

LA GRIPPE

The Spanish Influenza Epidemic of 1918-1919

On October 11, 1918 the Perth Courier informed its readers that;

Several cases of Spanish Influenza have developed in town but all are receiving careful attention and the possibility of it becoming an epidemic here as in the cases of many towns, is remote. The medical officer of health warns all who have heavy colds to attend to them and thus avoid development of la grippe or influenza.

Considering the swath of death that the influenza epidemic was already cutting across much of the world by October 1918, and the number of lives it would eventually claim, the lack of concern expressed by Perth's Medical Officer of Health may seem astonishing. The explanation for the Courier's low key report is twofold.

First, no one at Perth, and few in Canada, had any idea how virulent the 1918 virus was, nor the rapidity and extent of its spread. War time control over public information channels saw to that. That it was dubbed as 'Spanish Influenza' (even though it probably originated in either China or the American mid-west) arose from the fact that press reports of the epidemic first appeared in Spain, a non-combatant in WWI and thus a country where the media was not subject to extensive government censorship. The outbreak emerged in the trenches of Belgium and France nearly a year before the Perth Courier took notice. Doctors and scientists knew it was a virus, but in a day before they could even see viruses, and decades before advances in genetic science could identify it and create vaccines, it spread through the armies of Germany, France, England, Russia and Canada with terrifying speed. Carried home by wounded soldiers, military camps and hospitals across Europe and North America became transmission vectors into the civilian population. Fearing, after four years of bloody stalemate at the front, a collapse of both military and home-front morale, if not panic, the authorities struggled to prevent news of the outbreak, or at least the severity of the disease, from reaching the public. Perth's Medical Officer of Health was being misled and outright lied to.

November 1, 1918 - Denzell Howard, the son of James Denzell, Ramsay, died on Sunday, October 20 from pneumonia¹ at the age of 22 years. He was on leave from the Ottawa military camp when taken ill.

Secondly, outbreaks of 'La Grippe', as influenza had been commonly known before 1918, were not uncommon at Perth. A study of obituaries and death notices in the Perth Courier shows that relatively mild epidemics of influenza frequently swept through the community in the 1890s, more or less in alternating years. Community news items frequently refer to many people being ill with La Grippe and death announcements clearly stating a cause of death show that at least a half dozen people succumbed to La Grippe each time; 1889/1890 = 8, 1891/1892 = 5,

¹ As it was almost always pneumonia that actually killed the victim, not the influenza virus itself, influenza deaths of the time were usually reported as 'influenza leading to pneumonia' or simply as 'from pneumonia'.

1893/1894 = 6, 1896/1897 = 7, 1898/1899 = 4. Other circumstantial evidence in the Courier reports would suggest the death toll was actually about twice these numbers, perhaps a dozen or more in each year. There had also been a minor epidemic of influenza over the winter of 1916-1917.

Although unaware of the full ramifications of this new strain of influenza, through that first Courier story the Medical Officer of Health did issue some guidance to local residents headlined "*How To Combat Spanish Influenza*".



1) *Avoid all unnecessary crowds. Keep out of doors, walk to work if possible and sleep with the windows open. Make use of all available sunshine.*

2) *Keep the feet dry and warm. Use sufficient heat to keep the house dry and comfortable.*

3) *Get seven hours sleep and good, clean food.*

4) *All those coming into contact with the sick should use gauze face masks covering the nose and mouth with at least*

four thickness of cloth. These should be changed at two hour intervals and either burned or boiled four to five minutes. All persons should wash their hand immediately before eating.

5) *Avoid all sneezing and coughing individuals. If necessary to sneeze or cough, cover the face with a cloth or handkerchief.*

6) *Refrain from eating in restaurants where dishes are either imperfectly sterilized or not sterilized. There is grave danger of conveying infection from this source as well as soda fountains. Ask for destructible cups and saucers or be sure all dishes are sterilized by being boiled.*

Some parts of this advice were sound and helpful, and probably helped to save lives. Other parts are indicative of the medical profession's minimal understanding of viral transmission. Sleeping with the 'windows open' at Perth in October and November, while still managing to keep the house 'heated, dry and comfortable', seems contradictory. The Medical Officer's advisory must have also represented a serious economic blow to restaurants and soda fountains.

Despite assurance that the risk of an epidemic at Perth was 'remote', and the best advice of the Medical Officer, two weeks later the Perth Courier reported eight people dead, most from pneumonia developed in concert with an attack of Spanish Flu. Among these, Sharbot Lake lost its doctor.

EPIDEMIC INFLUENZA (SPANISH)

**This Disease is Highly Communicable.
It May Develop Into a Severe Pneumonia.**

There is no medicine which will prevent it.
Keep away from public meetings, theatres and other places where crowds are assembled.
Keep the mouth and nose covered while coughing or sneezing.
When a member of the household becomes ill, place him in a room by himself. The room should be warm, but well ventilated.
The attendant should put on a mask before entering the room of those ill of the disease.



TO MAKE A MASK

Take a piece of ordinary cheesecloth 8 x 16 inches, fold it to make it 8 x 8 inches. Next fold this to make it 8 x 4 inches. Tie cords about 10 inches long at each corner. Apply over mouth and nose as shown in the picture.



ISSUED BY THE PROVINCIAL BOARD OF HEALTH

October 20, 1918 - Sunday afternoon, Dr. Barker died at Sharbot Lake only being confined to his home a few days from pneumonia. He leaves a wife and young child. Deceased was 33 years of age and previous to being taken ill was very busily engaged attending to the wants of people who were ill, the village having been gripped very severely in the remorseless hand of the prevailing epidemic.

In the following week there were at least four more deaths clearly linked to Influenza, but the authorities imagined the worst to be over. In its November 8, 1918 edition the Courier assured its readers that;

The epidemic is abating in Perth but is still reported to be quite prevalent throughout the country. In town, however, it is on the downgrade and there is cause to believe the worst is over. Last Sunday, the request to the churches to remain closed was lifted and

services were held in all the churches with the exception of the Baptist and St. John's Church, Rev. Father Hogan has been indisposed lately. Sunday school was held, however, and while it is expected that all the churches will be open for both services on Sunday, the Board of Health does not wish that Sunday school be held at any of the churches feeling it is not in the best interest of the community to bring bodies of children together at the present period of sickness.

In the same edition the Watson's Corners corresponded reported that, "Church service was held in Zion Church on Sunday after having been dismissed for three weeks due to the flu epidemic". The correspondent from Franktown reported that, "The public school will reopen in the village and the other sections throughout the township on Monday next. They have been closed by the Beckwith Board of Health for the last five weeks".

Despite these notes of optimism, in the same edition the Courier reported the deaths of a husband and wife within days of each other.

Last Thursday morning James A. Devlin passed away following that of his wife Eliza Jane Edwards who predeceased him by but a few days both being victims of the prevailing epidemic. Six sons and three daughters survive ... [son] Hugh just convalescing from the same illness ...

By November 22nd there had been at least another six, and possibly as many as 15, additional deaths, and the Courier informed the community that;

Owing to the flu situation in the west, the national Thanksgiving [marking the end of WWI] which was supposed to have been observed Sunday, November 17 has been postponed to December 1st.²

Over the 15 months from October 1918 through March 1919 Perth Courier death announcements and obituaries reported a total of 49 deaths specifically identified as resulting from influenza, plus at least 57 more which would appear to have been caused by influenza.

In addition the newspaper's columns ran as many announcements for influenza victims across Canada and the United States who were former Perth residents or who had relatives living in the Perth area. Some of these were local soldiers who, having survived the long odds of WWI, made it home only to fall victim to Spanish Influenza.

November 29, 1918 - Particulars have been received this week by Michael McCaffrey of Drummond regarding the death of the late Harry Mullen of Deloro³. Deceased was a returning soldier having enlisted on Nov. 17, 1914 with the 21st Battalion going overseas in the spring of 1915. After serving 8 months in France, he received shell shock at the Battle of Vimy Ridge and was returned to England to regain his former health. After four months in England, he returned to France again and after serving twelve months he received shrapnel wounds in the left leg at the Battle of the Somme and after some months of convalescing in England was returned to Canada in April 1918. On October 5, he went to Delora and shortly after was stricken with influenza which he succumbed to on Oct. 17. Although being a stranger at Delora, great sympathy was shown for the deceased by the many spiritual and floral offerings which adorned his casket.

For others, having miraculously survived the war, influenza cut them down in the breeding ground of England's Army Camps as they awaited transport back to Canada.

March 7, 1919 - It is reported that Private Floyd Smith, a well-known local young man, died of Spanish Influenza in a hospital in England. Private Smith who was a son of Mr. and Mrs. John Smith of town, had been with the colors a considerable time and passed through many of the larger engagements on the western front. He was back from France prior to his return to Canada when he succumbed to this dread malady.

For Perthites unfortunate enough to succumb while away from home, restrictions put in place to contain the epidemic could mean they had to be buried where they fell.

November 29, 1918 - Mr. and Mrs. James Shirley have met with a sad bereavement in the death of their son Ed, on Nov. 10 at Rosetown⁴, of pneumonia which developed from influenza. As the trains were not conveying any who died of this malady, interment had

² Canadians generally defied the postponement decree and proceeded with end-of-war thanksgiving services on Sunday, November 17, 1918.

³ Deloro, Ontario, Hastings County.

⁴ Rosetown, Ontario, in York County near Newmarket

to take place at Rosetown. A sad feature is that not any of the family were able to attend the funeral due to sickness.

The combination of the 'Great War' and the Spanish Flu often piled tragedy upon tragedy for Perth area families.

November 29, 1918 - A sad death occurred at Lanark on Monday, of last week when Miss Gertrude Strang passed to the beyond after a severe attack of influenza. She was the only surviving daughter of Mr. and Mrs. William Strang and was 19 years of age. Within a week, Mr. and Mrs. Strang have been sorely bereaved as their other daughter Annie passed away on Tuesday of the previous week. A son, William, was killed in action this summer.

One of the most striking aspects of the post WWI outbreak is that, compared to those of the 1890s, the average age of victims dropped from 56 years in the 1890s to 34 years in 1918-1919. In the latter the youngest to succumb was only four months old and the oldest 54 years of age. In the 1890s the youngest to die was 22 years of age and the oldest 93 years of age. Perth was, however, in no way unique in this respect. Across Canada and around the world the 1918 outbreak disproportionately killed the young and middle aged.

December 13, 1918 - Died, at Balderson on Sunday, Dec. 1, Dorothy Alice Balderson, youngest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. James Balderson, from influenza followed by pneumonia, aged one year six months.

January 24, 1919 - Watson's Corners: Death entered the home of Mr. and Mrs. John McIlquham on Saturday last and claimed their little four month old daughter after an illness from pneumonia.

By January 1919 the plague seemed to be abating somewhat. Over the course of that month the Courier reported only five deaths in which the announcement specifically stated the cause as influenza, with only about a dozen others which may have been influenza related. By February, however, the scourge was back in full force; in that month there were 17 deaths specifically blamed on influenza and another 10 probably related to the disease.

February 14, 1919 - Owing to another outbreak of the Spanish Influenza, a special meeting of the Board of Health was called last Friday evening and it was decided to close all public buildings except churches and places of amusement. Funerals must be provided. This time the type does not seem of such a serious nature and it is principally children who are suffering.

A warning that tuberculosis is an after-menace of Spanish Influenza was issued by the state charities aid association which urges everyone who has been ill with influenza and who has failed to make a prompt and complete recovery to take precautions by being examined by medical authorities.

By the following week the epidemic was back to full force in the Perth area and the Board of Health reacted with further orders attempting to prevent assembly and transmission;

February 21, 1919 - The influenza epidemic is again raging in our midst and taking a toll from many families, sparing neither the young nor the old. On Saturday, as a precautionary measure, the Board of Health ordered the closing of schools, skating rinks, etc. It is earnestly hoped the public will loyally cooperate with the spirit of the order and refrain from gatherings of any description. Loitering in streets, post offices, rail road rooms for the purpose of friendly chats should be avoided. Let persons who have no business abroad busy themselves at home, endeavoring to keep fit and well and if attacked by the dreaded flue take every care that the home is practically under quarantine orders.

That the Spanish Flu epidemic closed the local skating rink and put an end to the hockey season at Perth was in no way unique. Even the Stanley Cup playoffs were brought to a halt after five games when six of the Montreal Canadiens were hospitalized at Seattle on April 1, 1919.⁵

⁵ The 1919 series was never completed and 1919 is the only year in which the Stanley Cup was not awarded after playoffs were held. Canadiens defenseman Joe Hall died of the disease in Seattle hospital.

STANLEY CUP OFF; TEAM IN HOSPITAL

STANLEY CUP SERIES IS OFF

Five Canadiens and Manager Are Very Ill With Influenza

EACH TEAM WINS TWICE

Lalonde, Hall, Couture, Berliquette and McDonald Have Temperature of 101-5

Seattle, April 1.—Five of the Canadian hockey team are seriously ill with influenza and the deciding game for the Stanley Cup with Seattle will not be played.

"It will be two or three weeks before the visiting boys will be back on their feet again able to play. Consequently the series has been called off, with two games to the credit of each team. To-night's game would have decided the title," the arena management said.

"Neway" Lalonde (Canadiens' captain), Joe Hall, Bert Couture, Berliquette and McDonald are all ill at their rooms at the Georgian Hotel. In addition George Kennedy, manager of the Flying Frenchmen, is also a victim of the disease.

Temperatures of the men, it was announced, ranged to-day from 101 to 105 degrees. Plans are being made to remove them to a hospital.

Lalonde, Berliquette, Couture and Kennedy are reported only slightly ill. Last night the remaining four men came down, leaving only Pitre, Cieghorn and Vesina who are not afflicted. It is believed here the Canadiens contracted the disease in Victoria, where the players of that team are just recovering from influenza, seven of them having been in bed at one time.

Canadiens, Most of Whom Are in Seattle Hospital



Back row, from left to right—George Kennedy, manager; Pitre, Berliquette, Couture, McDonald, and trainer. Front row—Lalonde, O. Cieghorn, Corbeau, Hall and Vesin.



Former R.C.Y.C. Boat Defends Quincy Cup

Toronto yachtsmen and Lake Ontario men generally will learn with interest that Ahmeek, the former Toronto racing craft, will defend the Quincy Cup in the Atlantic this spring. The Boston Yacht Club has accepted the challenge of the Corinthian Yacht Club for a series of races for the cup.

The only Class P. boats now available at Boston are the Ahmeek, now the property of J. V. Sautry, and the Wasaka, owned by J. J. Martin. The Ahmeek was built by a Royal Canadian Yacht Club syndicate to defend the Yacht Racing Union Cup against Michleago here in 1914. Michleago was sailed down and reached the Welland Canal, when war

MUCH RACING FOR WESTERN CANADA

Fifteen Meetings, at Some of Which "Derbys" Will be Run

Winnipeg, April 1.—The Western Canada Fairs Association has an extensive program of mixed trotting, running and pacing meetings extending from June to October of this year.

At the more important points "Derbys" are provided for the runners, those so named at Calgary and Edmonton being of the value of \$1,000. All around there is considerable money to be won by runners not up to the standard of speed necessary for participation in the greater fields of international racing. The dates:

The intensity with which the scourge returned in the February of 1919 is illustrated by the tragedy of one family at Carleton Place.

February 14, 1919 - Five deaths in a family at Carleton Place within a few days from influenza makes an unhappy record for the province. A sister and brother Pearl Trotman and Bert Trotman died within an hour of each other on Sunday. A day afterwards the father Harry Trotman passed away aged 53 years. A day later Mrs. Bert Trotman and a little daughter passed away. This was five deaths from Sunday evening to Thursday all in one family. The brother and sister had a double funeral.

The upswing in case numbers in February, after the lull in January, was probably linked to the return of Canadian soldiers from camps in England.

December 20, 1918 - The death occurred in Toronto a few days ago of James L. McCann, formerly of Westport. He was ill but a short time from influenza which was followed by pneumonia. Deceased spent three years overseas taking part in the Battles of Ypres and Verdun. He was twice wounded and returned home last April.

December 20, 1918 - Following an illness from influenza and pneumonia, Edward J. Traynor died at his home on Brock Street being 33 years of age. He was a son of Mrs. Michael Traynor. Another brother, George, who was in Calgary with the Canadian Army, succumbed to this dread malady over a month ago.

March 7, 1919 - That the flu is again raging among the military forces in parts of England is the statement of Pte. L. Conlon, now attached to the 6th Canadian Reserves in Seaforth, England. In a letter recently received by his brother, A.J. Conlon, extra precaution is being taken by the camp commander to prevent the spread of the malady.

The Spanish Influenza strain, although decreasingly virulent, would remained active in Canada until the mid-1920s but by the summer of 1919 the epidemic at Perth was on the wane. The outbreak of 1918-1919 had killed some 21 million people world-wide, including about 50,000 Canadians, among whom were between 50 and 100 in the Perth area.

- **Ron W. Shaw (2016)**