

Dreadful disease, dreadful dilemma: quarantine the city or risk losing Bethlehem Steel to the war effort

The Bethlehem Gadfly Spanish Flu April 3, 2020

🌸 Latest in a series of posts on the Spanish Flu 🌸

For perspective on our current coronavirus 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).



Our president has called himself, metaphorically, a war-president in the fight against the coronavirus.

In 1918, there was a real war going on when the Spanish Flu arrived.

A war in which Bethlehem Steel, Bethlehem Steel workers, and Bethlehem in general played an essential role.

Gadfly bets you hadn't considered how fighting a foe in Europe complicates fighting a flu in the ether.

But doesn't the following situation sound familiar?

Recognition that "social distancing" combats the disease (plus recognition that we're a crucial link in the military supply chain) but

reluctance to “go the distance” because of entertainment and business interests.

Another disease sometimes seems to come in tandem with the pandemics: political paralysis.

The government official recommends the Lehigh Valley tri-cities enter in to an “absolute quarantine . . . in order to guard against the danger of a Spanish influenza epidemic which the government fears would cripple the industrial centres hereabouts that are turning out war products.”

The government official recommends “the prohibition of all public gatherings in the city, the closing of all schools, theatres, saloons, pool rooms, soda fountains and churches for an indefinite period.”

Shut-down. Shelter-in-place.

The Allentown mayor drags feet. Such “drastic and radical” action will interfere with fund raising for the war (red herring), there’s already the constructive effort of an anti-flu placard, sign, and card campaign (we’re doing enough to fight the disease now), and he opts to wait to see what others will do (punts).

The government official sees the real reason: “When General Pershing cables for guns and ammunition we cannot tell him that we cannot send the supplies because we didn’t quarantine a city for fear it would be an inconvenience to the merchants and saloonmen.”

The government official turns the screws, or tries to: “If production at the Bethlehem Steel plant is impeded because of the epidemic, we will be culpable. . . . This is a radical act but these are radical times.”

Decision, decisions — that’s why our local officials make the big money! (Just kidding, of course.)

God grant our elected officials the courage to act with wisdom and speed in radical times.

(Wouldn't you love to see "man-in-the-street" interviews?)

A session of City Council was set buzzing with excitement and conjecture yesterday at noon when Past Assistant Surgeon A. J. Lanza, of the United States Army, now attached to the United States Public Health Service at Washington, made his appearance before that body and recommended an absolute quarantine to be enforced in this city in order to guard against the danger of a Spanish influenza epidemic which the government fears would cripple the industrial centres hereabouts that are turning out war products and thereby hamper the carrying on of the war abroad. Literally, the recommendation and desires of Dr. Lanza as expressed in a letter from Brigadier General T. C. Dickson in charge of the government work at Bethlehem, would mean the prohibition of all public gatherings in this city, the closing of all schools, theatres, saloons, pool rooms, soda fountains and churches for an indefinite period or until the epidemic and the danger from it had been gotten under control.

That the action would be a drastic one is admitted by Dr. Lanza but the only reply is that these are radical times and that the output

public unless we took such action as I have recommended."

He indicated clearly that now is the time to take vigorous precautions. "Anybody," he said, "can close the schools after children begin to die. We are now awaiting word from Harrisburg regarding the closing of all schools.

"I recognize that this is a radical act, but these are radical times.

"When General Pershing cables for guns and ammunition we cannot tell him that we cannot send the supplies because we didn't quarantine a city for fear it would be an inconvenience to the merchants and saloon men.

"We must do our best, and the best we can do is prevent crowding. Every day we delay invites trouble."

Dr. Lanza said that the Bethlehem City Council has acted favorably upon the recommendations.

No formal action upon General Dickson's recommendation was taken by council when the conference adjourned at noon. It was decided to await further instructions from Dr. Lanza, who went to Bethlehem to learn what action was being taken there.

of war materials comes first of all. It is the intention of Brigadier General Dickson and the Government, Dr. Lanza said, to enforce this general quarantine on the three cities surrounding the Bethlehem Steel works and other plants here turning out war materials. These are to be Easton, Bethlehem and this city. No formal action was taken on the recommendation of Dr. Lanza when Council adjourned but they will await the result of his meeting with Bethlehem and Easton city authorities.

Mayor Reichenbach, Health Officer Butz and members of council informed Dr. Lanza of the steps being taken by the city to prevent an epidemic of **influenza** here. The mayor expressed an opinion that he did not feel that the situation warranted such radical action.

"If such an order is enforced, preventing all public gatherings, we might as well stop the Liberty Loan drive in this city," he said.

Dr. Lanza briefly told his reasons for recommending the quarantine. He said that the Federal Government looks at the matter from only one standpoint. "Any decrease in the production at the Bethlehem Steel plant at this time may spell disaster for our armies abroad. We know that the **influenza** is all around us. There are many cases in Bethlehem and a number have been discovered

The letter sent by General Dickson to Mayor Reichenbach explaining the situation and motives of the planned quarantine was as follows:

"To the Mayor of Allentown, Pa.

"The foregoing report of Past Assistant Surgeon Lanza, U. S. Public Health Service, is forwarded to you with the request that the recommendations contained therein be promptly carried out, viz: That all public gatherings or meetings of any description in the city of Allentown be prohibited, that amusement places such as moving picture shows and theatres and schools be closed, and that all saloons, ice cream parlors and soda fountains be closed. It is my understanding that several cases of influenza now exist in Bethlehem. The United States, France and Great Britain are dependent upon the output of the Bethlehem Steel Company, Kurtz Bros., etc., for most urgently needed munitions and it is imperative that continuous production at the maximum obtainable rate shall not be interfered with. It is considered that the attainment of this very necessary object fully justifies taking the actions recommended by Past Assistant Surgeon A. J. Lanza.

(Signed)

"T. C. DICKSON,

"Brig. Gen. Ordnance U. S. A."

According to the Health Department, now that **influenza** has been made a reportable disease, there are about thirty cases known to the de-

partment. Two new cases were reported yesterday. The campaign by placards, etc., against the spread of the disease is well on its way. Signs and cards bearing informative data of the symptoms and method of combating the disease are being distributed.

among the munition workers at the steel plant. It is reasonable to suppose that these cases are the forerunner of an epidemic."

"If production at the Bethlehem Steel plant is impeded because of the epidemic," he said, "we will be cul-