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1918 Influenza pandemic left heart-wrenching statistics in its wake

By WARREN D. HUSE, for The Laconia Daily Sun
Apr 17, 2020

Part 7 of a series

LACONIA — The “Spanish Flu” pandemic was essentially over here by the end of 1918, but it left behind sobering statistics. — looking back at the events of 102 years ago.

There had been some 125 or 150 deaths due to the H1N1 flu virus in the space of six weeks in this city.

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These figures did not include men or women in the armed services, whose bodies would have been "brought here for burial" over the next year or two. They would add at least a dozen more to the death toll.

And, in perspective, none of these figures takes into account natives or residents of the city who had moved away or who entered military service from some other place and are thus counted there.

In its report, the Laconia Board of Health's listing of "communicable diseases" for 1918 included "approximately" 3,000 for influenza and 400 for pneumonia — for a potential total of up to 3,400.

(By comparison, 78 cases of measles were reported for the year and a scattering for scarlet and typhoid fever, diphtheria and membranous croup.)

There had been a tremendous spike in the number of all deaths reported for October 1918 — a quick count showed 102 from the Vital Statistics section of the City Report — but only 13 back in May, and only 14 in August, just before the pandemic struck.

Dr. True, secretary of the Board of Health had given a figure of 109 influenza deaths thus far, in late October, as reported by *The Democrat* at the time.

Of course, there had been deaths in September and November, so the ultimate total to be ascribed to the influenza pandemic would be higher for the year — perhaps somewhere in the vicinity of 125? Perhaps as high as 150?

In the Board of Health's report, it concluded, "There are still quite a large number of people sick in the Lake city, but very few new cases have been reported during the past few days and it is thought that the danger is practically over."

This assertion is not dated, but the City Report was issued "for the year ending Feb. 15, 1919."

The CDC notes there was no vaccine to protect against influenza infection and no antibiotics to treat secondary bacterial infections.



Control efforts were limited to non-pharmaceutical interventions — isolation, quarantine, good personal hygiene, use of disinfectants and limiting public gatherings, the last applied unevenly.

The writer's grandfather, an M.D., who practiced in Dover until 1931, recalled late in life that the only thing he had with which to treat influenza victims was aspirin.

In the city historian's report for 1918, some 553 Laconians were documented as having served during World War I.

Of that number, two had been killed in action, one died of wounds, and 11 died of disease. A high percentage of the latter succumbed to influenza or pneumonia.

The end of World War I enabled a resurgence of infection as people celebrated the Armistice in November 1918 and soldiers began to demobilize.

The CDC records a third wave of influenza during winter and spring 1919, killing many more but subsiding in summer.

Laconia, however, seems to have been spared from this third wave, at least judging from a lack of mention in *The Laconia Democrat* during that period.

Moreover, in addition to a "Welcome Home" celebration in July, involving nearly the entire population, there was a Chautauqua lecture series, a big agricultural fair at Opechee Park and dances at the Music Hall at Weirs among other events — all involving large crowds and visitors from away.