

# The 1918 Spanish Influenza Pandemic

In 1918 Cleveland had to cope with two major global events. One was the first World War, a conflict that the United States entered in April 1917. Nearly 41,000 Clevelanders would serve in the armed forces and 1,023 would die as a result of the conflict. The second event was a global pandemic commonly referred to as the Spanish Influenza.

The city was no stranger to the flu, more commonly known as the “grippe.” Outbreaks of the flu can be found in Cleveland in the 1880s and at other times in the city’s history, including a mild outbreak early in 1918. But this version was different, far more virulent than previous forms. Its origins are still debated, but it became part of the news when a major outbreak took place in Spain in the late spring of 1918 thus resulting in its popular name. By the summer it had spread into Europe and Britain, and by August some cases were reported in Canada. The ongoing war in Europe played a significant role in the spread of the illness – large numbers of troops lived in close quarters in barracks and moved across borders thus infecting one another and others as they moved about.

By September a more virulent form of the flu had reached Boston, arriving by ship. It spread rapidly and by September 22 US Army Surgeon William Gorgas advised Cleveland City Health Commissioner Dr. Harry Rockwood of its likely spread to the city. However, it took until October 4th for the city to investigate flu conditions in the community. By October 7th there were 500 cases in Cleveland and action was taken to limit the spread.

Then as now, isolation was seen as the best preventative. The initial approach was to suggest voluntary closures, but on October 14, theaters, movie houses, dance halls, night schools, churches, and Sunday Schools were ordered to close. Streetcar conductors were ordered to assist police in arresting those who spat on the floor of the cars. Outdoor gatherings could take place only with permission. The closure of schools followed on October 15. Businesses, including saloons and poolrooms remained open, but their hours of operation were shortened. The fact that saloons remained open led to protests from clergy, many of whom had prohibitionist sentiments and who had seen their churches closed. The overall closing of the schools

occurred after an initial attempt to keep them open so that teachers could monitor health conditions. The initial plan was to close only if absentee rates at any particular school reached 20 percent. Clever students “gamed the system” by playing hooky – thus insuring a particular school’s closure.

By October 21 the situation had gotten worse and there were 1,000 people in local hospitals. A concern about a shortage of beds for patients was answered by using other spaces in the city including the Cleveland Normal School and the local headquarters of the Liberty Loan war bond drive. The operating hours of local businesses were further shortened. However, industrial Cleveland continued at work given its role in supplying material for the war. Sick workers were advised to stay home – and at this time, sick pay as we know it was non-existent.

The epidemic began to ease by the first week of November. The closure order was lifted on November 10 and the schools reopened three days later. In between those dates an Armistice ending the fighting in the “Great War” was announced. In a sense Clevelanders had two reasons for rejoicing. But the crisis was not yet fully over – a new, but minor wave of the flu continued into the coming early months of 1919.

The cost of the epidemic was considerable both fiscally and in terms of mortality. Cleveland businesses lost \$1.25 million dollars (equivalent to more than \$21 million today). Globally over 50 million people died directly from the flu or from pneumonia or other issues caused by the flu. The estimated death toll for the United States was 675,000, and for Cleveland more than 4,400 or 474 per 100,000 – a higher rate than that in Chicago or New York City. The flu was the costlier of the two global events that reshaped the city in the late 1910s – it lost more of its citizens to the epidemic than it did on the battlefronts of the war.