

THE INFLUENZA EPIDEMIC OF 1918-1919

By Ellen Knight¹

The entire year of 1918 was a difficult and sorrowful one for the town. Hundreds of Winchester men had served in the war and endured its horrors. Some were wounded. Eighteen died.

On the home front, during the first half of 1918 a severe epidemic of measles (230 cases) hit. That fall, the great influenza epidemic, known as Spanish Flu, struck.

As if a world war was not enough devastation, while that was ending a pandemic descended upon the world, claiming at least twice as many lives as the fighting had. That fall and on into 1919, it swarmed across Europe and America. An estimated 30 to 50 million people died from it. At least a half million died in the United States.

“One fifth of the world's population was attacked by this deadly virus. Within months, it had killed more people than any other illness in recorded history,” a National Archives exhibit stated on the 90th anniversary.²

According to figures cited in the *Boston Globe* of Nov. 1, 1998, in Massachusetts 28,870 deaths were attributed to influenza during 1918-1919. A very small proportion of those occurred in Winchester, but the opinion of the Winchester Board of Health was that the illness contributed to other deaths.

The flu appeared in Boston in August 1918. Although Winchester reported no cases during that month, in September the situation suddenly and dramatically changed. The report for the week ending on Sept. 18 reported 44 cases and evidently tried to allay fears by calling Spanish influenza “nothing more than the old fashioned grippe.”³ The next week, 339 cases and two deaths had been reported.

Week after week the number of cases and number of deaths, sometimes for both influenza and pneumonia, were reported on the front page of the paper. On Oct. 4, for example, a day-by-day

“Spanish” Influenza

A few rules recently issued by the Surgeon-General of the Army by which the public may guard against the spread of this plague:—

Rules to Avoid Respiratory Diseases
(By the Surgeon General of the U. S. Army)

1. Avoid needless crowding—influenza is a crowd disease.
2. Smother your cough and sneezes—others do not want the germs which you would throw away.
3. Your nose, not your mouth, was made to breathe through—get the habit.
4. Remember the three C's—**clean mouth, clean skin, and clean clothes.**
5. Try to keep cool when you walk and warm when you rest and sleep.
6. Open the windows—always at home at night; at the office when practicable.
7. Food will win the war if you give it a chance—help by choosing and chewing your food well.
8. Your fate may be in your own hands—wash your hands before eating.
9. Don't let the waste products of digestion accumulate—drink a glass or two of water on getting up.
10. Don't use a napkin, towel, spoon, fork, glass, or cup which has been used by another person and not washed.
11. Avoid tight clothes, tight shoes, tight gloves—seek to make nature your ally, not your prisoner.
12. When the air is pure breathe all of it you can—breathe deeply.

Clean Clothes

Have your outer garments brushed and aired thoroughly every day. Change them, too; wear all clothes if necessary so that the same suit, coat or dress is not worn every day. This is some trouble but it may prevent the creeping of the infection into your home or to other people.

Clean Body Garments

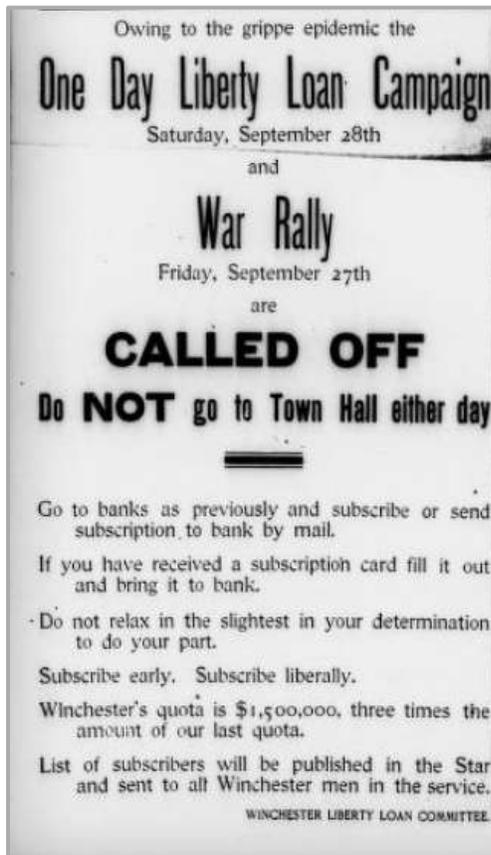
Change your underwear as often as possible.
It May Mean More Laundry Bills For a While But It May Be the Means of Preventing Infection

“An ounce of PREVENTION is surely worth a pound of CURE”

Winchester Laundry Company
The Great White House of Sanitation

The Winchester Laundry Company, along with health officials, promoted keeping clean during the influenza epidemic.

account of new cases reported 40, 32, 62, 38, 32, 35, and 43 new cases over seven successive days. By the 11th of October, 800 cases of influenza and pneumonia and 11 deaths had been recorded.



Not only were soldiers impacted by the epidemic, so also were WWI support activities at home.

The worst day was Saturday, Sept. 28, when 62 new cases were reported. The next day, the Board of Health decided to forbid all public meetings and close all schools, churches, and the library for three weeks in October. The library put the situation to good use by taking an inventory of fiction without interruption; however, the library was short-handed that fall since four assistants contracted the flu, none struck fatally. After the first wave of the epidemic was over, the Board of Health wrote, "We wish we knew whether these drastic measures did any good or not, but we have no such knowledge. The fact is no epidemic of a virulently contagious disease like measles, smallpox, or influenza was ever controlled by isolation. It is only fair to say that this may be because the isolation has never been sufficiently complete."

Winchester's medical profession rose heroically to the task of caring for the sick, although, the Board of Health reported, "so far no serum or vaccine has been discovered that does any good either in curing the disease or preventing it." Some victims were treated at home; 130 cases of influenza and its complications were cared for at the hospital.

WINCHESTER HOSPITAL

Winchester Hospital, run by the Visiting Nurse Association, had just opened a new building in 1917, about the time the country entered the war. Although used by doctors, it was staffed by nurses.

"On Sept. 13, our first nurse was taken sick, and within a week, we admitted as patients ten nurses and employees, our head nurse among the number, all victims of the epidemic. As the rooms on the third floor accommodate only nine patients at most, beds were put in the corridors and, at one time, there were fourteen patients cared for on that floor. All the nurses but three and all the employees but three had the influenza. Those left on duty worked without any hours off, and all classes had to be suspended. Had it not been for the help given by the women of Winchester, it would have been impossible to care for the patients who were in the hospital when the epidemic broke out, and for the emergency operative cases and maternity cases which had to be admitted," the Hospital's Annual Report stated.

The nursing situation was so critical that the conditions of the individual nurses—who was on duty, who was stricken, and who had recovered—were reported in the paper. Once the nurses were able to resume their duties, the top floor of the hospital was opened to the public and used only for influenza patients through March. In a number of instances, practically whole families were cared for.

COMMUNITY COOPERATION

On Oct. 4, it was reported that “while Winchester has and is having its troubles, our residents should note that we are infinitely better off, both in the number of cases and deaths, than almost any of the surrounding communities. Our conditions over other places are due in large respect to our abundant and efficient medical staff, and the local nursing association, and those ladies outside who are giving their unstinted efforts to the relief of the sick.”



*Winchester Hospital nurses in 1915
outside the cottage hospital*

Not only medical personnel helped during this time. When the churches were closed, the minister and deaconess of the Episcopal Church announced that they would “give their time and strength to responding to all calls from homes stricken in the Grippe Epidemic,” adding, “It does not matter whether the people who call for help are in the Parish of the Epiphany or not.”

The help of the Boy Scouts was enlisted to distribute information about influenza printed by the state Board of Health to all the homes. “Many automobile owners,” it was reported on Oct. 11, “have given the use of their cars to carry the district nurses in their rounds.”

While the staff could not work, it made no difference what had to be done, the help was there. “Nothing has ever taxed our work more than our one great problem of the year – it taxed our work, our hearts, and our courage – the epidemic; but we are thankful to say that no call went unanswered. We couldn’t have done it alone, the whole town did it with us,” wrote VNA Secretary Amy E. Pond in 1919. “Former nurses volunteered to go the District and into the Hospital; through the Public Safety Committee automobiles were at the nurses’ command. Many were the homes where food was a necessity and no one to provide it, so Mrs. O. C. Sanborn organized daily relief with broths and other nourishing food which was delivered to those who needed it. Others went into the Hospital and took the cooking, cleaning and laundry work into their hands; two extra nurses were employed on the District.”

The epidemic reached a climax in mid-October. “By the middle of November,” the Board of Health reported, it “had ceased to be epidemic, although a few scattering cases were reported each week.” But in December another severe outbreak occurred, and the epidemic did not run its course until April of 1919. The Board of Health was not immune; Board physician Dr. Clarence Allen himself contracted the disease in the first wave. Neither was Gov. Samuel McCall immune. At the end of 1918, he was confined to his Winchester home while he battled the illness.

While 6,500 died in Boston, the total number of deaths in Winchester that were attributed directly to influenza from 1918 through 1919 was 38. However, the flu contributed to yet more deaths (perhaps twice as many). After it was over, the Board of Health reported, “The terrible epidemic of influenza...left behind a trail of lessened vitality and lowered resisting power that increased the death rate for last year far beyond normal.” In 1918, the board wrote that some people who died of other diseases “would have lived but for a previous attack of influenza.”

The like of that epidemic was not seen again for more than a century afterward.

¹ This article © 2020 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on May 5, 2009. This article supersedes all previous articles.

² *Deadly Flu Pandemic (1918): Remembered at the National Archives*, on-line exhibit posted in 2008.

³ *The Winchester Star*, Sept. 20, 1918.