

The Steel responsible for crowd banning in Bethlehem (and beyond), saving lives for profit

The Bethlehem Gadfly Spanish Flu April 11, 2020

 Latest in a series of posts on the Spanish Flu 

“At the behest of Bethlehem Steel, Pennsylvania enacts the most stringent requirements for crowd banning in the entire country.”
James Higgins

Gadfly’s been walking you through a history (let’s call it a “pedestrian history”) of the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic in Bethlehem via the daily issues of the *Morning Call*.

You may remember that the Flu “arrived” in the U.S. September 13 according to the headline in the *Call*, and in previous posts we have moved a month’s time to the apex of deaths from the Flu around the weekend of October 14-16.

It’s truly been a pedestrian history, but yesterday follower John Smith called Gadfly’s attention to the overview lecture “Bethlehem Steel, Industry, and the 1918 Influence Epidemic” by Lehigh Ph.D. James Higgins, an expert on the subject, on our local **National Museum of Industrial History** web site.

(Gadfly suggests linking to the lecture through the NMIH web site rather than the direct link below so that you can see several other interesting lecture/videos there, e.g., one on Martin Tower.)

Gadfly highly recommends this lecture, which is about 50 mins. long, with another 15 of Q&A.

Gadfly learned a lot about the interrelationship of Bethlehem, Bethlehem Steel, and the Spanish Flu — rather fascinating, actually.

- Gadfly knew Archibald Johnston was the first mayor of Bethlehem; he did not know that Johnston was also a Bethlehem Steel executive, a combination which enabled firm coordination with the city of the Steel’s desire to continue profitable war work by insuring a steady work force.

- Gadfly had never heard of Loyal Shoudy, the Steel medical director, who played an extraordinary role in the activities that produced a low death rate in the city.
- Shoudy and Johnston got the state to enact the stringent crowd-banning requirements in Bethlehem — “draconian measures” — which Allentown, for instance, resisted.
- The Steel completely set up and funded the emergency hospital at Washington School, Northampton Heights.
- Such Steel measures made it less likely that the sick workers — many single men living alone with no one to care for them — would die.
- There were house to house searches for the sick.
- There may be mass graves at St. Michael’s.
- The Bethlehem death rate was remarkably low.
- The Steel protected people because production meant profits — the motive was not altruistic.

Here are key outline cards from Higgins:

Bethlehem’s Long Reach

- **Bethlehem Steel and military ask Royer for quarantine in Lehigh Valley**
 - Allentown fights crowd ban
- **4 October Royer initiates crowd ban**
 - All entertainment venues shuttered
 - Alcohol sales banned except for medicine
 - Local communities left to close houses of worship and schools
 - Communicated honestly to local officials – NO HELP COMING

Bethlehem's Ban

- All dormitory-equipped schools quarantined
- All schools and houses of worship closed
- Coffeehouses raided and arrests

Other Measures

- Emergency hospital
- House to house searches
- Possibly mass burials

Aftermath

- Bethlehem deaths lowest for city of size
- Far lower than other mill cities
- Funerals private through winter 1919
- Bethlehem Steel production does not falter