, Holmes County officials enacted a quarantine and ban on large gatherings to arrest the polio outbreak. Health Commissioner Kleinschmidt disputed the effectiveness of these provisions. In a special meeting of doctors and business leaders in mid-July, he urged the public to live normally and to continue taking part in picnics, swimming, outings and every-day business. He stated, "No quarantine has ever influenced the outbreak of polio in the slightest." He followed up his advice with giving a green light to conducting the Medina County Fair in the fall, as well suggesting that it was public hysteria and absurd for any concerns in visiting Chippewa Lake Park or various sunshine camps located throughout the county. He advocated that the major weapon against the spread of the polio virus was instead, strict personal cleanliness and hand washing to avoid the "hand-to-mouth danger."

Under a flood of public requests and citing a loss of \$25,000, the Medina Fair Board called off the 107th annual exposition previously scheduled for September 3rd, 1952. Shortly thereafter, school officials throughout the county postponed the start of classes in the fall. Dr. Earl E, Kleinschmidt still refused to sanction any of these actions, stating that "delaying school openings will serve no purpose scientifically, but that from the standpoint of public opinion it might be advisable".

The epidemic not only attracted a Yale University study of Medina and Wayne counties, but it was fully reported in the November issue of *Public Health Reports* by the U.S. Public Health Service. Authors of the article included Dr. Kleinschmidt, Mabel Abbott of Wadsworth, and E. Ilah Kauffman of Wooster. They observed in this national journal, “It has been aptly said that every poliomyelitis epidemic comprises actually two diseases, poliomyelitis and hysteria.”

Jump ahead to 2020 and you have a whole new story. On June 3rd, the Medina Agricultural Society Board of Directors reluctantly decided to postpone the 175th Medina County Fair until 2021, because of the COVID-19 pandemic. On June 9th, Governor Mike DeWine, Senate President Larry Obhof and House Speaker Larry Householder announced a new plan to reduce many of the previously issued Ohio Department of Health restrictions and provide grant money to help conduct the county fairs. Under the plan, each fair that conducts a junior fair will receive \$50,000 from the state, while those that do not will receive \$15,000 towards next year’s fair.

On June 11th, after much chatter on social media, media attention, and I am certain behind the scenes phone calls, the Fair Board rescinded the vote and the annual exposition scheduled for August 3rd through 9th was back on. Relaxation of the prior restrictions, as well as the promised state assistance no doubt helped in that decision.

This is not 1952. Legitimate public health concerns have been considered and precautionary actions taken. Borrowing from Dr. Kleinschmidt, this COVID-19 epidemic may very well be comprised of two diseases: COVID-19 and hysteria. The facts are, we have found a way to manage both the risk of disease and curb our fears. In the end, the 2020 Medina County Fair will go on. See you at the fair!