

# HISTORIC ROOTS

## HISTORIC ROOTS

Ann E. Cooper, *Editor*  
Deborah P. Clifford, *Associate Editor*

## ADVISORY BOARD

Sally Anderson	Nancy Chard
Marianne Doe	Mary Leahy
Robert Lucenti	Caroline L. Morse
Meg Ostrum	Michael Sherman
Marshall True	Catherine Wood

Publication of *Historic Roots*  
is made possible in part by grants from the  
A.D. Henderson Foundation, the Vermont Council  
on the Humanities, and Vermont—NEA.

**A Magazine of Vermont History**

Vol. 3

April 1998

No. 1

# “AWFUL, AWFUL”: THE SPANISH FLU IN VERMONT, 1918–1919

By MICHAEL SHERMAN

On September 24, 1918, Dorman Kent, an insurance executive from Montpelier, wrote in his diary that he had the flu.

*...Sick, sick, sick. Didn't get up or try to. Had a high fever and awful headache every minute all day and was sick to my stomach also. Tried to get Dr. Watson...but he couldn't come....The schools closed at noon today....There is a tremendous lot of influenza in town.*

Two days later he was no better:

*Another whole day in bed....The papers say there are six or eight hundred cases...in town and five doctors are sick.*

By September 29, Kent was up and around. By then, however, his two sons had caught the flu. Both had high fever and nosebleeds. “Terrible times,” he wrote, “The sickness is increasing hourly. *Awful, awful!*”



*Dorman Kent in 1920.*

Dorman Kent and his sons were lucky. They survived. But in Vermont, 2,146 people died of the flu in 183 of Vermont's 246 towns. This was almost one-third of all the deaths in the state in

1918-1919. Seventy-one people died in Montpelier. Nearby Barre had 184 flu deaths, the largest number in the state,

In the United States, 500,000 people died of the flu. This was five times the number of American soldiers who died in the four years of World War I, which lasted from 1914 until 1918. Worldwide, more than 22 million people died; some say as many as 30 million.

The war helped increase the spread of the disease. Experts think it started in the United States and then spread to Europe when American troops crossed the ocean. It was then that it became known as "Spanish influenza."

The number of cases was highest in ports, cities, and railroad centers. Vermont's major railroad centers—Burlington, St. Albans, St. Johnsbury, Rutland, and Hartford—had some of the highest numbers of deaths in the state.

FRIDAY, VERMONT, FRIDAY

**60 CASES HERE OF INFLUENZA**

One College Student Died Yesterday

DEATH TOLL AND SICK LIST IS ONE OF THE HEAVIEST ON RECORD

Practically Every State in the Union is Affected; Innumerable Cases in the County

Several Meetings Will be Held Tomorrow—All Public Meetings Have Been Cancelled—College is Under Martial Law

---

MIDDLEBURY, VERMONT, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 11, 1918

**FOUR PNEUMONIA DEATHS LAST NIGHT; 41 IN COUNTY THIS WEEK**

Epidemic, However, is Now "Decidedly on the Wane"

**ABATEMENT IN EPIDEMIC NOW**

Few New Cases Reported In Middlebury


**SUDDEN DEATH OF RUTH WRIGHT**

*These headlines from The Middlebury Register tell it all. The first cases of flu appeared in Middlebury in late September. A week later, the town was in crisis. Meetings were banned. Classes were cancelled at the college. By mid-October, there were fewer new cases and fewer deaths. Although the story at the end of October was still on the front page, it was below the fold and tells of only one Middlebury death. By the beginning of November there was no mention of the flu in the paper at all.*

But even small country towns, such as Jamaica, Wells, Calais, Goshen, Isle LaMotte, and Canaan, recorded at least one flu death.

Flu had been a known health threat since the 1850s. But this kind was different. In addition to the usual sore throat, high fever, aches and pains, Spanish flu brought nosebleeds and attacked the lungs. The high number of deaths

**DON'T BE AFRAID**  
OF  
**Spanish Influenza**  
WHILE YOU HAVE  
**Mysterious Pain Ease**  
In Your Home



For Influenza                      For Pneumonia

Rutland Herald October 7, 1918

in Barre and Montpelier included many granite workers, whose lungs were already weakened by the granite dust they inhaled at work.

Most kinds of flu are most dangerous to the very young and the very old. The Spanish flu killed people aged 20 to 35 as well. In 1918, 1,205 people in that age group died in Vermont. This was three times as many as those who died in 1917 and 1919.

There were few doctors. Many had gone to war. In Montpelier only 9 of 18 remained. Some of them became sick too. Some older doctors came out of retirement. Medical students were sent to care for patients. Newspapers asked doctors and nurses and anyone who was well to help.

There wasn't much anyone could do, however. There were no shots to prevent flu. There were no antibiotics to fight complications like pneumonia. Many products advertised that they could help, but the most anyone could do was to make patients comfortable.

Vermont was in crisis. On October 4, 1918, the State Board of Health banned public meet-

ings and closed the schools. Builders and volunteers in Barre quickly added a floor to the local hospital to take care of flu patients. A Williston man told of bodies being shipped to Burlington in baskets, because undertakers had run out of coffins. There were funeral processions every day. Cemeteries opened new sections just for victims of the epidemic.



The Vermont Historical Society

*The First Congregational Church in Burlington set up a nursery for children whose parents were too ill to care for them.*

New cases continued to appear, but the worst was over by November 1918, about the same time as the war ended. In the end, 50,000 Vermonters had the flu and more than 2,000 died.

The epidemic had serious results for many families. During the epidemic, the First Congregational Church in Burlington and the Kellogg-Hubbard Library in Montpelier set up nurseries to care for the children of the sick and dead. The American Red Cross found 440

children from 204 families who were orphaned by the disease. Some of them went to live with relatives or family friends. The newly formed Children's Aid Society helped others to find new homes.

Spanish flu disappeared after 1919. Most flus are not deadly, but the possibility of a

deadly strain still exists. Doctors and scientists at the Centers for Disease Control and the World Health Organization and elsewhere are still studying the disease, hoping to prevent another epidemic like the one that caused so much misery 80 years ago.



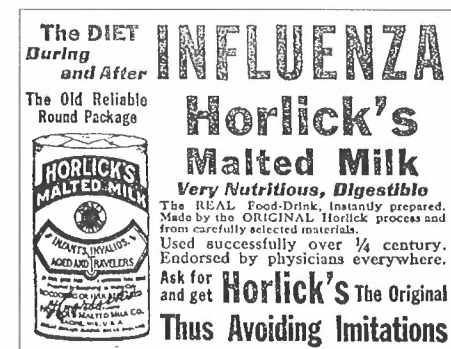
Rutland Herald October 8, 1918

### Rooting Around

In December 1997, there was an outbreak of flu in Hong Kong. Only a few people became ill. Several died. But the outbreak made headlines on the front pages of newspapers all over the world. Why was this so? What can you find out about this so-called "chicken flu?"

Your local cemetery may have a section where flu victims are buried. Even if it doesn't, it might be interesting to see if you can find out how many people died in your town in 1918.

The health departments of many cities and towns offer shots to protect both adults and children against some diseases. What such services does your town offer?



Rutland Herald November 8, 1918