

1918-19 flu epidemic hit Bloomington hard

The epidemic claimed an estimated 600,000 American lives, making it the worst epidemic in the nation's history.

The first Bloomington resident to succumb to the epidemic was twenty-seven-year-old factory worker Fred Meyers, who died on September 29. That same day, James Carroll, a twenty-six-year-old soldier from Arrowsmith, died while stationed at Camp Grant in Rockford. As with many influenza victims, Carroll appeared on the mend before dying of complications from pneumonia.

This was a flu "unlike any other" for it targeted those in their twenties and thirties, generally the healthiest segment of the population.

By earlier October, the pages of the *The Pantagraph* and its competitor, the now-defunct *Daily Bulletin*, were crowded with obituaries, with many residents dying while stationed at stateside training camps. On October 1, eighteen-year-old Clyde Kind of Danvers became the third McLean County boy to die at Great Lakes, a camp north of Chicago, in a five-day span. The following day, *The Bulletin* reported the deaths of Ransom Johnson of Bloomington at Camp Devens in Massachusetts and Harry Pietsch, also of Bloomington, at Camp Grant.

On October 7, Col. Charles B. Hagadorn, acting commander of Camp Grant, committed suicide, unable to cope with an epidemic that had left more than 500 dead at the training base.

Those who contracted influenza were not sent to Bloomington hospitals. Instead, public health authorities urged families to care for their loved ones at home.

By October 11, Bloomington schools—both public and private—were ordered closed, as well as theaters, churches, and public gatherings of various kinds. Normal quickly followed suit. Judge James Riley suspended county court business and trials.

That same day, *The Bulletin* reported that area doctors were "literally working day and night," with one exhausted physician noting that because he was making round-the-clock house calls he had not been in his office for five straight days. Undertakers too were "working almost to the limit," a shortage of help exacerbated by the fact that several gravediggers were sent to Rockford to help bury the hundreds of victims at Camp Grant.

Public health officials established an influenza command center at old Withers Library, and they accepted an offer by the directors of the Bloomington Country Club to use their clubhouse as a temporary hospital. At its busiest, the country club hospital cared for seventy-eight patients. Julia Scott's home at 701 E. Taylor (today known as the Vrooman Mansion) was used as a hospital for the sick from the Illinois Wesleyan University Student Training Corps program. A local Red Cross influenza committee organized the

donations of supplies, ranging from single iron beds to jams and jellies (those fortunate to recover oftentimes were keen for sweets).

With the epidemic raging in Bloomington as well as the surrounding countryside, The Bulletin of October 13 noted rather matter-of-factly: "Grim Reaper is Unusually Busy." The reaper's scythe made no distinction between rich and poor. Two days earlier, Albert H. Hoopes, a leading Bloomington merchant, called his barber to his home for his morning shave. Although he was feeling a little under the weather, his condition did not appear worrisome, Hoopes was dead that afternoon.

By October 18, one doctor estimated the number of influenza cases in Bloomington alone at 1,700. There was no more room at the country club or Scott home, so members treated all but the most severe cases at home, hoping for a periodic visit by an exhausted nurse or physician.

Yet by the end of October, the doctors were reporting a marked decline in the number of new cases, and by the first week of November schools, churches, and theaters were reopened, and the two emergency hospitals were closed. Influenza returned during the first three months of 1919, and again in March of that year, but not with the vehemence of October 1918.

That month proved to be the single deadliest month in United States history, with an estimated 200,000 American fatalities due to the influenza outbreak.