

The 1918 Flu Pandemic:

A Year of Hardship in Minnesota, America & Abroad

Story by RWCS Member Todd Avery

The year 1918 was full of fear in America. The country was preparing an army to send into the conflict engulfing Europe. Hundreds of thousands of troops – “doughboys,” as they were called – were training on bases all over the country. People were anxious and fearful, but a wave of patriotism bolstered the nation as it prepared for war.

Minnesota was experiencing all the pains of war preparation, as well as the ongoing business of being an agricultural-based Midwestern state. The summer was said to have been abnormally hot and dry, especially in the northern part of the state. Farmers in the southern part of Minnesota were busy growing crops in hopes of rising commodity prices. WWI had driven grain prices higher and farmers were eager to bolster their incomes.

Red Wing was enjoying the benefits of being a growing industrial town with a prosperous agricultural base in the surrounding area. The community manufactured many goods and was known for its flourmills. The local stoneware business was producing an ever-widening offering of products and growing in its annual output. Prohibition was still a year away and local production of liquor jugs continued. The hot summer moved into fall and times changed quickly.

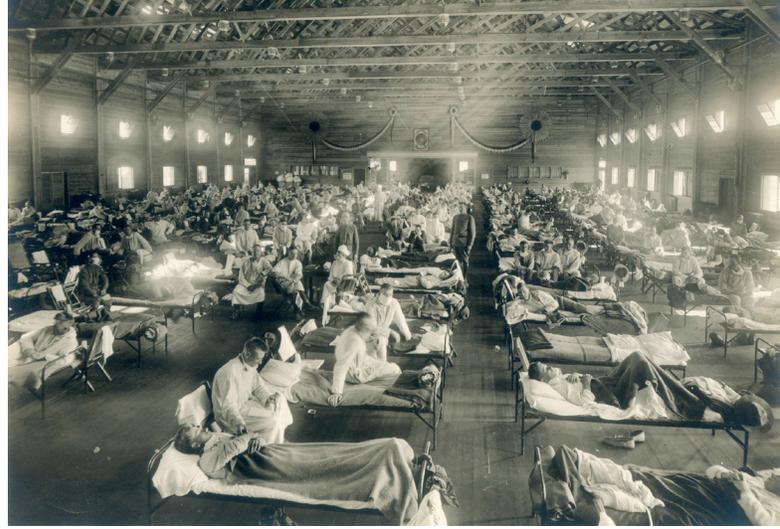
Towards the end of 1918, a severe influenza outbreak struck Red Wing. Quarantines were established, and churches and schools were closed. Public gatherings were forbidden. About one person in 40 was infected, with 31 deaths.

The city of Red Wing had joined the ever-growing number of communities throughout the United States battling this vicious enemy. Affecting the entire planet, this pandemic is incorrectly referred to as the Spanish Flu. Its exact origin is actually unknown, although a weaker version of the virus was noted at an army training camp in Kansas in spring of 1918. Some believe ship-borne soldiers exported this strain to Europe, where the virus mutated into a more deadly form. It was this second wave of the flu that was spread around the globe by wartime troop movements and killed millions.

The press in the United States and other countries fighting in WWI were severely censored to minimize reports of illness and deaths to help maintain morale. But Spain wasn't involved in the conflict, so their newspapers were free to report the epidemic's effects there. Since these were the only stories being told, it prompted the world to believe the virus came from Spain, giving rise to the nickname that persists today. However, more soldiers were dying from influenza across Europe than from the conflict itself. Minnesota lost more than 1,400 soldiers to combat and more than 2,300 to influenza.

*I had a bird, little bird – its name was Enza
I opened the window, and In-flu-Enza*

-Children's jump rope rhyme circa 1918



Soldiers from Fort Riley, Kansas, sick with the flu at an emergency hospital ward at nearby Camp Funston in 1918. Image courtesy of Otis Historical Archives, National Museum of Health and Medicine.

The fall of 1918 was not kind to Minnesota. In addition to the influenza pandemic claiming more than 10,000 lives in the state alone, a forest fire in Northern Minnesota burned 1,500 square miles. Many people were killed by the fire near Cloquet, with some driving their automobiles into lakes to escape the inferno. A tornado in August of 1918 decimated the town of Tyler. The twister, estimated to have been an F-4, killed 36 and injured more than 100.

Throughout the United States, more than 675,000 people are thought to have lost their lives to influenza. Worldwide, it's estimated about 500 million people, or one-third of the globe's population, became infected by the virus, and at least 50 million died.

Despite its diminutive size, the 1/8 pint Anti-Flu League mini jug is a testament to extraordinary times in our history. By all accounts, fear was the biggest enemy in the war on influenza. People just didn't have enough information to make sound decisions and they were dying. This flu killed those who should have been the most resilient; it targeted the young and healthy. Those with the strongest immune systems died because the virus caused their antibodies to overreact. This danger created a panic. Victims didn't receive treatment based on fear. Children starved and / or became orphans when both parents succumbed to the disease.

The formation of relief societies helped communities cope with fear by delivering medical help and information. In this time of need, people turned to the best science they had available and survived. Made by the Red Wing Union Stoneware Co. to promote awareness of the group and its efforts, and possibly even to help raise funds to support the cause, the little Anti-Flu League jug helped fight fear locally.

Sources for this article include *Saga of a Rivertown* by Madeline Angell (1977), "Why the Second Wave of the 1918 Spanish Flu was so Deadly" by Dave Roos (History.com) and Wikipedia.



Red Wing mini jug pictured courtesy of RWCS Member Juanita Evans.