

Spanish Flu in Astoria

By Morning Astorian, Astoria, Oregon

This newspaper article was published in the Morning Astorian on October 2, 1918. It describes the arrival of "Spanish flu" in Oregon.

"Spanish flu" was a particularly virulent strain of the influenza virus that swept across the globe from 1918 to 1920. Researchers estimate that 50 to 100 million people worldwide were killed by the virus during that period, including approximately 675,000 Americans.

The first reported case of Spanish flu in the Pacific Northwest came in mid-September 1918, when a trainload of sick sailors arrived at the Puget Sound Navy Yard from Philadelphia. The virus was soon transmitted to Camp Lewis (modern Fort Lewis), and from there to Fort Stevens, located near Astoria. As the article reproduced above states, three trainloads of soldiers were transferred to Fort Stevens late in September 1918, bringing the flu with them. "At last," the Morning Astorian reported, "Oregon has been infected with the plague."

In an effort to control the spread of the virus, the acting mayor of Astoria, Charles E. Johnson, ordered all "theatres, pool and dance halls closed until further notice" on October 12. The following day he issued a blanket statement closing all public places, including churches and schools. "Gatherings, anywhere, are forbidden," the Morning Astorian reported, "and street cars will be limited to their seating capacity." The paper reported that the "disease is not epidemic here, however, and will not become so in all probability." But within a week it noted that the Astoria Box Company factory had been closed due to flu, thirty-five of the company's one hundred employees being afflicted. Eight days later the paper reported that influenza was "crippling" local war plants, and that production had been cut in half.

October saw the peak of flu cases in Astoria. By early November the Morning Astorian reported that the "epidemic in Astoria is well under control and rapidly decreasing." The city's closure order was lifted on November 15, at which time it was reported that the city had experienced 2,008 cases of flu, 122 cases of pneumonia, and 72 deaths during the previous month. There was a slight increase in the number of flu cases in December and January, but not at the scale of October's outbreak. On February 5, 1919, Dr. Nellie Vernon, the city and county health officer, reported that "very few additional cases may be expected."

Historian Liisa Penner estimates that 164 people died from influenza-related causes in Clatsop County from October 1918 to January 1919. The Oregon State Board of Health reported 48,146 cases of flu and 3,675 deaths statewide from October 1918 through September 1920.

Further Reading: Penner, Liisa. "The 1918-19 'Spanish' Influenza Epidemic in Clatsop County: A Chronology." *Cumtux* 17, 1997: 31-41.

Rockefeller, Nancy. "'In Gauze We Trust': Public Health and Spanish Influenza on the Home Front, Seattle, 1918-1919." *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 77, 1986: 104-113.

Woolley, Ivan M. "The 1918 'Spanish Influenza' Pandemic in Oregon." *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 64, 1963: 246-258.

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