The Looming Specter of Death:
The Town of Madison and the Influenza Epidemic of 1918-1919

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Historians tend to gloss over the effects of international pandemics such as the influenza epidemic of 1918-1919. [1] What historical research exists comes from websites such as the *Influenza Archive* that exclusively focuses on the virus' impact in American cities.[2] Furthermore, books like *The Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918-1919* only cover the disease's progress from the perspective of whole countries.[3] Recent research into the virus mostly focuses on the biological aspect of the disease and neglects the human story behind the epidemic.[4] As a result of medical research, we currently possess vaccinations to prevent a large-scale epidemic, but the effectiveness of these treatments varies from year to year.[5] The 1918-1919 flu affected one-third of the world's population, and more soldiers died from the flu than combat in WWI.

This essay explores how the people of Madison, Indiana, reacted to the pandemic. To the contemporary perspectives of the writers of the *Madison Courier* the influenza virus mostly pertained to the world outside their city. Influenza infected a smaller portion of Madison's population than much of the outside world. It is difficult to estimate the actual infection rate in the town, but according to the *Madison Courier*, the Red Cross Hospital treated three hundred patients over the virus' course in the town, which would be about 4.3 percent of the population.[6] The virus claimed twenty-six lives from a population of 6,934, which amounts to only a point-four percent mortality rate for the town.[7] 50 million to 100 million individuals died from influenza worldwide.[8] The lower infection/death rate in Madison begs an inquiry into the local history of the community, especially given its prominence as an Ohio River town. The influenza epidemic arrived at Madison in September of 1918 and lasted until the early summer. In response, the riverside town initiated two separate public bans against congregating in groups larger than five people at a time. The *Madison Courier*'s coverage of the virus in addition to letters from prominent citizens can give viewpoints on the virus from the townspeople. These sources might offer explanations as to why the virus affected the town so little. Possible

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[1] Howard Phillips and David Killingray, eds., *The Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918-1919: New Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2003), 1.

[2] University of Michigan Center for the History of Medicine and Library Archives, *The Influenza Encyclopedia: About this Project* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing, Ongoing Project).

[3] Phillips and Killingray, eds., *The Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918-1919*, 1.

[4] David M. Morens and Anthony S. Fauci, "The 1918 Influenza Pandemic: Insights for the 21st Century," *The Journal of Infectious Diseases*, vol. 195, no. 7 (Apr. 1, 2007): 1018-1028.

[5] Susan Scutti, "Flu vaccine just 36% effective this season, CDC reports." *Cable News Network* (2008).

[6] "Ban was on Twelve Weeks Lifting of Health Regulations Marks Ending of Unprecedented Condition," *The Madison Courier*, December 30, 1918: 6.

[7] Chas Bruce Kern, "September 1918 – March 1920 Monthly Bulletin," *The Indiana State Board of Health.*

[8] Jeffery K. Taubenberger and David M. Morens, "1918 Influenza: the Mother of All Pandemics," *Emerging Infectious Diseases Journal*, vol. 12, no. 1 (January 2006): 15-22.

explanations for the low death rate could be the public bans initiated by the local government, the galvanizing fear of the epidemic, and sterilization guidelines from the Red Cross.

The government of Madison, Indiana, took immediate action to combat the spread of the influenza virus in the town. The public health board initiated two public bans throughout the course of the virus' stay in the city. The first, initiated October 7th, prohibited people from going to pool rooms and other social gatherings. Furthermore, the ban required people with colds to stay at home. Additionally, the ban required people to avoid crowds in public. Lastly, the board of health put a stop to public funerals; henceforth, only family and close friends could attend. The original ban lasted five weeks until November 8th, but the lifting of the ban still stipulated that children remain at home from school if they had colds.[9] Influenza continued to appear in Madison, however, and the Health Board reinstated the ban on November 14th, extending it until December 30th. Additionally, the second ban shut down church on Sunday. According to the *Madison Courier*, "the necessity of the ban created conditions in Madison that heretofore were unknown."[10] The people of Madison realized that limiting the spread of the influenza virus would create a safer environment in the town. Madison's size of roughly seven thousand in 1918 might have made the bans feasible. It is doubtful that a population much larger would have been able to start a public ban with the same success. A larger city would come with greater amounts of commerce and a greater risk for exposure. Madison's small scale allowed the citizens to take drastic measures that might have stemmed the rise of influenza patients. The people of Madison disrupted their social lives for the sake of stopping the spread of the influenza. The ban arose from the fear that one could contract influenza just from appearing in public. The fear the public expressed towards influenza can be seen in the advertisements for products that "prevented" contraction of the virus.

The pervasive nature of advertisements for influenza-combating products in the *Madison Courier* throughout the epidemic reflects the fear of the population at the lack of reliable preventative care. Even though the conditions for influenza in Madison were not apocalyptic, advertisements to combat the virus popped up more commonly than government sponsored messages. At the time, no dependable treatment for influenza existed, so products for combating influenza could only have caused a placebo effect. One local pharmacy, Peter's Drug Store ran an advertisement that promised: "Ward off Influenza Grip and Pneumonia by taking Peter's Cold Tablets. They break up a cold in a few hours. 20¢ Box. Satisfaction guaranteed or money refunded. Made only by W. A. Peters . . . ."[11] Despite the money-back guarantee, Peter's Drug Store continued to place these advertisements in the *Madison Courier* throughout the epidemic's time in Madison. Another non-local brand of medicine called Father John's Medicine advertised itself as a "Wholesome Food Medicine and Body Builder" prior to the epidemic's arrival in Madison. Father John's Medicine switched its tune, however, and advertised itself as way to cure

[9] "Board of Health Makes Official Announcement – Schools to Open Monday," *The Madison Courier*, November 8, 1918: 1.

[10] "Ban Was on Twelve Weeks – Lifting of Health Regulations Marks Ending of Unprecedented Condition," *The Madison Courier*, December 30, 1918: 6.

[11] Peter's Cold Tablets, Advertisement, *The Madison Courier*, September 24, 1918: 6.

the "grip" once the virus had spread to Madison. The advertisement for the remedy stated, "If you are overtired, weak or run-down, you catch cold easily. If you have a cold it is easy for grip to take hold. If you have the grip, it may easily lead to pneumonia, and that often ends fatally. So first of all do not allow yourself to get run down or weakened. Build up new strength by taking Father John's Medicine, which gives health resistance to overcome disease."[12] Both national and local pharmaceutical products sought to command the patronage of Madison citizens during the epidemic. The pharmaceutical ads dropped the influenza angle once normal conditions returned. The persistence of flu-related advertising in the *Courier* demonstrated the desperate lengths that people would traverse to avoid contracting the flu, even though none of the products was efficacious. The public wanted a medicine they could take to prevent influenza infection, but it is doubtful that any contemporary medicine would have helped in that regard.

The fear of the influenza virus can also be seen in letters exchanged by family members connected to Madison. The Rogers family of Madison discussed the virus in their letters throughout the duration of the epidemic. Irene Rogers wrote to Alma Rogers to express concern over her afflicted brother-in-law, Carter. Irene stated in her letter that:

> I am so sorry Carter is sick – I know how serious it is; we have a young friend just came home from a camp in the East with the Spanish Influenza. The care that you [Alma] can give ought to help him thru – but <u>do</u> take care of yourself no to overdo. I am thinking about you all the time – all of you – it will be on my mind constantly until I hear that Carter is better . . . .[13]

At the time of the letter, Irene lived in Ann Arbor, Michigan, while Alma remained in the Madison area. Alma's response is not possessed in the same collection of Rogers Family Papers. The letter shows a number of aspects of the experience of living in the epidemic. One example would be the seriousness with which people approached the pandemic. Irene expressed concern that her mother-in-law not debilitate herself while treating Carter. Additionally, by overdoing it Alma might contract the flu as well. Furthermore, Irene's letter displayed the uncertainty people possessed in the face of their own mortality.

Throughout the epidemic people compared the spread of influenza to World War I. An article in the *Madison Courier* on December 2, 1918, declared: "Influenza More Deadly Than War Census Bureau Says. Epidemic caused 82,306 Deaths In One Month. Disease Quite Likely to Return."[14] Like World War I, the epidemic hovered over the people of Madison, but the virus posed a more potent threat to the burgeoning city. The fear of the influenza virus led the people of Madison to take unheard of precautions in order to prevent the infection of new victims. Nonetheless, the anxiety caused by the influenza outbreak did not diminish the practicality of the citizens of Madison in their responses to the epidemic.

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[12] Father John's Medicine, Advertisement, *The Madison Courier*, October 29, 1918: 2.

[13] Irene Rogers, letter to Alma Rogers, Sept. 28, 1918, folder 1, box 6, Rogers Family Papers Collection, Duggan Library, Hanover College (Hanover, Ind.).

[14] "Influenza More Deadly Than War," *The Madison Courier*, December 2, 1918: 2.

The actions taken by the civil government and the compliance of the citizenry demonstrate the pragmatism of Madison's population in 1918, despite the relatively low number of influenza patients. In October, the Red Cross published a list of guidelines to enable the people of Madison to stem the spread of the virus. These guidelines stated, "All colds, however slight, should be treated as possible attacks of influenza. Patients affected by colds should stay at home and sterilize discharge from the nose and throat . . . Avoid the breath or expelled secretions from people suffering from colds . . . All those in attendance on patients with influenza should wear masks."[15] Additionally, the local Red Cross chapter financially supported the cost of the care for the influenza patients, which the *Madison Courier* estimated to be in the thousands. Furthermore, the newspaper discussed sanitary precautions the Red Cross took to stop the spread of the virus. According to the paper, "The Emergency Hospital established by the Red Cross in the Elks' home on November 7th for the care of influenza and pneumonia patients was closed today . . . The nurses worked about the building cleaning up and disinfecting the rooms."[16] The Red Cross took excellent precautions to prevent the spread of the disease. Regularly cleaning the environment of the infected most likely helped to stop the spread of the disease. Their advice to avoid public spaces, maintain a clean home environment, and sterilize bodily expulsions might have limited the reach of the influenza virus.

The citizens of Madison appealed to the *Courier* as well as the local government to take measures to make influenza easier to avoid. In November, according to the *Courier*, citizens became concerned with discerning families stricken with influenza. An editorial stated that "a number of citizens have asked the Courier to say that all houses with cases of the Influenza should be quarantined and placarded. Not having a degree as a doctor of medicine the Courier interviewed Dr. Rudolph, president of the city board of health, who said the citizens are right and that he will bring the matter before the board at once."[17] Clearly, the lack of an effective method by which to identify influenza victims led the citizens of Madison to call for more drastic measures. On one level, the placard precaution quarantine might appear a bit extreme, but the world was dealing with unprecedented levels of the virus. Restricting the movements of those who had contracted the virus through quarantine and then labeling their houses so that others might avoiding contact with them for the duration of the pandemic would have provided a practical and effective course of action. Alas, the newspaper did not publish a follow up article reporting whether or not the public followed through with the citizens' request.

Madison, Indiana, might have kept the extent of the influenza's reach small through the concern of the local populace, the actions of the Red Cross, and the local Health Board's Public Ban. The influenza epidemic posed a real threat to people of Madison between 1918 and 1919 even if few residents actually contracted the virus. Lack of reliable preventative care led to a surge in advertisements for "medicine" to combat the virus' spread. The increase in advertisements could be seen as a symptom of the townspeople's fear of the illness. Furthermore, the Red Cross and the *Madison Courier* ensured that methods to prevent the spread of the disease

[15] "Red Cross: Observe These Rules," *The Madison Courier*, October 10, 1918: 5.

[16] "Care of Influenza Patients Closed Today," *The Madison Courier*, January 6, 1919: 6.

[17] "Quarantining the Influenza," *The Madison Courier*, November 14, 1918: 3.

were known in the community. Proper sanitization would ensure that the victims rested in a clean environment. Containing bodily expulsions and wearing masks also helped to prevent the spread and contraction of influenza. Public bans prevented people from gathering in areas, so that they would not contract the disease.

At the same time, however, the influenza virus clearly impacted the people of Madison economically, socially, and politically, as they altered their entire way of life to prevent its spread. The influenza virus, in fact, took many more American lives than World War I. Not surprisingly, the influenza epidemic threatened and impact the daily lives of the townspeople of Madison, Indiana, in ways that the First World War could not. Because the national death rate horrified the Madison townspeople, they took extreme measures to combat the spread of the virus locally. Church did not close because of World War I, nor did other public spaces like theatres and pool halls. One cannot understate the significance of the public Bans. The influenza epidemic fundamentally disrupted the social fabric of Madison. In today's world, people can interact with one another through social media, so a complete ban on public interaction might not seem so daunting, but the same technology did not exist in 1918. People willingly cut themselves off from their neighbors and friends in order to minimize the spread of influenza. In so doing, the people of Madison, Indiana, demonstrated their courage as they fought their own war here at home.

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