

# Siouxland's Response to The Spanish Flu

On Thursday, October 17, 1918, the editor of the *Maurice Times*, Maurice, Iowa, had no idea what was to come. In just a couple of days, he would have loved to edit that off-base lynching reference and burn the evidence. Thousands died in October 1918. No one pushed them to flatten the curve.

The world was a different place in 1918. Maurice had a daily newspaper; today it doesn't have a downtown. More people lived "on the land" back then, on small family farms, the pride of America. Food cost more--generally one-third of a family's income, twice as much as today. Nine out of ten babies were born at home; ten percent of the babies never made it to a year old. We walked or rode horses.

In 1918, we had only a beginner's sense of science, **and** we were at war, the Great War. That war was greatly responsible for the Spanish Flu. Although its origins are still debated, one of its early hotbeds was Fort Riley, Kansas, where 100 troops caught the new influenza in one week, a number that quadrupled the next. That was March of 1918.

Thirty-two army camps were wonderful breeding grounds for a contagion that no one saw coming and ended in an unimaginable death toll: 50 million died worldwide. In the U. S., 675,000 men, women and children died out of a population of 100 million. It was as if all of Nebraska and South Dakota, today, were to be wiped out, over two million gone--dead.

And it came in waves. The first wave, that spring, was virulent and contagious like nothing anyone had seen; but it didn't kill. During the summer, drifted away until fall, when it returned with a vengeance, spread around by troop movements. Whatever mutation had occurred that summer made that new edition an unforgiving killer.

In three months, September through November 1918, almost 200,000 Americans died. Many here.

In England, France, and America, war-time censorship barred any reports of sicknesses and death in the training camps and on the battlefield. The only journalists who did stories were from Spain. That's why it was called the "Spanish Flu."

The war machine kept quarantines down because supplies and armaments were so needed. Keeping that war's Rosy the Riveter from her job at the munitions factory meant our boys dying. You can't keep people from work if what they're making is keeping their husbands and brothers alive.

In one twelve-hour period at Camp Dodge in Des Moines, 1000 new cases of the Spanish influenza occurred on October 8. When, finally, the curve flattened at Camp Dodge, 10 thousand soldiers were hospitalized and 700 died.

The pandemic didn't end until 1920. Its devastation was greatly enhanced by troop movement all over the world. Twenty million military and civilians were killed in the "war to end all wars." As many as 50 million died of the flu.

We live in a different age. We know more than our ancestors did a century ago. We're staying away from each other now, and we've gatherings that draws more than a handful of close relatives. We're all self-quarantined.

But remember, the Spanish flu ended, its powers gone. While no one ever found a cure, we have scored successful inoculations.

It's easy to despair when you make the comparison. But we're not the same a century later. The coronavirus is not the Spanish Flu. Keep doing what you can.