



THOMAS & KATHERINE DETRE

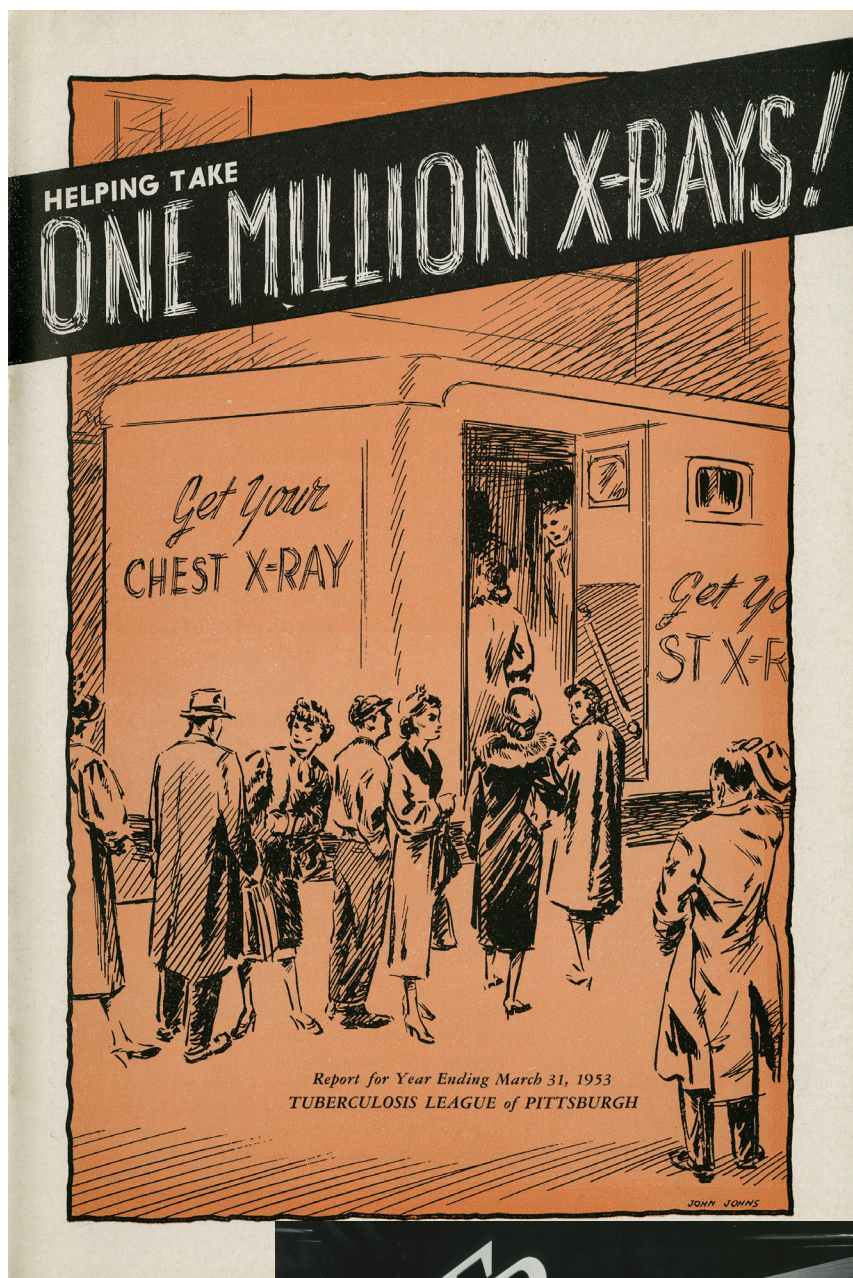
## LIBRARY & ARCHIVES TREASURES

By Matt Strauss, Chief Archivist

### Breathe Pennsylvania Records

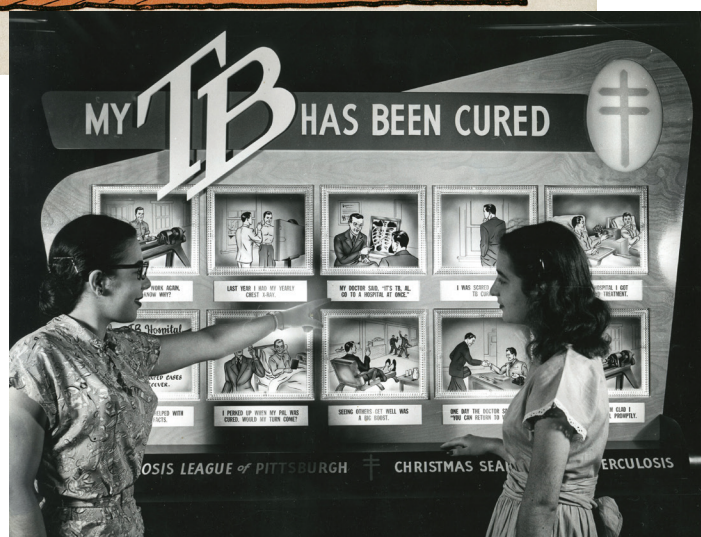
Over thousands of years, Tuberculosis, also known as consumption and the White Plague, has exacted a heavy toll on humankind, affecting humans as far back as Ancient Egypt. In the United States, infection rates skyrocketed during the 19th century and became the leading cause of death in the 20th century as the disease spread due to the cramped and unsanitary housing conditions of rapidly expanding cities. Breathe Pennsylvania has fought tuberculosis, or TB, and other respiratory ailments in Western Pennsylvania for more than a century. Established in 1905 as the Pittsburgh Sanitarium by Otis H. Childs, a local industrialist who lost his wife to the disease, the organization represented the first coordinated effort to combat TB in Pittsburgh.

Donated in 2016, the Breathe Pennsylvania Records provide documentation of the organization's activities through meeting minutes, reports, and photographs. The materials reveal the early challenges the organization faced, not only in treating the disease, but also in securing funding and providing public education. Meeting minutes mention the lack of government assistance in addressing the TB crisis, noting that local hospitals were not accepting patients obviously suffering from the sickness. With state resources lacking, the organization turned to the city's business leaders, including



Cover of the 1953  
Tuberculosis League of  
Pittsburgh annual report.

All photos HHC Detre L&A, Breathe Pennsylvania Records, MSS 1106.



A Tuberculosis  
League of Pittsburgh  
exhibit, 1950s.



Open-air shacks with beds for patients, c. 1920.



A child on a bed on the porch of the Tuberculosis League of Pittsburgh's Hospital.

H.J. Heinz, R.B. Mellon, and Henry Phipps, to provide broad leadership and funding. William McConway, owner of a local steel company, offered his mansion on Bedford Avenue in the Hill District to serve as the organization's first hospital, which reached capacity soon after opening.

Renamed the Tuberculosis League of Pittsburgh in 1908, one of the continuing goals of the organization was to send nurses to the homes of TB sufferers to provide information about the disease. A common misconception about TB was that it was hereditary, so many did not take precautions to avoid infection. According to meeting minutes, this educational effort would be "the most pressing and monumental field of work. It can only be accomplished by a personal crusade of corps of trained young women who will reach the people in their homes and conduct what are widely known as tuberculosis classes and

form by far the most encouraging part of tuberculosis work."

Photographs in the collection depict strategies the Tuberculosis League used to combat TB. In its early years, the organization focused on providing rest, exercise, and fresh air to its patients. Reflecting a widespread belief that exposure to cold air was an effective method of treating the illness, they established an open-air classroom and sleeping quarters where doors were only closed during blizzards. Children in the open-air classroom sat at their desks with sleeping bags covering most of their body.

Beginning in the 1940s, antibiotics were developed that proved successful in the treatment of TB. With demand for beds dropping, the Tuberculosis League closed its hospital in 1955, but this did not end the work of the organization. They treated other respiratory ailments such as asthma, bronchitis,

and black lung. With TB remaining a stubborn adversary, the organization dispatched mobile X-ray units into neighborhoods where the disease persisted and continued testing students in schools.

The organization went through several name changes in recent decades, spending time as the Christmas Seal League of Southwestern Pennsylvania, American Lung Association of Western Pennsylvania, and the American Respiratory Alliance of Western Pennsylvania. Known as Breathe Pennsylvania since 2014, the organization continues to offer lung health education and direct services to residents across southwestern Pennsylvania. 🌟

The Heinz History Center is grateful to Breathe Pennsylvania for generously supporting the preservation and processing of this collection.