

Adams Historical Society Newsletter

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RETURN OF THE INFLUENZA PANDEMIC

On October 23, 2009, in order to proactively address concerns about an impending pandemic, President Obama signed a proclamation declaring 2009-H1N1 Influenza a national emergency. The proclamation enhances the ability of our Nation's medical treatment facilities to handle a surge in H1N1 patients by allowing, as needed, the waiver of certain standard federal requirements on a case-by-case basis. With this medical situation on the forefront of our minds, the Adams Historical Society decided to revisit a previous newsletter published ten years ago that explored how Adams was affected by the deadly pandemic in 1918. Although some of the situations are different, there are a number of similar traits between the H1N1 flu and the Influenza of 1918 including the type of symptoms and the fact the victims were usually young.

THE INFLUENZA EPIDEMIC OF 1918

In 1918, the United States was faced with the worst epidemic in its history. Before it was over, the flu would kill more than 600,000 Americans – more than all the combat deaths of this century combined. The pandemic, an epidemic that is spread worldwide, killed at least 25 million people in one year. It was no minor disease, everyone was at risk and it began here in the United States.

America in 1918 was a nation at war. Draft call-ups, bond drives, troop shipments were all in high gear when the flu epidemic appeared on the morning of March 11, 1918 at Camp Riley in Kansas. The company cook reported to the infirmary with typical flu-like symptoms. By noon, 107 soldiers were sick. Within two days, 522 people were sick. Reports soon followed of sick soldiers from other military bases around the country. Within seven days, every state in the Union had been infected.

In March, 84,000 American "dough-boys" set out for Europe; they were followed by another 118,000 the next month. Little did they know they were spreading a virus around the globe that would prove to be more deadly than their rifles. By July, tens of thousands had fallen ill and died. This first wave was only a prelude to the devastation the flu would elicit when it reappeared in full force that fall.

Returning troops began bringing the flu back home. In September, the disease spread to the civilian population. It moved swiftly down the eastern seaboard. It was a flu unlike any other. It preyed most heavily upon the 20-40 year old age group, which was normally the most resistant to disease.

The onset of illness was quite sudden. In a matter of hours, a person could go from good health to being so weak they could not walk. Victims complained of general weakness and severe aches in their muscles, backs, joints, and heads. Fevers could reach 105 degrees and the sick fell

prey to wild bouts of delirium.

October saw the epidemic's full horror. There was a nationwide shortage of caskets. Guards were hired by funeral directors to protect their stock of coffins. In Philadelphia, the dead were left in gutters and stacked in caskets on the front porches. Trucks drove through city streets picking up caskets and corpses. People hid indoors afraid to interact with their friends and neighbors.

Doctors were helpless to stop the epidemic. Through advances in microbiology, researchers had developed vaccines for many bacterial diseases, but the tiny influenza virus could not be detected through the microscopes of the time. Vaccines they developed didn't work; the virus was too small.

Viruses were not understood, but a number of measures to prevent persons from spreading the disease were undertaken. Schools, theaters, lodges, dance halls and other public places of amusement were closed. People were arrested for spitting in public. Instructive posters, newspaper advertisements and pamphlets were widely distributed with recommendations for preventing the disease. Advertisements for many products appeared touting their effectiveness in fighting the grippe. Despite these efforts to get the word out, many people, particularly in rural communities, were left uninformed.

In desperation, some people turned to folk remedies to fend off or try to cure the flu. The air was filled with the pungent smells of garlic, camphor, onion and sulfur. Although the effectiveness of some of the home cures could be questioned, people felt that they were doing something to fight the epidemic.

The disease peaked within two or three weeks after showing up in a given city. Just as suddenly as it struck, the calamitous disease abruptly began to vanish. By mid-November, the numbers of dead dropped markedly. It probably ran out of fuel, the people who were susceptible and could be infected.

LOCAL IMPACT

The Influenza Epidemic of 1918 left its mark on the Town of Adams. The Annual Report of 1918 provides specific information about the epidemic in the reports from several committees. The report from the

Board of Health stated that "cases began to be reported on Sept. 17th. The number gradually increased, until the week beginning October 13, when a large number of cases were being reported daily. On October 18, a public Board of Health meeting was held at which committees were appointed to assist in controlling the epidemic. The Town was divided into districts, and a Diet Kitchen was opened at the High School where meals were prepared for those who were ill with the disease and had no one to look after their needs. The nourishment was distributed by several young ladies...."

"The local physicians were so busy and overworked that it was necessary to call in outside aid. Two State and one Federal Physician, with several nurses, were added to the local corps during the height of the epidemic. The total number of cases is estimated at 3,000...." The number of deaths in 1918 was 56, "a much lower death rate than in some other portions of the State. It was necessary to close the school for several weeks and to forbid public gatherings of all kinds for sometime."

Cost of Epidemic of Influenza	
Relief Dr. drugs	\$58.37
Stimulus H.H. etc	40.39
Thompson's Pharmacy	5.22
" " "	21.10
Diet Kitchen	21.97
Mabel	1.45
Dania Bros.	131.
Ice cream bills	55.55
Plunkett Memorial Hospital	139.
Dr. Bond	16.
No Adams Transcript	5.
Mc Donagh + minkid	1.96
Murphy, D.A.	5.15
Berkshire Hotel	7.50
Berkshire Hotel	32.
Seymour Auto Station	7.20
Total	\$547.61

This written entry in the Board of Health meeting minutes adds up the cost of the epidemic. A more detailed account appeared in the Selectmen's Report of the 1918 Annual Town Report.

The Board of Health Report ended by stating that, "The total cost of the epidemic was \$547.61." Under the itemized listing of expenses incurred, there are payments made to ten businessmen for the cost of "ice cream loss on account of epidemic." They were reimbursed for business loss due to the forced closure of ice cream parlors.

The School Calendar was adjusted to provide "for a winter and two spring terms, each eight weeks in length," because the schools had been closed during the fall term for about four weeks owing to the influenza epidemic. The report of the Supervisor of

Household Arts for the school system states, "From Oct. 21 to Oct. 29, during the epidemic, the school kitchen was opened as a diet center where food in the nature of soup, broth, gruels, custards, light and solid diet was prepared. The total number of persons helped was 778 or an average of 87 per day. Much interest was shown by many of the townspeople and many contributions were sent in which greatly assisted in the work at the diet kitchen."

In 1919, the report of the Almoner, a person who distributes money to the poor, reflects more lasting economic effects. He states, "The aftermath of the influenza epidemic of 1918 brought many applications for temporary assistance, some of which would have to be continued for several years to come. The cost of aid to families assisted temporarily because of the disease was extraordinarily large, but the last few months of the year saw fewer demands from that source."

TRANSCRIPT REPORTS

During the month of October 1918, stories in the *North Adams Transcript* reflected the local concern. The number of new cases reported in each town headlined articles. When fifty-one new cases were reported in Adams, the article stated that the physicians were unable to take on any more work and if illness were to break out among them, Adams would be in a serious way for physicians. Persons who desired their services were told that they must place their calls in the early morning or early afternoon. So busy were the doctors that the calls which came at those times required work late into the night. So strenuous was the day's activities for the doctors, that they needed the necessary sleep if they were to remain well enough to care for the others. The article goes on to say that there were a number of families in town that were severely attacked by the disease. One physician had a family of seven, all but one of whom was confined to his bed.

Calls were sent out for women to give their assistance to the Red Cross officials and aid in the making of gauze masks used by those caring for the influenza patients. "Your housework and preserving can wait while you do your share to conquer the epidemic," the article implored.

There were also several advertisements for commercial products which proclaimed their abilities to assist in the prevention or treatment of influenza. Vick's Vaporub which was called comparatively new in New England, was advertised as being able to

stimulate the mucous membrane to throw off the germs. The ad went on to advise patients to call a physician, go to bed, stay quiet and don't worry.

Large advertisements sponsored by the State Department of Health advised on how to avoid influenza and how to care for those who have it. Readers were told that if they "follow the dictates of this official bulletin, you will be doing your duty to your fellow man and to yourself."

ADAMS BOARD OF HEALTH

In 1918, the members of the Board of Health were Dr. J. F. Crowley, Herman Klammer and Antoni Bloniarz. The handwritten minutes of the Board of Health chronicle the progress of the epidemic in the town. They are copied here as they appear in the original.

September 20 - meeting held all members present voted to close all the schools and moving picture theaters also the library on account of the prevalence of influenza - meeting adjourned

October 3 - meeting held all members present voted to close all the churches in town to public services - all funerals to be private and attendance limited to near relatives. All lodge meetings prohibited. - meeting adjourned

October 18 - Special public meeting held in District Court Room 8 pm Dr. Crowley, H. Klammer, Dr. Streeter, District Health officer present. Anthony Bloniarz absent on account of death in his family. The object of the meeting to discuss ways and means to control the spread of the epidemic. Dr. Streeter gave an interesting talk regarding Influenza. The following committee were appointed Miss Angie Sanderson, Mary Carney, Chief of Police Hodecker, Rev. Mr. Breaker, Rev. Mr. Bauer and Supt. of Schools F.A. Bagnall. - meeting then adjourned.

October 19 - Dr. Graves arrived to assist the local physicians being sent by the State Board of Health.

October 21 - meeting held at High School at 8 pm. all members present voted to close all the saloons and to prohibit the sale of soda and ice cream at drug store and all places where such luxuries were sold. - meeting adjourned

October 22 - Dr. J.F.C. Luhan of N.Y. City arrived representing the U.S. Public Health Service

October 23 - Dr. Taylor arrived being sent by State Board of Health

October 31 - Epidemic under control.

PERSONAL STORY

The Board of Health meeting minutes state that Antoni Bloniarz was "absent on account of death in his family." The meeting minutes fail to tell us that he lost his young wife to influenza. He was an undertaker during the epidemic. Burying the dead as quickly as possible was considered vital to the control of the spread of the disease. Many funerals and burials were conducted at the home of the deceased, especially in the rural areas of the community. Mr. Bloniarz left his wife and seven children healthy at home when he traveled to perform the duties of his occupation. When he returned, his young wife was mortally ill. Two of his young children were also ill, but they survived. His story has been passed down to me. Antoni Bloniarz was my grandfather. He took great pride in stating that he was the first person of Polish descent to have been elected to a public office in Adams, the Board of Health. In that capacity he touched many lives and inspired generations of his descendants to follow his example of public service.

Every family was affected in some way by the influenza epidemic of 1918. Today we can all remain hopeful that increased communication about preventive actions, practicing good hygiene, and protective vaccinations will help to stem the tide of spreading disease with far less tragic results.

- Juliette Wilk-Chaffee

Petronela and Antoni Bloniarz were married in 1902. No man in Adams was more affected by the epidemic than Mr. Bloniarz. He was a member of the Board of Health as well as an undertaker. He saw the worst of the epidemic in his job. He felt the frustration of a public official dealing with the crisis. He knew its tragedy personally when his wife was killed by the virus.



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N O V E M B E R 2 0 0 9

Comments about the "Italians in Zylonite" issue

The last newsletter was the most popular of all our past newsletters and we received the greatest amount of requests for extra copies.

An incorrect identification of #38 in the photo was published as Joseph Giorgini but the correct identification is Annibale Benvenuti, the father of "Nando" Benvenuti. He was visiting from Italy. The correction was supplied by Annibale's great-grandson, Roger Benvenuti, whose father, Ray, originally identified the people in this photograph.

The young girl #9 was identified as Olga "Minnie" (Bianchi) Battista is correctly identified as Carmella (Bianchi) Demastrie. In fact, Olga and Ermine "Minnie" are two separate sisters of Carmella.