

# A Blue Sabbath: Pandemics Past and Present

By Robert Kodosky, Westtown Historical Commissioner

History might not repeat, but it sure does rhyme. While the coronavirus is novel, the flu is hardly new.

*I had a little bird,  
Its name was Enza.  
I opened the window,  
And in flew Enza.*

Sound familiar? That poem, popular in Southeastern Pennsylvania a century ago, resonates today. As do others. Take this one, penned by a member of West Chester State Normal School's graduating class of 1919, it appears in that year's school yearbook, *The Serpentine*.

*The winter days are sighing,  
The flu is at the door.  
Many people are dying,  
Who never died before.*

This proved astute. The influenza pandemic of 1918-19, one that newspapers of the time dubbed the "Spanish Flu," infected nearly one third of the world's population. By the time it ran its course in the summer of 1919, the virus (H1N1) claimed the lives of nearly 700,000 Americans. Pennsylvanians comprised many of these. According to the Pennsylvania Museum and Historical Commission, there existed 350,000 cases of the flu throughout the state, with nearly half of these coming from Philadelphia.

The flu took a greater toll on the City of Brotherly Love than it did on any other city in America. It arrived in September 1918, carried into the Philadelphia Naval Yard by sailors from Boston. Over the next six months, 16,000 Philadelphians perished from the virus. Many residents of surrounding communities did the same.

According to the Daily Local, by October 9, 1918, a month after the virus came to Philadelphia, "almost two thirds of the people in Media, Clifton Heights, Swarthmore, Haverford, Upper Darby, Darby, Colwin and the Chester Pike towns are already ill or recovering." The Pennsylvania Commission of Health estimated "that there are between 30,000 and 40,000 cases in Delaware County alone."

The city of Chester proved to be the hardest hit. By the beginning of October, it reported 10,000 cases. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* observed that due to the "prevalence of Spanish Influenza," Chester stood "closed up tight." Mayor W.S. McDowell's "drastic edict" shuttered "bars, theaters, moving picture houses, poolrooms, clubs, schools, and churches." Only saloon keepers resisted. They complained of the requirement "to close their bars" while "liquor stores are permitted to keep open."

Alcohol offered little reprieve, however, as the flu moved west. By the end of September, *The Inquirer* reported the existence of "sixty-two cases of Spanish influenza" in Coatesville. A local druggist observed, "In all my experience...we never had so many prescriptions to fill." On October 4, the *Inquirer* noted that, "Influenza" had become "prominent in many sections" of Lancaster county and "is beginning to assume serious proportions." In the West Chester area, it already had.

Influenza exacted its toll on the home front. "Over there," the First World War did the same. Casualties mounted daily. To show their support for America's "doughboys" fighting overseas, West Chester citizens staged a rally outside of the Court House on September 28. Thousands attended. The flu arrived a few days later. *The Amulet*, the Normal School's Student newspaper, advised "Be keerful, men, both day and night. Or else the doggone germ will bite you on your unprotected head. And then they'll cart you off to bed."

By October 3, West Chester officials acknowledged that "the deadly Spanish influenza made its appearance" in the area and "is growing steadily." Board of Health member Alger C. Whitcraft added his certainty "that there are many cases no one has said anything about." Walter H. Lewis, Secretary of the West Chester School Board, identified "several of the teaching staff ill" and cited that "many students are absent from school." Burgess J. Paul MacElree pledged that "every precaution should be taken to insure the stamping out of the disease."

The situation appeared dire. The Normal School's Infirmary admitted eleven students stricken by the virus while the Homeopathic Hospital registered over a dozen. Chester County Hospital listed forty cases and that "several of the nursing staff have succumbed to the disease." This caused "much discomfort" as the town already suffered "an absence of many local physicians and nurses in service to the United States."

By the end of the day, West Chester officials proclaimed that "all gatherings and assemblages of people" constituted "a public menace to health." They ordered to close immediately public and private schools, churches, clubs, bar rooms, pool rooms, lodges, libraries, and soda water stands. Moreover, they closed the Court House and placed students attending the Normal School and Darlington Seminary under quarantine. Chief of Police John E. Enrikin resolved to lend "every aid possible in seeing the laws obeyed."

At the Normal School, "about 100 girls respond to telegrams and telephone calls by packing their bags and making a hasty exit home." Students left behind "rave on," even as the school "seems deserted since one half of our 'fellow sufferers' are enjoying a vacation." Soon there appeared the need for "a force of cops to patrol the campus" while the faculty "longs for relief."

Sure enough, a respite soon appeared. On October 8, the *Daily Local* discerned "a feeling of happiness about town" as "Old Mr. Flu is loosening his hold." Medical personnel "took heart" that the sudden onset of "clear cold weather" meant that "the worst of it is over." After all, they contended, "a 'flu' germ hates nothing worse than clear cold weather."

Officials congratulated residents who "rallied to the call" and provided "bedding and other necessities" and helped families in need of "food and medicines." It all went to show, they said, that "West Chester can respond to the call for help when the situation demands it." They deemed it now as unnecessary to turn West Chester Golf Club into an emergency hospital, as local doctors detected "a ray of light in sight."

Such optimism was premature. The following weekend proved deadly. On Monday, October 14, the *Daily Local* reported that fourteen deaths transpired over the weekend and there remained "many more in critical condition." In addition, at Chester County Hospital, 14 nurses laid sick in bed. Although a "beautiful Indian summer" had set in, a "feeling of anxiety and that prevailed manifested itself on all of the faces one met." Sunday, October 13, constituted "truly a 'blue sabbath' in West Chester."

The *Daily Local* regretted that "The quarantine will remain intact until the authorities feel it safe beyond doubt to allow the places closed to open again." Still, the newspaper applauded the "many West Chester men and women who continued to sacrifice to "comfort the afflicted." It surmised that "the worst is over" and expressed hope that "West Chester will soon resume her normal condition as to health."

By the end of the month that hope transpired. It will in our time as well.



*Influenza victim in Philadelphia. The American Influenza Epidemic of 1918-1919: A Digital Encyclopedia. University of Michigan Center for the Study of Medicine.*

*(The author would like to thank West Chester University librarians Neal Kenney and Alexander Miriello for their assistance in providing materials for this article.)*