

## **Influenza pandemic brought Twin Cities to standstill**

“Do Not Fear Influenza,” read a local Red Cross notice from October 1918. “Learn how to avoid it—How to care for those who have it—What to do if you get it.”

Also known as the Spanish flu, the influenza pandemic of 1918 claimed an estimated 600,000 American lives, making it the deadliest such outbreak in the nation's history. Bloomington was hit hard as well, and in October 1918, the worst month of the scourge, the city was brought to a near standstill.

A look back at the 1918 pandemic is scary stuff for sure. That said, it also can be reassuring to learn that a century ago the nation triumphed over an even deadlier pathogen than today's COVID-19. And we did so with public health measures and ordinary folk embracing common sense routines—from social distancing to repeated handwashing.

Before victory, though, there were staggering losses. As the bodies began piling up from the pandemic, the World War in Europe ground to a bloody end. The cruelly named “war to end all wars” led to the deaths of some 20 million soldiers and civilians. In its wake, the influenza pandemic spread to nearly every corner of the globe, taking in the process another 50 million or more souls.

It was, quite simply, a brutal one-two punch to a benumbed world.

“The influenza epidemic, which is sweeping the country, has invaded every township of McLean County,” reported The Pantagraph on Oct. 12, 1918. “Already there are thousands of cases of the disease in this community and a number of deaths have resulted.”

It's believed that the first Bloomington resident to die of the Spanish flu was 27-year-old factory worker Fred Meyers, who died on Sept. 29. That same day, James Carroll, a 26-year-old soldier from the eastern McLean County community of Arrowsmith, died while stationed at Camp Grant in Rockford. As with many influenza victims, Carroll appeared on the mend before quite rapidly and unexpectedly dying of complications from pneumonia.

This was a flu "unlike any other" because it targeted those in their 20s and 30s, generally the healthiest segment of the population.

By early October, the pages of The Pantagraph and its competitor, the long-gone Daily Bulletin, were crowded with obituaries, with many residents dying while stationed at World War I training camps. On Oct. 2, The Bulletin reported the death of Bloomington resident Ransom Johnson at Camp Devens in Massachusetts, and Harry Pietsch, also of Bloomington, at Camp Grant. The situation at the latter was such that on Oct. 7, Col. Charles B. Hagadorn, the acting commander,

took his own life, as he was apparently unable to cope with the more than 500 influenza deaths, camp-wide, on his watch.

By Oct. 11, Bloomington schools—both public and private—were ordered closed, as well as theaters and churches. Normal quickly followed suit, while Judge James Riley suspended county court business.

“Influenza is a crowd disease and it can be most effectively combated by comparative isolation,” declared *The Pantagraph* a day later. “The diseases must be met and fought fearlessly. Panic would only contribute to its spread. Let everyone look to his personal health as never before and take every precaution possible against contracting the influenza.” The newspaper even called for a temporary halt to public funerals.

“Protect others by sneezing or coughing into handkerchiefs or cloths, which should be boiled or burned,” instructed the local Red Cross influenza committee. Area residents in proximity to those sickened were advised to wear gauze masks—“which may be obtained from the Red Cross or may be made at home of four or six folds of gauze.”

This committee also organized the donation of supplies, ranging from single iron beds to jams and jellies (it was said that those recovering were keen for sweets).

Area doctors were “literally working day and night,” a situation complicated by the dire shortage of trained nurses. Undertakers too were “working almost to the limit,” circumstances exacerbated by the fact that several area gravediggers were sent to Rockford to help bury the hundreds of dead at Camp Grant.

Local public health officials established an influenza command center at old Withers Library in downtown Bloomington, and they accepted an offer by the directors of the Bloomington Country Club to use their clubhouse as a temporary hospital.

Clara Brian, McLean County’s first Home Bureau adviser, recalled the “never-to-be-forgotten flu epidemic” in a later reminiscence. “I began work as dietitian of the emergency hospital set up in the Bloomington Country Club,” she wrote. “During the two weeks, 3,600 meals were prepared and served. One hundred and fourteen patients were cared for by doctors and nursing staff.”

At the country club, Brian and others undoubtedly helped save many lives, but the virus sometimes overwhelmed their best intentions and efforts. Those who died at the converted country club included 15-year-old Marie Jasper of Bloomington. She was the only one of nine members of her family admitted to the hospital to succumb to the virus.

Julia Scott Vrooman’s home at 701 E. Taylor St. (today known as the Vrooman Mansion) was also used as a hospital, though its beds were reserved for ailing Illinois Wesleyan University students enrolled in a wartime training program.

With the epidemic raging in Bloomington, the virus made no distinction between rich and poor. On Oct. 11, Albert H. Hoopes, a leading Bloomington merchant, called a barber to his home for his morning shave. Although he was feeling a little under the weather, his condition did not appear worrisome. Hoopes, though, was dead by that afternoon.

"Grim Reaper is Unusually Busy" noted an Oct. 13 newspaper headline. Five days later, one local doctor estimated the number of influenza cases in Bloomington at 1,700. There was no more room at the country club or Scott-Vrooman home, so family members had to treat all but the most severe cases from home, hoping for a periodic visit by a fatigued nurse or physician.

Yet by month's end, doctors were reporting a marked decline in the number of new cases, and by the first week of November, local schools, churches, and theaters had reopened, and the two emergency hospitals closed. Influenza returned during the first three months of 1919, but not with the vehemence of the previous fall.

The Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 is a sobering lesson regarding the virulence of communicable diseases. But let us also remember it as a story of perseverance and community spirit.

We could all use a little hope these days.