

Museum Notes

by Kristen Parrott, curator
for the week of December 9 – 15, 2018

The Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918-1919 was a significant event all around the world, including here in Vernon County. The flu began in the final year of World War I, but it kept killing people long after the armistice had been signed. About 20 million people all over the world perished in this epidemic, more than twice the number of those killed in combat during the war.

The so-called Spanish flu didn't start in Spain but in Kansas, in January of 1918. The disease spread quickly to an army camp in Kansas full of soldiers preparing for war, and as the soldiers were moved around the globe, the flu went with them. It was called "Spanish" flu because neutral Spain's lack of wartime censorship allowed the Spanish press to report on the epidemic, and so stories of the flu came to be associated with Spain; in addition, the King of Spain himself came down with the illness.

To try to grasp how Spanish influenza affected people in Vernon County, I went to the Register of Deeds, at the county courthouse, to look at the deaths recorded for one week at the height of the local epidemic. During the week of December 9 – 15, 1918, twelve people in Vernon County died of flu, while only two people died of other causes. Most were in their late teens, twenties, and early thirties, the generation hardest hit by this illness.

Mary Alderman, a 32-year-old mother and housewife from the Westby area, died of influenza on December 9. Seven-year-old Marie Hanson of Westby died that day too; her little sister Evelyn had died of flu one week earlier. Also from Westby, Esther Kjelland, age 19, died on December 10, and Carl Erickson, almost two years old, died on December 12. Westby undertaker A.C. Sveen was kept sadly busy as he assisted with all of these funerals.

Louis Stein of Hillsboro, a healthy young blacksmith looking forward to his 20th birthday, died of influenza and pneumonia on December 13. Hjalmer Sherry, not quite 18, died the next day and was buried on Belgium Ridge. Edward Kuchera, a 30-year-old married farmer who lived near Yuba, also died on the 14th.

Young mother Elizabeth Duell died on December 14 from influenza with pneumonia, and her two-year-old son Ray died of the same illness on December 17. Both were tended by Dr. MacKechnie of Hillsboro, and both were buried in Mt. Vernon Cemetery.

The Pocepicky family, Bohemian immigrants who lived in the Town of Union, was also hit hard. Jan, age 32, died of pneumonia with influenza on December 14, and his 18-year-old sister Tereszie died on the 17th. Their brother Jakub, 22, had died of flu a few weeks earlier in November.

The Stone family, also of Town of Union, similarly lost several members to the flu. Cynthia Stone, 56, wife of George, died on December 15, as did Sarah Stone, 18, wife of Jacob. Both were tended by Dr. Bingham of La Farge, and both were buried in Jug Creek Cemetery near Rockton. Cynthia's married daughter Hattie Lawrence, 35, died of flu on December 18. No doctor was available to care for her; she was also buried in Jug Creek.

Also dying of pneumonia with influenza on December 15 was Clarence Thrune of Coon Valley, a 27-year-old auto mechanic in an era when cars were a new thing. He left behind a pregnant wife, Amanda, and a young son, Irvin.

So many sad stories. Next week we'll recall some of the stories of courage that surrounded this tragedy, and we'll look at how the Spanish flu epidemic affected day-to-day life in Vernon County.