

The Influenza Epidemic of 1918

By Jean Luddy

SARS, Asian Bird Flu, Mad Cow Disease- During the last few years stories about these diseases remind us that microbes never rest. New diseases emerge or familiar ones mutate into dangerous strains. Recognizing that diseases can evolve, scientists and historians are looking back to the Influenza Epidemic of 1918 hoping to learn what caused the mutation of a flu virus, what factors influenced the spread of the disease and how to prevent or lessen the impact of a new strain of flu.

This article will provide a brief sketch of how the people of Rockville and Vernon coped with a disease that struck with the intensity of a hurricane, leaving devastated families in its wake. By using newspaper articles from the Rockville Journal and town death records, the extent of the epidemic and the response of town officials and citizens can be told.

By the fall of 1918 the United States had been sending soldiers to fight in World War I for over a year. Even though victory seemed near, men were still leaving town to join the armed forces. The first mention of "Spanish influenza" appeared in the September 26th edition of the Rockville Journal when readers learned that two local soldiers had died at Camp Devens near Boston. By the October 3rd edition, several more soldiers had died at camp and one death in Rockville was reported.

Within a week the numbers of the sick had risen so high that town leaders took action. Schools, saloons, ice cream parlors and other places where the public gathered were closed. Mill owners reported that work on materials necessary for the war effort had slowed due to illness. The number of people sick in town was estimated at 1000. In the October 10th newspaper, town officials presented plans to open an emergency hospital in Rockville High School which at that time was located at the corner of School and Park Streets. Committees were formed to acquire supplies, handle food preparation, and assist the doctors with transportation and medical services. Seats in the auditorium were removed for a general ward. One room was set aside for the critically ill and another designated as a children's ward. Within a day of the hospital's opening, temporary ambulances were bringing in the stricken.

These measures were taken none too soon. By this time the mortality rate was 3 to 5 people per day. By Sunday October 13th, authorities realized that more room was needed. Tents were set up in nearby Talcott Park and in Dr. Thomas Rockwell's yard which was adjacent to the park.

The stress of caring for the sick and dying was beginning to take its toll on overworked doctors and nurses, some of whom were coming down with the disease. Mayor John Cameron wrote the local Congressman in Washington DC requesting help.

" The city of Rockville is in desperate condition. We have over one thousand cases of influenza and only four doctors. Have established an emergency hospital. All the industries of the city are working on Government contracts for army cloth, envelopes and silk thread. We must have doctors and nurses or the death rate will be enormous. Have appealed to the State Board of Health without avail. We appeal to you for help. We are utterly unable to cope with the disease.

Through the efforts of the United Envelope Company, some additional doctors and nurses arrived to relieve the weary local practitioners. Many private citizens and mill workers served as assistants, orderlies, and cooks. On October 17th there were 105 in the emergency hospital, 30 of whom were children.

By the last week of October, the epidemic was winding down and the numbers of sick and dying were diminishing. Plans were made to close the hospital and reopen Rockville High School by early November. The building was emptied out, cleaned and disinfected. Between private donations and town funds, the costs of operating the emergency hospital were covered.

The mortality rate of the Influenza Epidemic can be seen in the annual list of deaths published in the newspaper every January. In 1918, the monthly total for August was 15 deaths. September's number was 18 deaths, including 3 soldier deaths from flu. October's total was 78. Of these 67 deaths were directly attributed to the flu. The death rate returned closer to its usual numbers with 15 deaths in November (5 from influenza) and 16 deaths in December.

The newspaper obituaries suggest the emotional costs of the influenza epidemic. Most of the victims were in their twenties or thirties, often leaving young families behind. Six soldiers from town died of the flu, away from home. Several children lost their lives, including two sisters. Several young couples, one recently wed, did not survive the flu. The trauma of those who experienced the epidemic first hand was evidenced during an oral history interview in 1980 with one of Rockville Hospital's first nurses who was in training in Massachusetts during the flu epidemic. As she spoke of the high mortality rate, her eyes filled with tears when she remembered the young expectant mothers who suffered flu-induced miscarriages before losing their own lives. Proof that even 60 years later, the flu epidemic left a mark on those who saw the devastation brought by this horrific disease.

The health crisis brought by the flu made citizens and town leaders realize that a local hospital was needed. Even as the emergency hospital was overflowing, an editorial urged people to revive an earlier campaign for a town hospital. When businessman William Prescott died in 1908, he left \$50,000 for a hospital fund. This money was combined with funds raised over the years. The Gainer house and property on Prospect Street was purchased and the Rockville City Hospital opened in 1921. In 1945 the Hospital moved to its present location where it has expanded its space and services through the years. Rockville Hospital recent undertook an ambitious expansion project which will offer the community a wider array of services in an updated facility.

We can learn valuable lessons from tragic events. The Influenza Epidemic of 1918 made people of the time aware of the need for a community hospital. Even today as scientists try to unravel the secrets of this killer virus, the epidemic reminds us of the durability of the microbe and of the fragility of human existence.

For further information:

Barry, John M. *The Great Influenza: the epic story of the deadliest plague in history.* Viking, 2004.

Kolata, Gina. *Flu: the story of the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1918 and the search for the virus the caused it.* Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1999.

Influenza 1918. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/influenza>

Deaths Attributed to Influenza
From Death Certificates
Vernon Town Hall

9/18/1918

William Kingston, age 27, died at Camp Devens

9/24/1918

August Keune, age 24, died at Camp Devens

9/28/1918

Ernest C. Hoffman, age unknown, died at Camp Devens

10/1/1918

Fred Sweitzer, age 22, died at Camp Devens

10/4/1918

Anthony Rogales, age 34, Rockville

10/5/1918

Martin Mattys, age 45, Rockville

Konstanti Suchecki, 34, Rockville

10/6/1918

Albert Ulitsch, age 43, Vernon

John F. Gonsewski, age 27, Rockville

Mary Gonsewski, age 22, Rockville

10/7/1918

Stephan Kalina, age 25, Rockville

10/8/1918

Martha A. Hirth, age 23, Rockville

Michael Karas, age 38, Rockville

Agatha Stolarz, age 22, Rockville

Anthony Oliwa, age 1 mo., Vernon

Bernice Mazowska, age 33, Rockville

Lucy A. Brown, age 1, Vernon

10/9/1918

Pauline Schmidt, age 52, Rockville

Edward Kemek, age 3 mo., Vernon

Daniel Regan, age 20, Rockville

10/10/1918

Baby Gebhardt, premature, Rockville

Clara S. Moorhouse, age 15, Vernon

Clara Stoetzner, age 24, Rockville

John Dowczeiat, age 30, Vernon

10/11/1918

Elmer Sykes, age 30, died at camp

Emma Sheehan, age 30, Rockville

Lodya Deptula, age 3, Rockville

10/12/1918

Anna Gebhardt, age 28, Rockville

Everett Yost, 1 day, Rockville

Boleslaw Polenski, age 34, Rockville

10/13/1918

Mary Yanishewsky, age 2, Vernon

John Harrison, age 34, Vernon

Joseph Ducharme, age 26, Vernon

10/14/1918

Charles Niese, age 27, Vernon
John A. Beinhauer, age 42, Rockville
Joseph Weasko, age 42, Ellington
Richard Landgraff, age 34, Vernon
Carl E. Ludwig, age 37, Rockville

10/15/1918

John Backhaus, age 30, Rockville
Max W. Dintsch, age 30, Rockville
Mary Smith, age 68, Vernon
John Dlubac, age 33, Rockville

10/16/1918

Emil Treutzschler, age 54, Rockville
Eva Hill, age 26, Vernon
Bernard Gebhardt, age 30, Rockville
Emil Hirth, age 33, Ellington

10/17/1918

John Zimmerman, age 67, Rockville
Frances Gonsewski, age 2 wks., Rockville

10/18/1918

John Felber, age 27, Ellington
Bernice Hyjek, age 1 yr., Vernon
Charles Kirchnebel, age 30, Vernon

10/19/1918

Albert H. Stengel, age 24, Rockville
Stanislawa Konarska, age 24, Rockville
Anna Klaus, age 25, Rockville

10/20/1918

Hans Naumann, age 50, Rockville
Anna H. Bush, age 26, Vernon

10/21/1918

Marion Elliott, age 27, Rockville

10/22/1918

Irene Yanieskewsky, age 3, Vernon

10/23/1918

John Theuren, age 25, died at camp
Elsie R. Clark, age 1, Vernon
Frank W. Wendheiser, age 39, Rockville

10/24/1918

Angelina Minor, age 22, Rockville
Thomas W. Sweatland, age 49, Rockville

10/25/1918

Helen Gregus, age 11 mo., Rockville

10/26/1918

Albert Leyianka, age 37, Rockville

10/27/1918

Annie Schultz, age 28 days, Rockville
Elma E. Horton, age 9, Rockville

10/29/1918

Mary Gworek, age 63, Rockville
Gustave Rydholm, age 23, Rockville

10/30/1918

Carrie L. Rydholm, age 20, Rockville

11/1/1918
 Norman O'Connell, age 18
 11/2/1918
 Gustav E. Krohn, age 48
 11/3/1918
 Gertrude Moore, age 7
 11/10/1918
 William L. Frieze, age 20
 11/28/1918
 William Priess, Jr., age 25

Influenza Epidemic of 1918
 Rockville Necrology
 January 1919

Total Deaths during 10/1918 – 78

Deaths from Influenza – 67

(Based on Death Certificates- Vernon Town Hall)

Daily death rate for October 1918

(Influenza deaths in bold type)

10/1	10/2	10/3	10/4	10/5	10/6	10/7	10/8	10/9	10/10
1	2	1	1	2	3	1	6	3	4
10/11	10/12	10/13	10/14	10/15	10/16	10/17	10/18	10/19	10/20
3	1, 3	3	5	4	1, 4	2	3	1, 3	2, 2
10/21	10/22	10/23	10/24	10/25	10/26	10/27	10/28	10/29	10/30
1, 1	1	1, 3	2	1	1	1, 2	0	2	1

Monthly Death Statistics for Comparison

August 1918 - 15 deaths

September 1918 - 18 deaths (3 influenza)

November 1918 – 15 deaths (5 influenza)

December 1918 – 16 deaths