



Illustration from the Palmyra Courier, October 17, 1918.

Palmyra and the Flu Epidemic of 1918

**By Betsy Lewis, Palmyra Historian
February 9, 2020**

Today we hear stories of the coronavirus and some of us wonder if this could become a pandemic like the Spanish Influenza of 1918 that resulted in millions of lives lost.

Palmyra, in 1918, was not spared the flu. On the news today we hear of China quarantining great pockets of people, practically shutting down cities to quell the spread of the coronavirus. Palmyra did much of the same, albeit on a much smaller scale in 1918.

On October 9th of that year, the Palmyra Village Board and the Palmyra Board of Health met and decided that it was in the community's best interest to issue a closing order. The October 10th Wayne County Journal (published in Palmyra) stated the following:

“Public gatherings of any nature are forbidden in this village until Monday, Oct. 21...the Palmyra Classical High School will be closed. No church services whatever are to be held; the Opera House, picture shows and public gathering of any kind will be discontinued until the date mentioned.

“The doctors agreed that while there were a large number of cases of influenza within the village limits, there was no reason for alarm, as there are no really serious cases at present.

“Principal Stroup stated that there were at least 125 children now kept from school. Parents have kept their children from school as a precaution against possible contagion; also many children have been excused by the faculty when symptoms of the disease were noticeable.”

“Children and others assembling in crowds on the streets or elsewhere,” were prohibited.

Interestingly, on this same newspaper page, two columns over, the death of Robert Trull, a 12-year old boy was reported, “as the result of typhoid pneumonia following an attack of Spanish Influenza.” Later the article stated that he was survived by a brother and sister, both ill but thought to be recovering.

The newspapers of the time were peppered with updates on residents and their illnesses, most frequently the flu, and whether or not they were improving.

The Village Board had hopes of reopening public places in one week’s time. That was not to be. Schools did not reopen until the week of November 7th as noted in that issue of the Wayne County Journal. Students and teachers flocked to the high school in the morning but instead of starting right back into the classroom, each student and teacher first had to be examined.

“The first thing done was to find out if any of the pupils or any member of their families were suffering with the ‘flu.’ Those pupils who had not been sick or any member of their family sick were

excused and the others were detained and examined by the school physician, Dr. H.L. Chase.” Those deemed healthy got back to their school work in the afternoon.

The “Primary Department” at the Canandaigua Street school did not reopen “owing to sickness and death in the Cookman family. The house [school] is to be fumigated today...and will open Monday next.”

Rural teachers, 40 in all, from Palmyra, Macedon, Walworth and Marion were examined for healthiness by a state examiner. It was not reported if any of them were unfit for teaching at that time.

The closing order resulted in 17 missed school days. It was said that many children forgot their lessons while out.

Along with schools and churches, soda fountains, cafes and other businesses were closed and funerals were to be private.

By November 7, the Wayne County Journal reported that churches in the area would be reopening that upcoming Sunday “after being closed for four Sunday’s.”

Things were looking up. Not only was our community getting healthier, but so was our country. On November 11, 1918, the armistice was signed, ending World War I.

In the March 27, 1919 issue of the Wayne County Journal, the health officer gave a brief recap of the 1918 influenza epidemic in Palmyra. He stated, “The influenza has made memorable the months of October, November and December of 1918, surpassing all previous records in the number of fatalities of the cases. However, Palmyra escaped less harmed by the savages of this disease than some of our nearby villages.

“The Board of Health was grandly supported in their action to control the spread of this epidemic of Influenza by the united action of the churches, Board of Education, the businesses, the business men and the factories of your village.”

According to the CDC, “one-third of the world’s population became infected” with the disease during the 1918-1919 pandemic. Approximately 675,000 people died in the United States, alone. No vaccines existed to help prevent the flu so other methods to help stop the spread of the disease were incorporated. One of those preventive measures that Palmyra instituted was the closing order, or limiting the public from gathering where the disease could easily spread.

Please follow the Palmyra, NY Historian’s Page on Facebook, contact me at palhistorian@palmyrany.com or stop in to see me at the Palmyra Town Hall, 1180 Canandaigua Rd., Palmyra during my office hours. They are held monthly on Thursdays from 7-8 PM when the Palmyra Town Board meets in Palmyra, February 27, March 26, May 28, June 25, July 23, August 27, September 24. Other times by appointment.