

FLU

1918 Epidemic Frightens Entire County & Kills Several Thousands; Final Toll in Doubt

by John W. Smith

As the month of October dawned in Berks County in 1918, optimism was clearly in the air.

It seemed obvious that the Great War in which the country had been engaged for the last year-and-a-half would soon be over. Headlines in the *Reading Eagle* for Tuesday, Oct. 1, 1918, proclaimed: **"The Allies Still Successfully Smashing Foe . . . Americans Sweep On to St. Quentin . . . The Enemy Weakened."**

Baseball fans were excited about the prospect of seeing more games at Lauer's Park involving such greats as Babe Ruth, Rogers Hornsby and Shoeless Joe Jackson. The major league season ended prematurely because of the war, and the players were barnstorming in the area on their own.

Roman Catholics were looking forward to the first Berks visit of Archbishop Dennis Dougherty of Philadelphia later in the week.

But something else that was invisible was in the air, also. In days it would affect thousands of households, especially in the city and the bigger boroughs, and bring lasting grief to many.

That *something* were germs of the Spanish influenza, which had been gradually spreading across the United States, after having earlier devastated Europe and Asia. There had been reports of outbreaks across the United States

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throughout the summer, especially in the military camps, but the disease seemed far away.

The only hint of it in the Oct. 1 *Reading Eagle* was an obituary for Elton Smith, a Kurtztown native who had died of influenza in Allentown, but he had contracted the disease in Philadelphia, where he worked in a munitions plant.

The next day's newspaper reported that the disease was spreading in Massachusetts, in New York, and in Washington, and that the Reformed Theological Seminary in Lancaster had closed because half the students were ill.

A page 4 article on Oct. 3 assured Berks County readers: **"No Cause for Alarm, If People Cooperate Against Influenza."** It would be the first of several assurances that would soon prove unsure.

That story said that almost every physician in Reading was treating some cases, but if people in good health avoided large gatherings their chances of contracting the illness were slight. The main advice: **"Stifle your cough or sneeze if you can. If you can't, bury it in a handkerchief."**

It also reported that one local nurse and three local pharmacy students, all at school in Philadelphia, were suffering from the disease, and that the first serious outbreak in western Pennsylvania had occurred in Butler.

But by the next day, the Spanish flu was the big story. Dr. B.F. Royer, act-

ing state commissioner of health in Harrisburg, ordered the closing of all public indoor gathering places—saloons, lodge halls, theaters, dance halls—except for restaurants, schools and churches, in all cities and towns in the Commonwealth.

Royer also issued a list of symptoms: fever of 101 to 104 degrees, chills, headache, pain, bronchitis. The main problem was that bronchitis often developed into fatal pneumonia. We now know that the culprit was an airborne virus that set the table for a variety of killer bacteria. Many patients literally drowned as their lungs filled with fluids.

One strange thing about the disease was its name. It apparently began in Eastern Europe, but picked up the "Spanish" tag when Spain was devastated in April; close to one-third of that country's citizens became ill. Playing no favorites, it swept through both Britain and Germany in the late spring and early summer.

Returning troops presumably helped bring it to the United States, and also spread to the other continents. One source, though, says that the epidemic started in the United States at Fort Riley, Kan., where a great pall of smoke hung over the area for days because of the daily burning of horse manure at the headquarters of the U.S. Cavalry.

Whatever its origin it became a genuine **pandemic**, i.e., worldwide.

But the strangest thing about the

disease was that it especially attacked young adults, who would ordinarily be considered the least likely group to be fatally stricken. Medical men have never come up with an answer to that puzzle.

Dr. Royer urged everyone to "practice every care in the way of personal and domestic hygiene." People were also urged to have regular bowel movements, keep in the fresh air, avoid crowds, get lots of sunshine and get plenty of sleep.

One of the first victims of Royer's ban on public gatherings was the state Women's Christian Temperance Union annual convention, which began its preliminary session in Reading on October 4.

It was reported that when the women heard that every saloon in the state was being closed, they rose to their feet and spontaneously sang the Doxology. Then they were told they had to shut down, too, so they ran through some necessary business and closed at noon. William Jennings Bryan would have been their main speaker the next day, but he had already canceled. His wife had the flu.

The next day – Saturday, October 5 – Reading City Council requested churches and Sunday schools to remain closed the following day; called off the big Liberty Day parade scheduled for the next Saturday; and banned baseball games.

The baseball ban was an afterthought. Mayor E.H. Filbert wanted the churches closed but Dr. Charles Roland, the city health officer, didn't think that step was necessary. When Filbert's view prevailed, Roland brought up the baseball issue, and Filbert agreed that if church was bad, so were ball games.

One problem was that no one knew how many cases of the flu had developed in the city, because it was not a reportable disease. Council immediately took action to require reports.

The *Eagle* of Sunday (Oct. 6) reported that on Saturday night, "Money burned holes in men's pockets. There were few places where men could spend. Saturday night by most people is dedicated to pleasure, or to shopping. The latter was possible, for the department stores and shops were open as usual. But the palaces of pleasure, the movies, the theaters and the caravansaries where a man under normal circumstances may slake

Fourteen graves in a day established a record at Charles Evans Cemetery; gravediggers there were put on a 12-hour day, seven days a week. The casket works at Boyertown was put on a seven-day schedule. Six full trucks a day were dispatched from Boyertown to Philadelphia.

his weekend thirst were barred and bolted.

"The younger element, the lads and ladies whose wont it is to forget their daily work and their youthful worries on a Saturday night by tripping the 'light fantastic,' could not indulge in their favorite syncopated diversion. The jazz bands jazzed nary a jazz. Not a toe tripped daintily over a waxed floor."

And the next day, the newspaper reported on the atmosphere of Sunday: "Sunday was without a parallel in the history of Reading. It was churchless, preachless, gasless, singless, gameless, clubless and everything but influenzaless. . . ." (Sunday gasoline sales had earlier been banned as part of the war effort.)

"It was a common expression about the middle of the afternoon to hear, 'How was a day in the fall ever so long?' . . . Walking still remained, but who cares to hike all day?"

For the first week of October, the City of Philadelphia – only 50 miles removed – reported an all-time high in deaths of 1,191; 75 percent of these were estimated to be from influenza. In the nearby coal region, field hospitals had been established at Minersville, Shamokin and the Pottsville Armory.

Cooperation was excellent among the Reading proprietors who had been forced to close, though one saloon, at Fifth and Cherry streets, was caught doing business with the shades drawn. This was in contrast with Schuylkill County, where the state police raid defiant saloons in Minersville, St. Clair and Silberton.

There was grumbling about Reading stores being allowed to be open late on Saturdays when clubs were closed, so

the stores were ordered to close at 6 p.m. The trolleys were ordered to provide additional ventilation.

By Wednesday, Oct. 9, the *Eagle* was proclaiming: "Epidemic at Zenith; Expected to Subside." City Health Officer Roland said he hoped the worst was over. His hope would not be realized.

The obituary list was increasing, but most of the danger still seemed far from Berks. The deaths of a dozen local young men were recorded Oct. 7-9, but all had succumbed in military camps in the East and South. The most notable of the group was Harry Eyrich, who had played the lead in several amateur theatrical productions; he died in Camp Greenleaf, Georgia.

Obituaries later in the week included John W. Wacha, 19, son of the leader of the Philharmonic Band, at Lehigh University, and Ralph J. Mattern, 24, son of the deputy county controller, at Aberdeen, MD, Proving Grounds.

On Saturday, Oct. 12, the *Eagle* reported that the epidemic was on the wane. The number of new cases appeared to have peaked on Wednesday, at 418.

But on that Saturday night, police vans had to be pressed into service at transporting new patients to the hospitals.

And by Monday, the count was showing no signs of dropping. The total was now 2,200, and that didn't include cases before reporting became mandatory. And more than 100 deaths had been recorded, including that of Nelson B. Keyser, 45, of Wyomissing, prominent cashier of Penn National Bank, who was ill just a week.

Word came from Boyertown that there were 1,050 cases there and the healthcare system was breaking down under the strain.

The obituary page for that Monday contained the news of 30 deaths of Berks residents 48 years of age or under, including eighteen between 21 and 35, all from the flu. Almost all were from Reading. Birdsboro reported its seventh flu death in a week, while Shillington suffered only its first.

The next day, 607 new cases were reported in the city.

Emergency hospitals, which had stood ready for several days, were pressed into

service. No. 1 was at the Rajah Theater, No. 2 at the Armory. No. 3 at the Elks Home and No. 4 at Liederkrantz Hall. Population at both the Rajah and Armory quickly passed 60.

On Tuesday, Oct. 16, the state Board of Health announced it was sending four doctors to Reading to help with the crisis.

People said they had never before seen so many graves being dug in rural cemeteries. In many cases burials had to wait until the graves could be completed; the caskets remained at the side of the plots. Fourteen graves in the day established a record at Charles Evans Cemetery; the gravediggers there were put on a 12-hour day, seven days a week.

The casket works at Boyertown was put on a seven-day schedule, and undertakers from all over the state were rushing there in auto trucks. Six full trucks a day were being dispatched from Boyertown to Philadelphia.

The Rev. Adelbert Malusecki of St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church appealed to City Council for help on Oct. 18 – he said that 60 members of his parish had died in the last ten days. Many of them could not speak English and were suspicious of hospitals. Council agreed to publish fliers in foreign languages. Malusecki drafted out-of-work saloonkeepers to act as orderlies at the Liederkrantz, where the Polish citizens were taken.

That day, word came that the epidemic was on the increase in such diverse places as Bally, Robesonia, Gibraltar and Mohnton, though it waned in Boyertown.

The *Eagle* carried a list of prominent citizens who had loaned their automobiles to visiting nurses during the emergency.

On Oct. 19, the report was that Reading was holding its own, but Topton was calling for help, and an outbreak was imperiling the Hamburg Tuberculosis Sanatorium, where 19 patients and 15 staff were ill.

The latest rosy report was issued on Monday, Oct 21: cooler weather had virtually broken the back of the epidemic, officials felt. The number of new cases dropped below 200 for the first time in 10 days. The total of cases had now surpassed 7,500, but 4,800 were listed in the "recovered" category.

The **next** day it was Womelsdorf calling for help. And the **next** day, more careful accounting put the total at more than 10,000 cases in the city and 300 deaths there. And the **next** day, officials were alarmed to uncover 334 new cases, more than double the previous day. The secretary of the school board, Robert E. Richardson, 35, was among the latest to die.

The feeling on Friday, Oct. 25, was that the epidemic had been checked, but not stamped out. That day, Henry S. Fichthorn, 44, a teacher at Reading High School, died. Early the next day, Mae Quirk, 20, a student nurse at St. Joseph Hospital, became the first Reading nurse to succumb. Also dying that weekend was Warren Kachline, 18, former editor of the Reading High newspaper, at Lehigh University. The three-week city death toll from the flu was put at 371.

Finally, as the end of October drew near, so did the epidemic. On Friday, Nov. 1, city officials asked the state board of health to rescind the ban on assemblies. The least-used emergency hospital facility was closed, and 200 unused mattresses were shipped to western Pennsylvania.

The next day, word came that the state would lift the ban by Wednesday. The flu deaths in the city for the month of October were put at 490 by Dr. Roland, the health officer.

Churches opened for the first time in a month on Sunday, Nov. 3. Most of the pastors preached in a spirit of thanksgiving, but some, including F.K. Huntzinger of St. Luke's Lutheran and Max Wiant at First Baptist, **deplored the spiritual indifference which they said may have brought God's judgment.**

Unlike Lancaster, the city agreed to wait to open the theaters and bars until the state said it could. Lancaster went ahead and opened up that weekend, with the result that the state slapped a quarantine on Lancaster. The effect was that trains didn't stop there for a couple of days, but the issue soon became moot.

Schools were back in session in Reading Thursday, Nov. 7. The children were to have only two days of classes before they were granted another holiday – to celebrate the signing of the armistice on

Monday, November 11.

Isolated cases, of course, continued to crop up. On Nov. 18, it was reported that five cases had broken out among the 100 people sent to the county prison a few days earlier after extensive vice raids.

Perhaps the biggest local debate that marked the response to the flu was whether the streets should be flushed. Many believed the accumulating grime was contributing to the spread of the disease. But because the city was in a drought situation, John K. Stauffer, head of the water bureau, said he couldn't spare the water.

On Roland's urging, it was agreed that flushing would occur if the citizens of Reading were willing to practice water conservation. This was judged by whether the consumption would be cut by the housewives on Monday morning. It was – **but only up to 10 a.m.!** So no flushing was allowed.

Another solution was apparently found when John Barbey, the brewer, offered water from his private wells. But the city contractor, E.R. Posey, didn't have the facilities to take advantage of the offer. Finally, on Oct 30, the streets got flushed – by a heavy rainstorm. An *Eagle* reporter suggested that the failure to flush had been an example of municipal apathy that voters would remember.

Multiple deaths in one family from the flu were common. The three-member Roy Goodhead family of 1245 Spring St. was wiped out. Former Sheriff Jacob H. Sassaman lost two sons at Camp Merritt, NJ, and a granddaughter. Elia George, 31, of 124 Plum St. and two sons all died. Adam Fisher, 28, of 1057 Union St. and his wife, Eva, 25, died a few hours apart. The Cerniglias of 24 Neversink St. lost a 6-year-old son one day and his 7-year-old brother the next. John and Gertrude Alexander of 346 S. Seventh St. lost two sons the same day, shortly after burying their daughter.

In early November, the state health bureau put the number of statewide deaths at 35,000, but of course that would not have been a complete report.

The generally accepted number of deaths in the United States was more than half-a-million. The worldwide count was more than 21 million.

How many of those were in Berks

County is unknown. Some reports have placed the figure at 5,000, but that seems much too high. That would be more than 80 a day for 60 days, and contemporary accounts do not reflect anything like that.

The number from the city, confirmed by sketchy state records, would be over 500. But no credible records exist for the rest of the county. It is not likely that the total in the rest of Berks would be much more than in the city. Schuylkill County, where the epidemic by contemporary accounts was worse, counted 1,600 deaths.

In Philadelphia, though, the death toll was more than 7,000 in just the two middle weeks of October.

One problem is that many of the flu deaths might have been listed as pneumonia rather than influenza. And there would be deaths from tuberculosis, certainly complicated by contracting the flu. Also, there's a tangible "reality" that in 1918 not everyone consulted doctors when ill, particularly in the more remote rural areas. And since the '18 flu was known to target the young and killed fast it's entirely possible that a substantial number of the victims of the epidemic were simply buried in rural graveyards without an accurate record of how they died.

An argument can be made that a new, detailed study of church and graveyard record would get us a more accurate assessment of the death. And one suspects it would be substantially higher than what we now know. Three graveyard examples come to mind:

(1) Gethsemane Cemetery, Laureldale, recorded 244 burials in 1918, nearly three times the number of the year before. That would involve both city and suburban deaths.

(2) Charles Evans Cemetery, Reading, recorded its largest yearly total of burials in 1918: 999. That was 193 more than recorded in 1917, and more than 330 that would be recorded in 1919.

(3) And then there's the visual testimony found at the historic St. Paul Mission Chapel along Route 724 between Monocacy and Douglassville. (See the photo on this page and its telling story.)

Whatever is uncertain about the



Photo by George M. Meiser, IX

Pictured is that section of the graveyard of the St. Paul Mission Chapel where all of the surnames are of Italian derivation. Fully two dozen of the stones have death dates of October 1918, clearly indicating they were victims of the influenza epidemic.

numbers of the 1918 flu epidemic, there is the certainty that it was the greatest civic tragedy in Berks County history.

In that emergency, it wasn't only healthcare professionals who responded to the call for help. The *Reading Eagle* averred that "when the history of this epidemic is written, the part that public

school teachers of Reading rendered to this community will be no means inconsiderable."

In addition to volunteer nursing work and sewing, the idled teachers ran a Fresh Air Home at the Driscoll Farm on Pricetown Road, for children whose parents were ill or dead.

The two leaders were Misses Anna Rapp and Bessie Mason. They and a

dietitian remained on duty all the time, but according to a newspaper account, "the other squads came in relays and took entire charge of the establishment, mopping the floors, making the beds, preparing the meals, bathing the children, etc., in addition to supervising their play and recreation."

The home was praised by state officials as being the first of its kind in the Commonwealth.

Various precautions and treatments were of course urged throughout the epidemic, in that day before electron microscopes and antibiotics. One official now called for the use of a nasal atomizer with an ounce or two of tincture of iodine. A Romanian couple from East Reading appeared before City Council to advocate the use of vinegar mixed with garlic.

In many local households there were smelly asafoetida bags, containing a fetid gum resin of various Oriental plants related to the carrot family. These cloth bags were fastened around the neck and asafoetida was a folk remedy for almost any ailment.

Dr. George Baer, a prominent Pitts-

burgh physician, was sure an injection of 1.54 grains of iodine in combination with creosote and gualacol (?). From another source came the suggestion that children should eat a cake of yeast a day. Imbibing whiskey was a popular home remedy. A Boston physician counseled the removal of clothing - to what end we don't know.

Patent-medicine remedies abounded. One peddler who advertised regularly offered this advice: "**Avoid crowds, coughs and cowards, but fear neither germ nor Germans.**" He advocated plenty of exercise in the fresh air; a clean mouth, skin and bowels; and of course "pleasant pellets," a vegetable pill that would keep the liver and bowels regular. He was selling the "pellets."

Later in the month of October, 1918, no less of a personage than the Surgeon General of the United States issued an "**absolute cure.**" A one-inch ball of cotton was to be saturated with alcohol, then three drops of chloroform were to be added. The ball was to be placed between the patient's teeth. He/she was to inhale for 15 minutes, rest for 15, inhale for 15, rest for 15, and keep go-

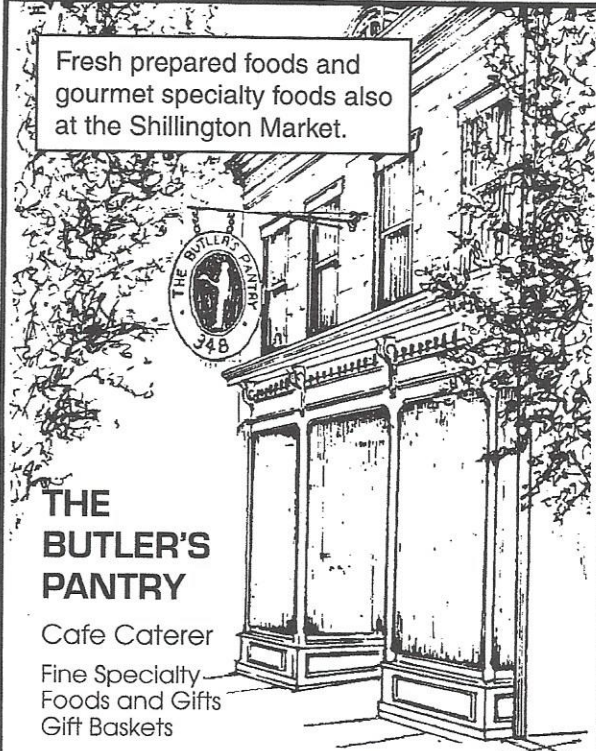
ing that way for 12 hours. The theory was that the lungs would expand to their normal condition under such treatment.

One of the many ways in which hospital care differed eight decades ago was in the financial arrangements. According to the *Eagle*, "The need for hospital treatment is so imperative that there is no question of payment. The patients are conveyed to the hospital as speedily as possible, and there is never any question of their paying fees or room rent.

"Some of the patients who have recovered, however, are so grateful that they have made voluntary contributions to help in the fight against the epidemic."

Among the newspaper advertisers of the day there were those who took notice of the epidemic. Berks Supply, 838 Penn St., offered "economic oil stoves" as a means of keeping warm, deemed important in staying healthy. An Eighth Street music store suggested that citizens should buy a piano or player piano because good music would bring cheer to influenza victims.

In the month of October, 1918, the people of Reading and Berks needed all the cheer they could get. ■



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THE BULLETIN

OF THE

Berks County Medical Society

Vol. 9.

READING, PA., SEPTEMBER, 1919

No. 9

GEORGE W. OVERHOLSER, President

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PROGRAM

TUESDAY, SEPT. 9, 1919

3.00 P. M.

Ectopic Pregnancy, - - - Dr. G. I. Winston

Actinomycosis, - - - Dr. W. F. Knoll

Principles of Medical Ethics p5-6

are adequate and, if not, recommend ways and means for the better protection of the people from sickness and its effects.

That there are many good arguments favoring so-called health insurance cannot be ignored, and that many able and influential people and organizations favor it cannot be denied; therefore the medical profession must give it respectful hearing. If we are convinced that health insurance will accomplish much for the happiness and well-being of society, then we physicians must make it our business to see that a practical, far-reaching, fair and satisfactory health insurance law is made to allow the maximum benefit for the worker, adequate compensation for the physician and a minimum of expenditure for the state. If we are convinced that health insurance is not what is claimed for it, then we must suggest an alternative. It is our problem and it is obligatory for us to make as few mistakes as possible and the best time to rectify mistakes is, paradoxically, before they are made. So many interests must be considered, the workmen, the manufacturer, the physician, the public. All irritation, selfishness, recrimination, must be forgotten. All parties interested should get together and weigh the subject in every detail and then outline legislation which would satisfy all concerned and mean something in the development of better well-being for the people of our state. The medical profession must be clearly and explicitly in favor of some health system that will remedy some of the distresses revealed by various investigating commissions. J. B. McA.

ATTENTION—ATTENTION

At the August meeting, the following amendment to the Constitution and By-Laws of the Berks County Medical Society was passed:

Section 1. The entrance fee for applicants who have practised medicine in Berks County for a period of three years or more shall be twenty-five (\$25.00) dollars. The entrance fee for applicants who have practised medicine for a period of less than three years shall be five (\$5.00) dollars, and the annual dues shall be ten (\$10.00) dollars. The entrance fee and annual dues must accompany the application for membership.

The dues accompanying application made during October, November and December shall cover the dues for the following calendar year.

PRINCIPLES OF MEDICAL ETHICS

CHAPTER III

(Copyrighted)

The Duties of the Profession to the Public Physicians as Citizens

Section 1. Physicians, as good citizens and because their professional training specially qualifies them to render this service, should give advice concerning the public health of the community. They

should bear their full part in enforcing its laws and sustaining the institutions that advance the interests of humanity. They should cooperate especially with the proper authorities in the administration of sanitary laws and regulations. They should be ready to counsel the public on subjects relating to sanitary police, public hygiene and legal medicine.

Physicians Should Enlighten Public Duties in Epidemics

Section 2. Physicians, especially those engaged in public health work, should enlighten the public regarding quarantine regulations; on the location, arrangement and dietaries of hospitals, asylums, schools, prisons and similar institutions, and concerning measures for the prevention of epidemic prevails, a physician must continue his labors for the alleviation of suffering people, without regard to the risk to his own health or life or to financial return. At all times, it is the duty of the physician to notify the properly constituted public health authorities of every case of communicable disease under his care, in accordance with the laws, rules and regulations of the health authorities of the locality in which the patient is.

Public Warned

Section 3. Physicians should warn the public against the devices practiced and the false pretensions made by charlatans which may cause injury to health and loss of life.

Pharmacists

Section 4. By legitimate patronage, physicians should recognize and promote the profession

of pharmacy; but any pharmacist, unless he be qualified as a physician, who assumes to prescribe for the sick, should be denied such countenance and support. Moreover, whenever a druggist or pharmacist dispenses deteriorated or adulterated drugs, or substitutes one remedy for another designated in a prescription, he thereby forfeits all claims to the favorable consideration of the public and physicians.

NINTH CONFERENCE OF INDUSTRIAL PHYSICIANS AND SURGEONS IN HARRISBURG, PA., SEPT. 22, 1919

My dear Doctor:

This Department will hold its Ninth Conference of Industrial Physicians and Surgeons at the State Capitol, Harrisburg, Pa., on Monday, Sept. 22, which conference will be held in co-operation with the Medical Society of the State of Pennsylvania, which during the week of Sept. 22 will hold its annual meeting in the city of Harrisburg.

I have the honor to extend to you, and through you, to all physicians with whom you come in contact, a most cordial invitation to be present at and participate in this meeting.

A copy of the program is enclosed for your information, and I sincerely trust that your professional engagements will permit our having the pleasure of your presence at this Conference.

Faithfully yours,

FRANCIS D. PATTERSON,
Chief, Division of Industrial Hygiene.