

Exploring the Cemetery: The Spanish Flu (August 2016)

(This is a reprise of an article from August 2016, with some added information)

As a microbiologist married to a physician, I've been interested in looking at the cemetery in terms of mortality and how that has changed over the years. If one looks at early (pre-1906) obituaries, the cause of death is frequently stated to be "complications" or "apoplexy" or "conditions of old age." Given the level of medical sophistication at the time, these diagnoses translate to "we don't know," "stroke or heart attack," or "got old."

By 1906, the state required that a death certificate be issued, and the level of medical knowledge had improved enough to allow some insight into the cause of death. Death certificates from 1906 to 1966 are part of the public record and can be searched for cause of death, which I have done for virtually everyone in the cemetery.

The notorious Spanish Flu of 1918 probably came out of the Midwest, despite its name, but spread rapidly through the military population and in the trenches of World War I. In late September 1918 Pennsylvania authorities were not terribly concerned because the outbreak was limited to the Philadelphia area. Within a week, they declared an emergency because of the wildfire spread of the disease.

In 1918, three young people died of influenza or "broncho-pneumonia" and were buried in the Rothsville cemetery. Carrie Haines was the first to die on October 10. She was the daughter of William and Emma Amelia (Carvell) Mumma and was married to Milton Haines. She was 29 at the time of her death and had just given birth to a stillborn child on Sept. 23. The second, on October 27, was Harry Ravegum, son of Henry and Sarah Ellen (Rathman) Ravegum. He was 26 years old and worked on a farm. He died after just three days of sickness. On December 11, Caleb Spangler died. His obituary is below.

Lititz Record, Thurs., Dec. 19, 1918, p. 4:

"Caleb W. Spangler died Wednesday night at his home near Clay of pneumonia, following an attack of influenza. He was twenty-nine years of age and was a son of Mr. and Mrs. Abram Spangler, of near Clay. His wife, Mrs. Beulah Shreiner Spangler, his parents, his parents, and the following brothers and sisters survive: Elsie, wife of Stephen Levan, Rothsville; Verna, wife of Benjamin Weidler, Tenville; Susan, wife of John Miller, near Lititz; Dora, wife of Jay Lupold, Lincoln; John, near Lincoln; Mazie, wife of William Young, Brunnerville; Maud, wife of Jacob Garner, Ephrata, and Lizzie and Katherine, at home. He was a member of the Lutheran church. The funeral was held Monday morning and was private, with interment in the Lutheran cemetery at Rothsville."

The flu continued throughout the winter, but the epidemic was worse in population centers. The next incidence I could identify was Emma Hess, daughter of Christian and Lizzie Messner and wife of Abraham Hess, who got influenza on top of other conditions. The last was Dorothy Leed, daughter of Sherman and Lillian Levering Leed, 6 months old, who died of pneumonia. By the summer of 1919, the epidemic was over.

Today we think of flu as hitting the elderly first. But this flu was different because it seemed to strike young people hard, and pregnant women even harder. Modern scientific techniques have led to a possible explanation for this phenomenon. It appears that a less virulent, but related,

form of the virus circulated in the late 19th century. As a result, many older people had some immunity to the virus due to earlier exposure.



I recently looked again at the Dec. 19, 1918, issue of the Lititz Record in which I found the obituary for Caleb Spangler and found some other interesting flu-related items.

There were several deaths due to pneumonia or influenza. Page 1 included a brief note that "Rev. F. A. Weicksel is confined to the house with influenza and was unable to hold services last Sunday. He is showing improvement."

The paper listed numerous Christmas observances to be held in the following weeks, a fried chicken dinner, Christmas sales, news from Europe after the Armistice, and so forth. In other words, life went on as usual.

Perhaps the best little article was entitled "Spanish Influenza – Do Not Fear When Fighting A German or a Germ," by Dr. M. Cook. It read as follows:

"The cool fighter always wins and so there is no need to become panic-stricken. Avoid fear and crowds. Exercise in the fresh air and practice the three C's: A Clean Mouth, A Clean Skin and Clean Bowels. To carry off the poisons that accumulate within the body and to ward off an attack of the influenza bacillus, take a good liver regulator to move the bowels. Such a one is made up of May-apple, leaves of aloe, root of jalap, and is to be had at any drug store, and called 'Pleasant Purgative Pellets.'

If a bad cold develops, go to bed, wrap up well, drink freely of hot lemonade and take a hot-mustard foot bath. Have the bedroom warm but well ventilated. Obtain at the nearest drug store, 'Anuric Tablets' to flush the kidneys and control the pains and aches. Take an Anuric Tablet every two hours, together with copious drinks of lemonade. If a true case of influenza, the food should be simple, such as broths, milk, buttermilk, and ice cream; but it is important that food be given regularly in order to keep up patient's strength and vitality. After the acute attack has passed, which is generally three to seven days, the system should be built up by the use of a good iron tonic, such as 'Irontic' tablets, to be obtained at some drug stores, or that well-known blood-maker and herbal tonic made from roots and barks of forest trees – sold everywhere as Dr. Pierce's Golden Medical Discovery."

With this type of advice, no wonder the Spanish Flu came and went for more than two years.