

The Great Flu Pandemic of 1918

ANN ARBOR CONFRONTED DISEASE EVEN AS IT PREPARED FOR WAR

Between the summers of 1918 and 1919, in part due to massive troop movements associated with World War I, millions of people across the globe — as many as 60 million according to recently revised estimates — died of a deadly variant of influenza known as the “Spanish flu” because it initially struck a Spanish beach resort in early 1918.

Comparatively, the pandemic was kind to Ann Arbor, decreasing the city’s population of roughly 18,000 by about 100 residents. This figure is thrown into relief when compared to the devastation influenza wrought in Philadelphia where the virus took the lives of 11,000 people, killing over 500 a day at the height of the epidemic. The United States lost a half million Americans, many in the prime of their lives, a national toll so profound that the average lifespan plummeted by one decade in the years 1918 and 1919.

Toward the close of World War I, in September 1918, the University of Michigan inaugurated its Student Army Training Corps (SATC), a program that allowed students to continue their studies while simultaneously preparing for warfare on the European Front. Almost 4,000 men made up Michigan’s SATC, the largest in the country. The Michigan Union, recently constructed but still unfurnished, was turned into barracks and a mess hall for the soldier-students. To accommodate 1,900 more men, the recruits built a temporary mess hall adjacent to the Union.



Student Army Training Corps in the Michigan Union mess hall, 1918. Courtesy: Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan (Records of the Alumni Association of the U-M)

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As with military training facilities across the nation, the close quarters of the SATC and the constant arrival of new recruits promoted the transmission of disease. It is not surprising, then, that the first cases of influenza in Ann Arbor appeared among members of the SATC.

In order to impede its spread, recruits were forbidden from attending public gatherings and required to wear gauze masks outside their quarters. Despite these precautions, influenza struck the SATC harder than the general population, forcing hundreds of men to be

quarantined at the Waterman and Barbour gymnasias, the homeopathic hospital, the contagious disease ward, and other locations throughout Ann Arbor. By Armistice Day, November 11, when Ann Arbor celebrated the end of the war with a parade along William and State streets, 57 SATC men had died.

Influenza also turned the life of Ann Arborites upside down for all of October and much of November. On October 16, 1918, Ann Arbor's health officer, John A. Wessinger, issued an order that "all places of public assemblage, including auditoriums, churches, theaters, dance halls and all places of amusement within doors be and are hereby closed until further notice." Reacting to the fact that a new and mercilessly virulent influenza virus had already killed at least 20 people in the city, infected several hundred more, and was reaching pandemic proportions throughout the world, Wessinger decided that no more risks could be taken. The same day, University of Michigan President Harry B. Hutchins decreed that all students and faculty needed to don white gauze masks "while on the street, and campus and in all university exercises," as well as in rooming houses and dormitories.

From October 16 to November 7, the order prohibiting meetings at public spaces was in force. During these trying weeks, many of the city's female residents, following calls from the Red Cross and city newspapers, cut and sewed the gauze masks that were distributed on campus and also worked as nurses in many of the ad hoc wards around town. Following both local and state decrees, all of the city's gathering places, and eventually the schools, were closed, causing many residents to remain sequestered at home, fearfully awaiting the first signs of a headache or sore throat. On October 24 it was announced that the long-anticipated concert of the operatic tenor Enrico Caruso, planned by the University Musical Society, was canceled due to the flu.

Despite dramatic advances in medicine at the turn of the century, the etiology of influenza, caused by a virus much smaller than any bacteria and invisible



Two soldiers photographed on campus on Armistice Day, November 11, 1918. Although it is likely that this photo was staged, it dramatically symbolizes the twin pillars of military preparation and disease prevention that defined America in the fall of 1918. Courtesy: Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan (Caroline Maier Photograph Collection)

to microscopes of the day, was barely understood in Ann Arbor or elsewhere in the early century. It was not until the 1930s, when scientists such as Thomas Francis, who later became chair of the Department of Epidemiology at the U-M School of Public Health and achieved fame for running the Salk polio vaccine trials, began to solidify the field of virology and isolate the influenza virus (it was discovered that it traveled among swine, birds, and humans). Grasping the complexity of the influenza virus was furthered by the discovery of DNA in the 1950s and the growth of molecular medicine and techniques such as PCR (polymerase chain reaction), which several years ago enabled a group of physicians and geneticists to determine that the 1918 flu virus consists of a single strand of RNA containing segments coding for particularly lethal hemagglutinin and neuraminidase proteins.

Those who lived through the epidemic acquired antibodies, a lifetime of immu-

nity, and memories in which preparations for war were intertwined with confrontation of the deadliest flu epidemic the world has ever known. [m](#)

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