

May the American soldiers “croak of influenza”!

The Bethlehem Gadfly Spanish Flu April 17, 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).

During the week of October 15, 1918, just after cases of the Spanish flu peaked in Bethlehem, readers of the *Morning Call* would learn that “the most rigid precautions” in our city (we saw earlier that the paper called them “draconian measures”) was the reason our city recorded such a low death rate.

The readers would learn that the Allentown streets needed to be flushed to combat the disease and that the Flu was demonstrating the need for a hospital, an issue much and long debated.

They would learn that they were lucky if they had the Consolidated Phone Co. rather than Bell, because Consolidated used an automated system that was not prone to the disruption caused by the flu-depleted corps of female operators at Bell.

They would learn of heroism and unselfish sacrifice, of the woman in Philadelphia who volunteered to take the place of the flu-downed ambulance driver at Women’s Mercy Hospital and worked “day and night” transporting the multitude of cases.

They would learn of bitter tragedy — the kind that makes you doubt the existence of a Divine Being — of good-hearted Miss Eva Gusset who “died from burns caused by her clothing catching fire from melting camphor gum and turpentine to ease members of her family who were afflicted with influenza.” (Gadfly shudders imagining the scene.)

But most bizarre of all, they would learn of a mini-war among the female workers of



the Bayuk Brothers Cigar Co., 610 N. Jordan, Allentown, a company in which “there are ten times as many aliens as American girls,” a company in which Austrian Annie Strokel said, “she would rather kiss a nigger than the American flag” and that “she hoped all the American soldiers would croak of influenza.” Moreover, a company in which the Austrian “girls” refused to buy the Liberty Bonds that financed the war, explaining “Shall we pay for bullets to shoot our brothers?”

Wow! Gulp!

We have to remember the situation. World War 1 was in its fourth long year. In fact, October 1918 was a period of last-ditch desperate fighting by the Germans. The *Morning Call* was full of such news. The war would end November 11 in abject surrender.

Tempers among Austrians working shoulder to shoulder with jubilant Americans must have been ragged.

Think of alienating conditions on the factory floor as the Austrian girls, predominant in number, spoke in their native language.

Look at the factory boss in financial quandary trying to “keep peace” — if the Austrians strike or quit, he will have to close. The almighty dollar is intertwined with patriotism and freedom of speech.

Surely one of the most striking stories of the war on the home-front. And we don’t even know how it turned out. There’s a movie in this.

DISLOYAL TALK AND CONDUCT ALLEGED

American Girls Resent Actions of Austrian Fellow Em- ployes in Cigar Factory.

Resenting alleged disloyal remarks made by Austrian women employed by Bayuk Bros., cigar manufacturers, Nos. 601-609 North Jordan street, a dozen American girls left the factory early yesterday morning, marched to Police Headquarters and appealed to the police to safeguard their rights. They were: Carrie Miller, No. 150 Lehigh street; Beulah Moll, No. 419 Church street; Mrs. Mamie Everett, No. 635 Gordon street; Mrs. Bella Barr, No. 1019 Allen street; Mrs. Anna Miller, No. 1021 Allen street; Mrs. Lizzie Heckman, No. 944 North Seventh street; Sallie Miller, No. 326 Fountain street; Bessie Kerr, No. 442 North Penn street; Clara Ziegler, No. 403 Bryan street; Margaret Feather and Louisa Royer, No. 219 North Second street.

At Police Court the Americans presented a mass of testimony relative to the disloyalty of the Austrians employed in the factory. When this evidence has been transcribed it will be turned over to the Federal authorities for further action.

Mrs. J. C. Burke, of the Y. M. C. A., acted as the spokesman for the young women, and told of conditions in cigar factories, where there are ten times as many alien as American girls.

Witnesses testified that Annie Strobel said that she "would rather kiss a nigger than the American flag;" "that she hoped all the American soldiers would croak of **influenza**."

Some time ago when church bells and whistles heralded an Allied victory, the girls testified, the Austrian workers at the factory closed the windows and made vile, unmentionable remarks, slurring the Americans and their Allies. Such incidents, it is said, have frequently occurred.

Max Wolfe, superintendent at the factory, testified that he had pleaded with the American girls not to agitate the Austrians, but that he did not intend to discharge any of them. The Austrians, it is said, have announced that they will quit work unless Miss Feather, who resented their remarks, is discharged. The American girls insist on the right to express satisfaction over American vic-

tories. If the Austrians go out on strike the factory will have to be closed, it is said.

Wolfe admitted that the Austrians had taken this position when they were requested to buy Liberty Bonds: "Shall we pay for bullets to shoot our brothers?" On Wednesday when Geza Bolez addressed the Austrians in their native tongue and urged them to support this country by buying bonds a few responded. Although a number of the Austrians earn \$30 a week, it is said they claim to be too poor to buy bonds.

The police advised the American girls to return to work pending action by the Federal authorities. They have been promised protection by the authorities.