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# Panic in Petoskey

The 1918 Flu Pandemic

by **Richard A. Wiles**

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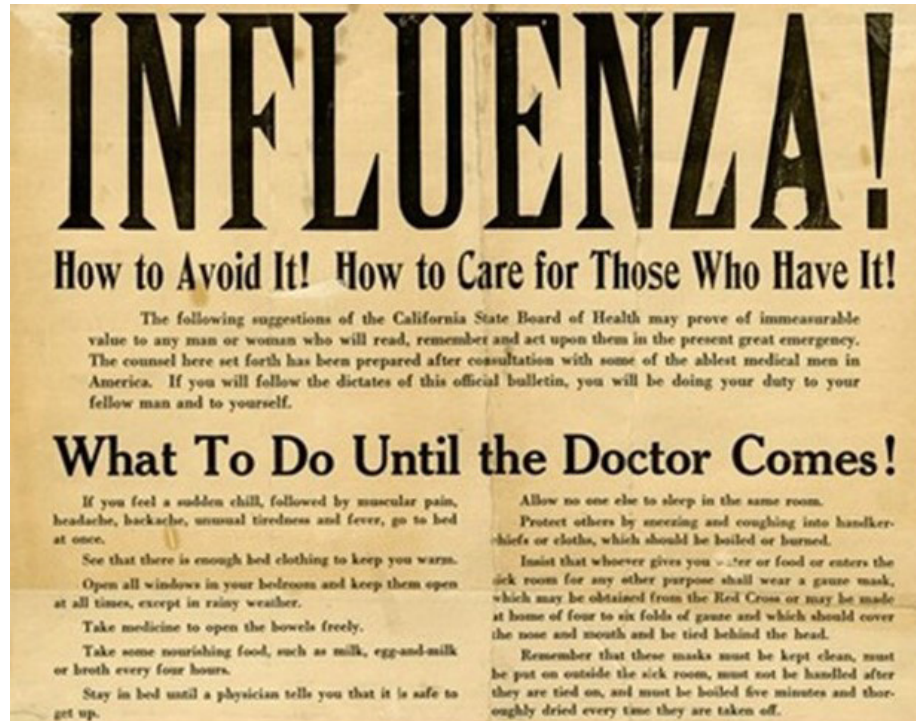
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# Panic in Petoskey: The 1918 flu pandemic

By Richard A. Wiles

In the fall of 1918, World War I was still raging. Folks in Petoskey, Michigan, were focused on how to pay for the expensive conflict. The *Petoskey Evening News* on Wednesday, October 2, 1918, contained an article stating Petoskey and surrounding Emmet County areas, were having a hard time finding enough individuals to volunteer to buy Liberty Bonds to meet the region's obligation in financing the war. Another article in that same newspaper mentioned that the vote for allowing women suffrage in the United States had been 53 Senators (men) saying yes, and 34 Senators (men) saying no. The vote meant the 2/3 majority necessary was not reached to grant women the vote. A third front page article reported that Michigan's Army Camp, Custer, near Battle Creek, had been hit hard by a thousand cases of Spanish influenza. The article said, "...men are falling at a rate one a minute, so malignant is the attack." The third article was a precursor of what was coming to Petoskey!

Petoskey would soon understand the warning being given by this growing national pandemic. The first signs of the flu developed during the spring



of 1918. Author John Navarro, in his 2010 article titled "Influenza in 1918: An Epidemic in Images," said, "No one knows exactly where or when the flu originated, but some traced it to an outbreak at Fort Riley, Kansas, in March of 1918 that sickened 500 soldiers and killed 48. Doctors there were baffled by the raging fever, delirium and nose bleeds followed by bloody pneumonia. The faces of victims turned blue, and they spit up blood. Autopsies revealed that the lungs had turned blue. Doctors said the deaths were caused by pneumonia but knew it was different. They could offer no cure."

This first outbreak of the flu pandemic in the spring of 1918 was actually very mild. Those who were sickened experienced typical flu-like symptoms such as chills, fever, and fatigue. It took only a few days to recover, and the number of deaths associated with this

first outbreak were few. However, by September of 1918, a second wave of influenza broke out in various military camps throughout the United States, and this second wave was much more virulent. Besides being highly contagious, the second flu outbreak caused victims to die within a few hours or days after developing the symptoms. This more powerful disease turned its victims' skin blue and caused their lungs to fill with so much fluid that they literally suffocated by drowning.

Influenza is a word derived from the 18th century Italian language meaning "influence." It most likely was adopted from the Latin word "influentia" which meant having power or influence over someone, or something. In the 1740s, the Italian word "influenza" became associated with "an outbreak of an epidemic" and that meaning carried on into the 20th century. According to medical dictionaries, "Influenza, or flu,



1918 military camp infirmary

is a virus that attacks the respiratory system. The flu virus is highly contagious: when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks, respiratory droplets are generated and transmitted into the air, and can then be inhaled by anyone nearby.”

At that moment in time, the summer and fall of 1918, the world’s medical community — especially the military — was able to understand the nature of the influenza (and pneumonia) that was causing such harm to their patients. They were able to identify the bacteria causing the deadly pneumonia in their patients, they just did not yet have antibiotics to fight the infectious disease. Those would not come along until the 1930s. Thus, as the epidemic struck military camps, hospitals, ships, or ports, many medical officers documented what they saw, trying to define that



John Phillip Sousa and the Jackie Band

which they could not control. With World War I in progress and the vast movements of troops back and forth across the Atlantic, the flu eventually took hold in the front-line trenches of war-torn Europe. The unsanitary conditions common in warfare helped the disease to flourish and it wasn’t long before it crossed the ocean back to the U.S., this time more virulent than the original outbreak.

Meanwhile, to help sell Liberty Bonds needed to finance the United States’ costly participation in World War I, John Phillip Sousa, a composer and conductor, had enlisted in the U.S. Naval Reserve Force at the age of 62 in order to organize and train Navy band units. Their purpose was to travel to various cities in the United States to encourage patriotic participation in the buying of the Liberty Bonds. According to author John Bierley in



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Jackie Band announcement from the Sept. 18, 1918, *Petoskey Evening News*

his book, John Philipp Sousa: American Phenomenon, “the visiting band would play request numbers, patriotic songs, and plenty of Sousa marches. The Navy Band Battalion raised over \$21 million in Liberty Bond sales.”

The battalion band at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center in Chicago, Illinois had come to be known as the “Bluejacket Band” due to their blue uniforms. That was shortened to be called “Jackie Band” and always leading their performance was John Philipp Sousa.

The Wednesday, September 18, 1918 *Petoskey Evening News* announced an upcoming performance of Sousa’s “Jackie Band.” The Naval band was to appear on Saturday, September 21, 1918, in both Petoskey and Harbor Springs, Michigan. The article stated,

“The visiting party will number 43 and will proceed from the Great Lakes Naval Center to Charlevoix, where, on Friday, it will hold its first big meeting to boost Liberty Bond sales (Fourth Liberty Loan). It will arrive in Petoskey at 11:45 a.m. Saturday over the G.R. & I Railroad ...” The article went on to say that the band would also visit Mackinaw City, Cheboygan, Onaway, Alpena, Gaylord, Boyne City, and other Michigan towns. The article did not hint at what the band members would leave behind.

The first indication to area residents that something might have accompanied the visiting Jackie Band on September 21, 1918, was given in the September 24, 1918, edition of the *Petoskey Evening News*. The newspaper contained a front page article discussing Spanish influenza deaths

at the Great Lakes Naval Station near Chicago, Illinois (a total of 7,000 cases were reported) The paper also reported influenza deaths in the city of Boston, and the occurrence of Spanish influenza in Army camps all throughout the state of New York.

The very next day, on September 25, 1918, it was announced in the local Petoskey paper that the Jackie Band tour had been stopped in Bay City, Michigan, by an outbreak of influenza among the various band members. The band was being quarantined and sent by rail back to Chicago.

On October 5, 1918, the Petoskey newspaper carried a small article concerning the death of Levering resident Carl Carlton who died of pneumonia at the Great Lakes Naval Station where he had been staying after enlisting in the Navy. He was the first Emmet County resident to die from the pending pandemic. Two days later, Spanish influenza hit Emmet County in a fury. The *Petoskey Evening News* headline from Monday, October 7, 1918, read “Epidemic Hits Emmet County; 2,000 Stricken; Three Die.” Over the weekend of October 5-October 6, what was referred to as the “grip” or “grippe” had taken over the lives of more than 1,000 citizens of Petoskey. The article went on to state “The disease first made its appearance in Petoskey when the Jackie Band visited here to assist the Liberty Bond campaign. Dr. Nihart, who treated one of the boys for the trouble, contracted a mild case and several girls who danced with band members were taken ill immediately. The disease as manifested here starts as ordinary grip and in some cases is accompanied by extreme nausea.

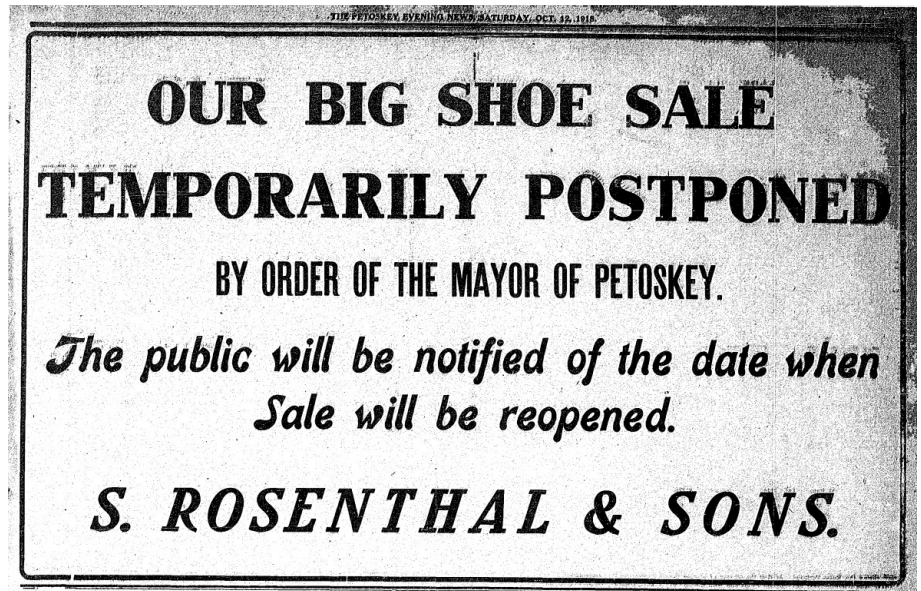
This lasts about 48 hours. After which the patient begins to convalesce or develops pneumonia, in which case he becomes very ill.”

On October 7, 1918, Mrs. Eva May (Edward) Shanley was the first Petoskey resident to succumb to the disease. She was 34 years old. Many articles accompanied her death notice in the October 8, 1918, *Petoskey Evening News* such as “Don’t lose your grip?,” “Grip lessening, declares Nihart; ‘Slightly on the Mend’ says health board” and “Here are ways to prevent grip; Petoskians try onions and lemonade; Surgeon General gives 12 rules which are posted at Army camps.”

The article stated, “Spanish influenza, now an epidemic in Petoskey and in hundreds of other localities in America, is held by physicians to be largely preventable. It is said to have its origin in the mouth and throat ... Sterilize the mouth after each meal ...”

Other preventive methods included avoiding needless crowding, cover mouth during coughs and sneezes, breathe through the nose — not the mouth, remember the three “Cs:” clean mouth, clean skin, clean clothes, keep cool when you walk and warm when you sleep, Open the windows always at home at night; at the office when practicable, chew your food well, wash your hands before eating, drink a glass or two of water on getting up, do not use a utensil or napkin used by another person, avoid tight clothes, and when the air is pure, breathe all of it you can — breathe deeply.

An ominous headline was printed in the *Petoskey Evening News* on



Everything was ordered to stop, even shoe sales, according to this Oct. 12, 1918, announcement from the *Petoskey Evening News*

October 9, 1918, concerning one of the Jackie Band members who had danced with many Petoskey girls during the band’s visit in September: “Auburn haired Jackie is dead; Won Petoskey hearts when here with band; Danced at Cushman and dined at home of Mr. and Mrs. J.N. Ferris; Only 18.” He had died of pneumonia.

On Thursday, October 10, 1918, the *Petoskey Evening News* reported the deaths of 21-year-old Ralph P. Morgan, Mrs. Harriet Martin who was 34 years old, and Paul Wingate, 26, serving at the time of his death as medical corpsman at Fort Custer near Battle Creek, Michigan. By the next day, the death toll in Petoskey had risen to nine and, as a result, the Emmet County Fair had to be shut down and Health Officer Nihart urged suspension of church and public gatherings.

It was reported in the local newspaper on October 11, 1918, that the pandemic had spread to every state in the nation,

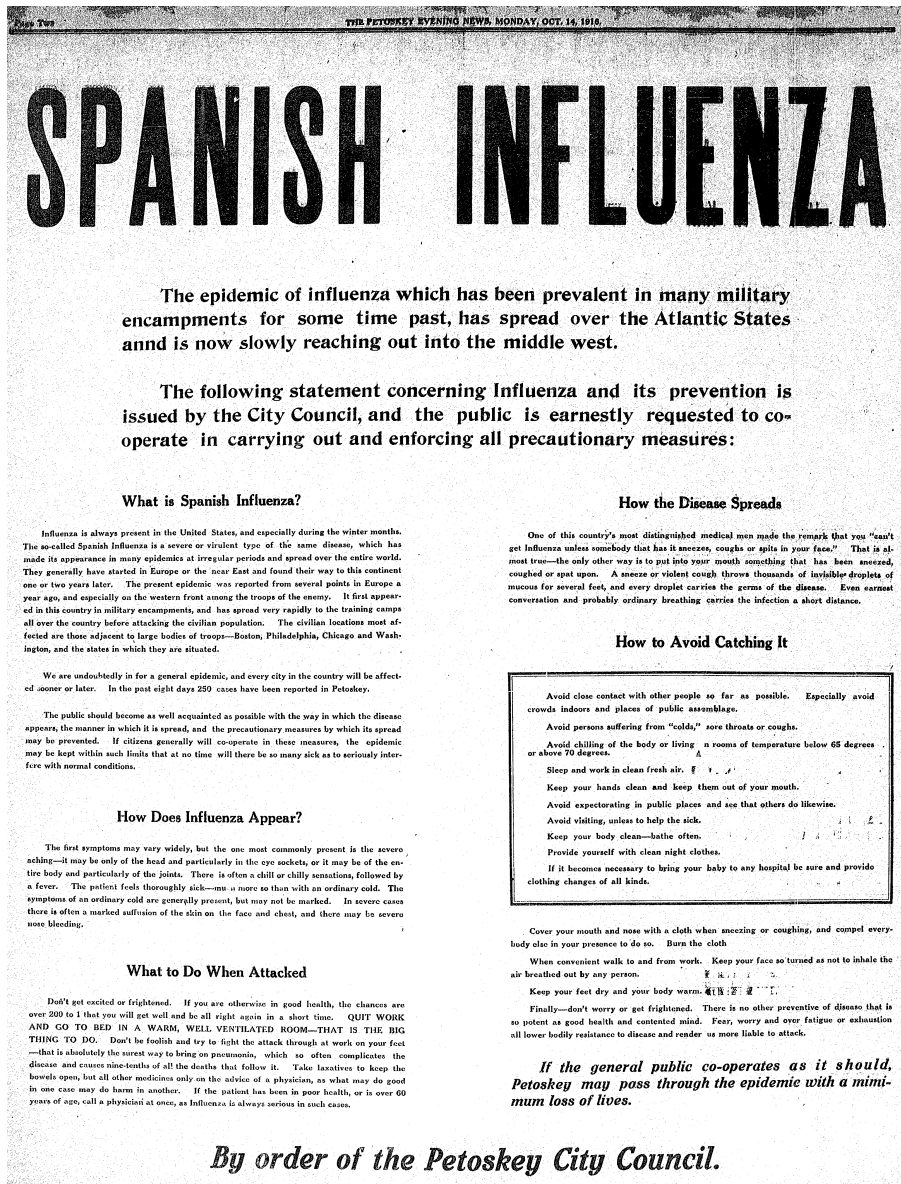
and in Boston, over 140 deaths had occurred within just 24 hours. By Saturday, October 12, 1918, the city of Petoskey had set up an emergency Red Cross hospital in the Cushman House (hotel) annex and had listed the 24 patients there. The same newspaper edition stated that the Governor of Michigan had closed the state to help stop the spread of the influenza. Also, two more Petoskey citizens had succumbed to the flu, one was five years old and the other 25.

The spirit of Petoskey was by the acts of several individuals to help those suffering from the dreadful disease. The October 14, 1918, local newspaper edition ran the headline, “Petoskey Women Battle With the Deadly Influenza Epidemic; Loving Esprit de Corps Pervades Entire Community ... To Help Prevent Further Spread.”

The article called attention to the various Petoskey women teachers going to the Cushman House Annex emergency



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continued throughout that weekend and it was reported that “the situation in Petoskey was much better.” However, the optimism was quickly diminished with the deaths of 10 more victims during the next six days, and a report of six new flu cases in the city.

On October 25, 1918, the Red Cross Emergency Hospital in the Cushman House hotel annex was closed. The number of patients had dwindled down to 27 and only one new case of influenza had been reported. On Thursday, October 28, 1918, the worst of the pandemic in Petoskey seemed to be over, with no new flu cases reported in the last 24 hours. The schools in Petoskey, which had been closed since, were scheduled to open on Monday, November 4. Then, on Thursday, October 31, the call of danger was heralded by a *Petoskey Evening News* headline: “Petoskey Still in Great Danger.”

Ten new cases of the flu had shown up and the public health officer proclaimed more preventive measures had to be instituted, including a plan to get a “serum treatment to every person who has not had the disease.” Thus, the reopening of the Public Schools of Petoskey was delayed until Wednesday, November 6.

On Monday, November 11, 1918, World War I fighting was put on hold with the signing by Germany of an armistice agreement. On that same day, the flu death of another Petoskey citizen was announced. No other deaths were reported in the paper until December 18, 1918, when 41-year-old Harry Piester succumbed to pneumonia. As a result of his death,

hospital and “working ceaselessly with the Red Cross nurses and local doctors with no thought of self ... they also went into the homes of the stricken ... without thought of infecting themselves ... and yet there are men in Emmet county who are not quite sure that it will be a safe thing to give them the ballot at the November election!”

That same newspaper reported “Five more deaths to noon today.” One,

Mrs. Helen (William) Kishigo, was a 24-year-old nurse.

By Saturday, October 19, 1918, the *Petoskey Evening News* was reporting that it was believed the epidemic of flu was now under control. The paper stated that during the past 24 hours, only one death had been reported, that of 19-month-old baby. The Red Cross Emergency Hospital had 63 patients and on this day, discharged 11 of them. The lessening of flu cases and deaths



Cushman House and Annex, Petoskey, Mich.

**For a few weeks in October of 1918, the Cushman House and Annex had been converted to an emergency Red Cross hospital to hold Petoskey flu patients.**

Dr. Ralph Engle, the Petoskey Public Health Officer, announced that all holiday events would be called off, including church services.

By the end of the year, December 31, 1918, approximately 48 influenza-related deaths had occurred in Petoskey. The age of those who succumbed to the disease ranged from the still-born deaths of several infants (whose mother was sick with the disease when they were born), to several over 50 years of age. Those hit the hardest seemed to be in their 20s and 30s. By then, Michigan had suffered over 3,000 flu deaths and ranked 27th in the nation in flu mortalities.

The Petoskey influenza deaths did not stop with the end of the 1918 year. In fact, they continued all through 1919 and into 1920. During the year of 1918, Petoskey's 48 flu deaths compared to only one Petoskey soldier being killed in action. That soldier was 28-year-old Army Corporal Carl Weaver. Weaver was in the Army

infantry with General Pershing in France. Carl Weaver died on October 5, 1918, just before the outbreak of influenza in Petoskey. The first United States troops had not reached Europe until June of 1918 and did not see battle until October of that same year. By the War Department's most conservative count, influenza sickened 26% of the Army — more than one million men — and killed almost 30,000 before they even got to France. Another 16,000 United States soldiers died in Europe from the flu while 26,000 were killed in action during the war.

Thus, more U.S. soldiers died from the 1918 flu than were killed in battle during our participation in the war. Forty percent of the U.S. Navy was hit with the flu, while 36 percent of the Army became ill, and troops moving around the world in crowded ships and trains helped to spread the killer virus. Death estimates from the 1918-1920 flu pandemic range from 50 to

over 100 million worldwide victims. The exact numbers are impossible to know due to a lack of medical record-keeping in many places. The flu pandemic of 1918 was the worst in history, infecting an estimated 500 million people across the globe. In the United States over 675,000 deaths were thought to be attributed to the pandemic. 🌿

Richard A. Wiles is a retired history and reading instructor at Petoskey High School and a former Spring Arbor University class instructor in research. He has written five White Paper research projects for the Petoskey Public Library involving historical events in the area, including the crash of the B-52 Air Force bombing trainer into Little Traverse Bay in 1971.

Wiles holds a Bachelor's degree in history from the University of Toledo, a Master's degree in reading development-psychology from Michigan State University and an Educational Specialist degree in community leadership from Central Michigan University.

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