

First reports of the 1918 Spanish Flu followed by two weeks of relative unconcern

The Bethlehem Gadfly Spanish Flu March 31, 2020

 Latest in a series of posts on the Spanish Flu 

For perspective on our current situation, we are following the entrance of the 1918 Spanish Influenza, that paragon of pandemics, into the minds and bodies of Lehigh Valley residents who got their news through the Morning Call (the files of the Bethlehem Globe are closed to us at the moment).

So awareness of the Spanish flu “arrived” in the Lehigh Valley September 13, 1918 — through an unprepossessing and not especially alarming story on p. 17 of the *Morning Call*.

Over the next two weeks the news was dotted with stories every day — short Associated Press releases with headlines like these below, not immediately and not always on the front page, and sometimes two releases on a page in different positions, as if the editor was simply filling the space as releases came in without realizing their connection. All of which went to dilute impact.

INFLUENZA SPREADS IN
NEW ENGLAND STATES

SPANISH INFLUENZA
IN NAVAL TRAINING CAMP

SPANISH INFLUENZA
CASES IN TRAINING CAMPS

SPANISH INFLUENZA BREAKS OUT IN FIVE ARMY TRAINING CAMPS

3000 NEW CASES OF
SPANISH INFLUENZA YESTERDAY
CAMP DEVENS HAD
66 DEATHS YESTERDAY

CAMP DIX LOSES 42
MEN FROM SPANISH INFLUENZA

INFLUENZA IN CAMPS TAKING HEAVY TOLL

CAMP MEADE HAS 600
CASES OF INFLUENZA.

The news was all about someplace else. And that someplace else was in military camps — remember World War I was going on.

4,000 cases at Great Lakes Naval Station, 3,500 at Camp Devens, 857 one place, 9,313 at another, 3,000 new cases here, 500 new cases there, 1,200 in Philadelphia, 42 deaths somewhere else.

And the news was all about providing assurance. The situation was “in hand,” a “serious epidemic” was not anticipated, civilians were attacked but not in “considerable” numbers, health authorities were “confident,” the outbreak was mainly among Negroes, Pfeiffer’s Bacillus was identified as the possible cause, you could use Dover Powder for pain relief.

But connecting the dots to bigger trouble was possible. First concentrated on the Northeast coast, the outbreak was recorded in Georgia, then Louisiana. High-level Army sanitation experts were deputized to “combat the disease.” Wives and mothers of afflicted soldiers began to be stricken.

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