

Spanish Flu of 1918: a look back at the brutal, relentless pandemic

Written by Darci Tomky

I had a little bird,
It's name was Enza.
I opened the window,
And in-flu-enza.

Instead of singing “Ring Around the Rosie,” referring to Plague hundreds of years ago, children jumped rope to this rhyme in the early 1900s. Quite the opposite of the mental image of a little bird named Enza, the rhyme refers to the Spanish Influenza of 1918, a pandemic that some consider to be the worst epidemic the world has ever faced.

“It begins to look as though it would be much easier to count those who do not have the influenza than it would to count those who have,” reported *The Holyoke Enterprise* Oct. 25, 1918. While some may think this could be said of the H1N1 flu faced today, it doesn't compare with the severity of the brutal Spanish Flu of 1918.

An estimated one-third of the world's population, or 500 million people, were infected by this flu with as many as 50 million deaths. It's estimated that 675,000 Americans died with 28 percent of the U.S. population affected by the flu.

This strain of the flu was particularly vicious with a high mortality rate, killing people within days or even hours. Just like the H1N1 flu today, the Spanish Flu had a greater ability to infect the lungs than the common seasonal flu virus.

“The epidemic has raced around the world with unprecedented speed and virulence,” reported an article from *Chronicle of the 20th Century*. It spread rapidly through European and American soldiers fighting in WWI and thus spread easily to America and other countries affected by the war, hitting them harder because the populations were already weakened by the stress and poor nutrition caused by the war.

More U.S. soldiers in WWI died from the Spanish Flu than those who died from wounds suffered in battle.

A letter sent to Holyoke from (your son) IRA dated Jan. 22, 1919 and printed in the *Enterprise* Jan. 31, 1919 said, “Was glad to hear that you had all escaped the flu so far. It hit our ship

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pretty hard while we were going over in September and October. At one time only 14 out of the crew of 79 men were able to get around. All of us seamen were detailed to the fire-room. I was on the doors for 10 days. That is for 20 four-hour watches, and during that time we were for six days in a hurricane.”

While the flu first appeared in the spring of 1918, it hit hardest in the fall of that year.

Teresa Mailander remembered her grandmother, Katie Herrington, died of the Spanish Flu when she was around 38 years old. Herrington lived in Montana and left behind five children, including Mailander’s mother Teresa Blickhan who was 10 years old at the time. As the second youngest sibling, circumstances forced Blickhan to move to an orphanage after her mother died.

“This swine flu has been affecting me a lot because I think of my grandma,” said Mailander.

Spanish Flu virus spreads to Colorado

United States Department of Health and Human Services reported on their Great Pandemic website the Spanish flu was first found in Colorado among military recruits who had reported for duty at the University of Colorado. By October it had spread throughout the state.

Every area of the state was affected, but the flu was more severe in the mountainous region of Colorado. Especially high death rates were found among miners whose lungs were already weakened.

Emmanuel Miller, grandfather of Darrell Tomky (and my great-grandfather), was 11 years old when the pandemic hit. His parents both died of the flu, and Miller, the oldest of eight children, was now in charge.

Knowing he had relatives in Ft. Morgan, Miller hitched a wagon, loaded up his siblings and headed east across the Rocky Mountains from their home in Silt. Seven of the children were

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able to live with relatives, but the youngest, only a baby at the time, was adopted by another family.

“Wouldn’t that have been scary living at that time with everyone around you dying?” said Tomky.

An article in the Oct. 25, 1918 *Enterprise* said they found 400 cases of the Spanish Flu in the Haxtun area. “Some of the stores have had to close their doors because all the force is ill. The depot will have to be locked between trains, as both the agent and his assistant are sick.”

A headline in the same newspaper said “Public Meetings are not Permissible While Influenza Rages” in Holyoke. In the midst of the War Fund Campaign, it said, “The fact that public meetings are prevented is going to make it necessary for all individuals to do all in their power to boost for the coming campaign and to inform their neighbors of the merit of the cause to be represented.”

Parties and celebrations at the end of the war on Armistice Day, Nov. 11, 1918, certainly did not help the spread of the fatal disease. Still in an effort to control it, a Dec. 6, 1918 *Enterprise* said Haxtun again shut down all schools, churches, picture shows and all other places which might suggest public gatherings.

“Every person should as near as possible observe the health rules suggested for the prevention of influenza,” reports the Dec. 6, 1918 *Enterprise*, “And by doing so, may save much suffering for themselves as well as others.

“Well, it seems as though you are having some hard luck back home. That pest, the flu, you have got is a stem winder. I think you had better be a little careful,” American soldier William F. Saylor advised his family in a letter sent home to Holyoke dated Dec. 7, 1918 and printed in the Jan. 17, 1919 *Enterprise*.

Another soldier overseas, Carl Mason, wrote to his father P.B. Mason on Jan. 11, 1919. He said, “Yours of the 16th of December received today. I am indeed very sorry that you have been

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ill with the influenza, but the news that you are quite well is cheering.”

Some Holyoke residents were not as lucky to avoid the flu. An article printed Nov. 22, 1918 explained how a “local farmer succumbs to ravages of influenza.”

It said, “Claude Henry Magers, a prominent farmer who resides 18 miles southeast of town, died on last Sunday night at 10:30, after suffering several days with pneumonia and influenza. His death came after his being unconscious several hours—he having suffered severely until the time of his death. He was 37 years of age and left a wife and one son, 12 years old.”

“Epidemic is on the increase and conditions serious” headlined the Dec. 6, 1918 *Enterprise*. Four deaths were reported that week—28-year-old Anna Jasper, Mrs. Maude Ethel Saunders, Jack Miller and Anderson Mooney. Colver Brothers Undertaking was surely busier than usual during that time.

In general, morticians were running out of coffins for all those dead from the flu, and the undertakers themselves were also getting sick.



Medical staff members combat the Spanish Flu

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A shortage of health professionals made caring for those infected with the flu a great challenge.

Reports from northeast Colorado said entire families were sick and in bed leaving no one to care for those who had the flu.

Besides all their focus on the war efforts, the American Red Cross also stepped in to help with this “dangerous menace.” An *Enterprise* article from Oct. 11, 1918 said, “To the end that we may render the necessary and expected assistance we must enlist the aid of every graduate nurse, every undergraduate nurse and every nurse’s aid in the Mountain division. Our chapter must do its share. Every eligible nurse within this jurisdiction must be enrolled immediately, subject to call at any hour, for services anywhere.”

In October, 1918, three physicians from Haxtun were all ill and a doctor from Denver had to be called out to help with the large number of flu cases in that town.

Doctors in Holyoke were kept busy day and night and were in much need of rest. They found little time to sleep in between caring for so many flu patients.

According to an advertisement in 1918, the best hospital care was found in Holyoke as it boasted they had “The Only Modern Hospital within 200 Miles of Holyoke.” Either Dr. Timmons or Dr. Parker were always at the hospital which had trained nurses, x-ray machines, laboratories, modern operating rooms and modern rooms for patients.

With the Spanish Flu epidemic also came a number of other diseases that contributed to the high death rate of those infected with the disease.

Both pneumonia and tuberculosis were reported to attack patients following the flu virus.

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A U.S. Health service warning in the Dec. 6, 1918 *Enterprise* said, “The present epidemic has taught by bitter experience how readily a condition beginning apparently as a slight cold may go on to pneumonia and death ... unless the people learn to realize the seriousness of the danger they will be compelled to pay a heavy death toll from pneumonia and other respiratory diseases.”

Smallpox also seemed to be a problem in Haxtun the same time they were hit with the flu. Comparing smallpox and the flu, the Dec. 6, 1918 *Enterprise* said, “It seems as though it is doubtful as to which is to become the most popular disease.”

Because of the limited medical knowledge at the time, there were no cures or vaccine for the Spanish Flu. The U.S. Public Health Service simply gave this advice—“Build up your strength with right living, good food and plenty of fresh air ... become a fresh-air crank and enjoy life.”

At the start of a new year, there was hope for the Americans affected by the pandemic. The Jan. 3, 1919 edition of the *State Herald* said Holyoke physicians were now prepared with the flu vaccine. “Dr. Timmons became interested in this treatment and spent a few days in Denver recently investigating the success with treatment, and he expresses himself well satisfied that this vaccination is a preventive of the flu if rightly handled.”

Even with the vaccine, Holyoke was still reporting more deaths from the Spanish Flu in March of 1919 including 30-year-old Emil Walker, 20-year-old Emil Hanson and the 15-month-old Neomia Burham. All three were buried in Holyoke Cemetery.

Pandemic flu viruses all related

Just like the H1N1 flu today, the Spanish Flu of 1918 was affecting people in the younger generation, with many deaths of people 20-40 years of age. Because this was not the first flu pandemic, older people had some immunity from exposure to a similar strain of the flu virus that swept through the world in 1890.

Today’s flu is the third global pandemic strain since 1918. An article in *Scientific American* in

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October, 2009 said, “Every human flu strain in the past 90 years has been a member of a dynasty founded by the 1918 virus including the H2N2 virus in 1957, the H3N2 pandemic strain that began circulating in 1968 and the 2009 H1N1.”

In America, 70,000 people died from the 1957 flu virus while only 33,000 died in the 1968 pandemic—small numbers compared to the 675,000 who died in 1918-1919.

WWI was man’s destruction of man, but whether one was a soldier fighting on the front line or a civilian on his farm at home, in 1918 the world was forced to cope with this violent infectious disease which proved to be one of the worst enemies of all.

Editor's Note: Join us on a journey through time as we take a look at the good ol' days in Holyoke History 101. Each story in the Holyoke Enterprise's "Do You Remember When..." series will explore a major event in history and the ways that event changed and shaped Holyoke history. Hopefully it will help stir up some good memories of days gone by.