



Face of Fillmore

By *Sherry Shepard*
April 8, 2020

One of the purposes of the Face of Fillmore has been to compare the old and the new. The news over the past weeks has certainly given way to another such comparison. As we watch the continuing CoVid19 pandemic affect our lives from every direction, we cannot help but compare this pandemic with one that happened just over 100 years ago – The Spanish Flu.

From Milestones of Millard, we read:

“During the winter of 1918-1919, while the World War I was being fought, an epidemic of influenza swept Millard County. It was impossible to get efficient medical aid. Doctor R. B. Stevens, Mrs. Grover A Giles, R.N., and Beatrice Owens, together with a staff of volunteer workers, went night and day doing all that was possible for stricken families, but many died during the winter.”

While there is not much mention of it in Fillmore’s history, detailed accounts of it in Salt Lake City give us a clear picture of what went on then.

While the rest of the nation mobilized in the fall of 1918 to fight influenza, Salt Lake City looked like it might be spared from the disease. As September moved into October, no cases were yet reported. The people knew of the epidemic through the news media but were not personally affected at that point. Citizens were told that if the flu came to Salt Lake City, the best plan of action to prevent its spread was covering your mouth and nose with a handkerchief to prevent spread through particles released by coughing or sneezing. They were told that if the disease came, further action would be taken. (No advanced planning as we see today.)

By October 4, there were a handful of cases in the Salt Lake Valley. People were told they had been brought in by a family from Wyoming who came to the state fair. In the town of Coalville, 40 miles to the east, there were over a dozen cases, including the mayor and a city



The Spanish Flu Pandemic of 1918

councilman. Still the state officials were not worried, only isolating the known cases of influenza, but on October 9, they ordered closed “all churches, public school and universities, theaters, movie houses, public meetings, pool halls, dance halls and private dances, and prohibited public gather of all kinds” effective October 10. Utah was shut down.

Interestingly, one of the top health officials was very much against these measures. He believed “that children were best left in schools, arguing that they would mingle as much out of school as they would in their classrooms. More effective than the closing order”, he argued, “would be an order to prohibit funerals (because surviving family members would most likely have had contact with the deceased and would likely have influenza themselves).”

To prepare for the worst, Red Cross officials began renovating Judge Mercy Hospital for emergency use to isolate as many patients as possible.

On October 16, Fort Douglas—located on the outskirts of the city—issued a quarantine of the military post.

The epidemic in Salt Lake City rolled on, gaining momentum. On October 18, 100 new cases happened and on October 28, 147 cases and 11 deaths were reported.

The local chapter of the Red Cross was swamped with calls for help. There was a shortage of doctors and nurses to care for the sick. Eight of the most urgent calls on one day went unanswered for lack of nurses. As the month came to a close, the epidemic numbers began to look increasingly grim. Over 2,400 cases had been reported since the start of the epidemic that same month, with nearly 130 deaths. Worldwide, the flu had spread rapidly, killing 25 million people in just the first six months. People were sure it was the end of the world.

As November rolled around, things seemed to be improving. By November 11, only twenty-two patients were in the emergency hospital, and next day, the hospital was closed, and the fourteen remaining patients were sent elsewhere. Things were looking up until Armistice Day, November 13, when large crowds gathered to celebrate the end of World War I. Then another spike in influenza numbers happened.

Winter began with many cases reported. Despite a significant drop-off of cases in February, the health department continued to quarantine houses each day, well into April. By the end of its epidemic, Salt Lake City experienced a total of 10,268 reported cases, nearly nine percent of its population. Of those who fell ill, 576 residents died as a result of influenza or pneumonia.

It is interesting to note the differences in safety measures. While we are told to stay home, keep six feet apart and the use of masks is common. During the 1918 flu epidemic, businesses remained open, but stores and restaurants were told not to have sales. Schools were closed for a time but reopened as the teachers needed their pay checks. The only families staying at home were the ones quarantined with known cases. Distancing was not an issue in most cases. City busses ran but with a restricted capacity of only 75 people. Long lines of people were seen waiting for inoculation shots.

As we look around it is hard to imagine the huge amounts of CoVid19 that are impacting the entire world. We had hoped our area would be spared but it seems that is not the case. Please do all you can to protect you and your family. Stay Home, Stay Safe.