

History: Flu pandemic mows down young and old alike

By Nancy Dinger

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Early in the spring of 1918, the front pages of the Fairfield Enterprise began printing more frequent obituary notices of prominent or well-known elderly pioneers and some infants.

The interior pages of the paper were peppered with death notices of the lesser known, or indigent. Little did the quiet city realize, or for that matter, any quiet city or large metropolitan area realize, that they were going to be swept by a disease so virulent, that its kind had not been seen since the European bubonic plague.

The "Spanish flu," as it became to be known, was far more reaching than the plague and before spent, would kill an estimated 20 to 40 million people.

More than an epidemic, because of its world-wide devastation, it was pandemic. In the two years that this scourge ravaged the earth, a fifth of the world's population was infected.

The flu was most deadly for the 20- to 40-year-age group. Usually flu (influenza) struck at the most vulnerable, the elderly and young children, so it was especially alarming to be striking at the usually healthy age group.

The flu infected 28 percent of all Americans. An estimated 675,000 died, 10 times as many as in the world war. And 43,000 U.S. soldiers, in Europe, died of the influenza virus. The effect of the pandemic was so severe that the average life span in the U.S. was depressed by 10 years.

At the time, no one knew the flu's origin or cause.

Fear and panic gripped the public. Some blamed Germany. It was suspected that the Kaiser had sent spies to deliberately seed Boston Harbor with influenza germs.

Lending misguided credence to this theory, was Lt. Col. Philip Doane, head of the health and sanitation section of the Emergency Fleet Corp., opined that the epidemic might have been started by Germans put ashore from U-boats.

"It would be quite easy for one of these German agents to turn loose influenza germs in a theater or some other place where large numbers of persons are assembled," he wrote.

In January of 1918, the Solano County supervisors approved the plans for a new county hospital. Local boys who had gone off to war were returning with wounds and lungs seared by mustard gas.

The need for a hospital was quite apparent. Unfortunately, it would not be completed until after the devastating virus swept through the community, mowing down rich and poor, young and old, or wounded and hale.

Perhaps the local contagion began with the returning wounded or from a lecturer. In April of 1918, Lt. Foster was the guest lecturer at Crystal Auditorium in Suisun, telling of his experiences at the battlefield. However and whoever brought the flu to Solano, it soon swept through local communities.

The U.S. Public Health Service faced the challenge of educating the public about an illness that was largely a mystery. By October of that year, The Fairfield Enterprise printed on the front page "Uncle Sam's Advice on Flu."

The story from Surgeon General Rupert Blue stated that the flu was probably not Spanish in origin. The article was quite lengthy, going into the history of influenza, then explaining the symptoms and how it was spread and what to do if you got sick.

"It is very important that every person who becomes sick with influenza should go home at once and go to bed. This will help keep away dangerous complications, and will at the same time, keep the patient from scattering the disease far and wide."

In November, H. Seyler of the Grove barber shop in Fairfield received a letter from his brother in Texas. Mr. Seyler's brother wrote that a doctor, nurse and army officer were arrested for spreading the flu.

"The third degree was being given the doctor to bring out more information, if possible. The doctor was arrested in a "Y" hut and a revolver and a vial of germ fluid were taken from him." As provocative as Mr. Seyler's letter was, there seemed to be no wide, or well-known knowledge of this episode.

The front page of the Enterprise was almost nothing but obituaries. In October, Navy enlistee William Vann was reported to be recovering from the flu in an Eastern Army hospital. Not so lucky was the 18-year-old son of Daniel and Ida Ambrose, who succumbed. So too, was the well-liked and well-known Adolph Widenmann, who had

been appointed just the week before by the governor of California to the post of county Supervisor to fill the vacancy caused by the death of Mr. Widenmann's brother.

In November, Mrs. Oscar Van Bulen of Cement City died, leaving behind a grieving husband and two children, a boy, 7, and a girl, 3. Miss Nellie Keym of Oakland, who was in her 20s, had come for a visit. Upon returning home, she contracted the flu, which turned into pneumonia (the usual complication) and died.

Earl C. Smith, an employee of the Southern Pacific Co., died in the Oakland Hospital after complications from the flu, leaving behind a wife and three small children. The family was visiting relatives in Texas when their father became ill, and were not permitted to leave because of quarantine. To compound the tragedy, Earl's brother died in the same hospital the same week from the same complications.

The town trustees, in a special meeting in early November, ordered the poolroom be closed as a precautionary measure against the spread of the virus. By December, the last month of such a terrible year, Henry and Kathryn Goosen suffered a terrible blow.

Their eldest son, Victor, just 20 years old, succumbed on Christmas morning. Henry Goosen was a self-made man who went into the hardware store business and eventually owned the Fairfield water works. The Goosens' restored home graces Empire Street in Fairfield.

The flu would finally peter out by the spring of 1919, but not until it caused widespread heartache and grief. The county hospital was completed by 1920.

References: Fairfield Enterprise, January-December 1918, January-June 1919.

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