

"The Bat Semi-Panic of 1976"

Carroll County Times Article for 22 July 2001

by Jay A. Graybeal

Carroll's American Bicentennial celebrations were interrupted by a panic over rabid bats during July 1976. The Carroll County Health Department was inundated and made an effort to calm concerned citizens bent on eradicating the creatures. The story was front-page news in the July 28th issue of the Sykesville Herald:

"The Health Department said this week that the 'semi-panic' generated in Carroll County by a statewide bat scare is unnecessary, and it is asking citizens not to become embroiled in any efforts to eradicate the animals.

Health Officer Dr. Ruth H. Singer said her office has been inundated with phone calls and has been receiving bags full of bats as a result of the scare which began after a Cecil County woman died in June from a bat bite.

A new serum which has only been in use since last year proved ineffective in combating the rabies. The serum is being investigated to see why it did not work.

'People are bringing in so many bats that we had them fluttering in our refrigerator,' said Dr. Singer.

Dr. Singer does not want to discourage people from being concerned about bats and rabies, but she said it is unnecessary to panic about the animals.

She said people should only be concerned if a bat (1) has bitten a human or an animal (2) if it has been handled with bare hands and (3) if it is grounded or found lying on a horizontal surface. (One third of all bats found lying on flat surfaces have been shown to have rabies.)

Dr. Singer noted that studies have also shown that rabid bats are normally not found in colonies such as those which nest in barns and attics.

If a bat is found on a flat surface, it should not be handled with bare hands. Rabies can be transferred through a cut in the skin even if a bat is dead.

Should a bat fly into your house, Dr. Singer said, the worse thing you can do is try to strike it with a tennis racket or similar object.

'The best way to get rid of it is to turn out the lights and close the door,' she said. 'Once it has come to rest, open up some windows, two if possible. Allow a cross current and the bat will leave.'

Some people are going out with shotguns in an attempt to eradicate the animals, she noted. Efforts such as this can only engender adverse effects for the community however.

Sanitarian Art Caple, the Health Department's 'bat man,' said 'bats usually eat five times their weight in bugs each night.'

'If they are eradicated there could be an increase in illnesses such as encephalitis, which is transferred by ticks and mosquitoes,' he said.

Encephalitis is an inflammation of the brain caused by a virus.

Mr. Caple normally receives three phone calls a year for bats 'at the most.' Since the scare began he has been getting as many as forty calls a day.

'People also seem to think there are more bats around nowadays,' he said. 'But this doesn't seem to be true. This just happens to be the season when bats are migrating, particularly the red bat. They do it every year. They follow moths which thrive on peaches.'

In the past three years he said only three rabid bats have been found in the county. One recently found in Woodbine bit a man. He was treated for rabies.

Statewide, there are 19 persons receiving treatment for bat bites, according to Dr. Singer. She said only four bats have been confirmed as being rabid.

'I also want to make clear the Health Department is not in the extermination business' she said. 'That's not our responsibility. Our prime function is an educational one.'

The bat panic eventually eased as local residents accepted that the creatures presented no significant threat to human safety. Health Department officials, residents and perhaps the bats breathed a sigh of relieve when the panic was over.



*The Carroll County Health Department handled the 1976 bat panic shortly before moving into its new building in 1978. Historical Society of Carroll County collection.*