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1918 flu pandemic in South Dakota remembered

PIERRE, S.D. – On Tuesday, Sept. 17, 1918, Mrs. Arthur Nielson of Hot Springs received word that her brother had died while serving his country in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The local South Dakota newspaper noted that, “He died of the new disease, Spanish Influenza, and was only sick three days.” Her brother was buried at White Rock, SD, and became one of the first documented South Dakota casualties of the 1918 flu pandemic.

More deaths followed throughout the United States and the world. The Spanish flu was a global disaster and affected a high percentage of the population, hence the term “pandemic.” Reports indicated that about a fifth of the world’s population contracted the Spanish flu over a two-year period. Deaths world-wide ranged anywhere from 25 to 50 million people; estimates show that about 675,000 Americans died of the flu in 1918.

In December of 1917, the South Dakota Division of Vital Statistics (then under the Department of History) recorded only 54 flu related deaths. Of the 189 possible causes of death listed, influenza ranked 20th. The five leading causes of death in 1917 were premature births, heart disease, stillbirths, Bright’s disease (disease of the kidneys) and pneumonia. The flu represented a little over one percent of the total deaths recorded statewide (4,706 deaths) in 1917.

In late September 1918, newspapers ran accounts of the flu spreading through major U.S. cities. South Dakota newspapers wrote of the flu epidemic in Boston, Baltimore, New York, New Orleans and Washington. Newspapers also ran daily accounts from military camps where the flu was out of control. The bodies of soldiers who died of the flu at camp were shipped back to their home state. The spreading of the flu in military camps was so out of hand that Provost Marshall General E. H. Crowder cancelled draft calls in October.

By December of 1918 the total number of deaths via the flu in South Dakota skyrocketed to 1,847, ranking influenza as the No. 1 killer of South Dakotans – a ranking held for the next two years. The flu accounted for 28 percent of the total number of deaths (6,728) in South Dakota in 1918.

“The scary thing is that the Spanish Flu hit South Dakota in early October of 1918,” explains Matthew T. Reitzel, manuscript archivist for the South Dakota State Historical Society-Archives at the Cultural Heritage Center in Pierre. “The Department of Vital Statistics calculated its findings at the end of December. That means a vast majority of the 1,847 flu related deaths occurred in a three month time span.”

The counties with the most flu-related deaths in 1918 were as follows: Lawrence (145), Brown (118), Beadle (98) and Minnehaha (95).

Some of the October and November headlines in 1918 read: “Triple Funeral Held at Vernon Recently,” “Seventh Double Funeral has been Held at Lead,” “Fourth Death in Murphy Home,” “Three Die in One Week in Sioux Falls Family,” “Fourth Lead Teacher Dies in ‘Flu’ Fight,” “Four Deaths in One Family at Faith,” “Brother Dies Soon After Sister’s Death,” “Five Funerals Held in Rapid City,” “Huron Losing in Flu Fight,” “Spanish Influenza Claims Seven People in One Day,” and “600 Cases of ‘Flu’ in Aberdeen.”

In late November, Gov. Peter Norbeck was diagnosed with the Spanish flu. He was admitted to St. Joseph’s Hospital in Deadwood, having contracted the flu on a business trip in Lusk, Wyo. The governor had a fever of 103 degrees, though his condition was never deemed critical. He was released after spending a few days in the hospital.

Throughout the state, churches, theatres, schools, pool halls, parlors and other public gathering places were closed indefinitely. The flu escalated to the point that the superintendent of the South Dakota Board of Health declared that, “In any community where the disease is prevalent, public gatherings of all kinds are forbidden.” Individuals who had any symptoms of the flu were asked to refrain from public gatherings of any kind. Public drinking cups and towels were prohibited. People were forbidden to congregate at train depots, requiring patrons to buy their train tickets one person at a time.

The Red Cross was also employed to “supplying nursing personnel, nursing supplies, and performing such other duties as the public health officer shall call on them to do.” The University of South Dakota closed its doors in mid-October to stall the spread of the flu. In Rapid City, the mayor decreed that all funerals must be conducted in the “open air,” to prevent the spread of the flu at funerals. Finally, in some cities a doctor’s note was required as proof that you had fully recovered from the flu, thus allowing you to walk in public.

“It would be safe to say that the state went through a period of organized chaos,” Reitzel said. “Civic officials were trying any and every means necessary to end the spread of the flu.”

One of the best examples was in Rapid City. The Home Guard (the equivalent of today’s National Guard) roamed through the streets of Rapid City, fining and arresting people who were not abiding by the cities newly created “sanitation laws.” City residence were fined or arrested for “expectorating” (spitting) on the sidewalks of Rapid City. As the local paper noted, “The Guard will be out in full force today to see that there is no breaking of the quarantine regulations.” On October 27, 1918, one Rapid City man was charged with “flagrant violation of the anti-spitting ordinance.” Even a Rapid City police officer was arrested by the Home Guard for violating the anti-spitting ordinance and paid the customary fine of \$6.

Several newspapers gave rules and precautionary tactics to stop the contracting and spreading of the flu. Advice included: “When talking to another person stand at least two

or three feet away,” “Keep yourself comfortably dressed and eat plenty of wholesome foods.” “Keep your home well ventilated and have plenty of fresh air in it at all times.” “When you get a severe cold and think you have Spanish influenza go home and go to bed.” Another newspaper mentioned, “Plenty of fresh air and sunshine are wonderfully helpful in combating of the disease and in the hindrance of its spread.” Reitzel noted a small number of ‘cures’ for the flu in newspapers, including Hood’s Sarsaparilla, Hood’s Pills, Peptiron, and Foley’s Honey and Tar.

Death as a result of influenza continued throughout the state. The following year, 1919, there were 700 deaths via flu (14 percent of total deaths) and in 1920 there were 551 deaths from influenza (10 percent of total deaths).

“It should also be noted that several individuals contracted the Spanish flu but died from pneumonia.” Reitzel added. “If you calculate the number of influenza deaths in 1918 plus those who died from pneumonia, the total number of deaths rises to 2,391 or 36 percent of total deaths in South Dakota for 1918. To put it another way, if you take 36 percent of the total number of deaths in the state for 2003 (7,109) you would have had 2,559 flu and pneumonia related deaths in South Dakota for that year.”

There are still several questions that remain unanswered regarding the 1918 Spanish flu in South Dakota.

“We know how many people died of the flu, but we don’t know how many contracted the flu and survived,” Reitzel said. “An overall view of newspaper accounts forms the opinion that several people contracted the flu, a number of people died, but several people survived. It appears you had two outcomes if you contracted the flu -- either you died within three days to a week or you lived.”

Reitzel added, “The Spanish flu pandemic occurred 87 years ago; any statistics or speculations are difficult to compare with today’s world. I believe medicine has come a long ways since 1918.”

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The South Dakota State Historical Society, an office of the Department of Tourism and State Development, is headquartered at the South Dakota Cultural Heritage Center in Pierre. The center houses the society’s world-class museum, the archives, and the historic preservation, publishing and administrative/development offices. Call (605) 773-3458 or visit www.sdhistory.org for more information. The society also has an archaeology office in Rapid City; call (605) 394-1936 for more information.