

2006

A Plague in Paradise: Public Health and Public Relations During the 1962 Encephalitis Epidemic in St. Petersburg, Florida

Eric Jarvis

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Historical Quarterly by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Jarvis, Eric (2006) "A Plague in Paradise: Public Health and Public Relations During the 1962 Encephalitis Epidemic in St. Petersburg, Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 85: No. 4, Article 3.
Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol85/iss4/3>

A Plague in Paradise: Public Health and Public Relations During the 1962 Encephalitis Epidemic in St. Petersburg, Florida

By Eric Jarvis

During the months of August and September of 1962 the city of St. Petersburg, Florida, experienced an outbreak of St. Louis encephalitis. The United States Communicable Disease Center in Atlanta soon labeled the outbreak a “major epidemic” as it spread into nearly all areas of surrounding Pinellas County. The first case of the disease was reported on July 24 and the outbreak was not officially considered to have ended until September 28. During that time the various public health agencies and the press reported between 140 and 190 cases. Initially reports claimed that fourteen people had died of encephalitis,¹ although a 1965 study reported thirty-eight deaths in Pinellas County.²

Eric Jarvis is an Associate Professor of History at King's University College in London, Ontario, Canada.

1. Florida State Board of Health (FSBH), *Annual Report* 1962: 1, 34, 91-93, 219; U.S. Communicable Disease Center (USCDC), *Morbidity and Mortality: Weekly Report*. U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Public Health Service, vol. 10-11, 1961-1962, 31 August, 7, 14, 21 September, 26 October; *Florida Health Notes* (FHN), Florida Board of Health, vol. 53: 1 January 1961, 5; vol. 54: 8 October 1962, 155-156, 163; vol. 55: 6 June 1962, 119; *New York Times*, 4, 9 September 1962; *Washington Post*, 1, 2, 22 September 1962; *Miami Herald*, 7 September 1962; *Tampa Tribune*, 27 August, 2, 10 September 1962; *Newsweek*, 24 September 1962, 19-21; *Time*, 14 September 1962, 64; *The Nation*, 29 September 1962, 177-179. There were outbreaks of encephalitis in the region in 1959 and 1961, although they were not as severe as in 1962, FSBH, *Annual Report* 1961. See also Gordon Patterson, *The Mosquito Wars: A History of Mosquito Control in Florida* (Gainesville, 2004), 145-147.
2. James O. Bond, Donald T. Quick, John J. White, and Harry C. Oard, “The 1962 Epidemic of St. Louis Encephalitis in Florida, epidemiological observations,” *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 21, 1965: 394-395.

Encephalitis, or “sleeping sickness” as it is often incorrectly called, is well known in North America. Mosquitoes act as the vector, carrying the virus from infected birds to humans. Encephalitis is not a contagious disease in that it cannot be transmitted from one human to another; it can only be spread through the bite of an infected mosquito. Therefore, the only mechanism for halting the spread of the disease is to kill the mosquito carriers in an infected region, or kill the birds who are the host carriers. The symptoms of encephalitis are weakness, nausea, high fever, severe headache, mental confusion and drowsiness potentially leading to coma. It is an inflammation of the brain that can, at its worst, result in permanent brain damage or death. Many who are infected, however, suffer only mild symptoms that are similar to a wide range of other diseases, a fact that makes early diagnosis difficult. In the early 1960s lab tests confirming suspected cases of encephalitis required up to ten days to complete. There was no cure and no known preventative. The St. Louis type that broke out in St. Petersburg was a relatively mild strain, with an expected death rate of 5% to 30% of cases. Older people were more susceptible to it than others: in the 1962 outbreak nearly all the recorded deaths occurred in people over 60, an aspect of the disease that was particularly dismaying in a city and region known as a retirement center.³

As a result of the disease and its potential impact on both the health and economy of the city, local officials fought the encephalitis outbreak on two levels. First, they mobilized an astonishing array of county, state, and federal public health officials to work in league with government employees ranging from the governor’s office in Tallahassee to local parks departments and mosquito control districts. In addition to the campaign against the disease, a second and equally concerted effort emerged to combat

3. FSBH, *Annual Report* 1962, 1, 34, 91-93, 219; USCDC 1962 *Weekly Report*, 31 August, 7, 14, 21 September, 26 October; *FHN*, January 1961, 5 October 1962, 155-157, 159, 163, June 1963, 119; *New York Times*, 1, 3, 4, 9, 10 September 1962; *Washington Post*, 1, 2, 22 September 1962; *Miami Herald*, 6, 7 September 1962; *Tampa Tribune*, 27 August 1962; *St. Petersburg Times*, 4, 10 September 1962; *The Florida Times-Union*, 30 August, 3, 4 September 1962; *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, 28 August, 5 September 1962; *Newsweek*, 24 September 1962, 19-21; *Time*, 14 September 1962, 64; Hubert B. Stroud, *The Promise of Paradise: Recreational and Retirement Communities in the United States* (Baltimore, 1995), introd., 144-153. Gerald N. Grob, *The Deadly Truth: A History of Disease in America* (Cambridge, 2002), 21, 229.

the potentially negative publicity associated with the outbreak. This effort was directed at playing down, qualifying, or even concealing the extent and seriousness of the epidemic, particularly in national news stories, out of fear for the devastating impact such information might have on the upcoming tourist season. Thus, local and state officials believed they had to deal with both the physical and fiscal manifestations of the encephalitis outbreak. The methods they used in both cases were well publicized and controversial.

It is neither an exaggeration nor an overly dramatic historical introduction to say that officials approached the epidemic as a form of combat on two fronts. In order to deal with and to describe the encephalitis outbreak government authorities, public health officials and the press naturally and routinely fell into the rhetoric of war. Their reaction and language regarding the control of insects was in keeping with the often used terminology of combat that followed World War II.⁴ In 1962 Florida, World War II and Cold War analogies abounded both in the popular press and in scientific reports about the encephalitis epidemic. Thus, *Florida Health Notes*, a publication of the State Board of Health, declared the mosquito to be “man’s greatest enemy” and asserted that the insect had to be controlled by an “all-out war” that demanded “night and day battle.” The publication claimed that since encephalitis was not “retreating” it would be necessary “to carry on the battle” against the mosquito in the laboratory and in the field.⁵ The *New York Times* suggested that a “scientific campaign was being waged” against the virus⁶ and *The Nation* noted that there was a “war on local birds” that carried the disease.⁷

Locally, the *St. Petersburg Times* consistently utilized military phrases to describe the efforts to end the outbreak. The paper encouraged its readers with martial pep talks, claiming that

4. Edmund P. Russell, III, “Speaking of Annihilation” Mobilizing for War Against Human and Insect Enemies, 1914-1945,” *Journal of American History*, 82 (March 1996): 1505-1529. For a larger view of the phenomenon, see Russell, *War and Nature: Fighting Humans and Insects with Chemicals From World War I to Silent Spring* (Cambridge 2001), passim. See also Patterson, who used the expression “Mosquito Wars” as the title of his book. He points out that this type of combat rhetoric was used at least as far back as the 1920s; pages 2, 12, 25, 33, 35, 44-45.

5. *FNH*, January 1961, October 1962.

6. *St. Petersburg Times*, 25 September 1962.

7. *The Nation*, 29 September 1962, 177-179.

encephalitis had to be fought "with every weapon at our disposal."⁸ An August 29th editorial declared that it was "time to take the offensive" and that it would require a "big war chest to open an immediate sustained offensive against mosquitoes."⁹ On September 1, following a meeting of local government officials called to deal with the epidemic, the paper reported that the city council and the chamber of commerce had "marched onto the encephalitis battlefield"; the next day it informed readers that a forty-man crew would be "conducting the current battle." Soon, it reported a five hundred-man force would be used "when the full scale war is launched by city, county, state and federal forces." When the specific type of encephalitis-carrying mosquito had been determined, it was seen "as a breakthrough" in the "scientific struggle to combat the epidemic." Now, it was felt, officials could "wage a more specialized campaign in combating the disease."¹⁰ Finally, to present a link between this war against insect-borne disease and the missile-driven era of the Cold War, it was noted that in the town of Dunedin, a four-person team was going block by block in a systematic search for mosquito breeding sites. All four were identified as official Civil Defense workers.¹¹

The war against the disease itself followed three strategies that unfolded simultaneously. The first involved a campaign against mosquito breeding places. It called for citizen volunteers to join city and county workers in policing and cleaning up sites that posed a threat to public health. The plan included efforts to clean, cut, drain and sanitize potentially dangerous areas.¹² St. Petersburg's notoriously poor drainage and storm sewer system presented a special problem, and voters had refused to pass earlier bond issues to alleviate the problem.¹³ Now government

8. *St. Petersburg Times*, 31 August 1962.

9. *Ibid*, 29 August 1962.

10. *Ibid*, 1, 2 September 1962. See also, *Miami Herald*, 2 September 1962; *Tampa Tribune*, 3 September 1962; *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, 28 August, 1, 5, September, 11 October 1962. The mosquito vector turned out to be *Culex Nigripalpus*.

11. *St. Petersburg Times*, 5 September 1962. St Petersburg had gone to war against mosquitoes before, particularly in 1923 and again in 1930-31. As in 1962, it was believed during the 1920s and 1930s that mosquito control was crucial to the economic health of the state. A public relations effort was also employed in those years. Patterson, 48-51, 74-75.

12. *St. Petersburg Times*, 22, 27, 29 August, 1, 2, 6 September 1962.

13. *Ibid*, 1, 30 September 1962; *The Nation*, 29 September 1962, 177-179.

employees and private citizens deployed through the city neighborhoods in a house by house quest to locate potential breeding places such as standing water in ditches, ground depressions, old tin cans, discarded tires, uncut high grass, house gutters, uncovered boats or any water-holding receptacle.¹⁴

The call for volunteers was extended to a range of local groups and organizations, service clubs, women's clubs, garden clubs and sports teams. The local Council of Neighborhood Associations (CONA), headed by R. T. (Tex) Herr, offered to "marshal citizen volunteers" and "organize a citizen's battle to clean up mosquito breeding places." CONA also provided information pamphlets and distributed over 100,000 booklets on how to combat the disease. In addition, it opened an "emergency headquarters."¹⁵

The State Board of Health, through its publication, *Florida Health Notes*, also employed the language of war and citizen volunteerism. In response to the question "What can YOU DO?" to fight encephalitis, state health officials observed that one person could inspect up to thirty or forty sites a day and urged citizens to volunteer and do their part in the campaign against the disease.¹⁶ Dr. W. C. Ballard, the Pinellas County Health Director, took the rhetoric of war an extra step by attempting a fractured version of John Kennedy's inaugural address. In a conversation with reporters he declared that "this is not a time to wonder what the State Board of Health Department or the County Health Department can do for you, but what you, as citizens, can do for yourselves in lending a hand."¹⁷ In September, the *St. Petersburg Times* printed a photo of a family cleaning up their front yard, with a young boy carefully placing an inverted can on a stick. The caption read, "Container of Honor" and the accompanying article requested that all those who had cleaned up their yards put "a stake with a tin can over it" on the front lawn to alert city crews looking for breeding places that "they won't have to stop at your house."¹⁸

An undercurrent of resistance to the anti-mosquito campaign emerged when Ballard called on citizens to clean up the property

14. *Newsweek*, 24 September 1962, 19-21; *St. Petersburg Times*, 22, 27, 29 August, 1, 2, 6 September 1962.

15. *New York Times*, 2 September 1962; *St. Petersburg Times*, 1, 2, 4, 9, 11 September 1962; *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, 4 September 1962.

16. *FHN*, October 1962; *New York Times*, 2 September 1962.

17. *St. Petersburg Times*, 2 September 1962.

18. *Ibid*, 8 September 1962.

of vacationing neighbors and city crews entered private property to search for tin cans and old tires. Some viewed this as unwarranted trespass. Reports circulated that city crews had "encountered some persons who balked at the cleanup campaign" and there were calls in the press for special legislation to permit mosquito control boards or health departments to conduct cleanup invasions.¹⁹ On September 4, the city manager of St. Petersburg, in fact, decided it was necessary to pass an emergency ordinance allowing the city to "go upon the premises in the city for the purpose of oiling stagnant water or emptying containers of stagnant water or for the purpose of moving or cleaning of weeds or underbrush or fogging . . . with insecticides."²⁰

The second tactic deployed against encephalitis was aimed at the carriers of the disease—wild birds. Birds constituted a particular problem since Pinellas County had one of the highest bird concentrations in the state and it was not known which type of bird carried the virus.²¹ Because of these factors and the public outcry that would certainly ensue, killing birds in order to halt the epidemic was not a viable option. Dr. Ballard alluded to the dilemma at a press conference when he claimed "that we can't destroy the birds, but we also can't allow too many deaths from encephalitis. We've swapped 10 lives already. How many birds is this worth?"²² Dr. Henry C. Oard, the county's communicable disease officer, admitted publicly that it would be impractical and unpopular to strike out against the varied bird species possibly acting as hosts.²³ Thus, while groups like the Audubon Society still worried that individuals might kill birds because of the fear of encephalitis,²⁴ city and public health officials moved against birds in more indirect and less confrontational ways.

On September 4, in two special sessions, city council passed emergency legislation outlawing the feeding of wild birds within the city. The council acted on the advice of public health officials

19. Ibid, 2, 5, 11 September 1962.

20. Ibid, 4, 5 September 1962; *Tampa Tribune*, 5 September 1962.

21. USCDC, *Weekly Report*, 31 August, 26 October 1962; *Washington Post*, 2 September 1962; *The Nation*, 29 September 1962, 177-179; *St. Petersburg Times*, 1, 6 September 1962; *Tampa Tribune*, 3 September 1962; *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, 28, 29 August, 5 September, 11 October 1962; *Miami Herald*, 6 September 1962.

22. *St. Petersburg Times*, 1 September 1962.

23. Ibid, 29 August 1962.

24. Ibid, 5 September 1962; *Tampa Tribune*, 14 September 1962.

in the belief that if the birds were not fed they would leave residential areas and take the virus with them.²⁵ Given the number of birds, the easy availability of other sources of food, and the large number of senior citizens who regularly fed birds, the action produced an immediate outcry of disbelief and derision. The *St. Petersburg Times* editorialized against the ordinance, asserting it would not drive out a single bird from Pinellas County. As the newspaper pointed out, there was so much natural food in the area, birds would shift a few hundred feet and continue to eat. It also warned that there would not be enough jail cells in the county to hold all the potential violators.²⁶ Thereafter the paper routinely ridiculed the law, publishing photos of birds under the heading “public enemy #1” or featuring images of seniors feeding birds in the park with the caption “a red letter day for lawlessness.”²⁷ Callers, some in tears, swamped the local branch of the Audubon Society, inquiring if the law had to be obeyed.²⁸ Letters to the editor openly advocated defiance, with one stating that “we intend to continue feeding our birds for we are not about to let a dictatorial city council tell us what we can and can not do on our own property.”²⁹ The national press also picked up the bird feeding law and added it to a growing list of negative images of St. Petersburg and its frantic city officials.³⁰

Despite the outcry, the law was not repealed while the epidemic continued and there was considerable evidence of compliance with the ordinance. Both the state and national Audubon Society advised people to obey the law. Citing the availability of natural food, Audubon spokesmen added that the organization did not advocate the feeding of wild birds in summer months anyway—a point that undercut the purpose of the city council’s action.³¹ In any case, no one was charged with the crime of bird feeding and it would seem that councilmen never really intended that anyone should be arrested and charged.³² Eventually, even the *St.*

25. *St. Petersburg Times*, 2, 7, 8 September 1862; *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, 5 September 1862; *Miami Herald*, 6 September 1962.

26. *St. Petersburg Times*, 6 (editorial), 7, 9, 11 September 1962.

27. *Ibid.*, 5, 6, 9 September 1962.

28. *Ibid.*, 5 September 1962; *Miami Herald*, 6 September 1962.

29. *St. Petersburg Times*, 10 September 1962.

30. *Newsweek*, 24 September 1962, 19-21; *New York Times*, 8 September 1962.

31. *New York Times*, 3, 8 September 1962; *St. Petersburg Times*, 16 September 1962.

32. *New York Times*, 8 September 1962; *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 3 September 1962; *St. Petersburg Times*, 6 September 1962.

Petersburg Times came to terms with the idea and on September 23, in a regular column devoted to senior citizens, suggested an alternative to bird feeding. In response to the evident sense of loss and sadness the anti-bird law evoked, the *Times* reporter offered an alternative, suggesting that homeowners "might like to bring fresh life and color to [the] yard with butterflies." Somewhat tongue-in-cheek, the columnist noted that "butterflies are not security risks and come in a wide range of sizes, colors, and styles." Readers could obtain a list of plants that attracted butterflies free of charge if they sent a self-addressed, stamped envelope.³³

In addition to the anti-feeding ordinance, the city and county also moved against the bird threat in a more active way. Beginning in the first week of September, various types of birds, especially ducks and pigeons, were trapped and removed from residential areas and city parks; over 160 ducks were rounded up the first day alone. Some birds were caught by hand, others by net, the rest in small cage traps baited with corn. In the first few days of trapping parks crews worked up to 12 hours a day, capturing hundreds of birds that were removed to remote nature areas. There they placed the birds in five large cages covered with 150 yards of mosquito netting to protect healthy birds from the virus until the epidemic abated. Sick birds were destroyed. While swans, geese and even peacocks were caught and caged, the majority of POWs were ducks and pigeons, which, as one city employee claimed, had become too numerous anyway. Thus, while all species were theoretically "under siege," it was surely no coincidence that the two types that were the least liked because of their noise and droppings were the most likely to be caged. No sea birds, song birds, or wild parakeets were captured in the roundup.³⁴

Even so, the roundup produced another outcry about the whole procedure. In response and to reassure the public, the press ran photos of parks employees caring for the imprisoned flock and feeding them regularly. One caption stated that "the birds never had it so good," and bird lovers were told that the "arrested fowls" were "living the life of Riley."³⁵ In an interview, the manager of the city nursery who oversaw the birds' care stated,

33. *St. Petersburg Times*, 23 September 1962.

34. *The Nation*, 29 September 1962, 177-179; *St. Petersburg Times*, 3, 6, 7, 25 September 1962; *Florida Times-Union*, 8 September 1962; *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, 28 August, 5, 7 September 1962.

35. *St. Petersburg Times*, 25 September 1962.

We should be covered so good. They're well-fed 3 times a day—cracked corn, greens and plenty of fresh water. They don't have a lot of room to move about and exercise, but all they've got to do is sit there and pick up food.³⁶

Eventually, most of the birds were released and allowed to return to the wilds of St. Petersburg. Reports published in the 1965 edition of the *American Journal of Epidemiology* indicated that lab tests on local birds identified seventeen species infected with St. Louis encephalitis. The least common carriers were ducks, doves and pigeons. Human testing and surveys also indicated only a slight increase in the likelihood of contracting encephalitis among those who fed pigeons or had bird feeders in their yards.³⁷ A separate *Journal* survey showed no significant difference in encephalitis rates between those who fed birds on their household premises and those who did not. The factors that increased exposure to the disease included proximity to water, density of shrubbery and the practice of gardening or other outdoor activity.³⁸

The third and final technology used in this war had the most significant and long lasting impact on the environment. It involved the use of chemical insecticides by local officials and private citizens to kill the only viable and least-defended enemy, the backyard mosquito. No public controversy arose, as mosquitoes had been seen for decades as a detriment to property values and the tourist trade. Eradication of mosquitoes, virus-carrying or not, was met with enthusiasm, even if, on occasion, the techniques of extermination raised questions about safety. City, county and state boards of health tackled the mosquito problem with chemical sprays and foggers.³⁹ Thus, both mosquitoes and humans dealt with the deadly fog of environmental combat.

36. Ibid.

37. Bond, Quick, White and Oard, 399-400. The number of virus-carrying bird species was also noted by FSBH, *Annual Report*, 1962. The *St. Petersburg Times* used a report of the State Game Commission that found doves were not carriers, 19 September 1962.

38. Donald T. Quick, Robert E. Serling, Ida L. Sherman and Helen L. Casy, "The Epidemic of St. Louis Encephalitis in Florida, A Survey for Inapparent Infections in Epidemic Area," *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 81, 1965: 409-410.

39. *FHN*, June 1963, 119; Patterson, 9-12, 40-41, 43. For the origins of chemical control of mosquitoes, see Margaret Humphreys, *Malaria: Poverty, Race and Public Health in the United States* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 47.

Anti-mosquito fogging trucks became ubiquitous in Pinellas County. Seventeen one-ton, slow moving trucks moved along residential streets belching out a “blue-white cloud” of “deadly dense fog” made up of a “lethal mixture” of three parts malathion, three parts lethane 384, and ninety-four parts diesel oil per 100 gallons. Machines mounted on trucks heated and vaporized the ingredients ingredients and emitted the toxic mix at a rate of 40 gallons per hour. Fogging occurred every night somewhere in the county or city. Between August 6 and September 2, over 70,000 gallons of insecticide were released, with spraying occurring in some densely populated neighborhoods every three or four nights. The loud noise and noxious odor quickly became an accustomed part of St. Petersburg night life as the fogging trucks made their rounds between 10 pm and 6 am.⁴⁰ While some critics called for more fogging and the use of aerial spraying,⁴¹ others felt that the current campaign was cause for concern. As one author expressed it in a letter to the editor:

The most beautiful city is treating me—not as a human—but as a mosquito. Please, may there be some kind of warning, some kind of timing in order to close windows ahead of fogging trucks? To be fogged in my sleep with sickening chemicals is a traumatic experience, and one which can drive away more people than the epidemic itself.⁴²

The National Audubon Society also expressed concern about the spraying and called for lighter insecticide applications, warning that too much fogging “might endanger human health as much as encephalitis.”⁴³

The Florida Board of Health disagreed. In June of 1963, months after the epidemic ended, FSBH reported that the St. Petersburg fogging program had been the major factor in mosquito control. There was little sense of potentially adverse effects on

40. *FHN*, October 1962, 155-156, 159; *FSBH Annual Report* 1962, 1, 34, 91-93, 219; *New York Times*, 2, 3, September 1962; *The Nation*, 29 September 1962, 177-179; *Washington Post*, 2 September 1962; *St. Petersburg Times*, 2 September 1962; *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, 5 September 1962. For a description of lethane 384 and malathion, see: *The Merck Index: An Encyclopedia of Chemicals, Drugs, Biologicals* (11th ed.) (New York, 1989), 857, 859.

41. *St. Petersburg Times*, 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 9 September 1962.

42. *Ibid*, 9 September 1962.

43. *New York Times*, 9 September 1962.

humans or wildlife. On the contrary, the Board boasted, with some pride, that the fuel oil used statewide (but mostly in Pinellas County) in 1962 as a base for fogging “would have heated 6557 homes for the winter” and the oil had been carried by fogging machines “that traveled a distance equal to 153 trips around the world.”⁴⁴ The government-supported program provided a nationally-covered “photo-op” for Governor Ferris Bryant, who flew into the city to stand in a garbage dump and pensively observe a demonstration of fogging technique. The *New York Times* reported that the sound of mosquitoes could be heard all around him. The September 24 edition of *Newsweek* printed a full pictorial montage of the encephalitis campaign, with images of fogging trucks on city streets, caged pigeons, and Governor Bryant standing in the dump looking concerned.⁴⁵

As with the clean-up strategy, citizen volunteers were encouraged to join the insecticide brigades. Residents were urged to arm themselves with chemical poisons in order to attack breeding places that the trucks might not be able to reach. The Florida Board of Health recommended spraying shrubs and plants with insecticides that would dissolve in water and urged residents to spray interiors with “residual spray, such as DDT or Lindane.” Home entrances and screens on doors, it was thought, should be sprayed with 5% DDT or 5% malathion.⁴⁶ The director of the County Mosquito Control Department recommended that, if a resident found any mosquito larvae in a ditch or pool, he or she should “spray a little kerosene on it.” He warned, however, against putting oil in any lake that might have minnows. As he put it, “minnows are the best friends we have and oil will kill them.”⁴⁷

The Mosquito Control Board, unlike the State Board of Health, suggested spraying open garages and utility rooms with a mix that was “25% malathion wettable powder, a tablespoon to the gallon of water.” In the meantime, city firemen were “attacking” small water holes with portable oil sprayers and the Cross Bayou Volunteer Fire Department began a “campaign” to spray oil on stagnant waters in the area. A representative of the

44. *FHN*, June 1962, 119; *FSBH, Annual Report*, 1962, 1, 34, 91-93, 219.

45. *The Nation*, 29 September 1962, 177-179; *Newsweek* 24 September 1962, 19-21; *St. Petersburg Times*, 7 September 1962.

46. *FHN*, October 1962, 155-156, 159, 163.

47. *St. Petersburg Times*, 2 September 1962. Minnows and kerosene were seen as important weapons even in the 1920s, Patterson 37-38, 40.

Communicable Disease Center in Atlanta advised that such oiling should be repeated at least once a week, since oil would evaporate rapidly. Crews from the Mosquito Control District attacked larvae in ditches and ponds with oil and Paris Green pellets and applied a herbicide to kill vegetation in marshy areas "to allow the minnows that inhabit such areas to eat mosquito larvae."⁴⁸ The *St. Petersburg Times* published drawings of larvae to aid readers in identifying them; the caption under one such drawing simply read "KILL." In strangely gendered language, the accompanying article warned residents to "kill this monster because it may be you or her."⁴⁹

As in other aspects of the "war" against encephalitis, the fogging campaign encouraged volunteer action. The County Board of Health suggested that residents who owned power mowers should acquire fogging attachments that would supplement the work of the trucks and spray hard-to-reach areas around shrubs and foundations.⁵⁰ The *St. Petersburg Times* printed a picture of a 16-year-old woman spraying the lawn of her home using a fogging attachment on her power lawn mower. The advised mixture for such work was a tablespoon of 25% malathion wettable powder to a gallon of water.⁵¹ In Manatee County, south of Pinellas, the Mosquito Control Board made fogging material available at no cost and hundreds of residents lined up with gallon containers to receive "free fogging liquid." In a message at odds with other information, the director warned against using the material on water, asserting that "plain diesel oil or kerosene is best for water and it doesn't affect fish."⁵² While the Pinellas Mosquito Control Board did not provide free insecticide, it did offer advice for those who used it. Among other instructions, the Pinellas director warned against mowing and fogging during daylight hours, claiming such activities should follow the 10 pm to 6 am regimen used by the fogging trucks to obtain the best results. He also advised

48. *FHN*, October 1962, 155-156, 159, 163; *St. Petersburg Times*, 2, 4, 6, September 1962. For the poisonous copper-based powder Paris Green, see: *Merck Index*, 411, and Patterson, 95, 98, 101, 103, 136.

49. *St. Petersburg Times*, 5 September 1962.

50. *Ibid.*, 29 August, 1, 13 September 1962; *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, 8 September 1962; *Tampa Tribune*, 5 September 1962.

51. *St. Petersburg Times*, 3 September 1962.

52. *The Nation*, 29 September 1962, 177-179; *St. Petersburg Times*, 7 September 1962.

people to read the labels on anti-mosquito chemicals and follow the instructions to the letter, since many of the substances "can be dangerous if not used properly."⁵³

The timing of the war against birds and insects provided an environmental irony: in September, as the fogging intensified and more birds were stuffed into cages, Houghton Mifflin published Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*.⁵⁴ Carson had already created a sensation with a series of articles in *The New Yorker* and by the fall of 1962 her condemnation of chemical pesticides had been widely reported and had generated a public debate in the nation's press. However, during the St. Petersburg encephalitis epidemic the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* carried stories about the epidemic and its war against nature as well as articles about Carson's theories without drawing comparisons between the two.⁵⁵ Perhaps more surprisingly, the *St. Petersburg Times*, whose editor, Nelson Poynter, an environmental supporter who knew Carson personally from her days in the Tampa Bay area in the mid-1950s, did not make such comparisons either. The paper printed stories about fogging with malathion and the use of Paris Green pellets, in some cases, side by side with articles about *Silent Spring* and its theories. At no point did the *Times* make a connection between Carson's warnings about fogging and insecticide use and the techniques employed against encephalitis in Pinellas County. The paper never ran an editorial collating the two nor did it ever criticize the fogging (although it printed letters to the editor that did so, but without mentioning Carson). Even critics of the fogging practice did not utilize Carson's ideas as weapons against public health officials and mosquito control directors. Thus St. Petersburg's war against the environment was waged at the very moment that an environmental peace movement was born. The juxtaposition of

53. *St. Petersburg Times*, 11 September 1962.

54. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston, 1962); *Washington Post*, 1 September 1962; *St. Petersburg Times*, 12 September 1962; *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, 27 September 1962; *Miami Herald*, 12 August 1962. For an examination of the use of pesticides and herbicides in the South see Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s* (Chapel Hill, 2000), chapter 4 and Daniel, *Toxic Drift: Pesticides & Health in the Post-World War II South* (Baton Rouge, 2005). See also Patterson, 150-151. Carson claimed that malathion could negatively affect the nervous system.

55. *St. Petersburg Times*, 12 September 1962; *Washington Post*, 1 September 1962; *Globe and Mail*, 6 September 1962.

the two phenomena imbues the encephalitis outbreak with a poignancy and significance beyond local interest.⁵⁶

Although insect control generated little professional or public concern, health officials had attempted to address concerns about chemical exposure in an effort that met stiff resistance and ultimately failed to implement regulation of spraying. In 1960, the State Board of Health recognized a potential danger to residents from the misuse of herbicides and pesticides and instituted regulations to control their use in residential areas. In response, a number of commercial pest control operators in Florida contested the right of the Board to enforce such regulations, and in the resulting lawsuit, the Board lost. On appeal, the Florida Supreme Court ruled that the Board of Health could not regulate the use of toxic materials in residential neighborhoods without specific authority from the Florida legislature. However in 1963, following the encephalitis epidemic and the publication of *Silent Spring*, the state legislature refused to grant the necessary powers to the Board.⁵⁷

A second campaign involving the encephalitis epidemic focused on the potential impact of the outbreak on the area's tourist economy. This battle was fought with the same intensity as the war against mosquitoes, but in this case, the enemy was negative publicity produced in "northern" media, publicity that had the potential of destroying the immediate economic health of the region and the state. Acting on their fears that reports of an epidemic disease would have a chilling effect on tourism, citizens, politicians and business people in the affected area developed an understandable distaste for news reports and headlines that spotlighted the encephalitis outbreak. Bad press, in their view, meant a bad tourist season, a potential economic problem that would ripple through the fiscal structure of St. Petersburg, Pinellas County, and the state. News of a "plague" went beyond the tragedy of individual suffering and death. And, unfortunately for the city and state, by mid-August most of the national news media had picked

56. *St. Petersburg Times*, 12, 24 September 1962; Robert N. Pierce, *A Sacred Trust: Nelson Poynter and the St. Petersburg Times* (Gainesville, 1993), 261; R. Bruce Stephenson, *Visions of Eden: Environmentalism, Urban Planning and City Building in St. Petersburg, Florida, 1900-1995* (Columbus, 1997), 130-131. Eventually, the environmental movement did challenge mosquito control's use of pesticides and impoundments, Patterson, 150-155, 161, 169, 188.

57. *FHN*, June 1963, 119, September 1963, 156-157.

up the story and, it was believed, had publicized the outbreak in a sensational and unfair manner.⁵⁸

CBS News and the *New York Times* provided the most damning coverage of the encephalitis epidemic. On September 3, following a dramatic increase in the number of suspected cases (17 in 48 hours), CBS devoted a segment of its nightly newscast to the topic. Reported by Walter Cronkite, the segment included the admission by the Pinellas County Health Director that the epidemic was "of serious proportions," and that it could be "catastrophic as far as the economy of the community [was] concerned." There were film clips of St. Petersburg residents in public meetings about clean-up projects and shots of the fogging trucks belching poison as they slowly moved down city streets. Strangely, Cronkite also reported on an Iowa woman's struggle with encephalitis and the death of this mother of four. The story angered St. Petersburg residents because the woman's death had no connection whatsoever with Florida or its encephalitis outbreak.⁵⁹ Although other network news casts did not repeat Cronkite's story, negative and exaggerated reports also aired on NBC's Huntley-Brinkley Report and on the Today show.⁶⁰

The *New York Times* gave the St. Petersburg story extensive coverage with a series of articles that spanned several weeks. While the majority of the *Times* stories on the epidemic offered objective and factual reporting, there were some that St. Petersburg residents perceived as unfair and obnoxious. The *St. Petersburg Times* admitted that its New York counterpart had reported on the epidemic with "painful accuracy" and it had no quarrel with "such legitimate journalism, unpleasant though it is." However, the paper's editors believed that some stories had gone too far, especially those written by an "estimable young reporter" named David Binder who had been sent to the city by the New York paper to cover the outbreak. It was suggested that Binder, and others,

58. *FHN*, October 1962, 166; *St. Petersburg Times*, 6, 9 September 1962; *Miami Herald*, 6 September 1962; *Toronto Star*, 3 September 1962. This public relations concern involving mosquito-borne disease had been present through much of Florida's development, especially in the 1920s, Patterson, 18, 40-41, 43, 147.

59. *New York Times*, 2 September 1962; *St. Petersburg Times*, 1, 4, September 1962; *Newsweek*, 24 September 1962, 20. For the separate story on the Iowa case, see *New York Times*, 4 September 1962.

60. *St. Petersburg Times*, 5 September 1962.

made too many references to cancelled conferences, empty motel rooms and deserted drive-in movie theaters.⁶¹

In fact, Binder often proved insightful and revealing in uncovering various aspects of the epidemic, but, on occasion, his reporting was too colorful, even lurid. Using language more suitable to steamy novels, Binder once described St. Petersburg as a "hot, somewhat clammy city of bungalows built on a flat, palm-studded peninsula. Gaudy motels with gaudy names like Outrigger Inn, Thunderbird and Buccaneer abound."⁶² He also exaggerated the fear surrounding the epidemic and overstated its psychological impact:

The current epidemic has developed in an atmosphere of confusion and near-panic on the part of local authorities and the predominantly elderly citizenry of St. Petersburg. Emotions bordering on panic grew among elderly citizens, who have been the prime subjects of virus attacks and among city officials, who feared that the epidemic label would hurt the tourist economy of this resort.⁶³

Most people living in the city and county found little evidence of panic among any group of citizens (although it was true that some city and health officials were scrambling to end the outbreak and control media coverage).⁶⁴

Binder saved his most melodramatic passages for an article he wrote for the September 29th issue of *The Nation*. That issue appeared after health officials had declared the epidemic over. As usual, much of the article was a thorough and well-researched study on the scientific problems associated with identifying and isolating the encephalitis virus, but facts were intermingled with an overheated description of St. Petersburg:

When a visitor enters this town, a sense of foreboding overcomes him. It is the place where the nation's old people go to die, just as ancient elephants are supposed to

61. *New York Times*, 11, 25 September 1962; *St. Petersburg Times*, 13 September 1962; Pierce, 260-262; Stephenson, 130-132.

62. *New York Times*, 11 September 1962. The article was reprinted in the *Globe and Mail*, 12 September 1962, for Canadian consumption.

63. *New York Times*, 8 September 1962.

64. *St. Petersburg Times*, 9, 13, 16 September 1962; *Florida Times-Union*, 2 September 1962.

seek some special spot in the jungle as a final resting place. The city has an air of decay about it—for all its flashy motels, wide new boulevards and comfortable-looking bungalows. Perhaps it is the summer heat, or the sticky air, or the occasional smell of the mangrove swamps behind the subdivisions. This month the feeling of foreboding has been intensified by a mysterious epidemic of St. Louis encephalitis.

After establishing the foreboding setting, Binder completed the description with a literary allusion that designed to resonate with educated readers of the magazine:

Now the uninitiated visitor, hearing the whine of an insect, wonders about mosquitoes. He sees a bird silhouetted against one of the enormous thunderheads that lower frequently overhead and wonders about the bird, too. A disease carrier? He thinks involuntarily of Albert Camus' description of an Algerian city in *The Plague*.⁶⁵

It was this type of reporting that infuriated city and county officials, motel owners and chambers of commerce throughout the region and produced public relations initiatives that included efforts to control the language used to describe the epidemic and pressure on public health officials to downplay the seriousness of the situation.

One response was a form of partial denial. At least at first local officials avoided the term "epidemic." For many, the numbers of those who contracted the disease and the number of deaths simply did not equate with such a horrendous term. The final reported death toll of fourteen in Pinellas County, with a population well over 400,000, seemed too small to warrant the label of epidemic. For a while officials used the term "outbreak" to describe the spread of encephalitis, but eventually they grudgingly accepted epidemic as the term. An August 22 editorial in the *St. Petersburg Times* summed up local frustration over the label, when it claimed that the "outbreak" of encephalitis was a cause for worry, but not for panic. It went on to suggest that the city had "had too many cases to be complacent," yet far from enough to use the term epidemic. Similarly, at a meeting of concerned motel owners from

65. *The Nation*, 29 September 1962, 177-179.

Treasure Island, the health educator for the county's health department claimed that the epidemic was mild when compared to the total population of Pinellas. She explained that more residents of Pinellas died of cancer and car accidents, stating that "an automobile trip down here from the north is more dangerous than actually being here."⁶⁶

The public often linked this type of thinking to the view that reporters picked on the city and region because of its perfect climate and enviable lifestyle. "It is no accident," claimed the *St. Petersburg Times*, "that an epidemic in our community is national news, whereas similar troubles elsewhere seem scarcely noted."⁶⁷ National radio broadcaster, Paul Harvey, reinforced that view when, in one of his reports, he claimed that "he felt sorry for St. Petersburg because of the outbreak and the accompanying bad headlines." He followed that sympathetic observation with this:

I know of no place that stays out of the news more than St. Petersburg; you hardly ever see a St. Petersburg dateline on the national news wires. St. Petersburg is very normal. That city enjoys an existence so comparatively tranquil that it does not attract the hoodlum gangs, the sex triangles, the droughts, the floods, the phony financiers, the noise makers. Yet, here we have an outbreak of illness which is costing fewer lives than when the Asian flu hit Timbukto and everyday there's a new bed check broadcast nationwide.⁶⁸

Thus, St. Petersburg residents received confirmation of their suspicions about the source of critical news articles from local and national sources sympathetic with their plight.

Along with defensive reactions to the publicity created by the epidemic, an active campaign, on a number of fronts, soon emerged to combat it. The mayor of St. Petersburg suggested a letter writing campaign by local residents to contact friends in the North and inform them that the impact of the disease had been

66. *St. Petersburg Times*, 22 August, 5, 15, 16 September 1962; *Miami Herald*, 4 September 1962; *Tampa Tribune*, 15 September 1962.

67. *St. Petersburg Times*, 23 September 1962. For instance, Ohio had 82 cases during roughly the same period with little publicity. *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, 2 October 1962.

68. *St. Petersburg Times*, 13 September 1962.

blown out of proportion.⁶⁹ A public relations man thought that motel owners might draft a “finely-worded” newsletter that promoted the area’s tourist attractions and send it to former guests. He warned, though, that it would be best to wait until the epidemic was over; otherwise the owners would be “wasting their postage.”⁷⁰ In a more direct approach to deal with negative television reports, the chairman of the St. Petersburg Beach Chamber of Commerce, Charles Gullickson, sent telegrams during the first week of September to Frank Blair of the Today show, Walter Cronkite of CBS News and Chet Huntley and David Brinkley of NBC News. He asked for a correction of “misinformation” concerning the actual number of cases of encephalitis in Pinellas County. Unfortunately, he made this request, as it turned out, on false data unwisely supplied by the county health that was soon rescinded.⁷¹

Once the epidemic was declared to be officially over (on September 28) St. Petersburg demanded that media outlets publicize the end of the epidemic as widely as they had reported the spread of the disease. The president of the county medical society, who was also chairman of the public health committee of the Chamber of Commerce, forwarded a telegram to the American Medical Association announcing the cessation of the epidemic. He noted that, “since the economy of our state depends on out-of-state visitors we would be grateful if this information could be disseminated as widely as the news coverage of the outbreak of the disease.”⁷² The city’s public information officer sent out press releases with a similar message to 350 newspapers across the United States. He followed up with a letter to the editors of each of those papers asking for equal and fair coverage of the end of the epidemic.⁷³ None of the editors heeded the pleas, and none of the

69. Ibid, 18 September 1962.

70. Ibid, 15 September 1962.

71. Dr. Ballard, the County Health Officer, had cut the number of suspected cases dramatically, claiming that they had been misdiagnosed and that they were more likely cases of bad colds or “hangovers.” Twenty-four hours later, the original numbers were reinstated. *New York Times*, 5, 6 September 1962; *St. Petersburg Times*, 5 September 1962; *Globe and Mail*, 5 September 1962; *Miami Herald*, 6 September 1962; *Florida Times-Union*, 6 September 1962; *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, 5 September 1962; *Tampa Tribune*, 5 September 1962. For an examination of the overall “epidemic numbers game,” see *St. Petersburg Times Magazine*, 9 September 1962.

72. *St. Petersburg Times*, 29 September 1962.

73. Ibid.

major press organizations ever mentioned the end of the epidemic or gave it the equal coverage St. Petersburg businessmen desired.⁷⁴

At the end of August, the public became aware of a more serious and disturbing attempt to deal with bad publicity. News of the scandal surfaced as a result of the resignation of Dr. Harry C. Oard as Pinellas County's communicable disease officer. One of the foremost authorities on communicable diseases in the country, Oard had recently moved to St. Petersburg to take up this position within the county board of health. His resignation on August 29, in the midst of the encephalitis epidemic, was a shock and a disappointment. The reason for his resignation was even more dismaying. Oard had hinted earlier that he had been pressured by area business interests to downplay the epidemic in his press conferences and news releases. While Oard said nothing about this in his resignation announcement, rumors circulated that forces within the local economic community believed that he had provided too much information and had been too frank in his assessment of the encephalitis outbreak. Oard refused to comment about such pressure, and his boss, Dr. W. C. Ballard, the county health director, denied its existence. Oard's staff, however, claimed that "pressure groups," particularly the Chambers of Commerce of St. Petersburg and St. Petersburg Beach, wanted adverse news suppressed in order to lessen its impact on the winter tourist season.⁷⁵ In fact, as more information became public knowledge, it seemed David Binder had misjudged the situation: rather than Camus' *The Plague* as a fitting analogy to describe St. Petersburg during the epidemic, a better comparison could be made using Henrik Ibsen's play *An Enemy of the People*.

On August 31, the *St. Petersburg Times* responded to the situation in an editorial entitled, "Virus is 'Pressure Proof'":

74. Ibid. A survey of the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Globe and Mail* and *Toronto Star* from 28 September to 6 October 1962.

75. *New York Times*, 1, 11 September 1962; *St. Petersburg Times*, 22, 29, 30, 31 August 1962; *Washington Post*, 1 September 1962; *Globe and Mail*, 1 September 1962; *Toronto Star*, 31 August 1962; *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, 1 September 1962; *Miami Herald*, 6 September 1962. This type of pressure to limit or prohibit news stories about epidemics in Florida for fear of hurting the tourist economy also occurred in the 1920s, Patterson, 43; Eric Jarvis, "'Secrecy Has No Excuse': The 1926 Smallpox Epidemic in Florida," a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Association for the History of Medicine and Science in New Orleans, February 2002.

We wish it were possible to take at face value the statement of Dr. W. C. Ballard, County Health Director, that 'pressure' had nothing to do with the resignation of Dr. Harry C. Oard. It is an incontrovertible fact, however, that the County Health Department, Dr. Ballard and Dr. Oard have all been under tremendous pressure from blindly selfish interests to 'play down' anything about the current outbreak of encephalitis in Pinellas. This is incredibly misguided on the part of the motel operators, representatives of several chambers of commerce and a number of other businessmen who think that if there's any talk about encephalitis it may scare away some of our tourist business.

The paper went on to admonish these interests:

You can't ignore a communicable virus out of existence. We have now lost one of the best experts on combating communicable diseases in the nation—at a time when we need him most—because of an utterly unrealistic and short-sighted attitude on the part of some individuals who ought to know better.⁷⁶

David Binder and the *New York Times* soon reported on this angle of the encephalitis story and the businessmen and politicians who "even put pressure on health authorities to suppress information about the epidemic to prevent adverse publicity about St. Petersburg."⁷⁷ Naturally, this part of the unfolding drama only added to the negative publicity. The news that unscrupulous business forces would be willing to endanger the public's health for economic and selfish reasons also made suspect all the ensuing statistics and claims about the epidemic, including the announcement of its termination, that some had thought "possibly a trifle premature."⁷⁸ A letter to the editor of the *St. Petersburg Times*, however, expressed the situation in its harshest terms:

I wish to offer my congratulations to those good businessmen and tourist interests of Tampa and St. Petersburg who have most recently demonstrated a remarkable civic pride. I am speaking of those who are pressuring against

76. *St. Petersburg Times*, 31 August 1962.

77. *New York Times*, 11 September 1962.

78. *St. Petersburg Times*, 30 September 1962.

the release of information on the outbreak of encephalitis, because it would hurt business. Thus, they even surpass, in a way, the industrious drug company in its quest for the Christmas market for thalidomide, since these good Florida citizens make their request in full knowledge that encephalitis can be fatal. By such unselfish devotion to their duty . . . they have brought further recognition to the relative merits of our economic system.⁷⁹

In its 1962 Annual Report the Florida State Board of Health referred to the problem of news manipulation far more obliquely by pointing out that during the epidemic it became evident that there was an “urgent need for expert aid in the handling of the news.” The report went on to say that, in retrospect, such “expert aid” should have been provided from the beginning.⁸⁰ This was a reference to the September 10 event, the last in this sequence, when Oard returned to his post as communicable disease officer. This time, however, he was accompanied by a newly appointed public relations man, transferred from the state road department by Governor Bryant. He was there to handle all news releases for the Health Board and in photographs he literally sat at Dr. Oard’s elbow.⁸¹ There was no mention of Dr. Oard’s resignation or of his reinstatement in the 1962 *Annual Report* of the Florida State Board of Health. The weekly reports from the U.S. Communicable Disease Center that covered the encephalitis outbreak also failed to note Oard’s departure and return even though he was identified each week as being part of the reporting team.⁸²

If any lessons were learned regarding the manipulation of health reports for economic reasons it was not evident later in September when reports of Red Tide circulated on the Florida west coast. This phenomenon, that kills fish by the hundreds, posed another potential tourist disaster; no one wanted to see dead fish on white beaches in addition to the encephalitis carrying mosquitoes. Therefore, the officials of some Gulf Beach towns pressed for an end to the daily aerial inspections carried out by the

79. Ibid, 9 September 1962.

80. FSBH, *Annual Report* 1962, 1.

81. *St. Petersburg Times*, 11 September 1962.

82. FSBH, *Annual Report* 1962, 1-2, 34, 91-93, 219; USCDC, 1962, *Weekly Report*, 31 August, 7, 14, 21, 28 September, 26 October.

State Board of Conservation along the coast of Pinellas County. The head of the Conservation Board confirmed that he had received notice from the Governor's office to cut back surveillance. Telegrams from Bryant's office to the Conservation Board were passed along "without comment," but it was understood that the original request had come from "Holiday Isles" mayors who wanted no more negative publicity.⁸³

Various groups and individuals also used the encephalitis epidemic for personal advantage and precise ends. For instance, the towns comprising the Gulf Beaches claimed, incorrectly, that there had been no encephalitis cases on their islands and, that unlike St. Petersburg, tourists would be perfectly safe in coming there for their vacations. In this same spirit of urban rivalry, Tampa put out the word that the encephalitis was "centered across the bay in St. Petersburg." This was true enough, but it was less than neighborly to point out that fact.⁸⁴ On September 10, at a luncheon meeting, the president of the St. Petersburg Women's Republican Club attempted to score political points with her audience by asserting that it was the fault of the Democratic congressional candidate, Grover C. Criswell, that Pinellas County had received so much bad publicity. It would not have happened, she claimed, "if Mr. Criswell hadn't called President Kennedy for help. We don't need President Kennedy to take care of our sick . . . in Pinellas County."⁸⁵ And, of course, the epidemic stimulated the entrepreneurial imagination in new ways to peddle goods and services to the community. Newspaper ads for insurance companies offering encephalitis policies closely followed the appearance of the disease. One company claimed to cover encephalitis (plus nine additional diseases) for people aged 0 to 100.⁸⁶ A booming business in home pesticides also emerged and one ad for lawn mower fogging equipment proclaimed its "special mosquito-killing treatment" would be "supervised by a graduate entomologist."⁸⁷

83. *St. Petersburg Times*, 22, 26 September 1962.

84. *New York Times*, 11 September 1962; *St. Petersburg Times*, 15 September 1962; *Miami Herald*, 6 September 1962; *Tampa Tribune*, 6, 16, 26 September 1962; *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, 14 September 1962. There were a few cases of encephalitis in Hillsborough County.

85. *St. Petersburg Times*, 11 September 1962.

86. *Ibid.*, 2, 8 September 1962.

87. *Ibid.*, 7, 9 September 1962; *Miami Herald*, 6 September 1962.

Local governments and health organizations were not above using the epidemic to enhance their causes. Pinellas County and its Board of Health actually played up the encephalitis outbreak in order to secure state and federal money for a new laboratory. St. Petersburg proclaimed its willingness to invest \$25,000 for a permanent encephalitis laboratory if the state and federal governments would cover the annual operating costs estimated at \$225,000 to \$250,000. At the same time local tourist promotions denied a health risk, proponents of the lab reinforced the need for the institution by alluding to the endemic nature of disease, suggesting that encephalitis would surely “stay with us for awhile and no one can predict when another outbreak might come.” The State Board of Health also decided to seize the opportunity provided by the encephalitis outbreak and asked the Florida legislature for funds to construct and operate three new labs. The Board wanted one lab in Tampa, another in Pensacola and a third in Jacksonville, all of which had been refused in the previous legislative session. Now, it was hoped, the lawmakers would be more generous in the wake of the epidemic. As it turned out, they were not.⁸⁸ Finally, near the end of the outbreak, the *St. Petersburg Times* used the epidemic in its editorials to advocate future mosquito control through public works projects. Newspaper editorials built on “civic pride” that had been fortified through reactions to the inflammatory press coverage in order to revisit a project to install new drainage and sewerage infrastructure in the city. As noted earlier, voters had previously rejected a proposed bond issue for that purpose. The epidemic, it was hoped, would force them to change their minds.⁸⁹

In mid-September the general promotion of Florida and St. Petersburg began as always in preparation for the “high tourist season.” This year, however, the state and city had to deal with an encephalitis epidemic that generated bad press around the nation. Thus, the Florida Development Commission counterattacked in its publicity campaign with ads in American and Canadian newspa-

88. *FHN*, September 1963, 156-157; *St. Petersburg Times*, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14 September 1962; *Tampa Tribune*, 10 September 1962; *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, 1 September 1962. An encephalitis research center had been temporarily set up in a former TB hospital in Tampa, Patterson 147.

89. *St. Petersburg Times*, 30 September 1962; *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, 29 September, 2 October 1962. There were similar concerns expressed during the 1920s, Patterson, 88.

pers highlighting attractive package vacation deals. A new ad agency hired by the city government of St. Petersburg also placed advertisements in the Sunday editions of over fifty newspapers in sixty-five cities. Agency researchers picked the targeted cities as "potential breeding places" for west Florida vacationers. The terminology was both unfortunate and indicative of the pervasiveness of mosquito-driven issues. In addition, there was also a suggestion from the *St. Petersburg Times* and other organizations that Canadian visitors, who made up a sizeable portion of the city's tourist population, should be wooed by an offer to accept Canadian dollars at par. Other Florida cities, including Daytona, already used that enticement, but St. Petersburg motel and store owners ultimately refused to go that far. However, at the end of September the city ad agency did cut a deal with *Glamour* magazine to use St. Petersburg as a backdrop for fashion shots in return for "financial cooperation" totaling \$18,000.⁹⁰

In the end, the economic impact of the encephalitis epidemic on St. Petersburg and its immediate region remained unclear. There were reports of lost convention business and fears of the potential loss of millions of tourist dollars, but it is difficult even now to determine the disease's toll on local revenue. At the time, anxious motel owners claimed a cancellation rate of one out of every ten reservations, but, with the exception of one motel already in financial difficulty, no motel or hotel closed its doors during this period. The negative publicity had never been as bad as some believed and, with a few notable exceptions, was accurate and restrained. Furthermore, the media failure to cover the end of the epidemic could be explained by two breaking news stories in late September and early October: the attempt by James Meredith to desegregate the University of Mississippi and the growing concern over the Soviet military aid to Cuba.⁹¹

The war against the encephalitis epidemic officially ended on September 28, 1962. On October 22, President John Kennedy

90. *St. Petersburg Times*, 14, 18, 20, 22, 23, 25, 26, 29 September 1962; *Globe and Mail*, 4, 31 August, 8, 15, 22 September 1962; *Toronto Star*, 1 22 September 1962; *Tampa Tribune*, 30 September 1962; *Miami Herald*, 18 September 1962.

91. *New York Times*, 11 September 1962; *Newsweek*, 24 September 1962, 19-21; *St. Petersburg Times*, 1, 5, 6, 9, 20 September 1962; *Tampa Tribune*, 27, 28 September, 1, 2 October 1962; *Miami Herald*, 18 September 1962; *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*; Jarvis, "'Secrecy Has No Excuse': The 1926 Smallpox Epidemic in Florida,"

appeared on national television to inform the nation that intermediate range Soviet missiles had been discovered in Cuba. As a result of that speech the residents and business people of St. Petersburg now found themselves grappling with a more serious tourist problem—potential nuclear combat, with missiles replacing mosquitoes as foes. The Cuban Missile Crisis not only ended the country's concern with encephalitis, but it also clouded the epidemic's effects on the region and made summarizing the fate of winter tourism more difficult.

An examination of the 1972 St. Louis encephalitis epidemic on St. Petersburg exposes the city's dependency on the tourist industry and the degree to which that fact dictated the parameters of the health campaign to combat the outbreak. The economic realities defined the framework for fighting the disease, even if that meant downplaying or suppressing publicity about the outbreak. Dealing with a plague in paradise involved two levels of attack: one focused on public health and the other public relations.

The problem became more pronounced when some local officials and business leaders reached the conclusion, with some justification, that the encephalitis threat had simply been blown out of proportion and its impact made to seem more severe than the facts warranted. Advocates of these assumptions soon succumbed to the temptation to tone down or manipulate news of the epidemic. If the health implications were not as serious as some suggested, the encephalitis outbreak should be handled with as much discretion as possible. This was not an idea generally shared by public health officials, who believed that full disclosure would help save lives.

It is also important to note that while the epidemic occurred primarily in Pinellas County, the entire state feared being swept up in negative encephalitis activity. The generalized anxiety explains the public relations involvement by the state government and its concern about press conferences and news releases originating with county health officials. It is also worth noting that a regional, Southern sub-theme can be discerned in the attitudes expressed by local officials toward media coverage. A defensive tone, critical of outside (Northern) news outlets and their approach to the epidemic and to the region's responses in fighting the disease quickly appeared once the story gained national prominence. Sensitivity to outside media criticism was not new for Florida. Similar examples can be found during a previous boom period in

the state's history. In the 1920s South Florida minimized and distorted the degree of damage caused by the hurricane of 1926 in an effort to lessen its impact on that year's tourist season. In that same year, outbreaks of smallpox occurred on both the east and west coasts of the state, with similar efforts to suppress the news in order to avoid further losses in tourist revenue. Indeed, local reactions to these events bear a marked resemblance to those associated with the 1962 encephalitis outbreak.⁹²

Finally, the public relations' conundrum was rooted within the symbiotic relationship that had evolved between Florida's prosperity and its promotion of an environmentally healthy image. This was put in bold relief by the headlines that warned of "killer mosquitoes" and "disease carrying birds." For Florida, St. Louis encephalitis, which was caused and spread by natural vectors, automatically spawned negative publicity for a self-proclaimed sub-tropical Eden. An image that had occasionally been challenged prior to 1962 by media attention to hurricanes, snakes, swarms of insects, and disease, now faced a threat that required a fight for citizens' health and for the state's healthy lifestyle. An epidemic associated with mosquitoes and birds, and that singled out retirees as likely victims, had the makings of a public relations nightmare. It offered the counter image of nature gone bad, an environmental shadow cast over the Sunshine State by the disease as well as the methods used to combat it. Thus, longstanding cultural constructions of St. Petersburg and Florida shaped the two-pronged battle against encephalitis and the economic impact of a plague in paradise.

92. Jarvis, "'Secrecy Has No Excuse': The 1926 Smallpox Epidemic in Florida,"