

The Spanish Flu in Shullsburg

By Cory Ritterbusch

I have been researching the 1918 Spanish Flu, especially, how my local area was affected. So often, history repeats itself. In many ways, it's like reading today's news on musty old paper. In 1918 it went in this order: Warnings > Financial Panic > Arrival and Reactions > Conspiracy Theories > Food Shortages > Desire for Normalcy. Déjà vu?

After watching from afar for most of 1918, the Spanish Flu finally arrived in Shullsburg, and the "Driftless Area," in October of 1918. Wisconsin had one of the lowest death rates in the country due to early preparedness and strict distancing guidelines. However, rural areas were less organized and controlled. By the end of the pandemic 8,459 died in Wisconsin and an estimated 103,000 were infected. In Lafayette County 74 died. I assume most deaths were located in the southwest corner where the lead mines were devastated due to the close confined working spaces. Benton, New Diggings and Shullsburg were hit very hard. To my count, 15 died in Shullsburg - Not including deaths in the countryside hamlets like Dunbarton, Seymour, White Oak Springs, Leadmine, etc. Worldwide 50 million died, 675,000 in the U.S. The population of Shullsburg (1,200) was generally the same. 18-year-old John Giles died in my living room - the town's second Spanish Flu victim.

The following is coverage from the weekly Shullsburg paper, The Pick and Gad:

July 25 – Shullsburg is one of 1,624 communities to attend a 'Health Officials Meeting' in Madison to discuss the incoming Spanish Flu.

August 1 – Call for a Woman Nurses Program in Wisconsin. 25,000 are needed. Young women are to apply at Dr. Mary Gratiot's office on Water Street (Second Chance Coffee today).

August 8 – Six women volunteered for the Nurses Program. It is promoted to eat beans to ration meat.

August 15 – Stores advertise they are running on "cash basis" terms only.

September – Reports seem normal in Shullsburg

October 10 – School has been canceled, programs "suspended." The Friday dance canceled. The Pick and Gad Newspaper staff has been going home sick. First death reported at Wardsville (5 miles north of Shullsburg). Workers in the mines getting sick.

October 17 – Many sick. 6 dead in Benton. Herbert Stevens (27) first Shullsburg death – wife and baby sick too.

October 24 – Red Cross publishes notice about controlling the spread and how to home remedy. Many sick at the Copeland Mine. Frank O'Neil, John Giles (18), John Aide (30) die in Shullsburg.

October 31 – Article about serum (blood plasma) from survivors to be used to treat the flu. Mine workers have been "broken up," and production is down. "New Diggings Mines should be back at full production in 30 days." 100 men at Benton "discharged" from mines. All surrounding towns reporting deaths and sickness. Joe Peacock (28), Mrs. Gus Anderson, Ted Sampson (16), James Doyle (17) die in Shullsburg.

November 7 – Shop owners are asking all debts to be settled. Confirmation at St. Matthews occurred. Surprising signs of normalcy. Reports of those who have recovered. James Martin (20), Savorro Cramer (58), John Stoyanoff, Mrs. Burt Fuller, Bernice Bray (19) die in Shullsburg.

-continued from page 1-

November 21 - The end of World War I and celebrations reported. A State election occurred. Conspiracy theory reported that the flu is just the Black Plague re-emerging. Shop owners wanting to settle debts. Vicks Vapor Rub sold out! School to resume. "This too shall pass" appears on the pages.

November 28 – School has resumed and it was held on the Friday after Thanksgiving to make up for time off. Thanksgiving gatherings seemed normal with relatives together. "Monster Sale" at the Big Store. The Blackbourn's went north on a hunting trip. Students must be symptom-free for two weeks before returning to school.

December 5 – Pork supply disrupted. GEM Theatre being cleaned before re-opening. Cases still being reported. Town physician Dr. Hayden dies.

December 12 – Going out of business sale in Darlington. Gratiot experiencing an outbreak. 6-Year old Cuba City boy dies.

December 19 –Dwindling meat supply. Article, "Have to rely on China?"

December 26 - Penalties for price gouging. Food shortages abound.

Galena schools reported back on New Year's Eve. I don't have the 1919 papers but by other accounts things faded away statewide. The last Spanish Flu death occurred in the U.S. in 1920.

It was later reported that Dr. Mary Peebles Gratiot, a pioneer female doctor, heroically went to New Diggings to treat miners. She saved many lives and survived herself, living until she was 93.