

THE SPANISH INFLUENZA 1918-1919

While Canadians have long remembered their dead of World War I, the victims of a companion misery have been all but forgotten. Seventy years ago, in the last months of 1918, a great plague swept around the world. The disease had been given the innocuous name "Spanish influenza", but it was one of the worst flu epidemics ever known. Spanish influenza was a killer that seemed to choose its victims with great care. That the contagion is now an all-but-forgotten part of Canadian history is unfortunate, because its effect on every region of the country was considerable. By the time the disease had run its course, the lives of many Canadians would be altered forever.

Influenza epidemics are not unknown to Western history. Outbreaks of the disease can be traced back to the sixteenth century, and possibly much earlier. The flu itself is rarely fatal, but it may be complicated by pneumonia, which becomes the final arbiter of death. Characteristically, the pneumonia deaths occur either among the very young or the very old — those without the strength to fight off the infection. Yet, strangely, during the 1918 epidemic the highest mortality rate was in the 20-to-40-year age group. These were young, active and apparently healthy adults cut down in their most productive years.

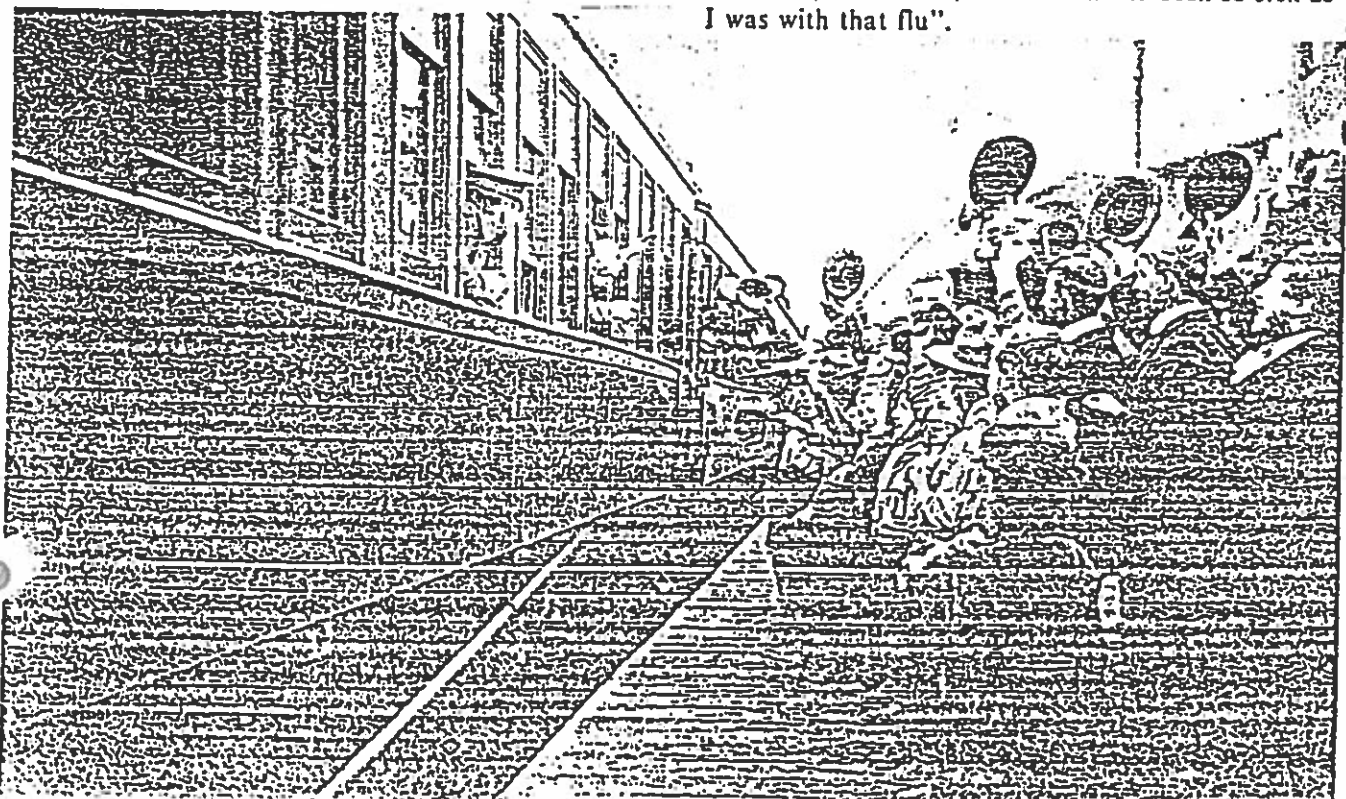
The origin of the Spanish influenza epidemic is not entirely clear, but it is certain that it did not begin in Spain. More likely, its source was among the new recruits pouring into the crowded American army

camps after the entry of the United States into World War I. The disease then came with American troops to Europe and spread among soldiers on both sides of the battle lines. By 30 June 1918 it had broken out among Canadian troops serving at Agny, France.

The Spanish flu epidemic then moved beyond the military to the civilian population. Its spread was extremely rapid. The epidemic had become a pandemic. As many as one person in four, world-wide, contracted the disease. In less than a year there were between 15 and 25 million deaths. Other plagues have had a more devastating effect upon whole societies — the Black Death reduced Europe's population by about

25 per cent — but no disease, no war, nothing in human history has killed so many so quickly. In the United States, flu deaths during the Spanish epidemic were placed at over half a million. In Canada, the death toll has been estimated at between thirty and fifty thousand. Sixty thousand Canadians had died in the war.

Even for many of those who escaped pneumonia, Spanish influenza was more than just another bout of the flu. The symptoms, which included elevated temperature, vomiting, and general malaise, were extremely debilitating. Frequently the patient was unable to even get out of bed and required considerable personal care. Some older Canadians have vivid memories of their experience with the Spanish flu. Edna Burke remembers coming down with the disease while attending school in Alberta. "I've had my share of sickness", she recalls, "but I've never been so sick as I was with that flu".



Spanish influenza arrived in Eastern Canada by ship in the summer of 1918. Oddly, however, it did not spread rapidly until early September, when 400 teachers and students at a Victoriaville, Quebec, school had come down with the disease. By 26 September, when the epidemic finally reached the Montreal school population, Quebec health officials had already counted 12 deaths.

The epidemic had broken out earlier in the city of Boston, and Canadian newspapers grimly reported the advance of the disease in the United States. Halifax, which had only partially recovered from the explosion of the French munitions ship Mont Blanc ten months earlier, at first escaped this new tragedy. Spanish influenza was not reported there until the first few days of October. By then it had a good hold elsewhere in the Maritimes. By 30 September Cape Breton Island was already severely affected: five deaths had been reported in Sydney and North Sydney.

The epidemic moved rapidly west along the Canadian Pacific Railway mainline and gradually spread it to the more remote areas. Soldiers ill with the flu were removed from troop trains and quarantined in Winnipeg, Calgary, and Coquitlam, British Columbia. In spite of isolation procedures the epidemic quickly spread beyond the military hospital wards to the civilian population. On 12 October, in an effort to limit

the spread of the disease, the city of Winnipeg moved to close schools, churches, dance halls, theatres and other public meeting places. One week later Calgary was to follow Winnipeg's example. By now the Spanish influenza epidemic was firmly established in every Canadian province.

British Columbia was one province particularly hard-hit by the flu. The disease was carried to Vancouver first by train from Eastern Canada and then by ship from all parts of the globe. Among other major North American cities, Vancouver had one of the highest flu-related mortality rates. From Vancouver the disease spread rapidly to neighbouring municipalities, and on to other cities, towns and villages throughout the province.

Vancouver residents were urgently requested by the telephone company to use their phones only in emergencies. Adding to the difficulties was the fact that cemetery space in the city was very limited. Moreover, with almost two dozen deaths on 21 October alone Vancouver was faced with a serious shortage of grave-diggers.

Struggling to cope with the ravages of the disease in their province, representatives of the Superior Board of Health requested that Ottawa suspend the application of the unpopular conscription law passed by the Borden government in the spring of 1918. Their representation made the point that transport of conscripts caused dissemination of the 'flu germ, endangering both the conscripts themselves and the people in the areas where they were taken. On October 24 they received word that there would be no further call for conscripts.

Today it would seem that the Spanish influenza epidemic is barely recalled at all. Yet, in the face of such an unparalleled tragedy, a fair question is why has the plague not been given a greater place in history? There are a number of reasons why it has been so neglected. First, because it rarely claims victims itself, influenza is generally a disease not regarded as serious. Writing in December 1918, Assistant Surgeon General A. J. McLaughlin of the United States Health Service observed:

an epidemic of yellow fever with the loss of thousands of lives spread over a considerable territory would throw the whole country into a panic. A dozen cases of plague in a seaport town would cause the same kind of excitement; but it is remarkable to see the placidity by which the people have generally taken the loss of 300,000 lives.

Second, even at the time, the epidemic did not receive the coverage it warranted. Contemporary newspaper accounts tended to play down the seriousness of the situation within their own communities. Early on, British Columbia newspapers reported the influenza epidemic in Eastern Canada and the United States as if it was an isolated event occurring on the other side of the world.