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CAMP GRANT AND THE 1918 INFLUENZA PANDEMIC

By Thomas Powers



This postcard shows one of the sixty hospital buildings at Camp Grant. When the pandemic struck they proved wholly inadequate.
Postcard courtesy of Terry Dyer

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

This issue presents the history of the 1918 influenza pandemic and its effect on Rockford and Camp Grant near the end of the First World War. I am the author of this article. This is a topic that has interested me for several years. It was at the time and remains to this day, the greatest medical calamity in the history of the world, surpassing even the Bubonic Plague epidemics in Europe during the Middle Ages. Yet today, ninety years later it is largely forgotten. It was called a pandemic because it struck the entire world. An estimated one third of the world's population (500 million) was infected and estimates of the number of deaths range from 50 to 100 million. Camp Grant, like many of the other Cantonments was a perfect breeding ground for the influenza. There were over 42,000 men living in close quarters, eating, training and sleeping together in close proximity. Once the first case struck, it spread like wildfire. Over one thousand men died in less than a month. The flu struck the civilian population of Rockford as well, just like virtually every city and town around the world.

Much of my research consisted of contemporary accounts printed in the two Rockford newspapers, the *Register-Gazette* and the *Morning Star*. I also used information from a number of books and websites about the 1918 pandemic. These are listed in the sources at the end of the article. I also reviewed some later accounts, written 50 to 60 years after the events. While these are valuable since they are eye-witness accounts, the passage of time makes some aspects of the accounts dubious. Lastly, I am indebted to Terry Dyer for his assistance. Terry works at Memorial Hall and is one of the foremost authorities on Camp Grant. Terry shared information with me and supplied picture postcards of the camp that help illustrate this article.

NOTICE TO RESEARCHERS

If you have a subject that you have researched, or an idea for an article that you would like to pursue, give me a call. I would like to encourage original research into some aspects of local history that have not been adequately pursued. I can be reached at 987-5724 (day) or 986-4867 (evening).

Thomas Powers, Editor

CAMP GRANT AND THE 1918 INFLUENZA PANDEMIC

By Thomas Powers

Ninety years ago in the late summer and early fall of 1918, just as the War to End All Wars was winding down, a terrible epidemic of Influenza broke out. It quickly spread around the world and in a matter of a few months had killed 10's of millions of people. Between September 1918 and June 1919, 675,000 Americans died of Influenza. That was more than five times the number who died in combat during World War I and 60% more than died in World War I, World War II, Korea and Vietnam combined. Worldwide, modern estimates say between 50 and 100 million people died, making it the greatest medical holocaust in history.

There had been earlier flu pandemics, the most recent being in 1847 and 1889-1892. None of these however was nearly as severe as the 1918 version. No one knows why the flu killed so many, but it was an especially virulent strain. Unlike other flu strains which attacked the young and old and people with compromised immune systems, this strain attacked young healthy adults in the prime of their lives. Another reason so many died was that because of the war, large numbers of people were moving across the country and across the world, carrying the virus with them.

No one knows for sure just where the virus came from or where it struck first. Some point to Fort Riley, Kansas, where the flu struck on March 11, 1918. By noon of that day, over 100 men had reported to the infirmary with symptoms of a bad cold. In April and May the flu struck at other places where men were living in close quarters like prisons and military bases. As large numbers of American "dough-boys" set out for Europe, they took the flu with them. By May it was passing from army to army. It passed over the Alps and the Pyrenees into Italy and Spain. In Spain an estimated 8,000,000 people caught the flu. It became known as the Spanish flu, not because it started there but because Spain was neutral and didn't censor their medical records. There is some evidence that the influenza actually originated in a military encampment in Belgium where the virus moved from the pigs raised to feed the soldiers. From there it traveled to America and then back again. That is unproven however. During the summer it spread throughout Europe and to Africa and Asia as well. Although tens of thousands had fallen, this first wave was not as yet the terrible killer that would strike in the fall.

On August 27th the second wave arrived in the United States at Boston's Navy Commonwealth Pier. Within two weeks over 2,000 men had come down with the flu. By the end of September, the influenza had spread to Navy and Army bases across the country including Camp Grant. It was also starting to effect the civilian population in many towns and cities across the country.

Camp Grant was a military cantonment. Building began in June 1917 and within 3 months 1520 buildings, 18 miles of water mains and 350 miles of electrical wires had been built to house and train 43,000 men. Like most army camps, thousands of men lived together in close quarters.

The first cases of influenza occurred at Camp Grant on September 21st. By the morning of the 23rd there were 400 cases in the infirmary. The camp authorities were considering putting the camp under quarantine. By the following day, there were 490 new cases and the first two deaths had occurred. The camp commanders issued an order that no civilians would be allowed to visit the camp that weekend and no soldiers would be allowed to visit Rockford without a special pass. The purpose of this order was to cut the spread of the disease.

By Thursday the 26th, Lt. Col. Lake, the camp surgeon announced for the first but not the last time that the epidemic was at its crest and would soon be declining. This was based on the fact that fewer new cases were reported that day than the day before. Still, there were 1900 patients in the base hospital, an increase from 600 just four days ago. Lieut. Col. H. C. Michie who was in charge of the hospital realized that the hospital was reaching capacity and ordered the enlisted men who worked in the hospital to vacate their barracks in order to make more room for additional sick men. This was in spite of the fact that the hospital complex consisted of 61 buildings! The soldiers who were vacated were put up in tents. Rockford women were asked to assist in making gauze masks to prevent the spread of the disease. Eight thousand masks were needed at once.

By Sunday, September 30th, sixteen more men had died from influenza over the weekend. Although some of the health officials at the camp believed that the worst of the epidemic was now past, 635 new patients were admitted to the base hospital on Sunday alone. There were now about 3,000 influenza patients in the camp hospital. The camp commander, Col. C. B. Hagadorn, issued an order on Saturday September 28th continuing the quarantine of the camp except for those on "urgent business" or those visiting family in Rockford.

By now the disease was spreading to the civilian population. The October 1, 1918 *Rockford Morning Star* reported that there were eight cases of the flu in the city, but no fatalities as of yet. The State Board of Health issued instructions to all municipalities that all cases of the influenza were to be reported and quarantined. No one was allowed to visit the sick patient except the doctor and attending nurses and they were instructed to wear protective masks. Public funerals of persons who have died from the flu are not allowed unless a) the body has been embalmed, or b) if not embalmed, the body must be sealed in an air tight casket. Red Cross auxiliaries were working all across the area to make gauze masks

The number of cases and the number of deaths continued to rise at Camp Grant. Twenty eight more deaths were reported on October 1st and forty more on October 2nd, bringing the total so far to over one hundred in just over a week. At the same time, the number of civilian cases reported in Rockford had jumped to fifty, from eight the previous day.



A portion of the hospital unit at Camp Grant. The hospital consisted of sixty one buildings and had a capacity of 1300 beds.

Postcard courtesy of Terry Dyer

One of the problems caused by this terrible scourge was a lack of undertakers. The firm of Murphy & Fitzgerald on West State St. had the contract for burial or shipment of the dead at the camp. With the terrible death toll over the last few days they had not been able to keep up with the demand. The firm had been looking far and wide for embalmers. They found one at the camp who had been an undertaker in civilian life and imported two more from central Illinois. Along with the two from Rockford, these five men had been working night and day yet can't keep up with the demand. By the evening of October 2nd there were 62 bodies in the morgue awaiting embalming. Mr. Murphy stated that he is continuing to look for more embalmers.

The number of civilian cases in Rockford began to explode. From eight cases reported on October 1st and fifty reported on the 2nd, the number reported on the 3rd rose to 800! City Health Inspector Cunningham stated that he believed that there were many mild cases that had not been reported and that the total number of cases may be as high as 2,000. The following day Mayor Rew issued the following proclamation.

Owing to the prevalence of influenza and pneumonia in Rockford and Camp Grant, all schools, churches, theatres, dance halls and places of public gathering will be closed until further notice.

Robert Rew (Mayor)

On October 4th 74 more young men died of influenza at Camp Grant. The death toll was overwhelming the local facilities and the camp enlisted the assistance of J. H. Camlin, president of the Chamber of Commerce, and I. L. Bell of the Rockford-Overland Company for help. As a result, the Overland Company garage on North Church St. was converted into an undertaking establishment. The Western Undertaking Company of Chicago was hired and they brought in several new undertakers to relieve the load being born by the local funeral parlors. On the night of the 4th, there were 51 bodies in the garage waiting for embalming and over 100 at Murphy and Fitzgerald

On Sunday, October 6th for the first time in living memory there were no church services in Rockford. Public funerals were forbidden. Ten deaths have occurred so far in the civilian population. The Overland garage now had over 100 bodies waiting embalming and shipment. Five more undertakers had been brought in from Aurora and more were being sought. Rockford College announced that the campus was under quarantine.

From the *Rockford Morning Star* of October 8, 1918 it was reported that over 600 deaths have been reported from Camp Grant in the last six days. Also, over 40 deaths were reported in Rockford the previous week. The Camp commander issued an order that the daily death toll would no longer be reported. At the morgue in the Overland garage, 218 bodies were lined up waiting for embalming. The estimate of dead for the day was 142.

On October 8th at 4:00 a.m. Col. Charles B. Hagadorn, Commander of Camp Grant, shot himself. He had felt personally responsible for his inability to stop the mounting death toll caused by the epidemic. The Colonel was a 29 year veteran of the army and had only been at Camp Grant one month. He had had many sleepless nights as the influenza epidemic swept across the camp and all attempts by medical and military science to stop it had failed. Unfortunately, the very day that the Colonel took his life, the epidemic reached its peak as more patients were discharged than admitted to the base hospital. The officers now in charge felt that the Colonel's mental condition led him to issue the order that the death toll would no longer be reported. This order was immediately rescinded.

On October 9th the first of three emergency hospitals was opened at the Boys Club. This was done because the three hospitals in town were being overwhelmed. Also, it was felt that it would be better to isolate the flu victims in order to slow the spread of the disease. Within 15 minutes of it's opening at 6:00 p.m. they had six patients. Within two hours half of the 25 beds were occupied. The following day, two more emergency hospitals were opened. The first was at the Knights of Columbus hall. The other was at Lincoln School. The Second Congregational Church had offered their facilities as well but it was determined that too much work would have to be done to prepare the building.

By October 11th the morgue that had been set up in the Overland Garage on Church St was finally starting to empty out. A crew of embalmers including 27 brought in from outside the city had been working day and night to keep up with the death toll from Camp Grant. In addition to these men, 12 soldiers from the camp who had been undertakers in civilian life were brought in to help as well. Despite this, the number of deaths and new cases

continued to rise both in Rockford and at Camp Grant. For example, the street car company reported that same day that 42 conductors were out sick with the flu.

Lt. Col. H. C. Michie, commander of the camp hospital had been working day and night to fight the terrible epidemic at Camp Grant where there were still over 3,000 cases in the camp hospital. Despite the enormous extent of the epidemic, Col. Michie had received high praise from the Army Command and other camps were looking at Camp Grant as a model of how to treat and contain the disease. On October 12th, despite the tremendous effort to keep the epidemic under control at the camp, Col. Michie offered any assistance he could grant to Mayor Rew and the City of Rockford. The following day, army doctors began to serve as interns at the three emergency hospitals.

As the pandemic struck Rockford and Camp Grant with terrible ferocity, people came forward to help their community wherever they could. There were many unsung heroes during this time. When the epidemic first struck the camp, Lt. Col. Michie asked for civilian workers to help in the hospital wards. The women of Rockford responded in great numbers providing nursing duties, clerical duties and guides to the wards when families had been called by telegram to their loved ones bedsides. Others worked long hours making gauze masks and sputum cups. Still others helped the sick write letters home or assisted the visitors with their needs. Over 200 women worked in shifts while other volunteers waited in lines ready to offer their services.

The War Camp Community Service (W. C. C. S.) was a national organization set up to provide recreation and improve morale for the soldiers and sailors at camps across the nation. In Rockford they established a soldiers club for the men who were visiting Rockford. They invited soldiers to home cooked meals in their homes. They worked with the YMCA, the YWCA, the American Library Association, the Knights of Columbus, the Jewish Welfare Board and the Salvation Army. They were active in helping the soldiers before the epidemic. During the epidemic they helped even more. They set up a convoy using automobiles volunteered by their owners to transport visitors to and from the camp. Police Officer Jack Prial was assigned to assist in the loading of the motor cars in front of the Headquarters Soldiers Club at 107 S Main St. It was estimated that during the three weeks of the peak of the epidemic that 30,000 people were transported to the cantonment and back.



The Main Street entering the Camp. This is where the vehicles car-pooling all of the family and friends of the sick soldiers would have entered.

Postcard courtesy of Terry Dyer

Ross Beckstrom, the president of the Kiwanis Club asked all Kiwanis members to serve their city by providing cars for the transportation of relatives and friends of sick soldiers to the camp. Many members of the club volunteered.

The Red Cross provided a great deal of support during this trying time as well. Groups of Red Cross Auxiliaries throughout the city and surrounding communities got together to make thousands of gauze masks. A supply of Red Cross writing material was kept on hand at the camp for the use of the sick and the families and visitors. Many letters were written by civilian helpers.

Help was also needed at the morgue. Men and women helped by providing lunches and dinners for the undertakers, the clerical workers, the other workers and the many visitors at the morgue at the Overland Garage. Others donated food. This included many bakers, grocers and meat dealers as well as ordinary citizens. Still others donated money to buy needed foodstuffs and supplies.

About 100 teachers conducted a canteen at the Soldiers Club for the benefit of the parents and relatives from out of town and also for the soldiers in service at the Overland Garage. Over 1000 people were provided hospitality in the homes of Rockford through the W.C.C.S.

The City Council approved a grant of \$1,000 to help fund the three emergency hospitals on October 14th. However, it had cost over \$5,296 to open and equip the three hospitals and \$1,247 so far to purchase ongoing supplies. This money came from donations from organizations such as the

Red Cross and the W. C. C. S. as well as many ordinary citizens. By now the emergency hospitals were caring for 170 patients. Three had died over the last 24 hours. The total deaths in the city were now 102. Twelve nurses were recruited from Chicago and reported for duty.

Only 29 men died on October 12th at the camp compared with over 100 two days previous. Also, the number of men discharged from the base hospital was more than double the number of new cases reported. The mood in the camp was much improved. On a more somber note however, 39 nurses were sick with the influenza or the pneumonia that follows it.

The death toll at the camp on Sunday Oct. 13th was 36. The following day only 20 deaths were reported. This was a new low since the epidemic started. There were currently 2,139 patients in the base hospital compared to 3,800 only a few days ago. The death toll however was not expected to drop any further for a while. The total number of deaths over the previous three weeks now stood at 955.

Reports on October 16th indicated that there were currently 31,800 active cases of influenza in Illinois. There had been over 300,000 cases in Illinois so far and the state health commissioner was expecting that number to double. Chicago reported 362 deaths from influenza and pneumonia just the day before. The number of deaths reported in Rockford that same day had jumped to 22.

Only three deaths were reported on October 18, at the emergency hospitals. Five had been reported the previous day. There were 18 deaths that day at the camp, bringing the total to 1004.

There were many attempts to develop a vaccine for the influenza but all of them proved ineffective. Even today doctors do not have a good understanding of what made this strain so lethal. It was reported in the October 18th edition of the *Rockford Register-Gazette* that a Dr Rosenow (from Mayo Clinic) had created an anti-flu vaccine. 100,000 doses were to be made available that day and 800,000 more would be ready by the following week in Illinois. However this vaccine proved no more effective than the others. No other mention of this vaccine is seen in the papers over the next month.

Inoculations against Typhoid Fever had been stopped when the epidemic began by order of Lt. Col. George B. Lake the camp surgeon. This was done because it had been observed that the vitality and resistance is temporarily lowered when given an inoculation. The camp commanders wanted to limit any potential risk of spreading the disease.

A report from Washington indicated that 6,266 deaths from the flu had occurred the week ending October 11th. The Adjutant General ordered that no more men would be inducted into Army camps until the epidemic subsides.

On October 18th, General E. H. Plummer, a 45 year veteran of the army arrived to become the new commandant at Camp Grant. The epidemic was still continuing at the camp but it was beginning to wane. The epidemic continued in Rockford as well. Eleven more deaths were reported on October 22 in the city hospitals.

By the later part of October things were improving at the camp. On October 22nd Lt. Col. George Lake officially declared that the epidemic was over. The epidemic began on Sept. 21st and since then 1,037 men had died of the influenza at the camp. There were five deaths over the last 24 hours and nine the day before and there were still 1,560 men in the base hospital. The flu is by no means gone, but it is no longer considered an epidemic. The quarantine however is still in effect.

The schools, theatres, churches and sporting events were still closed on 10/23.

The deaths continued however both at the camp and in Rockford. There were only two deaths at the camp on the 23rd and three more on the 24th, so the epidemic is definitely winding down at Camp Grant. However there were eight deaths in the city on the 23rd and eight more on the 24th. Also, the epidemic continued to rage in other parts of the country. Michigan reported 6,000 new cases on October 23rd. Minneapolis reported 633 new cases and Milwaukee reported 207. All of these were reported within a 24 hour period.

On Oct. 25th, Rockford reported ten more deaths. The state of Illinois announced that day that over one million cases of the flu had been reported in Illinois since the epidemic began, slightly over a month ago.

Although the schools were still closed and most sports activity had been halted, it was announced on October 26th that Camp Grant will play the University of Wisconsin in football tomorrow. However, no spectators would be allowed! Camp Grant had active baseball and football teams and they played college teams as well as minor league teams. For the record, Camp Grant won the game 7-0.

The epidemic continued to rage in Chicago which reported on October 26th that the previous day saw 213 deaths and 988 new cases.

On Oct. 28th only two deaths were reported at Camp Grant and the number in the base hospital was down to 823. Lt. Colonel Lake announced that the quarantine would be lifted the following day. There were four more deaths at the camp that day but the quarantine was still lifted.

By the end of October the epidemic was essentially over locally, although a few more deaths continued to be reported. The Lincoln School Hospital (#3) was closed on October 29th as it was no longer needed. It had been opened on Oct. 11th. No deaths were reported in Rockford that day although there were four deaths reported at Camp Grant.

On October 30th, Dr. W. H. Cunningham, the City Health Official announced that the ban on sports, theatres, churches and schools would be lifted. The Emergency Hospital at the Knights of Columbus (#2) was also closed.

The theatres opened officially on Nov. 4th after fumigation. A full page ad signed by all the theatres preceded the event. Despite the proclamation that the epidemic was over and the lifting of the quarantine, a few soldiers continued to die at Camp Grant. Four more deaths were reported on November 7th. However the Surgeon General's weekly report on November 15th showed that the disease was effectively checked.

A third wave of the influenza virus struck in the spring of 1919 but it was not as severe as the epidemic that had swept the world in the fall of 1918 and it did not strike Camp Grant. The pandemic was over, at least locally.

SOURCES

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