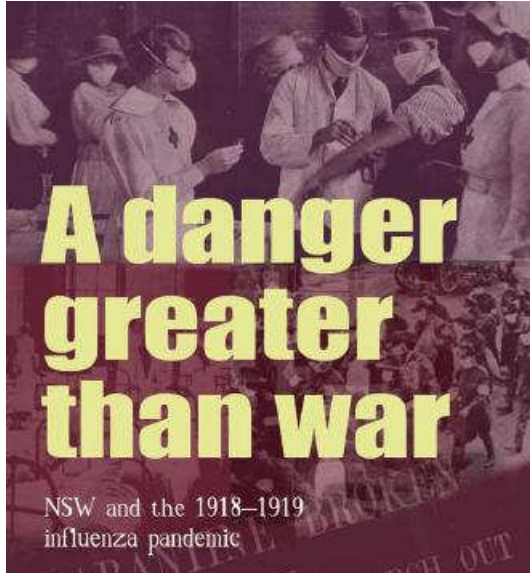


The Influenza Epidemic of 1918



The influenza epidemic of 1918 killed more people than were killed in the fighting and destruction of World War I¹, taking over 21 million lives²—with some estimates of as many as 100 million³--and affecting over one half of the world's population. It was the most devastating epidemic in recorded world history. More people died of influenza in a single year (1918) than in four years of the Black Death (Bubonic Plague) from 1347-1351.⁴ More Americans died in this flu epidemic (approximately 675,000) than have been killed in the Civil War, World Wars One and Two, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Iraq War combined (423,000)! Known as the “Spanish Flu,” this global disaster lasted from March 1918 to June 1920, spreading even to the Arctic and remote Pacific islands.⁵ From a historian's standpoint, the

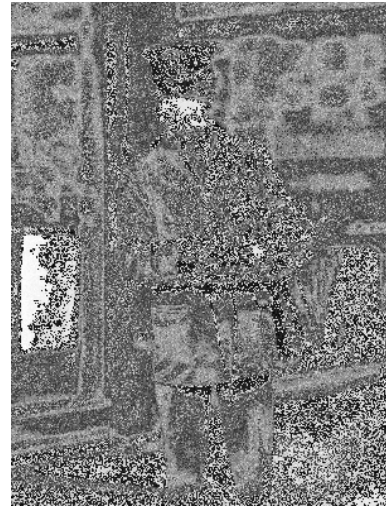
story of this great flu epidemic raises these big questions: First, “Why has this epidemic received so little emphasis in basic history?” and, second, “What lessons are to be learned from this flu epidemic?”

In the fall of 1918, the Great War in Europe (World War I) was winding down. Americans had joined in the fight, bringing the Allies closer to victory against the Germans. Almost suddenly, in various places around the world, something erupted that was seemed like the common cold. This influenza epidemic was most deadly for people ages 20 to 40, quite different from the usual flu's impact being harshest on the elderly and young children. Approximately 28% of Americans were infected.⁶ Of the U.S. soldiers who died in Europe, half of them—approximately 43,000--fell to influenza.⁷

The influenza epidemic came in two waves. The first wave, in the spring of 1918, took far fewer victims than the second. The disease was first observed at Fort Riley, Kansas, on March 4, 1918, and Queens, New York, on March 11, 1918.⁸ This first wave did not receive much public attention. One reason for this is that for the most part, America's public health system ignored it. Generally, public health departments did not receive reports of influenza. Most doctors simply cited pneumonia on the death certificates of those killed, since the flu came first and weakened the resistance so that pneumonia followed. At that time there was not a sufficient network of federal, state, and local public health departments. Another factor helping to explain why this spring wave of the flu epidemic received so little public attention was that it occurred at the time that American soldiers were getting into the war effort in Europe. In March 1918, a total of 84,000 American soldiers left for Europe. In April, another 118,000 followed.⁹

The second wave began on August 27, in Boston with the Navy. Within 2 weeks, 2,000 officers and men of the First Naval District had the flu. Boston and the state of Massachusetts took no action to protect their citizens against this epidemic for several more weeks. A big price would be paid for this neglect of the flu for such a long time in one of America's most important port cities for shipping troops and equipment to the front lines in Europe. This lack of public attention might be explained by the general good health of the city and the fact that other events were making headlines—the upcoming Senate vote on women's suffrage, the conviction and

sentencing of Eugene Debs under the Espionage Age, the victory of the Boston Red Sox in the 1918 World Series.¹⁰



Free Press newsboys don protective masks during the 1918 influenza epidemic, which killed 824 people in Winthrop.

For the country as a whole, the lack of solid information contributed most directly to the large number of deaths. The United States Public Health Service (USPHS) did not receive daily

reports from the states and was not organized to handle an epidemic. Boston, for example, requested 500 doctors, more than the entire amount the USPHS could provide. “People got sick faster than the nurses could be found to take care of them, and they often died from dehydration, starvation and poor care.”¹¹

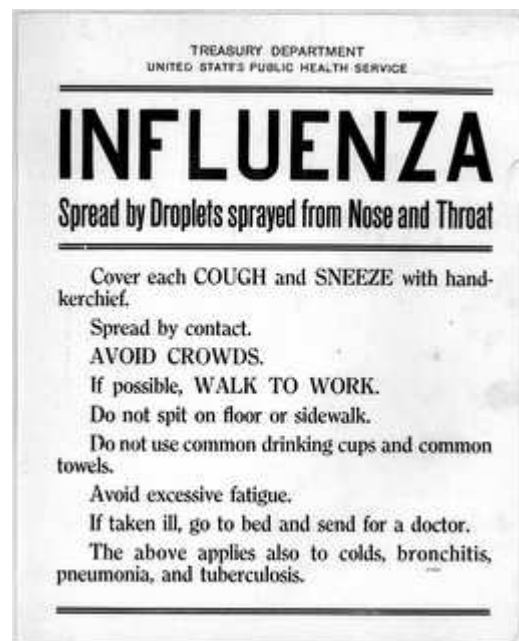
The armed forces contributed extensively to the rapid spread nationwide and worldwide of this flu epidemic. The conditions on the troopships going back and forth to Europe contributed greatly to the spread. Once the men boarded a ship in the U.S., they stayed on that ship until it reached its destination, no matter how many troops fell ill. As more and more sailors contracted the flu, the medical officers ran out of room in sickbay and had to take over the quarters of healthy soldiers, crowding them into smaller areas and creating more opportunities for infection.¹²

Among civilians, the urban dwellers fell victim to the flu most rapidly for several reasons. The crowded, dirty and poorly ventilated living conditions were major factors for this. The large numbers of immigrants who were unable to speak enough English to communicate with doctors, nurses, and public health officials is another major factor. Another reason was the large public gatherings—such as parades—in support of the war effort brought large numbers of people together to breathe on each other and spread the flu.¹³

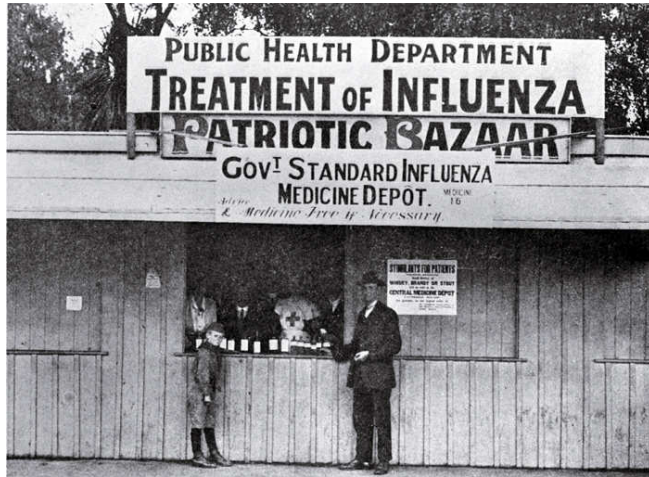
There are several reasons to help explain why the American public was not very concerned with this flu epidemic. The major focus of attention was the war (WW1) taking place. “The flu news paled in comparison to the news coming from the European front.” Another factor was that many people simply felt that lethal epidemics were a common factor in their lives. Hearing about another incurable disease sweeping the world had little effect on people who had already survived an epidemic of cholera, or yellow fever, or typhoid, or diphtheria, or malaria. Also, many people thought of the flu as just another aspect of the war. Still another factor is that the flu moved quickly—arriving in a town, flourishing for a short time, killing quickly and moving on to another town without leaving long-lasting effects. Significantly, no famous figure of the time was killed by the flu.¹⁴

The influenza strain was unusual in that it tended to kill many young adults and otherwise healthy victims—not the usual flu deaths concentrated in the elderly and infants. Another peculiarity of this flu epidemic was the speed at which it operated. People without symptoms could be stricken suddenly and within hours be too weak to talk, with many dying the next day. Symptoms include a bluish tint to the face and coughing up blood, caused by a severe constriction of the lungs. Many patients died from fluid filling their lungs. It appears that most deaths resulted from an over-reaction of the immune system. This helps to explain why the 1918 flu epidemic had its surprisingly large effect on the younger, healthier people—a person with a stronger immune system would potentially have a stronger over-reaction.¹⁵

In most places less than one-third of the population was infected. Even in areas where mortality was low, those incapacitated by the illness



were often so numerous as to bring much of everyday life to a stop. Some communities closed all stores or required customers to stay outside the store and place their orders for filling. In some communities, there were so many deaths that mass graves were dug by steam shovel and bodies buried without coffins.¹⁶ In Boston, the stock market closed. In Pennsylvania, an order shut down every place of amusement, including every saloon. In Kentucky, the state board of health prohibited public gatherings of any kind, including funerals. By the time the flu epidemic had runs its course in the United States, the epidemic had taken more than 600,000 lives. To put that number in perspective to today's population, it would be like over 1.4 million people suddenly this year dying from an outbreak for which there was no explanation and no known cure.¹⁷



The situation in our area closely paralleled the national situation. To begin, Dr. Robert Doran, in one of his periodic “Finger Lakes Life” articles for *The Geneva Daily Times*, reported that in Geneva, NY, there were 14 flu deaths in November 1918, another 14 in December, but only 4 in January 1919.¹⁸ John E. Becker, in his 1949 history of Waterloo, reported that by October 1, 1918, there were over 50 cases of the flu in Waterloo. In some instances, the flu infected whole families. Deaths included Raymond C. Shanks (age 27); Gertrude A. Miller (age 30); the Rev. Edward F. Lane,

pastor of the Methodist Church; Howard J. Fillingham (age 28); James A. Campfield (age 21); and Harold B. Bachman (age 23). Becker described the situations as “a sad time in Waterloo. No one knew what the ‘Flu’ was or how to treat it, and all feared contracting it. There was no indication of where it might stop. It seemed to take the very strongest of the young people.”¹⁹ During October 1918, more than 195,000 Americans died of the flu, including 11,000 in Philadelphia.²⁰

Naomi Brewer, the president of the Ovid Historical Society, shared some October 1918 entries from the diaries of her great grandmother, Carrie Coleman of the Coleman Hotel in Kidders, that help to illustrate how serious the situation was in the southern part of Seneca County. The October 3, 1918, entry stated “Dr. Arthur Gould (Interlaken doctor) came to see me (house call). He has many cases of Spanish influenza, which is now raging everywhere.” On October 11, 1918, the entry reads, “Dr. Louis A. Gould came about 9 a.m. to see me. Dr. Arthur has the prevailing influenza.”²¹

From the *Seneca Falls Reveille* we get insight into how the community was affected by this flue epidemic. In the October 25, 1918, issue, the publisher commented that for Seneca Falls there were “many indications that slowly we are emerging from beneath the dire cloud of the influenza and its accompanying scourge of pneumonia. We never had less heart to publish a paper than this wee, though last week was a sad one. The entire community is shadowed in gloom over the loss of so many excellent citizens. Every one is cast down by the great losses to the village.” The article went on to report that the churches and schools would be closed for another week and the “picture shows will be closed...until the epidemic of influenza has been sufficiently lessened to warrant their opening.” The December 6, 1918, issue included a local Red Cross committee’s “thank you” to the Seneca Falls community for the efforts to provide

help to those in the community sickened by the flu. Using the Trinity Church Parish House as a base of operations, the local churches took turns each day for about two and half weeks to provide “soups, custards and other supplies” daily to an average of 40 families. “Seneca Falls may be proud of its record. . . . In no instance has it shown a higher spirit of devotion than in meeting the tremendous problems imposed upon it by the epidemic now happily almost ended. Beyond all question that spirit of devotion was exemplified most by those who risked their lives to care for others.”²¹

Dorothy Van Vleet Hicks of State College, PA shared some wonderful information about how her mother’s family was affected after reading an abridged version of this article in the January 29, 2009, issue of the *Reveille Between the Lakes*. Her mother was Ruth Engel Van Vleet and was born in Willard, the daughter of Helen and John Engel. Dorothy reported how in late September 1918, her mother Ruth was in Albany Business School. Ben Franklin of Ovid, a “beau” of hers, was to meet her at the train station en route home on leave from the Navy. Ruth waited and waited, but Ben had died of the flu the day before. This Ben Franklin was the brother of George Franklin and the uncle of the present Ben Franklin residing at the Kendall Residence in Ithaca.

Dorothy also told that her father’s sister, Eva, age 24, had just left home for her first teaching job. She died of the flu the last week of September 1918. Her parents were Mary and Henry Van Vleet of Route 96A, near Kendaia, town of Romulus.²² (If others who read this article have personal stories to share, please contact County Historian Walt Gable at wgable@co.seneca.ny.us)

In recent years, more and more people have been urged to get an annual flu shot. Nevertheless, still thousands of Americans die annually from the flu. Hopefully, this nation becomes better prepared each year to prevent a repeat of the tragic influenza epidemic of 1918.

[This article was written by Seneca County Historian Walter Gable, and was revised on April 16, 2009.]

¹ <http://virus.standord.edu/uda/>

² <http://www.history.navy.mil/library/online/influenza%20epid%201918.htm>

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/spanish_flu

⁴ <http://virus.standord.edu/uda/>

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/spanish_flu

⁶ http://www.haverford.edu/biology/edwards.disease/viral_essays/redicanvirus.htm

⁷ <http://virus.standord.edu/uda/>

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/spanish_flu

⁹ http://www.haverford.edu/biology/edwards.disease/viral_essays/redicanvirus.htm

¹⁰ http://www.haverford.edu/biology/edwards.disease/viral_essays/redicanvirus.htm

¹¹ http://www.haverford.edu/biology/edwards.disease/viral_essays/redicanvirus.htm

¹² http://www.haverford.edu/biology/edwards.disease/viral_essays/redicanvirus.htm

¹³ http://www.haverford.edu/biology/edwards.disease/viral_essays/redicanvirus.htm

¹⁴ http://www.haverford.edu/biology/edwards.disease/viral_essays/redicanvirus.htm

¹⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/spanish_flu

¹⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/spanish_flu

¹⁷ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/influenza/filmmore/transcript/transcript1.html>

¹⁸ “The Great Epidemic,” *The Geneva Daily Times*, October 20, 1976.

¹⁹ John E. Becker, *A History of the Village of Waterloo, New York and Thesaurus of Related Facts*, Waterloo, NY: Waterloo Library and Historical Society, 1949, pp 372-73.

²⁰ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/influenza/filmmore/transcript/transcript1.html>

²¹ The Seneca Falls *Reveille* issues of October 25, 1918, and December 6, 1918

²² Letter to the Editor written by Dorothy Van Vleet Hicks, *The Reveille Between the Lakes*, January 29, 2009