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The Influenza Epidemic: A Memorable Impact Pushed Out of Memory?



Austin Arceo (right) and Wes Wilson, archivist

Austin Arceo
March 31, 2006

The rise of nationalism precipitated World War I and the carnage that followed. Considered the “strongest social force of [the] time,”¹ its rise took sociologists by surprise. They previously had thought it a “remnant of the past,” and something that was far beyond the culture of the twentieth century, ignoring the dictators who openly proclaimed “aims of aggrandizement and world domination” because they believed that the desire for peace along with economic realities would prevent dictators from having their way.² That misconception was shared by most of the world’s citizens, which was why World War I and its subsequent horrors took them by complete surprise and led through a domino effect to one country after another being dragged into it. Even those nations who wanted to remain neutral, such as the United States, would be brought into the war, with little idea as to the amount of sacrifice needed in order to win it.

This globalization of war would lead to a pandemic even more devastating than the war itself. Though many of the diseases that had once plagued mankind were being brought under control by innovations in medicine and technology, this by no means meant that epidemics were a thing of the past. In fact, quite the opposite was true. As developed and advancing technologies made it possible for individuals to travel faster than ever before, they also made it possible for certain diseases to travel faster and farther than ever before. While previously it had been likely that an epidemic would be confined to the place of its origin, suddenly the world had opened up, as soldiers marching across Europe and ships sailing across the Atlantic brought many different kinds of people from all over the globe in contact with each other for the very first time, and drastically increased along with them the possibility of a catastrophic pandemic.

Ironically, in a time of great warfare, it would be disease – and not warfare itself – that would be more costly in terms of lives lost. The Spanish influenza – wrongfully named because it could never be proven it originated in Spain³ – would take more lives than World War I, and in a much shorter time period. While World War I would erupt in 1916 and last until 1918, the influenza epidemic would break out in the spring of 1918, reach full force by the fall of that year, and go into 1919, before it finally ended. Yet although it did not even last a year, its estimated death toll is between 50 and 100 million, compared to the 37 million who died in the war.

Even in the small town of Greencastle, Indiana, the influenza had left its devastating impact, taking lives of many people of many different ages and causing a fear unlike anything in living memory. Fall of 1918 would see schools closed, from elementary schools to DePauw University, and quarantines put in place, during which the afflicted were forced to live their potentially final days as shut-ins. Greencastle was gripped by an epidemic so devastating and so depressing that it was believed to be the cause of one local doctor’s suicide. As newspaper articles, published university documents, student publications, and published reports by university officials indicate, the university suffered greatly from the influenza epidemic, but officials desperately tried to downplay its impact. DePauw, which had recently been remodeled into an army training facility, wanted to maintain the facade of normalcy as well as the nationalistic fervor generated by the war, in the face of a declining morale as a result of that war and the pandemic that followed. It was a slight of hand that served the university’s interest and that of the

military as well, but at what cost? Had the university been more transparent in its policies, and their results, might there not have been lessons learned that would better serve us and future generations as we face the very real possibility of another pandemic?

World War I

At the beginning of the war, the United States adopted an isolationist policy consistent with George Washington's belief that meddling in European affairs would compromise the country.⁴ But in reality it was only a matter of time before the United States would become involved. The United States, while initially neutral in the war, delivered much-needed arms and other supplies to Great Britain in its fight against Germany and its allies. This action caused many to think that Americans were involved in the war,⁵ because these American supply lines came under attack from German submarines. In fact, the German chancellor proclaimed that unrestricted submarine warfare in the Atlantic – the supply line from the United States to the Allies – would result in a German victory.⁶ The end result was warfare on American ships, which naturally angered many Americans, as the country was “officially” neutral.

The United States then declared a policy of “armed neutrality,” and added guns to merchant ships.⁷ It finally entered the war when the Allies discovered the Zimmerman Telegram. In February, 1917, the British obtained a message from the German Foreign Minister to the German minister in Mexico, which advocated that Mexico should align itself with Germany, and in return the Mexicans would reclaim New Mexico, Texas and Arizona – land lost by Mexico to the United States following the Mexican-American War.⁸ The British gave the telegram to the U.S. ambassador in London, and the note was published in American newspapers on March 1, 1917, which just gave Americans more fuel for anger and resentment toward the Germans, who were already attacking American ships and taking American lives in the process. On April 6, 1917, the United States officially entered World War I.⁹ Americans, who had already felt the impact of the war on a somewhat limited basis, were about to feel the stressful pressure that came from entering one of the world's biggest and most destructive wars.

The United States was dreadfully unprepared for the amount of soldiers and resources needed to help the Allied cause. Though Americans felt much hostility toward Germany, it was unlikely anybody knew exactly the toil and sacrifice that lay ahead. American officials wished to have a 1.5 million soldier army in Europe to help the Allies. At the time (April 1917), fewer than 250,000 soldiers, National Guardsmen, and Marines were available, many of whom were spread along the Mexican border, or dispatched to the West Indies.¹⁰ As a result, the United States passed the Selective Service Act in May 1917 to create a draft that would help the United States obtain the vast number of soldiers that were needed for an effective war in Europe. John J. Pershing, General of the American forces, later raised that number, saying two million soldiers were needed in 1918 and another five million soldiers were needed to be mobilized in 1919 if there were going to be any chance of an Allied victory in Europe.¹¹

This deficit left the United States with a heavy void to fill and little time to fill it. The British and French leaders thought a German victory likely, a mentality assumed after

years of a war that had taken so many lives and devastated an entire continent.¹² Although Allied leaders knew that Germany was suffering loss of life at a rate nearly as catastrophic as theirs, they nevertheless did not notice a decline in German effectiveness on the front lines.¹³ The United States was left not only with the task of aiding in the Allied effort, but also with resurrecting the morale of dejected European Allies who had so long suffered in the war. The German attacks on American vessels had caused a decrease in Allied supplies, which only added to the misery of their citizens and their soldiers alike. Now seen as the Allied savior, if the United States were to succeed, it needed the American people to pull together in a way as never before. The nationalist feelings that had drawn Europe into war, it seemed, were needed for Americans to come together and be willing to sacrifice as needed to achieve victory.

The stress from this effort possibly contributed to the pandemic that followed, as doctors have noted that stress can account for a wide assortment of illnesses.¹⁴ The stress Americans (and people in Europe) felt from World War I likely helped lower the resistance of those who came into contact with the influenza virus. The number of people carrying the virus was high, as were the resulting casualties, indicating that more was at work than a simple case of the flu. People were doing everything they could to sacrifice for the war effort, including changing their eating habits, giving what they could so that soldiers in Europe would be able to receive what they were sacrificing – including food. The dietary change alone could have also resulted in people becoming more susceptible to the influenza, as a change in eating habits carries its own unique stress, as witnessed by anyone who has ever been on a diet.

War at DePauw

A microcosm of the war and its impact on the country can be viewed through the lens of Greencastle, Indiana and in particular, DePauw University. While the published number of alumni who fought in the war ranges from 411 to 986, it has been speculated that as many as over one thousand soldiers fought in World War I attended DePauw.¹⁵ When one considers that the number of male members of the 1915 graduation class, and those of its previous graduation classes, hovered around fifty, one thousand seems an extremely high number of soldiers for one small Midwestern liberal arts college to send off to war, until one realizes that once we entered the war, DePauw was as much military camp as college.

The nationalism that overtook Europe and led to the war entered America as men, women and children throughout the country seemed ready to sacrifice whatever was necessary to win the fight. Soon the military would turn out not just college graduates eager to enter the working world, but American soldiers who would be transported half the world away and take their place in one of the biggest events in human history.

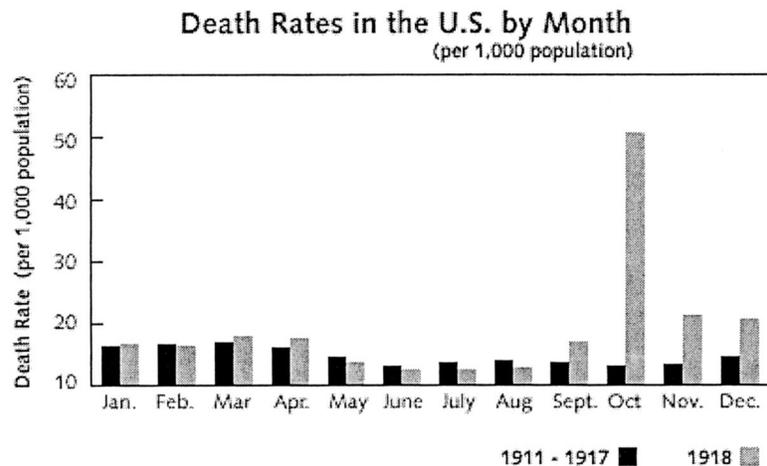
In the summer of 1918, the university contracted to be a part of the Student Army Training Corps, which turned the university into a military-like atmosphere as soldiers began to be trained at the university.¹⁹ As the 1919 university yearbook noted, the university quickly “took on the air of a military reservation rather than anything pertaining to [a] college environment.”¹⁶ *The DePauw Daily*, the university’s student

newspaper, was not published in the fall of 1918. Likewise, young men reporting to the university had their activities restricted, and were introduced to a regular daily routine that started early each morning and included both military exercises and academic classes.¹⁷ Women were also on campus, and would later feel the pressures of the flu epidemic, as they were sent home during the flu “vacation.”¹⁸ The university was on its way to contributing all it could for the world war, in hopes that the sacrifices would be worthwhile. The university embodied the sentiments of a nation at war: although the country initially was not interested in participating in the battle. Once drawn into it by the deaths of innocent American sailors and the destruction of commercial investments, Americans were willing to do whatever it took to get the job done. However, even as DePauw ramped up for war in the summer of 1918, a new menace, even more deadly than the trenches of Europe, loomed on the horizon, one that would bring the war home in a yet unimagined and terrifying way.

A New Epidemic

In March 1918, the United States felt its first impact, when a soldier in Fort Riley, Kansas, reported to the infirmary complaining of “fever, sore throat, and headache.” By the end of the day, nearly 100 soldiers reported to the infirmary with similar symptoms; by the end of the week, the number was up to 500.²⁰ From there the mysterious illness spread across the country, killing one in three of its victims,²² and by October 1918, over 195,000 Americans had died.²¹

Preoccupied with the war up until then, national attention did an about-face when it became obvious that this new terror was changing our way of life as radically as the war had. Boston cancelled parades, closed churches and put the stock market on half days.²³ Life changed in Greencastle as well: an October draft was put on hold due to the spread of influenza in military camps, which impacted thirty-two men from Putnam County expected to report to training camps.²⁴ A week later, on October 11, the *Herald-Democrat* reported that Greencastle schools closed due to the epidemic.²⁵ Death rates during October 1918 soared, compared to the death rate from months before, as can be seen from the graph on the next page. The country was gripped with fear and paranoia, as people knew little to nothing about this illness, and scientists knew very little more, except for the fact that this was one of the worst and most devastating epidemics the world had seen in centuries.



Source: PBS: The American Experience

Although many Americans were sacrificing in order to win the war, victory was by no means assured. A national flu epidemic claiming the lives of thousands of people nationwide and millions more globally could be the last straw. As a result, officials might have been hesitant to inform people on the severity of the epidemic, as it would cause the American populace to feel ever more pessimistic about the ongoing events in the world and its future. As George Soper pointed out in May 1919, it seemed in 1918 that one of the reasons the epidemic might have been so devastating was that Americans did not take adequate notice when the influenza was becoming a nationwide epidemic.²⁶ Some eighty-seven years later, American President George Bush would state that he was “concerned about what avian flu could mean to the United States and the world,” leaning on the lessons learned from the epidemic of 1918, and the failure of the United States and its people to be adequately prepared for the effects of the pandemic.²⁷ Officials across the country seemed to have downplayed the devastation of the epidemic, making it seem less serious than it was, stating in the press that it was under control as people were dying in numbers never before seen.

The American people knew that a devastating illness was spreading across the country, yet there was no one to give voice to that knowledge. Many businesses had to close down, as well as theaters across the nation. Although many of the film industry’s workers tried to remain as optimistic as they could during the epidemic, it was “hard to apply the precepts of practical patriotism,”²⁸ since the epidemic had impacted the film industry “in a way the [World W]ar never had.” Still, trade papers still chose to ignore that reality, stating that the exhibitors around the country were taking advantage of their time off to pursue other interests.²⁹

The influenza epidemic was particularly disastrous due to the quick rate at which the virus spread across the United States. Although a few initial cases of the influenza were reported in the spring, the epidemic did not become a national fear until the fall. As the *Herald-Democrat* reported on October 4, physicians from Hammond, Ind., located in the northwestern part of the state, reported that several city residents succumbed to the

influenza.³⁰ On the same front page, the newspaper reported that a member of the military who taught at a school returned to Greencastle because the school was closed due to “the prevalence of influenza.”³¹ Further, the newspaper reported that, in New York, the health commissioner notified the public that a “serum” was created which was effective against the influenza.³² On one front page, a weekly newspaper showed that, by the beginning of October, the influenza was impacting people as far north as New York and had the grip of the nation so much that, even with the events related to World War I occupying headlines on front pages of newspapers, the health minister was still answering people’s panic in an effort to calm the nation out of an epidemic seemingly out of control. While World War I was such an important event as to dominate the news week in and week out, the epidemic was also making national headlines. While in the spring of 1918 the illness might have been seen as an insignificant or minor breakout, by the fall the flu had been passed to so many people that it could not be put on the back-burner as an insignificant event. It could no longer simply be ignored.

The “serum” article was especially interesting, as it tried to calm the public despite the fact that no vaccine prevented people from contracting the illness that was extremely contagious.³³ By telling people that a serum appeared to be in the works to help prevent the spread of the influenza, it was very possible that many were put at ease about the devastating possibilities of the illness. After all, if the health commissioner reported that the illness would soon be preventable, it would seem that the main fear was over. But the only effective treatment was “bed rest, keeping warm, and avoiding crowds.”³⁴ If people felt there was little to worry about, with all the quarantines going on and a vaccination seemingly imminent, they were more likely to be out and about in the crowds and, with that, increasing the risk of contracting the illness. Although the government wanted to calm people and have them remain optimistic during the epidemic, the reality is that they might have been accomplishing the exact opposite, allowing people to have a more lax attitude during the epidemic, which might have led to more people contracting the illness and perpetuating the problem.

Effect on the University

The epidemic put DePauw in a very interesting position, as the campus was not a complete military base and yet not quite a university. When the epidemic spread to Greencastle and town residents were feeling its impact, university officials had to make a decision: force students to remain living in close quarters to each other on campus, or send them home, and suspend military training for the duration of the university’s closing? Both decisions could yield dangerous and potentially fatal results. Should DePauw close and its soldiers be sent home, their deployment would be delayed, meaning they would not be able to contribute to the war effort. Yet if the soldiers remained on campus, it provided a dangerous environment, as they were constantly in close contact with each other, increasing the likelihood that they would contract the influenza. Either decision would impact not only DePauw, but also the military effort of a war whose outcome, at the time, was still in question.

University officials decided to keep DePauw open, although female students were sent home and men were quarantined to the campus.³⁵ Men on campus had their activities strictly regulated, though they received help from other people when they needed goods

and services from somebody or someplace not on DePauw's campus.³⁶ The university voted on the importance of the military effort over all else; it kept the male students on campus, risking the possibility that they could contract a disease that was spread by the germs found in droplets of mucus emitted from people when they sneezed, coughed, or spat. It was also believed that the germ could be found in dust where mucus had dried.³⁷ Even the public high schools had closed for the duration of the pandemic out of fear that the virus could be easily spread from student to student as they attended school during the day. Yet the university remained open, and as a result the chances for the virus to be spread amongst soldiers living together twenty-four hours a day was a strong possibility, and did, in fact, happen. But it was believed that the military purpose outweighed the possible loss of life that would occur from the illness, as the war called for many more soldiers than the country had ready.

The university kept its doors open and worked through whatever would happen. As expected, the university would not – and could not – have been passed over by the influenza virus, and young men left at the university began reporting to the infirmary with influenza symptoms. On October 11, 1918, the *Herald-Democrat* reported that twenty-one young men reported suffering from the influenza. The infirmary was full to capacity and could not adequately accommodate all the new cases of the influenza, and it soon became so bad that officials commandeered the Phi Kappa Psi fraternity house, and used it to help quarantine the new patients that were suffering from the flu.³⁸ The newspaper article went on to add that the university officials calmed everyone, stating that none of the cases was very serious and added that the number of new cases decreased every day.³⁹ In this way, the university showed that the epidemic was seriously affecting students at DePauw, but it was not so devastating that it should cause much alarm. Another article right next to it added that Indiana University in Bloomington did not close, as health officials did not believe that conditions there merited shutting it down.⁴⁰ But the reporter of the article – which has no byline – does not indicate where this information came from, as the article notes that it was DePauw's president who spoke to officials at Indiana University. It is very possible that DePauw President George Grose presented this information to the *Herald-Democrat*, which in turn published this article in hopes of reassuring people that there was no need for panic regarding the university. DePauw officials also accomplished the goal of reassuring people, as most people reading the article about a fraternity house being used as a hospital would most likely also read the article about Indiana University. The officials hoped that most readers would not panic into thinking something was horribly wrong at either university.

Yet the impact of the seriousness of the influenza on DePauw's campus is debatable. While the university was closed for a month due to the influenza epidemic, the university president stated in the annual report to the university trustees that “not a single student was lost by death during the epidemic.”⁴¹ He then stated that the university sent condolences to two professors, one of whom lost his mother-in-law and another professor who lost both parents. The president then added that he shared in their sorrow, as he had lost both of his parents, who died within three months of each other. President Grose mentioned that the student body escaped the 1918-1919 school year with only one fatality, though he did not say when the student died or what caused the death.⁴² The

President then, giving a summary of health conditions, mentioned that “notwithstanding the epidemic of influenza and a few cases of serious illness in Faculty homes the year has been one of good health both among Faculty and students.”⁴³ The president downplayed the impact of the influenza epidemic at DePauw, insinuating that it was to be assumed that the board of trustees already knew the epidemic’s impact on the university. Since the newspapers reported how devastating the influenza epidemic had been, the president very well had chosen not to discuss the epidemic in detail due to the tragic devastation it caused people, though he was careful to issue condolences to professors who lost family members due to the epidemic. It appears that he wanted to sugar-coat – as best as he could at least – the year’s events, and seeing as how the epidemic left such a tragic impact on the nation, it could be assumed that it left DePauw in a similar condition.

The students themselves admitted that the epidemic hurt the morale at the university. In *DePauw Through the Years*, it was reported that “morale declined, [and] manners slipped,” leaving men alone on a campus that had previously been a co-ed campus until women were sent home and men quarantined at the university⁴⁴ It was noted that, in addition to the influenza epidemic’s impact on the university, the removal of women from the campus demoralized the men even more, which added to a low morale on campus. In a month-long start to the academic year, young men were introduced to military activities for the first time while contending with a nationwide epidemic taking human lives at a disturbing rate. Meanwhile, girlfriends or female friends were sent home, leaving men to adjust to a campus that seemed more like a military facility than a liberal arts college. In addition, the men were confined to campus, dependent upon others for recreation, as they could not explore Greencastle. Although John Taylor, a lawyer from Sullivan, Ind., helped the soldiers out by showing movies and keeping a recreation room in the gymnasium, the men were left with much less freedom than they would normally have given the militaristic nature of campus.⁴⁵

The influenza outbreak was just as disastrous for women on DePauw’s campus as for men. In her report to the President of the university, the Dean of Women, Katharine Sprague Alvord, reported that due to the craziness caused by a combination of the influenza and the S.A.T.C. on campus, some eighty-two women had left the university during the school year, bringing women’s enrollment from 491 to 409.⁴⁶ Further, Alvord admitted that a special nurse was needed during the epidemic to deal with the women who had contracted the illness, as the woman who was employed as the University nurse was preoccupied with all the cases among the male students. Alvord also admitted that there was no means by which to contain students who came down with highly transmitted illnesses.⁴⁷ Though women were sent home for a few weeks during the epidemic, there were still so many women suffering from influenza during the 1918-1919 school year that DePauw needed to hire a second nurse to help.⁴⁸ The dean of women also did not have an adequate report from the nurse to give the university president, since she said that the influenza epidemic left the nurse completely unorganized. The influenza epidemic left nobody at DePauw unaffected – in fact, it seemed that women were impacted just as much as anybody else despite the respite they received from campus when they were sent home. Alvord admitted what nobody else seemed to indicate: that women felt a great impact from this epidemic, and her analysis at the end of the year was

so dismal that she believed that an upgrade to the present facilities was needed to treat students effectively. Ultimately, women needed as much attention as the men did, but the university's resources were already focused on treating men who were training to be soldiers. The result was that it was just easier for the university to send the women home.

The Putnam County Impact

While the university officials claimed the university did not suffer much from the influenza impact of 1918, other people in Putnam County were not so fortunate. Putnam County residents suffered from the brunt of the influenza epidemic as much as any other locale in the United States. Men and women of all ages and locations around Putnam County succumbed to the influenza or illnesses resulting from it. In October 1918, the same month as DePauw's influenza "vacation," though no student on campus died from the influenza, 31 of the 45 Putnam County deaths listed by the county's Health Department were from the influenza or pneumonia.⁴⁹ The reason that the flu and pneumonia are listed together is because respiratory illnesses are not "separate entities by any means," and frequently influenza developed into pneumonia, as is common for respiratory illnesses.⁵⁰ Over two-thirds of Putnam County deaths in October alone were caused by the influenza epidemic. The death rate was rather high for the month; one year later, in October 1919, only fifteen deaths were reported to the Department of Health, three of which were from influenza.⁵¹ The epidemic left no specific age group or gender unscathed, as babies less than a year old to elderly residents over seventy years old succumbed to the influenza or its resulting illnesses.

Neither were its young people spared. Five teenagers and seven people in their twenties became victims of the epidemic.⁵⁴ This age group, typically the most resistant to illnesses, suffered from a death rate from the influenza that was compatible to the elderly.⁵⁵ As can be seen, though the university president wrote that no DePauw student succumbed to the epidemic, several high school-aged students in Putnam County died from the influenza. The epidemic was so tragic to Putnam County that, on October 27, Charles Sudranski, a 38-year-old doctor, committed suicide.⁵⁶ The *Herald-Democrat* reported that Sudranski had suffered a "broken-down nervous condition" resulting from the influenza epidemic, during which he had lost his wife to the illness, along with several patients.⁵⁷ His work also increased, as he was dealing with many people who suffered from the influenza, and the strain was too much for a professional physician, who ended his life in a horrendous fashion.⁵⁸ This would likely never have occurred, if the epidemic was as harmless as portrayed by the university.

The Published Impact

Despite the obvious evidence that indicated the influenza epidemic had a tremendous impact upon Putnam County and a lesser yet still notable impact on the university, published records seem to indicate otherwise. First, while the epidemic occurred in the fall, the *DePauw Daily* published its first issue of the school year in late December 1918, so no articles were available during the epidemic. Although the influenza epidemic's impact had diminished at DePauw and across the country by December, as it had struck the hardest two months earlier, the university's publication seemed to think of it as a thing of the past. In the first published edition of the school paper, the only article that

mentioned the epidemic was in reference to the fact that students needed to go to class on New Year's Day due to the classes missed during the epidemic "vacation." Students needed to report to class on a day they normally would have been off.⁵⁹ But while the newspaper was full of World War I occurrences from throughout the nation and the world following the cease-fire and rebuilding, the student-journalists did not write so much as a single article detailing the kind of impact the influenza epidemic had had on the university. Rather, the newspaper was full of articles detailing the war front and other college related articles. It seemed that the student journalists were caught up in the World War I fervor that had gripped the nation. Despite the fact that the influenza had caused one of the worst epidemics in global history, the United States had still just emerged victorious from the most brutal and devastating war in recent human history. Students now had the option of focusing their attention on one of the greatest military victories of all-time or one of the worst epidemics of all time. It was not surprising that the students, whose university had just weeks earlier been a training ground for the same American soldiers that won the war in Europe, would choose the war.

DePauw students who stayed on campus during October 1918 remembered the "flu vacation" as a time when women were not on campus, and as a time when "bad manners" developed.⁶⁰ Once more, students failed to address in any specific detail the impact that the influenza left on the campus. The university was in the heart of Greencastle, and while the students were confined to campus so that their chances to contract the virus were limited, there were still other people who were coming and going from campus, running errands on behalf of the soldiers. John Taylor worked to help entertain the troops on DePauw's campus and even ran errands for the men during the quarantine.⁶¹ Consequently, though students themselves were not leaving DePauw, people like Taylor, who were performing errands regularly in Greencastle, were put at risk of contracting the illness. That horror could have had devastating results, since Taylor was also spending a lot of time with the soldiers on campus, to whom he would give the illness if he had come down with it himself. While limiting the potential risk for students, there were also several military officials running the campus, who were likely to be going to and from campus and reporting for military duties elsewhere as need be. Student-soldiers also did suffer from the influenza, as they were housed in the Phi Kappa Psi house when the infirmary became over-crowded.⁶² Yet there was very little concern over those victims, in retrospect, either from the yearbook or newspaper staff, or even from university officials. The university never published full numbers of those who contracted the influenza in the *DePauw Daily*, the *Herald-Democrat*, or *The Mirage of 1919*. The result is an appearance that the university somehow escaped the influenza epidemic unscathed. But if the problems in Greencastle were any indication, the impact on DePauw could have been much worse than university publications let on.

The Nationalism Effect

The country's atmosphere undoubtedly had an impact on the decision as to what the university administrators did and did not publish so as to get nationwide attention. As noted earlier, though nationalism was thought of as a thing of the past, it had enveloped European nations and led to global war. However, the development of nationalism also resulted in a large number of people trying to downplay the impact of the influenza.

While the public supported troops during World War I, some people equated supporting the troops to supporting the government – which meant that nobody would question anything government officials would say. This line of thinking could have been one of the reasons that people did not question the integrity of authority figures who reassured people during the influenza epidemic, as public officials repeatedly said that the influenza epidemic was becoming better, even when many people were dying on a daily basis.

The refusal to question authority became especially disastrous when physicians, in an effort to reassure a worried public, released false statements that misled the public into dangerous and sometimes fatal behavior. An article in *The Herald-Democrat* on November 1, 1918, for example, explained that a study in Massachusetts found that sunshine and fresh air will cure and prevent the influenza.⁶³ In the article, physicians told the world that being outside was a cure for the influenza, which insinuated that quarantining influenza patients was an unsuccessful cure for the epidemic. The article went so far as to mention that “something from a bottle’ is not needed” in order to be cured from the influenza, as people undoubtedly found out when they tried to take any number of medicines that were supposedly remedies to the influenza.⁶⁴ But in reality, physicians knew that nothing they had would help protect people from the influenza. As the PBS special noted, 195,000 Americans died in October of 1918 alone, during a month where, in Philadelphia, dead corpses were left remaining on the streets.⁶⁵ And when people wanted to be reassured, a few authority figures were willing to grant them false reassurances. While they might have had good intentions, the result was more disastrous than what it would have been if they remained honest.

DePauw University is a perfect example of where this sort of censorship could have existed, as the government had a physical presence and wanted to keep people optimistic. DePauw’s contribution to the war effort necessitated that people remain confident during trying times, and in an era when the collective memory was “one of horror and fear,” the government needed people to remain confident that all was well everywhere, including Greencastle, Indiana.⁶⁶ People might have simply assumed that DePauw was an anomaly during the epidemic, as it was considered unpatriotic to challenge the on-goings in a military-run institution. It would have been much easier for people to just accept the fact the epidemic left DePauw a place where nobody died, few were harmed from the epidemic, and no long-term devastation occurred, despite the fact that the surrounding communities suffered greatly during the fall of 1918. Had people questioned the decision to keep DePauw open, the university might not have continued training students to become soldiers, meaning the American war effort overseas would be hindered by the influenza epidemic. The government tried to keep peoples’ hopes up regarding the epidemic, though it was just as fatal to soldiers as it was to the civilian populace. Had Americans known that the influenza epidemic affected the American war effort overseas, it would have given people more despair. This would have resulted in more stress in people’s lives, and the result would have possibly been more people dying from the epidemic, creating a horrible trend that could have resulted in an even more horrific epidemic. The result of government censorship, it could be reasoned, seemed to be the

best option available for the well-being of all people involved, whether they were American citizens or soldiers fighting on the European front.

Conclusion

The influenza epidemic caught the country off guard. While the country was busy with the First World War, a massive epidemic hit the United States, leaving thousands of dead in its wake. While World War I dominated the headlines of the day, the influenza quickly sneaked into the newspaper pages and soon the events of Europe were headlines with the influenza. Up until then, the American people were focused on Europe, and were less interested in events taking place at home. American soldiers embodied the last chance for an Allied victory in Europe, something that gave stress, as well as pride, to the entire country. The situation at times demoralized the populace, already war weary and over-exerted, which left the people extremely susceptible to illness once the epidemic hit.

Faced with a demoralized society, the public media tried to keep up the people's spirits, which meant downplaying tragic events – including the epidemic. The *Herald-Democrat* did not give much headline space to the epidemic until people in Putnam County started dying. When the epidemic did make headlines, many of them were from articles trying to reassure the community that the epidemic was under control, a strange occurrence when those headlines are juxtaposed against headlines announcing the deaths of people throughout the county. The media seemed to want to announce that the illness was beatable while simultaneously downplaying the truth that nobody knew much about the influenza, other than how it was contracted and spread from person to person. Nobody knew where it came from; very few people knew why it disappeared when it finally did, and – despite what some public officials said – nothing existed to cure or inoculate people from the influenza. While the *Herald-Democrat* gave a decent amount of press to the epidemic, the *DePauw Daily* made almost no reference to the pandemic, except in passing reference in a handful of articles.

The university seemed to enclose itself in a “bubble” of sorts during the epidemic, closing itself off in order to let the students properly cope with the epidemic in what it considered the most prudent way. While it was possible that the men on campus were stressed from military activities and the knowledge of what awaited them overseas, the lethality of the epidemic might have been lessened by the cocoon in which they found themselves. By letting the students stay on campus, the officials expected that they would keep themselves immersed in studies, military activities, and the few social opportunities that presented themselves during the “flu vacation,” a time when, according to DePauw officials, several students became ill, though none seriously, and nobody died. This experience was a far cry from the rest of Greencastle and Putnam County, where local deaths occupied the headlines all month long.

It is difficult to understand exactly why so little was written about the epidemic in the DePauw media. Though it is possible that the university simply did not encounter the severity of influenza cases that the rest of the world did, the epidemic's severity should have been enough for more to be published on influenza's impact on the university. The absence of a student newspaper on campus greatly hurt during this time, as it would have

been a great primary source where students would give their reaction to the influenza as it occurred. Articles from the *DePauw Daily* could have given much different insights and year-end retrospectives, like those in the yearbook or in university officials' annual reports.

While the students' collective morale undeniably had an effect on the decisions as to what to write in the *DePauw Daily*, there were many more factors that also came into play. During their training, students seemed to have little contact or experience with the outside world. The major exception seemed to be the war itself, which the United States military and the president of the university thrust upon the students' shoulders, irrespective of what students might have thought. The students appeared to be quite out of touch with the national reality, even during the flu "vacation," which occurred during some of the worst events of the twentieth century. The university shut out the students from the rest of Greencastle and Putnam County. While the intention was to keep the students' risk of contracting the influenza minimal, the end result was a DePauw student body that was thoroughly isolated – or at least advertised to the world that it was isolated – while Putnam County residents suffered dearly.

The fervor of nationalism in Greencastle and Putnam County also had an impact on the university officials' decision to downplay the pandemic. As published works in the *Herald-Democrat* suggest, people did not seem anxious to question the government. As soldiers were the physical embodiment of the government, and they were fighting overseas, the nation looked to support its brothers, fathers, and children through those tough times, no matter what. The sacrifice on behalf of the war effort, while simultaneously maintaining a façade of a positive nationalist pride, proved to be a crisis at that critical juncture in American history – one that could not be adequately addressed without perhaps unleashing panic throughout the nation. Though the influenza did in fact do that, the newspapers and other media attempted to maintain the spirit of optimism that preceded our entry into the war. The justification could be that, should people feel like they were suffering greatly at home, it would impact their views on the war, and they might be apt to just give up hope, and everything would be lost. Failure, it seemed, was not an option. Ignoring the full impact of the influenza epidemic was an option, and one that many seemed to exercise.

The university's decision to downplay the epidemic was a strategic one in regard to the university's and the nation's well being, yet it showed a general lack of compassion for the community at large. From students to administrators, people of all kinds at DePauw omitted speaking or writing about the epidemic, until after it was over. The adage, "out of sight, out of mind," seemed to be ringing in their collective living memory. If university officials had wanted to inform the campus community about the reality of the situation, they would have done so, and not just in internal documents and speeches to the university president or trustees. As it appears, though, they tried to ignore the epidemic in the hope that it could remain an internal affair. This meant that the university officials wanted to be part of a world where an outside society simply did not exist.

In communities worldwide – including Greencastle – healthy people on Monday were laid to rest in a casket by Friday. One expert has ventured so far as to say that the epidemic infected everybody that it possibly could, and that the influenza stopped killing people simply because there were no more people that were susceptible to it.⁶⁷ The epidemic was so devastating that the fact that the university did not suffer a single fatality is a miracle. Yet events both around the world and in Putnam County indicate that the university would have been a tremendous anomaly to have escaped the suffering of the epidemic. Unfortunately, this incredible good fortune was not investigated, either by the university or by print media, so the full truth is left to speculation, and analysis of what is available.

Nearly ninety years after the influenza epidemic of 1918, the possibility of another pandemic is likely. As the president's press conference indicates, government officials are trying to prepare the country as best as they can in an effort to prevent that possibility. They have done much to reassure the populace, just as officials did in 1918, which resulted in more lives lost when doctors and government officials made empty promises that led to needless deaths. The resulting confusion also led to a memory of the influenza epidemic as “one of horror and fear – which may explain why people let those few terrible months fade into obscurity,” as the producer of the PBS special put it.⁶⁸ He also noted that school children know more about the bubonic plague, which killed thousands in Europe, than they do about the influenza epidemic of the twentieth century.⁶⁹ The epidemic is just as ignored now as it was when it occurred. The American populace which fell victim to the epidemic back in 1918 thought that it should be best left forgotten, which could play a part in present-day teachers' decisions to skip over the epidemic in the classroom.

But history has a way of repeating itself, and the United States is preparing itself for the possibility that another devastating influenza epidemic could occur – only this time trying to take the government's failure to adequately handle the influenza epidemic of 1918 into account. As published media reports and other documents indicate, the right questions might not have been asked, leaving the best possible ways to handle an epidemic still a mystery. With experts saying that the influenza epidemic of 1918 impacted the lives of everybody it possibly could, it is puzzling that no student at DePauw died from the epidemic while other Greencastle residents and American soldiers in other military institutions around the world lost their lives. Was DePauw really so fortunate; and, if so, why? A thorough investigation of this question might lead to insight into the successful way to quarantine during an epidemic. History might be poised to repeat itself in the form of an avian flu. Should such an epidemic occur in the twenty-first century, it could have far more devastating results for DePauw, Putnam County, and the world than the pandemic of 1918. As the saying goes, those who choose to ignore or forget the past are doomed to repeat it.

Notes

¹ Frederick Hertz, "The Nature of Nationalism," *Social Forces*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Mar., 1941) p. 409

² Hertz 411.

³ "Uncle Sam's advice on flu," *Herald-Democrat*, Oct. 18, 1918, p.6

⁴ George Washington's "Farewell Address," 1796, Available online:
="http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/washing.htm" MACROBUTTON HtmlResAnchor
<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/washing.htm>

⁵ Grace P. Hayes, *WORLD WAR I, A COMPACT HISTORY*. New York, Hawthorn Publishers, Inc., 1972, p. 211-212

⁶ Hayes 211

⁷ Hayes 211

⁸ Hayes 211

⁹ Hayes, 211-212

¹⁰ Hayes 254

¹¹ Hayes 257

¹² Hayes 257

¹³ Hayes 253

¹⁴ Matthew McKay; Peter D. Rogers; Judith McKay, *WHEN ANGER HURTS, SECOND EDITION: QUIETING THE STORM WITHIN* (Oakland, New Harbinger Publications), 2003. p.20

¹⁵ George B. Manhart, *DEPAUW THROUGH THE YEARS, VOLUME I: INDIANA ASBURY UNIVERSITY, 1837-1884; DEPAUW UNIVERSITY, 1884-1919* (Chicago, The Lakeside Press), p.288.

¹⁶ *THE MIRAGE OF 1919: OFFICIAL YEAR BOOK OF DEPAUW UNIVERSITY* (Anderson, Ind., Herald Publishing Co.), 1919, p.220.

¹⁷ Manhart, *DEPAUW THROUGH THE YEARS*, p. 286

¹⁸ Manhart, *DEPAUW THROUGH THE YEARS*, p.286

¹⁹ Clifton J. Phillips and John J. Baughman, *DEPAUW UNIVERSITY: A PICTORIAL HISTORY*. Available online at www.depauw.edu/library/archives/ehistory/index.htm

²⁰ PBS: *The American Experience: Influenza 1918*. Available online:
www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/influenza/filmmore/transcript/transcript1.html

²¹ PBS: *The American Experience*

²³ PBS: *The American Experience*

²⁴ "Epidemic Gains, Crowder Halts October Draft," *Herald-Democrat* Oct. 4, 1918, p.3

²⁵ "Orders Schools Closed," *Herald-Democrat*, Oct. 11, 1918, p.6

- ²⁶ Soper, "The Lessons of the Pandemic," *Science*, New Series, Vol. 49, No. 1274 (May 30, 1919), p.502
- ²⁷ "Press Conference in the White House Rose Garden," C-SPAN, Oct. 4, 2005
- ²⁹ DeBauche, REEL PATRIOTISM, p. 148
- ³⁰ "...from influenza is mounting in state," *Herald-Democrat*, Oct.4, 1918, p.1
- ³¹ "Untitled," *Herald-Democrat*, Oct.4, 1918, p.1
- ³² "Serum discovered that will prevent 'flu'," *The Herald-Democrat*, Oct.4, 1918, p.1
- ³³ DeBauche 147
- ³⁴ DeBauche 147
- ³⁵ Manhart, *DePauw Through the Years*, p. 286-287
- ³⁶ Manhart, *DePauw Through the Years*, p. 287
- ³⁷ "Uncle Sam's advice on flu," *The Herald-Democrat*, Oct. 18, 1918, p.6
- ³⁸ "Phi Psi House as a hospital," *The Herald-Democrat*, Oct.11, 1918, p.5
- ³⁹ "Phi Psi House as a hospital," *The Herald-Democrat*, Oct.11, 1918, p.5.
- ⁴⁰ "I.U. has not closed," *The Herald-Democrat*, Oct. 11,1918, p.5
- ⁴¹ "Annual Report of the President to the Board of Trustees and Visitors of DePauw University," *DePauw University Bulletin*, Third Series, Vol. VI, No.7, Sept. 1919, p.3
- ⁴² "Annual Report of the President to the Board of Trustees and Visitors of DePauw University," p.3.
- ⁴³ "Annual Report of the President to the Board of Trustees and Visitors of DePauw University," p.3
- ⁴⁴ Manhart, *DePauw Through the Years*, p.287
- ⁴⁵ THE MIRAGE OF 1919, p. 229
- ⁴⁶ "Report of the Dean of Women," *DePauw University Bulletin*, Third Series, Vol. VI, No.7, Sept. 1919, p. 23.
- ⁴⁷ "Report of the Dean of Women," p. 23
- ⁴⁸ "Report of the Dean of Women," p. 23
- ⁴⁹ Putnam County Department of Health death records, 1918
- ⁵⁰ Soper, "The Lessons of the Pandemic," p. 502
- ⁵¹ Putnam County Department of Health death records, 1918
- ⁵⁴ Putnam County Department of Health death records, 1918
- ⁵⁵ Noymer; Garenne, "The 1918 Influenza Epidemic's Effects on Sex Differentials in Mortality in the United States," p.567
- ⁵⁶ Putnam County Department of Health death records, 1918
- ⁵⁷ "Physician ends life by suicide," *Herald-Democrat*, Nov. 1, p.6

- ⁵⁸ “Physician ends life by suicide,” *Herald-Democrat*, Nov. 1, p.6
- ⁵⁹ “No Rest for the Wicked,” *DePauw Daily*, Dec. 31, 1918
- ⁶⁰ THE MIRAGE OF 1919, p.227
- ⁶¹ THE MIRAGE OF 1919, p. 229
- ⁶² “Phi Psi as a hospital”
- ⁶³ “Fresh air, sun real flu cures,” *The Herald-Democrat*, Nov. 1, 1918, p.3
- ⁶⁴ “Fresh air, sun real flu cures,” *The Herald-Democrat*, Nov. 1, 1918, p.3
- ⁶⁵ PBS: The American Experience: Influenza 1918
- ⁶⁶ PBS: The American Experience: Influenza 1918
- ⁶⁷ PBS: The American Experience: Influenza 1918
- ⁶⁸ PBS: The American Experience: Influenza 1918
- ⁶⁹ PBS: The American Experience: Influenza 1918

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