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COVID-19 has parallel in 'Spanish Flu' pandemic of 1918

By WARREN D. HUSE, FOR THE LACONIA DAILY SUN
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Part 1 of a series.

LACONIA — The world, the nation and Laconia underwent an attack by a virus, in 1918, in many ways similar to the currently unfolding COVID-19 pandemic.

Looking back from the perspective of a little more than a century — 102 years to be precise — this small city had emerged relatively unscathed.

On the other hand, between 125 and 150 Laconians (including residents and those in military service) died from the disease in the space of about four months.

These from a city with a population of roughly 10,800 at the time.

(And, of course, the impact locally would be seen larger if casualties from neighboring Gilford, Belmont, Meredith and other towns were added in.)

Nationally, the first indications of what came to be called the H1N1 flu virus began in far-away Kansas, in March 1918, when flu-like symptoms were reported in Camp Funston at Fort Riley.

A month later, the first mention of influenza by name came from Haskell County, also in Kansas — some 267 miles distant from Fort Riley.

H1N1, also colloquially called “the Spanish Flu,” spread rapidly among members of the military, who had been deploying to Europe for the past year, the United States having entered World War I, April 6, 1917.

And, of course, the virus spread into the civilian populations with which the service members came in contact.

The virus spread unevenly through the U.S., Europe and possibly Asia over the next six months.

Meanwhile, as infections became a pandemic — ultimately killing between 50 million and 100 million people worldwide and some 675,000 in the United States — Laconia was apparently untouched during the spring and summer of 1918, at least according to the weekly editions of The Laconia Democrat.



But by September 1918, a second wave of infection emerged at Camp Devens, in Massachusetts, with 14,000 cases of flu there by the end of the month and 767 deaths.

In late September, The Democrat reported that even the war news had “been overshadowed this week by the Great Spanish Influenza Epidemic.”

Deaths in Boston were running as high as 170 per day and 5,000 new cases had been reported in Massachusetts on one day, that article continued.

Locally, “it appeared that Laconia had thus far been fortunate inasmuch as we have not been so seriously hit by the epidemic as other towns and cities like Franklin, Berlin, Tilton and many places in Massachusetts.”

Nonetheless, the Laconia Committee on Public Safety voted to request the Board of Education to close the public schools for one week, the board of health to close the theaters and moving picture houses for one week commencing Sept. 30, and the pastors of the churches to curtail their services that Sunday and to suspend services entirely the following Sunday unless there was a change in the situation.

“All gatherings and meetings tending to bring together a large number of people” should be discouraged “until the danger of an epidemic is past,” the committee warned.

In addition, the Board of Health closed the public library and ordered all regular meetings of secret and fraternal organizations cancelled until further notice.

And the County Draft Board was notified to cancel all entrainment of men to training camps, as well.

Note: Information about the 1918 pandemic was taken from “The Deadliest Flu: The Complete Story of the Discovery and Reconstruction of the 1918 Pandemic Virus,” available on-line at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<https://tinyurl.com/stqg3tr>) and from the CDC’s “1918 Pandemic Influenza Historic Timeline” (<https://tinyurl.com/y83bp7od>).

The local references were taken from the microfilm files of The Laconia Democrat at the Laconia Public Library.