

1918 Flu Epidemic Struck Erie, Nation, World

By Jefferson Publications Coordinator
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As Americans and people across the globe cope with the pandemic outbreak of coronavirus/COVID-19, many have been reminded of the deadly **Spanish Flu Epidemic of 1918**, just as World War I was entering its final year.

The statistics from that pandemic were staggering: about **650,000** Americans died, along with more than 50 million people across the world. About 350,000 Americans died within 80 days, from late summer to fall 1918. The influenza's effects were no less deadly in the Erie region in late fall 1918. In Erie alone, thousands contracted it, and about **500** Erie residents died from it. So extreme was the flu that an orphanage was established in Erie for 154 children who lost parents.

Local effects of the epidemic were chronicled in **Robert P. Pellegrini's** essay published in the *Journal of Erie Studies* in 1987. Most victims died from complications of the flu, particularly pneumonia, and its attack baffled medical experts at the time. Not only did many victims die within 24 to 48 hours of showing symptoms, approximately two-thirds were otherwise healthy and young.

Though scientific agreement has not been reached on its cause or lethal nature, the flu – **Type A, antigenic designation HsWNsw** – remains under study by the National Institutes of Health. Some modern scientists, based on a study of a genetically reconstructed strain of the virus, believe that the flu triggered a harmful immune system overreaction, instead of a healthful reaction. That would explain why healthy, younger people would be its prime target, rather than the older and very young targets in a typical seasonal flu.

The virus came on so suddenly that victims found themselves “often able to remember the exact time when they became ill,” according to infectious disease doctor and author **Robert Waldman**. Victims had to cope quickly with a fever of up to 104 degrees, an inflamed throat, hacking cough, headache, and pains to the neck, back, and joints. Those who recovered felt the effects for about three weeks.

Newspaper accounts reported that the flu came to Erie later than most American cities, with the first case recorded on **Oct. 2, 1918** by the Erie Times. In that same article, it was mentioned that nearby Corry had already been treating 500 cases.

Within a few days, Erie was in full crisis. A total of 100 new cases were reported on Oct. 6, followed by 30 on Oct. 7, and 102 on Oct. 8. All public schools were ordered closed, and State Health Commissioner **Dr. B.F. Royer** closed theaters, bowling alleys, taverns, pool rooms, and concert and dance halls. Church socials, lodge parties, and sporting events were canceled, as well as churches and Sunday schools. “The sale of alcoholic beverages without a doctor’s prescription was also prohibited,” Pellegrini wrote. Strict rules for retail stores were also established, such as children 12 and younger not being allowed to enter stores, and stores were barred from sponsoring bargains for fear of drawing crowds.

Just as today, the concept of “**social distancing**” – barring large groups and asking people to stay three to six feet from one another – was established, according to a Smithsonian documentary on the virus that first aired in March 2019. The nation’s large cities that continued to hold crowded events learned harsh lessons. On Sept. 28 in Philadelphia, for example, the city hosted a liberty parade in which 200,000 people attended. Within days, thousands of people contracted the flu. In one instance, a group of Roman Catholic seminarians helped dig graves for hundreds of people. In one Philadelphia cemetery, 3,400 were buried in mass graves.

Pittsburgh, home of seven major steel mills, dirty working conditions, and crowded living conditions, also suffered great losses. Of the 22,000 people stricken, about 4,500 died, which was twice the national rate, according to Smithsonian research.

Health and local government officials in Erie were credited with being ahead of their time for establishing a triage hospital at the Elks Club building downtown, with the worst cases being sent to Hamot and Saint Vincent hospitals. Mysteriously, the flu eased in **December 1918**, according to Pellegrini, though many suspected it was a result of fewer crowds, freezing temperatures, and the quarantine of stricken families.

Though named the **Spanish Flu**, the flu could have started and taken hold in New York City and other parts of the East Coast, or in western Kansas, according to Smithsonian research. The epidemic did strike in Spain, which was a neutral nation during World War I. The nickname was credited to independent Spanish newspapers that operated with more autonomy and less government influence compared to their American and European counterparts.

Unlike during the Spanish Flu, information and research about **COVID-19** can be shared at a mouse-click. Keeping it a secret does not work as we have seen, and luckily scientists all over the world have started to work together early on to find a vaccine and share advice how to contain the spread. While travelling and dense population is a common cause in both pandemics, we can be better off today if we listen to our health experts.

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