

Two samples from my weekly column on Haldimand and Norfolk history, "Heritage Lane.". I've been writing it since 1986, first for the Nanticoke Times, then for the Times-Reformer. Although the length has been drastically reduced to meet changing conditions in the newspaper industry, the column remains a perennial favourite.

Area hard hit by flu epidemic.

Without warning you started to shiver. Then your head and back began to throb. Soon, you collapsed. As you lay in bed, your fever soared. You coughed and coughed and coughed.

If you were lucky, the symptoms subsided after two or three days. If not, your skin became discolored as the hemoglobin in your blood deteriorated. Often, pneumonia developed. With no antibiotics available, death was almost inevitable.

The Spanish flu epidemic of 1918-1919 killed between 20 and 22 million people worldwide. In the 19th century, there had been at least six major flu epidemics, but nothing as serious as this. Not only was the Spanish flu fatal to many of its victims, but it was also particularly devastating to young people between 20 and 40, who normally had greatest resistance to disease.

Actually, the flu was not Spanish at all. The first case was reported in Canton, China, in February 1918, followed by an outbreak in Kansas in March and Britain in April. But Britain and the United States were still fighting the First World War, and news of the killer disease was suppressed by official censors. Spain, on the other hand, was neutral. In May, it became the first country to report on the devastating disease.

By fall, the flu had reached Canada, carried home by returning soldiers. By October 17th, the *Simcoe Reformer* reported,

In common with the rest of the world, Simcoe is in the grip of the so-called Spanish Influenza. This (Thursday) morning, at a meeting of the local Board of Health, it was estimated that there were four hundred cases in town – none of which were at that time described as of a dangerous type. The town physicians are in desperate straits to keep up with their work, and three of them were themselves stated to be in bed with the malady. The Board of Health ordered the churches, schools, public library, Lyric Theatre and the pool-rooms closed on Saturday night until otherwise advised. An emergency hospital is to be established today.

The Board also banned meetings of more than 25 persons.

The closing of public places was one of the most common attempts to prevent the disease. In some areas, ploughing matches were cancelled. The Ontario Agricultural College in Guelph was closed, and there were also bans on large weddings and funerals. Some municipalities – and the entire province of Alberta – enacted laws requiring people to wear face masks to stop the spread of the disease.

But the disease was not sufficiently understood to be stopped. The best alternative was to care for the ill as effectively as possible. On October 20th, the south annex of Simcoe's Norfolk House had been converted to a hospital, complete with new gas and plumbing fixtures. Under the

direction of Margaret Scott, volunteer nurses and assistants cared for those who had no family or friends to tend them.

Too much praise cannot be given by the people of Simcoe to these volunteer nurses and helpers, particularly the former, for their untiring efforts to relieve the suffering. One nurse of experience said that never had she seen so many people in such a suffering condition at once.

Meanwhile, members of the Charity Committee and the Board of Health saw to administrative concerns. Henry Crabb, chairman of the committee, was singled out for his "unrelaxing" efforts. According to one volunteer, he spent every spare moment of his time at the hospital. The community helped, too, donating cash, bedding, broth, custard, fruit, and whatever else might alleviate suffering.

All 25 beds in the makeshift hospital were occupied by Sunday, October 20th. Before evening, the first two deaths occurred. Frances Kate Medai died at 4a.m.; Eric Carted about 10 o'clock.

Elsewhere, other communities struggled with the disease. In Waterford, news came that Victor Lamont, a former resident, had died in London, leaving behind a widow and five young children. Around the same time, George Royal, a 22-year-old private, succumbed to the disease. Port Ryerse reported both church and school were closed. At least four Port Dover residents died within a single week: 15-year-old Robert Alair on October 18, his 50-year-old father Charles two days later, Erie Jemima Law on October 19, and Mrs. F.D. Awde on the 22nd. Meanwhile, Vittoria was without a village bakery while the baker's family struggled with the flu. Happily, they all recovered and the store re-opened after a week.

By November 6, with only seven cases in the temporary hospital, the Board of Health lifted the ban on meetings and allowed schools and other public places to reopen. "Meanwhile," the *Reformer* noted,

it will not be out of place to ask people to exercise ordinary precautions. Families that have recently had visits from the malady should voluntarily absent themselves from church services or other places where they may endanger others. Infected children should be kept from school, and promptly sent home by teachers if they present themselves.

Five days later, the First World War ended. It seemed the battle with Spanish flu had also been won, although milder attacks would occur until the mid-1920s. But the cost of both conflicts had been high. Both left an indelible mark on those who survived.

Plank Roads

In 1836, Upper Canadians borrowed an idea from Russia and built the first plank road in North America. According to transportation expert William Mitchell Gillespie, a short stretch of road was constructed, which “gave so much satisfaction, as to ease of traveling, and cheapness of keeping it in repair, that a mile of it was constructed the next year at a cost of \$2100.”

In 1855, Gillespie published a book on road-making, which reported that 500 miles of plank road had been built in Canada at this point.

Plank roads resembled old wooden sidewalks seen in western movies. Wooden stringers were laid down, then planks put on top. The widths of the road varied. Early on, they were about 9 to 12 feet wide. However, seven years after a Toronto plank road was built, it was observed that only the middle seven or eight feet of road showed any wear. That meant that four or five feet of wood was unnecessary. As a result, subsequent roads were narrower.

Locally, the most famous plank road was the Hamilton to Port Dover Plank Road. Constructed under legislation passed on March 6, 1834, it was designed to make transportation easier between Lake Erie and Lake Ontario. The route chosen cut the distance between Hamilton and Port Dover by some 20 miles. Other plank roads constructed between 1842 and 1862 included one between one between Sarnia and London, one between Boston and Port Dover, and another between Port Rowan and Middleton.

Some of these roads were probably privately owned, while others were government projects. The Hamilton and Port Dover road was a government project. As usually happens with large government projects, there were inevitable delays starting work. Although legislation was passed in 1836, construction didn't start until 1839, and it was 1843 before the road was completed. Various types of wood were used to make the three inch blanks, including oak, maple and beech. (This was not unusual, as Gillespie notes that pine, hemlock, tamarack, oak and walnut were all used in building Canadian roads.)

Of course it cost a bit of money to build the road. According to Gillespie, it cost about \$2100 to build a mile of road in 1837. However, another source states that plank roads could be built for about \$1750 a mile. Although this was considerable cheaper than railroads – about one-twelfth of the cost, according to some estimates – it still was a lot of money. So the government, which initially owned the road, offset the costs by setting up toll booths every six miles.

Collecting the tolls proved to be difficult at times. Some people objected in principal. More often, the objections were based on the poor condition of the roads. In fact, keeping the Hamilton and Port Dover road in good shape provided so costly that the government decided to sell it. Private ownership didn't improve a thing – for years afterward, the newspaper were full of complaints about the poor condition of the road.