

1918 Spanish Influenza Presentation Outline and Narrative

Thank you I am really honored to be a part of this series. This presentation was originally developed in 2018 with assistance from Hannah Weber, an archivist at the Pueblo City-County Library District.

Part A: Introduction and setting the scene

One hundred years ago in 1917, the entire world was engaged in warfare on a global scale and at the time it probably seemed as though things couldn't possibly get any worse than the war. Young men were being shipped overseas to an known fate in war, and they most often did not return in the same state, if they did at all. On the Homefront, all US citizens saw their lives drastically affected by war from mourning those who were lost to the war, to adjusting to giving up the everyday staples for the war effort, to filling the shoes of those who left for war, to being out casted for ethnic ties to Germany. Everyone was a part of the Great War in some way or another and to them, it was unimaginable that their lives could change much more. The Great War consumed daily life around the entire world.

Slide 3

Yet in the spring 1918, a new silent killer emerged. The Spanish Flu stealthily took center stage for a brief time in 1918 and reminded the world that things could get much, much worse. The Spanish Flu brought fear and death to the door steps of every household worldwide.

Part B: This pandemic had an effect on families and genealogy. Because it was killing healthy adults in their prime, family structures shifted. If you do your own family history at this time you will notice shifts in names, marriages people moving in with relatives as the flu altered the course of many family histories. The name of the boy in this photo is Monico Saldana, my grandfather. His father and two siblings died of the flu in 1918, leaving his mother a widow. Although, he was four at the time of his father's death he had a remarkable recollection of this traumatic and life changing event. Here is how he remembers the story

Part C: Supplement personal stories with some facts

The Spanish Flu affected 500 million people around the world. Of those 500 million people, a conservative estimate of 50-100 million people died. At the time, that was around 3-5% of the world's population. An estimated 10-20% of the infected died.

The life expectancy during the First World War, so the timer period of 1917-1919, was already quite low—age 50 for men and 55 for women—due to widespread disease and lack of hygiene and medicine at the time, dropped by twelve years in 1918, due to the emergence of Spanish Flu. So it went from 50 for went to 38, and from 55 to 43 for women.

To put into perspective the number of Spanish Flu deaths: The entirety of WWI caused the deaths of 41 million civilians and military personnel on a global scale. The Spanish Flu cause, at a conservative estimate, a total of 50 million deaths worldwide. I say a conservative estimate, as there are not exact statistics as to an accurate number of deaths as a direct result of the flu. Often times people died of pneumonia as a secondary state of the flu and had their deaths recorded thusly, when the pneumonia

was a direct result of the flu. In addition, many persons in the military died of flu but were listed as casualties of war. Other deaths were simply not accumulated into influenza statistics. It is suspected that there many more people that died of Spanish Flu, however 50 million is the most statistically factual and accurate estimate that has been provided.

Regardless it's pretty amazing that Spanish Flu claimed more lives than the First World War.

Part D: So why was the flu so deadly?

So why was this flu so deadly? How did it manage to claim so many lives around the world?

There were basically three factors that made the Spanish Influenza of 1918 be the perfect storm.

First of all, you had a world war. In general, historically there is a link between war and epidemics as you have many people together in poor conditions moving across the world and interacting with new people. And during the First World War, for the first time in history, there was modern warfare on a global scale. You had the mass mobilization of troops and civilians for the war effort. People were moving around the globe and using mass transportation to do that. Trains, automobiles, ships, marching, etc. In addition to that you had these men packed together on these trains, ships, and in the trenches. They were most often malnourished trying to survive on meager war rations while enduring the terrible environment of the front. Living in holes in the ground, covered in mud and cold water, packed with other people. This was a breeding ground for germs. In addition, these men were dealing with the intense stresses of war, battle, PTSD, chemical attacks, these men were exceptionally susceptible to influenza and due to their environment, in the perfect place and opportunity to spread it around.

So, these soldiers get sick or injured and they're sent to field hospitals or are transferred back to hospitals in the states. Or the soldiers are simply transferred back to a fort in US or go on leave. It takes one person for the flu to begin spreading like wildfire. Especially generally on the Homefront. In the general population, there already was malnourishment, and a general lack of good hygiene and medicines. It's really not until after WWI and the experience of enduring the Spanish Flu, that good hygiene practices and modern medicine are deployed upon the general public. So as the flu is brought from soldiers to civilians, you have a population that is primed to internalize this illness and spread it.

Lastly, with the perfect environmental conditions, you also have the perfect bug. The virus was particularly lethal as it caused massive hemorrhages and edema in the lung. In addition, this strain triggered a cytokine storm, which ravages the stronger immune system of adults. So what it does, is it creates a positive feedback loop between cytokines and white blood cells, with highly elevated levels of various cytokines. So, in the case of the Spanish Flu, a healthy immune system was more of a curse than a blessing as it basically causes the immune system to turn against itself. Often times as well, once the flu had ravaged the body, a secondary infection of bacterial pneumonia took over, which caused the majority of deaths associated with the flu. The Spanish Flu killed up to 20% of those infected, as opposed to a normal flu epidemic which has a mortality rate of 0.1%.

These three major factors of having a world war, poor general hygiene and a lack of medicine in addition to a super flu, led to the Spanish Flu becoming a pandemic. So an epidemic is a widespread occurrence of an infectious disease in a community at a particular time. A pandemic is when a disease becomes

prevalent over a whole country or the whole world. In this case war, poor hygiene, and the Spanish Flu led to a pandemic that encapsulated the entire world.

Part E: Trajectory and geographic spread of the virus

According to the research of epidemiologist Edwin Oakes Jordan, a 1927 study, which most current studies have built off of, there are three possible epicenters for the Spanish Flu:

The first are British military camps in Great Britain and France in 1916-17, the second is Haskell, Kansas (March 1918), and the third is China in the winter of 1917-18. There has been much research made in an attempt to discern which location is the true epicenter of the Spanish Flu outbreak, however no one has been able to factually and entirely pinpoint one location as being the start of it all.

What did happen is that one of these locations led to the rapid spread of disease, which took over the planet in three major waves.

The First wave occurred in the spring of 1918. This consisted of a few deaths, with the majority of people simply being sick. The military is what suffered most here.

The second wave in the fall of 1918, or mainly August-December 1918 was the deadly wave. This second wave caused the majority of deaths—soldiers and civilians alike. Especially from secondary pneumonia infections. It was so severe that it caused people to blue from the lack of oxygen and to cough up blood. Most often healthy adults between the ages of 18 and 40 were the victims of the flu due to the cytokine storm that we talked about earlier. So again, it was these healthy adults that they flu caused their robust immune systems to work against them and to kill them.

Then there was a final wave of the flu in the winter of 1918-1919, and in some places extended into 1920.

Part F: Bringing the topic regional and local

So, how did the Spanish Flu affect Colorado, the region, and Pueblo?

In Colorado, between September 1918 and June 1919, an estimated 7,783 people died of the flu, with nearly 1,500 of those people living in Denver

As you can see here, in 1917, Colorado had an estimated population of 910,000 people. In 1918, the statewide population drops to 906,000. In 1919, postwar, we then see the population right itself as it usually does after war, with a surge to 938,000 people.

It is believed that Colorado had one of the highest mortality rates in the country because of a larger ratio of the population with compromised lung function due to the large amount of miners and tubercular patients in the state.

The flu spread across Colorado and hit many small towns hard due to few doctors and limited medical resources and limited access to those resources. However, some small towns, like Gunnison, were able to avoid the high rate of infection by essentially quarantining the entire town for months.

Pueblo

So how did Pueblo, our community, react and deal with this imminent threat? While this sickness was ravaging the world, the United States, Colorado, and Pueblo, the citizens of Pueblo, as did much of the United States, took an approach of “keep calm and carry on” when seeking to persevere through this hardship. The Pueblo Chieftain during this period of the deadly second wave, so September-December 1918, sought to educate citizens while also assuring them that the situation is under control; that with constant vigilance, we all would persevere. Mainly the newspaper focused on war news, the flu rarely ever made a headline or even the front page. Deaths were reported to keep the community informed, but often a positive spin was put on the story to deter from fear mongering. Yet, again while mainly the news sought to keep a positive light shining on the situation, small bits of fear mongering were definitely used to emphasize the severity of the situation enough to ensure that the public adhered to the health department’s regulations to combat the sickness.

In addition to reporting on the number of cases and deaths of the flu in the community, the Chieftain also was a location where the Health Department advised the public on best practices for combatting the flu. So, how did one combat the flu?

According to the health department and community medical officials, typical things that we today recognize to combat the flu, were also suggested to the public. Keep in mind what we talked about earlier, that there was generally poor hygiene as a standard. These tips that the health department were putting out, were not necessarily readily known by the public, for many this meant adjusting routines and how one acted.

So the public was educated on best hygiene practices and society began now to internalize these practices that today we all learn as children. Here is a poem a community member wrote reiterating best practices.

In addition to simply educating citizens on how to avoid spreading the flu, city ordinances were passed which restricted public gatherings, meetings, schools were closed, etc. in order to ensure that the flu would stop spreading, at least at the rate at which it currently was taking the town. In addition, it reached a point during which it was required that citizens wore flu gauze masks over their faces to prevent the spreading of germs.

The citizens of Pueblo did their best to adhere to these rules in order to combat the spread of illness and potential deaths. Advertisement & quote from theater owner in Denver.

However, like with most things, there’s always those who will do just about anything to make a dollar on the situation. The Chieftain also contained many advertisements at the time which prostrated wonder cures and ways in which one could avoid catching the flu. In addition, many people turned to cultural medicines when it seemed that nothing else would assure them of immunity.

Here in Pueblo, the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company helped to assist the greater community in combatting the influenza pandemic. When the flu hit Pueblo in October of 1918, CF&I as well as Minnequa Hospital found themselves as unprepared for the onslaught of infected that would flock to their wards. Staff soon found themselves working around the clock in order to deal with the hoards of sick needing attention. Soon, additional space for sick wards was sought out and at CF&I the club buildings at various coal camps were requisitioned for emergency hospitals.

Part G: How did we combat the flu and how was the story resolved?

So how did we combat this siege on the Homefront?

During October 1918, CF&I was able to secure a small supply of a flu vaccine which they sought to distribute to as many workers and community members as possible. The *Industrial Bulletin* emphasized that the “vaccine was at once distributed to all the camps, to the steel works dispensary and the hospital, where all employees, members of their families, and in fact, any person, whether connected with the Company or not, were urged to apply the Company doctor and receive, free of charge” the vaccine. 4,500 vaccines were given out at the steel works dispensary alone. In addition, the hospital at CF&I treated 4,600 cases of the flu, which is astounding given that Minnequa hospital almost exclusively dealt with flu cases for the citizens of Pueblo. However, out of all of the victories, between October and December 1918, the deadly second wave of the flu, 638 Puebloans were claimed by the Spanish Flu. But that compared to the total almost 7,800 people in the state of Colorado is pretty good in comparison for the community.

Part F: Conclusion

So, for Pueblo, the flu winds down by the end of November. By December 3rd, some of the restrictions that were in place to combat the spread of the flu begin to be lifted. Life finally begins to go back to normal. When the final third wave hits in the winter, people are now vigilant enough that it doesn't hit as badly as the second wave. In addition, those that have had the flu and survived have built up immunity, as well as those who received a vaccine. The final wave doesn't affect Pueblo as intensely, as it is amongst the rest of the United States. On the right here, we can see an article in the Chieftain stating how the flu ended up killing more Americans than German bullets.

Once the third wave passes, the Spanish Flu pandemic is somewhat forgotten. With the intensity of the war and everything that went on during that time period, the flu most often gets pushed into the background even though it had a greater global effect on society in many ways. While there are war memorials remembering all of those who perished during World War I, there are no memorials to the masses that perished due to Spanish Influenza. It was the silent killer that emerged during WWI and created a war of its own. However, from this experience, society has gained in knowledge those best practices for preparing for sickness and other flu epidemics that periodically emerge. The greatest remembrance that we have of the Spanish Flu of 1918 is what we as a society learned from enduring it.

Questions & Stories