

SPOTLIGHT

A Page in History

Spanish influenza outbreak changes lifestyle, takes lives

"A Page in History" has chronicled some of the most distinguished and interesting former citizens who are now at rest in Sewickley Cemetery, one article at the end of every month in the Herald Star in the year 2003.

Visit Sewickley Cemetery and take the walking tour created from these essays.

This final essay of the series recalls an horrendous event, the flu pandemic of 1918, which as it occurred just as World War I was ending was somewhat neglected by history, but was searingly real to those who experienced it.

There were far more casualties in this valley from that influenza than from the World War, and influenza still presents today one of the greatest threats to humankind.

The danger with the viruses such as influenza is their capacity to evolve by occupying new hosts.

The influenza of 1918 hit the United States in two waves: spring, when it struck military camps throughout the country, and fall, when it was reintroduced from Europe with troops returning from the war. The virus spent the summer in a non-human host, most likely swine or birds, and mutated.

The spring infection although highly contagious caused relatively few deaths. The second infection was a different matter entirely. It swept the globe in six months. There were at least 30-40 million deaths worldwide. One-quarter of all Americans were infected, and 675,000 died, including 43,000 servicemen.

The effects of the second wave of infection were felt in the United States most painfully from September through November, and then the flu vanished again.

In the United States it all began on March 11, 1918, when a soldier at Camp Funston, Kan., named Albert Mitchell reported to the infirmary with typical flu symptoms, headache, sore throat, muscle pain. He was sent to bed.

Within a few hours, 100 soldiers were

sick and within two days more than 500. A few were soon ill with a secondary bacterial infection, pneumonia, but most survived, sick for only a few days.

The flu quickly spread around the country. It had visited elsewhere in the world that spring. There was a well-publicized outbreak in Spain that gave its name to this strain of influenza, although it did not originate there. In these places also the flu disappeared with the coming of summer.

In fall, the flu was back with a vengeance, ravaging Asia, India, Japan, China, the Caribbean and parts of Central and South America. The second wave of the flu arrived in the United States in August among a group of sailors who docked in Boston. Shortly, the illness spread to Camp Devens, near Boston and then moved outward.

The disease moved quickly through most every city and town in the land and in each place threatened catastrophe. About 20 percent of the victims had a mild case and recovered without incident, but others became deathly ill. Some displayed a bluish complexion with purple blisters and were prostrated by hoarse hacking breathing. Eventually the lungs would fill with a bloody foamy fluid drowning the victim.

Others contracted a secondary bacterial infection of pneumonia and either succumbed or faced long convalescence. Surviving victims faced an increased risk from tuberculosis.

The other terrifying thing about this flu is that it struck down strong and healthy individuals, including soldiers, not as was customary the elderly or very young. There were many orphans.

The birth rate in some countries was adversely affected by this event for a number of years.

The world's population has tripled since 1918, so a similar infection today would claim 100 million victims worldwide, and this in the course of a few months.

The second wave of the 1918 flu moved quickly to even the most remote



CAMP FUNSTON, Kan., registered the first case of Spanish influenza on March 11, 1918.

Photo taken from www.okstate.edu/Funston/frnsthsp

places. In the Arctic, whole villages of Eskimos were devastated. Often casualties overwhelmed the ability of the uninfected to cope, but that was not the case in the Sewickley Valley.

The crisis began here in early October 1918, when Franklin Noyer, the Commissioner of Health for the State of Pennsylvania, warned, "Due to the spreading of Spanish Influenza, which in other states has proven to be greatly accelerated by public meeting, the board has ordered the immediate closing of all places of amusement, including theatres, moving picture houses, dance halls, pool rooms and saloons until further notice."

The closing of schools, Sunday schools and churches was left to the discretion of local boards of health. The Sewickley and Edgeworth boards of health were prepared as was the Sewickley Hospital and the Red Cross Disaster Committee. These organizations were already active because of the world war, which had not ended yet.

Two physicians, Dr. John Walters (1872-1936) of Sewickley and Dr. Robert Dickson (1874-1956) of Edgeworth, already bearing a heavy burden of care as most of their colleagues had gone off to war managed the community's effort.

Both lie in Sewickley Cemetery, Walters in Lot 64, Section D and Dickson in Lot 77, Section A. They and

their helpers are local heroes, who at great personal risk to themselves nursed the contagious sick.

There were no immunizations back then, although having a case of the mild flu in the spring before did apparently afford some protection.

The local boards of health called off a Liberty Loan parade and closed up the Sewickley Theatre. Next came the order closing all public and private schools in the valley, churches and Sunday schools. All public gatherings of any kind were prohibited, including community sings and lodge meetings. Funerals were to be private, limited to members of the family.

Doctor Walters stated, "The Spanish influenza is an air-borne disease and Sewickley has suffered more than many other communities on account of the large amount of travel done by the citizens. There is no need for alarm, but there is much need for intelligent action. If proper precautions are taken in regard to sanitation and possible contact, the progress of the disease can soon be checked."

One week later there were 250 infected and 8 deaths.

The Presbyterian Church House was readied to accommodate patients to relieve crowding at Sewickley Valley Hospital, where eight student nurses had contracted the influenza.

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Many succumb to 1918 influenza

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The Herald opined, "One of the war's real horrors is now coming right home to us here in Sewickley. Let us meet it with the Sewickley spirit! There are no public meetings, no community sings, voices are mute in speech and song, while a silent effort is being made to induce persons to subscribe to the Fourth Liberty Loan.

"The air is filled with suspicion and onion fumes, and woe to the person who sneezes in public — he is shunned like a German. At the bank customers have to do business through windows barred with cheesecloth, in addition to the traditional bronze bars and plate glass. The town was dead before this, unkind persons have said, but now it is dead."

Edgeworth Public School building was requisitioned by the Edgeworth Board of Health and fitted up with 50 beds and two nurses.

The Oct. 26 Herald reported that Cochran Hose was washing down all the streets which was thought to materially aid in combating the epidemic. By then, there were 589 cases in Sewickley alone with 11 deaths.

A week later, the beginning of November, the flu seemed on the wane. On Nov. 9, the State flu ban on assembly of Oct. 4 was rescinded, and although infections continued to occur and there were some closings at the end of November, a modicum of normal life began to return to the valley.

The Herald spoke for all: "Normal community life is to be resumed today with churches, library, schools, lectures, moving pictures and all the social occasions which have been so greatly missed in our lives these past weeks.

"Perhaps it is a good thing for many of us to realize how much all of these things mean to us after all. The ban has cost us much, both as a community and individually. We fervently trust that we will never again be placed under such a misfortune."

Dr. Walters addressed Sewickley Borough Council: "Sewickley got through the epidemic very well. Our hospitals answered the purpose admirably, and with the help of the Red Cross were able to give the patients the best of attention. The hospitals could have been filled to overflowing with patients had it not been for the splendid work of the ladies of Sewickley, who supplied soup and other food and lent a hand in caring for patients in their homes, thus making it unnecessary to bring them to the hospital.

"It was common to find whole families sick at once, so that none of them could nurse or care for the others. A good proportion of our population was infected, but our death rate has been remarkably low."

By December, there were 950 cases in Sewickley with more than 20 deaths, and Edgeworth recorded having treated 64 patients in their hospital with 8 deaths. Each municipality incurred expenses of about \$2,500 in defense of the public health.

Deaths occurred on into the winter, but the worst had passed. It had been frightful, especially as society itself was threatened for a time. One was encouraged not to make social calls, not to visit the sick, to send a card instead, and you can pity the poor postman who made his rounds



THIS HEADSTONE marks the memory of Edgeworth's courageous physician, Dr. Robert Dickson.

with a gauze mask on.

Following are the dates of decease, names, addresses, ages and locations of the victims of the Spanish Influenza buried throughout Sewickley Cemetery.

Note the distressingly large proportion that were struck down in the prime of life, although there are some young people and infants.

May the community be mindful of what happened then, and be spared a similar fate.

• Oct. 1, Rini P. K. Vas, Sewickley Township, 7 months, Lot 76, Sec. F

• Oct. 7, Joseph Staunton Craig, Sewickley, 23, Lot 79, Sec. G

• Oct. 11, Louis W. Sheets, Shields, 32, Lot 143, Sec. G

• Oct. 12, Charles Ross Featherstone, Leetsdale, 2, Lot 9, Sec. F

• Oct. 15, Fletcher G. Brown, Aleppo, 28, Lot 141, Sec. E

• Oct. 16, Harry Mercer, Leetsdale, 3 months, Lot 129, Sec. E

• Oct. 16, Ralph Rine, Leetsdale, 25, Lot 146, Sec. G

• Oct. 17, Verner Nichols, Sewickley, 37, Lot 128 1/2, Sec. B

• Oct. 18, Josephine McDonald, Sewickley, 8, Lot 53, Sec. B

• Oct. 18, Robert W. Kellog, not living locally, 33, Lot 113, Sec. C

• Oct. 19, Robert W. Rine, Leetsdale, 18, Lot 147, Sec. G

• Oct. 23, Ruth Anna Peters, Ambridge, 22, Lot 140 1/2, Sec. F

• Oct. 23, Agniss Annabell Wharton, Sewickley, 12, Lot 96, Sec. E

• Oct. 25, Herman Devenney, Edgeworth, 8, Lot 213a, Sec. F

• Oct. 25, Anna Wickler, Leet Township, 28, Lot 128 1/2, Sec. F

• Oct. 25, Anna Ford, Sewickley, 30, Lot 137, Sec. D

• Oct. 25, Gertrude Weber, Glenfield, 27, Lot

Valley hit hard by 1918 flu

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152, Sec. G

• Oct. 26, Audley N. Marlatt, Sewickley, 35, Lot 6 1/2, Sec. B

• Oct. 28, James E. Parks, Ambridge, 34, Lot 155, Sec. G

• Oct. 29, Ella Morris, Leetsdale, 34, Lot 157, Sec. G

• Oct. 30, Tony Robella, Osborne, 3, Lot 537, Sec. E

• Nov. 5, Eleanor Johnson, Aleppo, 2, Lot 118, Sec. E

• Nov. 9, Norman Rucker, Edgeworth, 8, Lot 14, Sec. F

• Nov. 10, Edward McClelland, Edgeworth, 16, Lot 154, Sec. G

• Nov. 11, Daniel Brotherly, Glenfield, 28, Lot 161, Sec. G

• Nov. 12, Frances H. Gibson, Sewickley, 20, Lot 160 1/2, Sec. F

• Nov. 15, Laura D. Hawkins, Sewickley, 40, Lot 90, Sec. E

• Nov. 16, Dittman J. Luty, Sewickley, 20, Lot 90, Sec. E

• Nov. 16, Tucker Henderson, not living locally, 40, Lot 299, Sec. E

• Nov. 17, Minnie Tucker, Sewickley, 38, Lot 156, Sec. G

• Nov. 17, Mrs. Ward Gibb, Sewickley, 27, Lot 111, Sec. C

• Nov. 19, Buehla Featherstone, Leetsdale, 15, Lot 162, Sec. G

• Nov. 21, Wharton F. Gibb, Sewickley Heights, 28, Lot 111, Sec. C

• Nov. 22, Mary A. Langley, not living locally, 42, Lot 25, Sec. B

• Nov. 23, Gertrude Marie Kaelin, Shields, 25, Lot 18, Sec. C

• Nov. 26, Earling R. Brush, Sewickley, 32, Lot 150, Sec. C

• Nov. 26, Georgie A. Parker, not living locally, 40, Lot 80, Sec. C

• Nov. 27, Alice L. Wallace, Leetsdale, 31, Lot 164, Sec. G

• Dec. 1, Mary E. Jones, Sewickley, 46, Lot 92, Sec. E

• Dec. 1, Mary Esther Brown, Glenfield, 7, Lot 15, Sec. F

• Dec. 4, Anna C. Sickler, not living locally, 44, Lot 124, Sec. C

• Dec. 7, William H. Best, Osborne, 21, Lot 107 1/2, Sec. F

• Dec. 11, William H. Parrish, Sewickley, 39, Lot 165, Sec. G

• Dec. 12, Charles W. Woodward, Sewickley, 23, Lot 169, Sec. G

• Dec. 15, Mary Louise McElwain, Sewickley, 21 months, Lot 103, Sec. D

• Dec. 18, George O. Pardes, Haysville, 12, Lot 16, Sec. F

• Dec. 18, Walter J. Kaelin, not living locally, 16, Lot 124, Sec. C

• Dec. 22, Benjamin Tate, Leetsdale, 35, Lot 20b, Sec. F

1919

• Jan. 7, Marion W. Griffin, Shields, 15, Lot 160 1/2, Sec. F

• Jan. 8, Mary Edgar, not living locally, 40, Lot 14b, Sec. G

• Jan. 20, Mary Louise McElwain, Sewickley, 32, Lot 103, Sec. D

• Jan. 27, William Clarner, Haysville, 48, Lot 296, Sec. E

• Feb. 15, John B. Reno, Jr., Sewickley, 31, Lot 22, Sec. B

• Feb. 15, Walter Moore, not living locally, 42, Lot 26, Sec. G

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