

The 1918 Flu Pandemic and Martin County

In recent weeks the public has been inundated by the media with information about the H1N1 Flu, also referred to, perhaps inappropriately, as the “Swine Flu,” and the potential of another pandemic similar to the deadly flu pandemic of 1918 which was known as the “Spanish Flu.” The pandemic of 1918-1919, a deadly killer of people in the twenty to forty age group, came in three waves. The first wave occurred when mild cases of influenza erupted in the late spring and summer of 1918. The second wave involved a severe outbreak of influenza in the fall of 1918. The final wave took place in the spring of 1919. This pandemic left twenty million dead across the world, including 675,000 dead in the United States.¹

In Minnesota, the Paulson family of Wells was one of the first to be sickened by the outbreak. Three of the Paulson children were in the military fighting the Great War. On September 14th they received word that one son in the military had caught pneumonia. Within three days they were notified of his death. Shortly thereafter, another brother and a sister in the Paulson family succumbed to the flu. By the end of September a large number of army recruits being temporarily housed at the University of Minnesota became ill. In less than a week after influenza was first reported, Minneapolis had more than 1,000 cases. On October 10th, all public meetings were banned and on the 11th, all schools, churches, theaters, dance halls and billiard parlors were closed. By the time the pandemic ended in Minnesota in 1920, 75,000 people had been sickened and 12,000 were dead.²

The 1918 pandemic also left its insidious mark on Martin County. The October 4, 1918, edition of the *Fairmont Sentinel*, reported the following: “Welcome has 70 Influenza Cases Says Physician.” The article went on to state, “Spanish Influenza has broken out in Welcome, Fox Lake and Sherburn, according to Dr. W. G. Strobel who said today that there were 70 cases in and around Welcome, four in Sherburn, several in Fox Lake and others in neighboring territory.” The article further stated that Fairmont physicians reported a number of cases of the usual “fall grip,” but no influenza so far. However, as time would tell, things quickly deteriorated.

The *Fairmont Sentinel* headline reported the following on October 7, 1918: “Influenza Kills Two at Welcome; Mrs. Strobel Dead.” This article read that the flu was rapidly spreading and that the wife of Welcome’s Dr. Strobel, and others, had died from the flu. The situation had become so serious in Welcome that the Adjutant General had sent six medical corps men of the Fifth Minnesota Infantry. They ordered 500 gauze masks for use in Welcome, “which appears to be thoroughly impregnated with germs,” according to Major Dahl of the Fifth Minnesota Infantry.

Locally, the pandemic seemed to be getting worse by the day. The October 8, 1918, edition of the *Fairmont Sentinel* had the following headline: “Influenza Spreads Rapidly Here; 40 Cases in Fairmont.” The article went on to say that Dr. Hunt and his son were

¹ http://1918.pandemicflu.gov/the_pandemic/01.htm

² <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/generel/greatpandemic2.html#minnesota>

treating cases in Blue Earth, Granada, and surrounding towns as well as Fairmont. Fairmont schools, churches, Sunday schools, and theaters were closed. Hay and Nicholas stated that the Strand Theater will be voluntarily closed as they did not want to be responsible for possibly spreading the disease. They also canceled a production scheduled for the Haynic.

As the fall of 1918 progressed, the following was reported in the *Fairmont Sentinel*:

- October 9, 1918: Six New Cases of Influenza Here; Huntley Hard Hit. Consolidated school closed, teachers ill and one near death, Dr. Strobel better.
- October 10, 1918: Third Death in Village of Welcome Reported, Others in Serious Condition, Few New Cases in County and Worst May Be Over.
- October 11, 1918: Truman Soldier Dies of Influenza Few Weeks After Entering Service of Our country.
- October 12, 1918: Closing of Schools Extended One Week; Fred Johnson Dead. Johnson was the well known and respected manager of Rippe Elevator in Welcome.
- October 14, 1918: Influenza Takes Two More Lives; 5 Ill in 1 Home.
- October 15, 1918: Fraser Township Boy a Victim Of Influenza Plague
- October 29, 1918: Ruth Rademacher Former Fairmont Girl Is Summoned, Influenza Claims Young Woman Well Known and Esteemed in This City.
- November 2, 1918: Harry Wishnick Dies; Is Second Influenza Victim.
- November 3, 1918: Schools Closed For Fortnight; 4 Teachers Ill
- November 5, 1918: Fairmont Girl Dies in Montana - Influenza and Pneumonia Fatal to Teacher
- November 23, 1918: Health Officer Says Influenza Now Seems Over

As can be readily observed, the 1918 Spanish Flu Pandemic took a severe toll on Martin County residents, lingering beyond the fall of 1918. There were few that weren't touched by sickness or death. However, in contrast to the many somber accounts reported on this topic, there were also some humorous findings intermingled with this rather grim subject. One involved spitting on sidewalks in Rapid City, South Dakota. This article stated the following: "Yesterday the Home Guards patrolling the streets were kept busy enforcing the city ordinances prohibiting spitting on sidewalks. J. Mulcaby was haled into Judge Nystrom's court charged with flagrant violation of the anti-spitting ordinance. He entered a plea of not guilty."³ Another article of interest quotes a doctor from Des Moines stating that he had a serum that cures flu and pneumonia. Finally, there was a report that hogs were catching pneumonia around Mason City. Despite the bad news about the flu pandemic of 1918, some of the stories that appeared to be incidentally related to that flu outbreak might seem somewhat fascinating and humorous today.

The 1918 Influenza Pandemic infected 28% of all Americans and killed 675,000 people, ten times as many Americans as died in the war (WW I).⁴ Influenza is

³ http://1918.pandemicflu.gov/pics/newspapers/Arrested_for_Spitting.gif

⁴ <http://virus.stanford.edu/usa/>

obviously an illness to be respected and treated appropriately. Hopefully, the current H1N1 Flu will be controlled and we won't have to face the likes of previous pandemics in our history.