

Palmer Lake Historical Society

Colorado: 1918 pandemic hindsight is 2020

By Sharon Williams

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to unfold, affecting the lives of everyone globally in a rapid, dramatic way. This experience may feel unprecedented, but a similar pandemic transformed daily life in similar ways more than a century ago. We can look back to the Spanish Influenza pandemic of 1918-19 for historical insight and valuable lessons. This can help us understand the current critical impact on Colorado. Then and now, politics, human nature, and medical science are key elements that play a role in disrupting, reversing, supporting, and resisting policies to control the disease.

The pandemic's death toll was greater than the total number of military and civilian deaths from World War I, which was happening simultaneously. It is believed one-third to half the world's population was infected by the influenza. It moved indiscriminately. President Woodrow Wilson and Walt Disney survived the deadly flu, while acting first lady Rose Cleveland and many influential politicians, artists, and athletes did not.

Important facts about the 1918 pandemic matter a 100 years later. At the time, scientists had not yet discovered flu viruses, but we know today that the 1918 pandemic was caused by an influenza A (H1N1) virus. The pandemic is commonly believed to have occurred in three waves. The first flu-like activity was identified in U.S. military personnel during spring 1918. The second wave was the most severe, occurring during fall 1918. The third wave came during winter and spring 1919.

The 1918 flu virus spread quickly. Controlling the spread of flu was limited to non-pharmaceutical interventions. The science behind this was applied inconsistently. In Colorado, an estimated 7,500 deaths occurred beyond what a normal flu season might bring from September 1918 to January 1919. Colorado's reputation as a healthy tuberculosis recovery destination, as well as a key mining state, is thought to be a contributing factor to its high death rate. Only 24 states reported their flu deaths, and Colorado's death rate ranked among the highest.



Above: 1918 Ft. Collins influenza ward.
Photo courtesy The Denver Post.

There was no prevention or treatment for the virus. Many doctors believed the illness to be bacterial. By the time it was determined a viral threat, the death toll was so immense that life expectancy fell by a remarkable 12 years.

Although public gatherings were discouraged in various places in Colorado, citizens were required to wear masks in theaters and shops, but not in churches and hotels. Restaurant waiters had to wear them, but diners did not. It was noted that the way local authorities often reversed course inspired neither public confidence nor cooperation.

Shortly after three flu deaths at Colorado College, the Colorado Springs commissioner of public health advised, "There is no need to become panicky over the matter."

The pandemic of 1918 showed the hazard of easing up too quickly, with Denver seeing a resurgence in cases after allowing people to once again congregate before things were fully under control. The Denver Post noted that any measures to substantially slow the 1918 pandemic came too little, too late or were lifted too early.

Forty-thousand people gathered in Cheesman Park in early October to view a warplane for the first time, while another 10,000 filled the streets for a war bond parade. Just over a week later, Denver had 1,200 cases and 78 deaths.

In fall 1918, cases seemed to be leveling off in Denver. Business owners pressured government officials to let them open back up. The mayor relented. On Nov. 11, 1918, Armistice Day, the ban on gatherings went by the wayside as thousands came together to celebrate the war's end. It seemed, for a brief period, that the flu had taken its course, but it soon returned with a vengeance.

"Sickness" placards began to be placed outside homes in Colorado Springs that had been touched by the flu. Monument and other towns didn't allow customers to enter stores. They received orders at the store front door. When a Durango-bound train passed through, a dead passenger's bedding was burned and the railcar fumigated.

The U.S. experienced a severe shortage of professional nurses because large numbers were deployed to military camps in the United States and abroad. This shortage was worsened by the failure to use trained African American nurses.

Restrictions had to be re-imposed as public life once again ground to a halt. It wouldn't be until January 1919 that the Spanish flu would finally run its course in Denver, though it lingered into the spring in outlying parts of the state.

In 1918, Gunnison's strict measures earned the town the title of "escape community," because it emerged comparatively unscathed. But in 2020, Gunnison is far less isolated, with a highway system making travel easy and ski country nearby. Early on, Gunnison County surged with 52 cases of COVID-19 and one death, leading Colorado in cases per 100,000 people. The contrast of the Gunnison experience during the Spanish flu pandemic to much of the rest of the country can serve as a lesson for communities struggling with the coronavirus outbreak today.

The 1918 pandemic 2020 hindsight has shown that following precautionary and preventive measures is what we can do until adequate testing, personal protective equipment, and treatment is available, and an effective vaccine is developed.

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High Altitude Nature and Gardening (HANG)

Planet Earth: Farming or mining? We have 60 harvests left

By Janet Sellers

"Agriculture is the most destructive human activity on the planet."—Rosario Dawson.

The UN estimates we have fewer than 60 years of farmable soil left. At the 2016 World Soil Day event, speaker Maria-Helena Semedo, deputy director-general of natural resources at the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, said that if current soil degradation rates were not reversed, all the world's topsoil could be gone in 60 years.

As I mentioned last month, the Victory Gardens of the 1940s provided about 40% of our local food supply. This was done in backyard gardens and co-op land parcels. When we consider that we can put food on the table from our backyards, all the while creating healthy soil and clean air, just imagine the impact on our soil and all that implies! The Back to Eden no-till gardening methods create soil in place, and the byproduct is food for us to eat and clean habitats. We can change our ways and enrich the Earth's soil instead of ruin it. Eat locally, as from your own backyard and windowsill, and you save not only time and money while creating clean food but also reduce travel eco-impact as well.

It takes 1,000 years for nature to make topsoil. We lose 20 hectares of topsoil every minute to chemical-heavy farming techniques, deforestation, which increases erosion, and global warming. But we can act now: copying nature, we can save our soil and our Earth. South Africa has proven that large scale food production can be managed for conservation, ultimately putting back more into the soil than they take out. Successful no-till subscription farms in California have shown us that even small farms of 8 acres can have extraordinary results both ecologically and economically. We can actually help create soil and restore the Earth with dispatch—but we have to get going and do that.



Things to do

- Plant soil-replenishing lawns of low water, no mow white Dutch micro clover, for lush lawns (micro clover is used for Danish and Dutch golf courses) that support our pollinators, restore the soil, defeat erosion, and, since it only grows 4-6 inches high, it does not need mowing.
- Guerilla garden with plants and flowers in vacant spots and lots, plant veggies in places needing landscaping, plant gardens in vacant lots with seed bombs (balls of seed-embedded soil).
- Backyard Victory Gardens—replace the single-use zoning environmental disaster with food from home.
- Support our local village community—buy local food, walk or bike to shops and the farmers market. Buy local, organic food, support co-ops and subscribe to a CSA (community supported agriculture) farm, seek these out and support them.
- Deter deer and rodents: My neighbor has had zero deer and rabbit problems. She puts a 2-foot perimeter, sprinkling shaved soap and cayenne pepper all around her flower garden. The voles are 10 feet away in the green belt, but her flower garden goes untouched. For more high-altitude gardening tips, I have hundreds of hand-picked articles, videos and DIY tips on my Facebook

HANG (Cont. on 23)



Above Left: In a tub, drill/poke holes all around 4 inches up from bottom and use drain holes on bottom (optional in our dry area) or tip the bucket/tub to drain excess water. Layer shredded paper, leaves, grass clippings, kitchen scraps, toilet paper rolls, garden clippings, eggshells, coffee grinds, wood chips, and potting soil. Water lightly and keep it lightly watered. Plant zucchini and squashes and any other slow-growing seeds immediately.

Above: Broadtail hummingbird scouts are back! DIY feeder: 8-ounce water bottle, poke one hole in its lower third, mark hole in red, fill with nectar, and replace the cap. Hang by a red ribbon and watch the aerial dynamics begin. Hummers are attracted to the color red (bees and wasps are not).

Right: Hang a paper bag to simulate a wasp nest to deter nesting wasp queens. Bring feeders in at night to deter bears. In June, Friends of Fox Run Park will hold the annual Hummingbird Festival—stay tuned to nextdoor.com for exact dates.



Photos by Janet Sellers.