

Museum Notes

by Kristen Parrott, curator
for the week of December 16 – 22, 2018

100 years have passed since the great Spanish flu epidemic of 1918-1919, which killed millions of people around the world, including many here in Vernon County. While very few people alive today remember this tragedy, local stories about it have been passed down to us.

Vernon County knew that the flu was coming before it arrived here. In late September of 1918, the State of Wisconsin warned its citizens about the likelihood of an epidemic of the Spanish flu in the state, and explained about precautions, symptoms, and treatments. Recommended treatment consisted of “rest in bed, fresh air, abundant food,” pain medications such as aspirin, and “well-ventilated, warm rooms.”

To try to curtail the epidemic, indoor public gatherings were banned all over the county. For example, the Viroqua City Board of Health ordered that tobacco warehouses not open for sizing and packing until at least January 1, 1919. Church services were cancelled, as were classes at schools.

Occasionally a local resident today will talk about a parent or other relative who didn't have to go to school for weeks during the epidemic. St. Charles Borromeo School in Genoa, for instance, closed for a whole month, from October 15 to November 18, 1918. Once the epidemic was over, students attended extra classes on Saturdays to make up the time they had missed.

Other local stories involve ancestors who sang funeral hymns outside on the porches of those who had died. Because groups of people couldn't meet together indoors, there were no funeral services inside churches or in people's homes. The women's quartet from the Viroqua Congregational Church was one group that sang at graveside services and outside the homes of flu victims.

Doctors, pharmacists, and undertakers – all of whom were sorely needed during the epidemic – also got the flu. Dr. Clyde James Stormont, 38, of Viola, caught the flu from his patients and died in early October of 1918, leaving Viola without its chief physician.

Out of necessity, people around the county who lacked professional training took up nursing the flu patients. One such person was Nancy (Fish) Rusk of Viroqua. Her special treatment was to boil ears of field corn, wrap the ears in blankets, and pack the hot blanket bundles around the patient to cause the fever to break.

In January 1919, the Viroqua Red Cross, which had originally formed to help the soldiers during WWI, now turned its attentions to nursing the sick. A January article in the *Vernon County Censor* explained that “the society has shouldered the financial responsibility of employing six nurses, whose duty it will be to lay out daily routes covering the entire city with the intention that none of our sick will lack for care, as is now regrettably the case.”

Similarly, in Hillsboro the Red Cross set up a soup kitchen, and sent soup to homes where everyone was sick with the flu and no one was able to obtain or prepare food.

It sounds like it was a chaotic time, exciting but in an unpleasant way. I'm sure everyone was glad to get back to some kind of normal when the flu finally petered out. We are fortunate that Vernon County has not had to endure another such epidemic for many years.