

The “Spanish” Influenza Epidemic of 1918 in Northfield, MN

Until quite recently the “Spanish” influenza epidemic of 1918 was hardly mentioned by historians even though it was a catastrophic pandemic that killed an estimated 21-40 million people worldwide and 670,000 people in the United States.(1) In only a few months almost one half of the world’s population had influenza. Minnesota lost approximately 10,000 people to the disease. (2) Northfield and its surrounding towns were not spared. Scholarly studies and surviving eye witness accounts, especially from local newspapers (the Northfield News, Carletonian, Manitou Messenger, Mpls. Journal and Mpls. Tribune) make possible a basic chronology of the epidemic in our area.

One explanation today of the so-called “Spanish” influenza is that it was a type of swine/bird viral disease that somehow transferred to humans in March of 1918 at Camp Funston near Fort Ripley, Kansas. (3) By early May the massive transfer of over 1.5 million American soldiers to France spread the disease to millions of people in Britain, the Netherlands, Spain, Germany and Austria. The virus then mutated (reputedly in Brest, France) creating an unstoppable “super flu” that quickly spread to Africa, Asia and the Pacific Islands returning to the United States via military ships in late August of 1918. (4) The disease acquired many nicknames besides “Spanish Influenza,” and “the Spanish Lady”—a misunderstanding of its origin. The French named it “La grippe” and Germans called it “Flanders Fever” and “Blitzkatarrh.” Allied and Axis forces blamed each other for the disease, thinking that it was some terrible new weapon.

The onset of influenza was sudden and severe, usually with high fever (104-105 degrees), headaches and pains in the joints, massive nosebleeds, and possible delirium. (5) Many victims appeared ashen or bluish due to lack of oxygen from swollen, hemorrhaging lungs. There were many complications, including pneumonia, neuralgia, memory loss and a variety of other organ failures. The disease progressed at stunning speed and could lead to death within days. Unlike past flus, it targeted pregnant women and young,

healthy men (aged 20-35 years).(6) Unaware of its viral cause, baffled doctors were powerless to cure or prevent the disease, although they tried various new serums.

Once the USA declared war on April 6, 1917, Northfielders (population c3600) focused on doing their part for the “War Effort”. The first Liberty Loan drive raised money for “our boys” and “Loyalty Meetings,” organized by the town’s Security League, featured patriotic songs and stirring speeches which told citizens not to “shirk our duty”. (7) Soon Americans were urged to “Hooverize” by serving wheatless, meatless and sugarless meals, wearing out old clothing, and not wasting food. Appeals went out for nurses, laborers, teachers and stenographers. Farmers were encouraged to produce larger crops for Victory. Many young men dropped out of school to enlist or to work on the farm.

In August 1918, while the virulent, new influenza strain entered Boston, Northfielders worried about the delay of the harvest due to recent heavy rains.(8) The public schools prepared for a September 2 opening for 939 students and 35 teachers. That summer accommodations for a military Student Army Training Corps (SATC) had been set up at Carleton and St. Olaf to open on Oct 1. SATC men were expected to learn military discipline and drill, while also taking military and academic classes. (9)

In September 1918, the Fourth Liberty Loan drive began and the Mankato Fair (12-14th) offered its regular agricultural exhibits, horse races, and new armored truck demonstrations and regimental band concerts. (10) The Northfield News (20 Sept) cited local men who registered for military service and those who were leaving basic training camps for the front. The number of returning students dwindled (362 at Carleton and 549 at St. Olaf). But none of the local papers relayed the news (reported by the NY Times 27 Sept) that the flow of army troops was stopped and that draft calls temporarily were cancelled because of the severity of the influenza epidemic on the East Coast.

War news about Allied victories in the Argonne forest and the early signs of Axis defeat dominated the headlines. But ominous stories about influenza came from Camp Dodge near Des Moines, IA (the training center for many Minnesotans), which reported 8000 flu patients. In response, The Minneapolis Journal (1 Oct) made an appeal for 15,000

surgical masks to be sent there. The gauze masks were thought to protect the wearer from “catching the bug.”

Influenza first broke out in the Twin Cities at the military training camp at the University of MN (Farm School on the St. Paul campus). Fifty two new cases were reported in early October (11). These flu patients were transported to Fort Snelling’s military hospital, swelling their caseload to 283. A few more cases reported at the Dunwoody Technical School and the Overland Mechanic Training school (then used for military training) led to immediate quarantines.

Local political and public health officials were confident that the epidemic was contained, for in early October the Rice County Fair was allowed to open. On Oct. 3, Northfield’s Grand Theater held its first Liberty Chorus, where the audience sang national songs and then heard a speech to “Keep the Home Fires Burning.” Devised by the Fed. Public Safety Commission, such meetings were organized by state directors (Leopold Breunner for Minnesota) who then appointed local people in every town to lead public singing of patriotic songs in order to build morale. (12)

By October 4 influenza hit the civilian population of Minneapolis with 300 new cases. (13) 530 cases were reported at Ft. Snelling, which included 11 nurses. Suddenly the opening of SATC and Fall Term classes at the University were postponed until Oct 9-10. But even this serious epidemic was nothing like Boston, where there were 30,000 cases and already 1912 deaths.

In Washington, D.C. the U.S. Surgeon General Rupert Blue mobilized all states’ chiefs of Public Health (H.M. Bracken for Minnesota), ordering them to arrange for assistant doctors in every region for “influenza work.” (14) Local Red Cross units would help with nursing staffs and emergency hospital accommodations if needed. Blue also asked each state Chief to report to him daily the number of new influenza cases and deaths in order to track nationwide the progress and severity of the disease.

Dr. H.M. Bracken immediately relayed to Minnesota’s regional, public health officials the official understanding about the history and symptoms of this strain of influenza and

precautions to forestall epidemic. These appeared on the front page of the Northfield News on October 11. The same issue reported flu cases already in Kenyon and disease-related deaths in Castle Rock, but tried to avoid panic by saying that “there was no reason to fear.” Bracken reported to Washington on October 10, that (among other towns listed) Kenyon and vicinity had 60 cases, Cannon Falls-1, and Austin 150-200 cases of influenza. (15)

Northfield mobilized. Its health officer Dr. J.G. Phillips, together with representatives from both colleges, Mayor A.O. Netland and members of the City Council, acted quickly. Carleton and St. Olaf quarantined themselves voluntarily. Phillips required all new cases of influenza to be reported to him and that quarantine cards be placed in the windows of victims’ homes. The City Council voted to close the city theaters, to discourage all public gathering and to confer about if and when to close public schools. Castle Rock had already closed its schools and Dundas postponed a dance. Advertisements already hawked preventative pills and creams.

By October 18, the Northfield News cited the deaths of local residents and those with town connections. The same issue brought more distressing news. A big fire leveled fourteen towns in northern Minnesota from Moose Lake, through Cloquet, to the outskirts of Duluth. Approximately 1000 people died and over 100,000 were homeless, among whom influenza then broke out. (16) Dr. Bracken reported to Washington that “conditions in Minnesota are very bad indeed.” (17) Calls for relief aid were answered with State-wide responses of money, medical supplies and volunteer help.

Meanwhile influenza raged in the Twin Cities. Calls went out for women volunteers who could tend the sick and scrub floors. (18) By October 19th, 99 deaths were reported in Minneapolis and 75 in St. Paul. (19) To make matters worse, on the 26th the weather turned cold, 2 1/2 inches of snow fell in the metropolitan area and 101 more people in Minneapolis came down with flu.

Dundas and Stanton public schools closed. By October 25, Mayor Netland and the City Council closed Northfield’s community clubs, pool halls. Religious services were held

only at the discretion of church officials. The Northfield News included special bulletins to convey its best advice against the flu, “to keep well, keep clean.” (20) In contrast, the epidemic had waned enough in Castle Rock to warrant the reopening of the public schools after two weeks of quarantine closure.

Presidents Donald J. Cowling and Lars W. Boe at both colleges were wary. By mid October the colleges voluntarily were quarantined allowing no trips into town or visitors onto campus. At St. Olaf separate chapel services were held on Sunday. (21) The Carletonian urged caution even though the student body had so far escaped influenza. Ending with a usual list of precautions, including covering sneezes, washing hands, avoiding crowds and damp clothing, the student writer appealed to his colleagues, “Shall we as individuals, risk our lives and the lives of those around us, thru carelessness or thoughtlessness when our authorities have thus far kept us safe?” (22)

Indeed the lack of influenza in early November convinced many in Northfield that the quarantine would soon be lifted. Carleton announced an ambitious Concert Course to begin on the 15th. (23) The local SATC football team planned to play U of M. (24) But on Nov. 5, after guest lecturer Dr. Wilson described his experience with the influenza epidemic at Camp Dodge, students and faculty decided to suspend the publication of its Messenger. Soon thereafter 14 cases of influenza at Carleton and the death of one SATC lieutenant were reported.

The Armistice on 11 November marked the end of the war! Spontaneous, jubilant crowds filled streets all over the country. In Minneapolis and St. Paul a din of car horns, factory whistles and church bells continued for hours. Among the innumerable religious services of thanksgiving that occurred that day, St. Olaf’s informal, outdoor gathering was not unusual except that someone in that group carried the influenza virus. The next day St. Olaf men in the SATC came down with the flu. (25) Carleton officials immediately cancelled an upcoming football game with Hamlin and the first recital in its concert series. By 14 November Carleton reported 40 cases of flu among its men, St. Olaf had 29 cases, and Northfield residents had 41—a total of 110 cases of flu.(26) The epidemic began in earnest.

During the next few weeks in Northfield, many worked to deal with the sick. Superintendent M.P. Forbes, chair of the local Red Cross Committee, organized the towns' nursing staffs, among which 20 public school teachers served. The Red Cross gave out gauze masks and members of its Auxiliary left fruit and food baskets on the doorsteps of quarantined houses. (27)

St. Olaf suspended all classes in view of the 90 new cases of influenza in a week. (28) College buildings were converted into temporary infirmaries in order to tend and isolate the sick. Between November 21 and 26, four freshman Oles died. At Carleton classes continued but men were not allowed to mingle with coeds. (29) Wearing masks was officially compulsory at both colleges.

By November 29 the influenza situation was deemed "improved." Carleton marked its eighth week of quarantine and it canceled the rest of its Concert Course. Thanksgiving passed quietly. Northfield officials considered lifting restrictions imposed during the height of the epidemic, announcing it would blow a town whistle at 4pm on Sat if they did—the signal never sounded.

Early December brought Northfield a respite. Modified quarantine restrictions allowed for early Christmas shopping. (30) The Public Library was open to exchange books (although not its Reading Room). Small prayer gatherings were allowed at churches, but Sunday School was not. Pool halls remained closed. Rice County school officials fretted about how to make up the lost class time and how it would affect teachers' pay. Baptists felt confident enough about their safety from flu to hold their previously postponed State Convention in town, but not to serve the traditional lunch. (31)

On December 3, 36 Carleton men were still recovering in the hospital from the flu, but no coeds had gotten ill. At St. Olaf when 6 women came down with the disease, college President Boe terminated the semester early (7 December) to avoid a second wave of influenza. (32) On Dec 13 the Northfield News reported that deaths from influenza were four times greater than those in the recent war. By December 24, the SATC companies in

Northfield were demobilized and the barracks and mess halls again became dormitories and dining halls.

By January 1, 1919 Dr. Phillips lifted most of the flu restrictions in Northfield. (33) Public schools (those in Millersberg and Little Chicago a week later) and both colleges reopened. Reports of new cases of influenza and related deaths continued to come in from Stanton, Randolph, and Waterford, but the worst seemed to be over. Soldiers and shipmen began to return home from the war. There were poignant exceptions, however. Soldier Roy Keller had recently written his parents that happily he soon would be home, but he died of influenza shortly thereafter in Europe. Also Fred B. Hill, Carleton professor of Biblical literature, who had served as President of Northfield's Community Club, on the School Board, as Chair for the Third Liberty Loan drive and the Red Cross, and had worked in France on behalf of the YMCA, came down with flu on January 17. He died twelve days later, leaving his wife and five children. When his death was announced during half-time at the basketball game between Carleton and St. Olaf, a "great pall [came] over the audience." (34) The second game was postponed.

Through February and March, 1919 newspapers confirm the passing of the epidemic. Obituary notices increasingly do not cite cause of death, and the advertisements for flu remedies eventually disappear. On March 14, the Northfield News related its statistics about influenza in Minnesota. (35) Among the over 125,000 cases in the state during the months October-December, 1918, the death rate was the largest in history. The death count for October was 2088, for November- 3193 and December- 1995 for a total of 7276. Thus in November deaths exceeded births for the first time on record!

Once duly reported, the influenza epidemic was rarely mentioned again in local public journals and the many vivid experiences of it lived on only in memory and photographs. Indeed most writers from that time conveyed relief that the terrible epidemic was over and they preferred to look optimistically to the future.

End Notes

1. Lynette Iezzoni, Influenza 1918 (NY: TV Books, 1999), 15,17.

2. D.J. Tice, Minnesota's 20th Century (Mpls: U of MN Press, 1999), 30.
3. Iezzoni, 23; A.A. Hoehling, The Great Epidemic of 1918 (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1961), 11, 14-15.
4. Iezzoni, 36-40.
5. Ibid., 23-24, 27.
6. Hoehling, 83-86; Alfred Crosby, America's Forgotten Pandemic (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1989), graphs and tables, 210-215.
7. Carletonian for 23 April 1917; Manitou Messenger 18 Dec 1917.
8. Northfield News for August 16, 23 and 30, 1918.
9. Northfield News for 30 Aug and 6 and 20 Sep 1918; Messenger 15 Oct 1918. A brief history of the SATC and photos of the two St. Olaf companies can be found in the Victory Viking (1919,-20, and -21), Northfield: St. Olaf College, 1919. None of the pages are numbered. See also Gertrude Hilleboe, Analecta Manitou (Northfield: St. Olaf College, 1968), 33-35.
10. Northfield News 6 Sep 1918.
11. Minneapolis Journal 1 Oct 1918, 1 and 15.
12. MN Public Safety Commission: Liberty Chorus, papers of Leopold Breunner, Director, MN History Center, St. Paul, MN.
13. Minneapolis Journal 4 Oct 1918, 19.
14. MN Dept. of Health: Influenza. Correspondence of H.M. Bracken, MN History Center, St. Paul, MN.
15. Ibid., 10 October 1918.
16. Northfield News 18 Oct 1918; Hoehling, 113-14.
17. Bracken telegram to Rupert Blue in Washington, D.C. 15 Oct 1918.
18. Correspondence of Gray Tracy Cassidy, MN History Center, St. Paul, MN.
19. Crosby, 59-60; Hoehling, 171.
20. Northfield News 25 Oct 1918.
21. Messenger 29 Oct 1918.
22. Carletonian 5 Nov 1918
23. Northfield News 1 Nov 1918.
24. Messenger 29 Oct 1918,.
25. Ibid., 10 Dec 1918; Hilleboe, 38.
26. Northfield News 14 Nov 1918.
27. Ibid., 22 Nov 1918; Carletonian 19 Nov 1918.
28. Messenger 10 Dec 1918.
29. Northfield News 22 November 1918, 4.
30. Hoehling,3; Northfield News 6 Dec 1918.
31. Northfield News 20 Dec 1918.
32. Carletonian 3 Dec 1918; Messenger 10 Dec 1918.
33. Northfield News 3 and 10 Jan 1919.
34. Ibid.,31 Jan and 21 Feb 1919.

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Letters: (held in the Minnesota History Center, St. Paul, MN):Steward Hammond, Max G. Winkel, and Gray Tracy Cassidy

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