

The Influenza Pandemic of 1918

DEADLY 'BUG' CLAIMED MANY

By DICK SHEARER

Headlines over the past month have focused on the deadly Ebola virus outbreak sweeping through parts of Africa and raising fears that it might become a major threat in our country.

It makes us think back to stories we've heard about the Influenza Pandemic of 1918 that took a horrible toll in the waning days of World War I. The 1918 flu attack was selective but it left a path of tragedy that spanned the nation. The North Penn area was not spared.

There are still questions about where the disease started but we know it spread rapidly in military training camps like Fort Riley, KS, and in places where people were in close proximity to one another.

The most striking trait of this strand of flu was that it primarily attacked people in the 18-50 year-old range. For whatever reason it did not target children or the elderly; some died but to a lesser degree than supposedly healthy adults.

The 1918 pandemic came and went rather quickly. It was deadliest during a 60-day period beginning in September. By the end of November, the number of cases declined measurably.

In many instances the official cause of death was listed as pneumonia which was often a byproduct of the flu. Victims of "the bug" were simply too weak to fight off the pneumonia that followed.

Locally, the number of deaths escalated in late September and peaked during October. At least two soldiers – probably more – died from the flu. One was James Edward O'Hara, whose mother lived on East Main Street in Lansdale. He died in France on Sept. 26. O'Hara, 31, was assigned to the 316th Field Hos-

pital's sanitary train, which likely explains where he was exposed to it. The other victim, Sgt. Ira Frankenfield, 28, who lived on East Sixth Street, was stationed at Fort Meade, MD, when he was stricken. His parents were alerted to his serious condition and were enroute to the camp when he died.

The severity of the pandemic played out in the

Bucks-Montgomery Deaths

John J. Walsh died at his home, 228 James street, Norristown,

William Stauffer, aged 32, died at his home in Norristown, on Friday.

Sarah H. Featherston aged 74, died at the home of her son, Lahaska

David Behr, tailor, died of influenza

Kath... died of influenza

... died at his home, Norristown, on

... died of influenza on Saturday, at Camp

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Miss Lydia V. Fretz, aged 26 years, died Monday of pneumonia at the

... aged 90 years, died ... day. He was

... of

... passed away ... street, Norristown

Walter A. Kelly, ... of Rosaline Kelly, of Dox... died Sunday of influenza.

Harry C. Bean, aged 24, of Norristown, died of influenza at the Puget Sound Navy Yard, Washington.

Influenza Proves Fatal to Many in this Section

Lansdale Boy Dies of Pneumonia in France

Two More Gold Stars for Lansdale's Service Flag. Ira Frankenfield and Wm. Saxe Die

The service flag of Lansdale, if it is ever flown to the breeze, will contain two more gold stars, owing to the deaths of two of its brave boys during the past week.

William Saxe, son of William O. Saxe of Souderton, but who has been

They left at once for camp. Shortly after their departure another telegram arrived announcing his death.

He was born in Chalfont 28 years ago and when five years old the family moved to Dublin where they resided

pages of the *Lansdale Republican and Review*, which at the time was the parent newspaper of *The Reporter*.

Early in September, 1918, life in the North Penn area appears to have been quite normal despite the fact that many local servicemen remained in harm's way in Europe. But conditions changed dramatically as the month progressed.

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MANY FROM AREA SUCCUMBED TO FLU

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Unlike today where 24-hour news channels cover every nuance of the Ebola virus outbreak, the scope of the 1918 pandemic wasn't completely recognized until the number of deaths attributed to influenza or pneumonia doubled, tripled and quadrupled with each successive issue of the weekly paper.

A partial list of deaths from Bucks and Montgomery counties for a single week listed close to 50 deaths, three-quarters of them attributed to "the bug". Perkasio recorded seven deaths, all the victims between 6 and 38.

William Hause, a Lansdale native serving at Camp Gant, IL, wrote to his parents that "I am well and kicking despite the large number of cases of influenza.

"There are about 4,500 and they are dying right and left. The camp is under quarantine, everyone is wearing masks and no one is allowed to go in or out except those with special passes to see the sick."

Some of the local deaths were more troubling than others. Mr. and Mrs. Henry Bowers of Franconia, both age 25, died on the same day at his parents' home. Wilmer Clemens of Harleysville, 31, was stricken while selling farm goods in Philadelphia where it became necessary to bury victims in mass graves because of sheer numbers.

Howard Young of West Fifth Street lost his wife, Catherine, and his three-year-old daughter, Sarah Anne, in a matter of hours. Sam Fruit, the shoe

store owner, and his wife, both ill with the flu, lost their 11-year-old daughter Millie. Lillian Loman, 37, daughter of J.J. White, was out and about on Saturday and Sunday. She died of the flu on Tuesday.

One of the most heart-breaking cases involved Mr. and Mr. Horace Fleck of Blaine Street. Horace died on Sunday night, his wife on Tuesday. Left behind with no parents were four children, the oldest was age eight.

On Oct. 1, more than 300 pupils from Lansdale's public schools were sick or stayed home. Two days later classrooms were closed down until further notice. North Wales' schools followed suit.

In early October Lansdale's Board of Health issued an order that churches, Sunday schools, public schools, lodge rooms, club rooms, pool rooms and soda fountains be closed. Hotels and theaters were shut down by state order.

But by the 26th of the month, local doctors informed the board that very few new cases had developed in Lansdale and the order was rescinded.

The influenza pandemic of 1918 came and went with amazing speed. We don't know for certain how many hundreds of lives were lost in the North Penn area. Nor do we know how many children grew up without one of both of their parents, or how many parents never got to see their children grow to maturity.

We can only imagine the fear and uncertainty that gripped the region for a few short months that must have seemed like a lifetime.