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Randy Stapilus

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Stapilus: How will our response to COVID-19 be remembered?

By RANDY STAPILUS

Apr 20, 2020



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A decade from now, or further out, as big a deal as it is right now, will our coronavirus emergency of 2020 be much remembered — if at all? And how will our response to it be remembered?

Illnesses sweeping across civilization are something old in human, not to mention American, history, and yet many tend to be largely forgotten some years after the fact. The period around and after the American Revolution (especially in 1793) featured a mass eruption of American plague — or yellow fever as it also was known — in Philadelphia and other emerging cities, and thousands died of it. It was one of the biggest regional events of the time ... now largely forgotten.

I've wondered how many Americans, until the last couple of months, knew about the flu pandemic (then widely called the Spanish flu) of 1918 which infected a third of the world's population and killed two-thirds of a million Americans. Last week I scanned a number of general history books that cover the period, and found scarcely a mention of the disease, immense a reality though it was for people at the time, and as debilitating for individuals, businesses and society as ... what we're dealing with now, if not more so.

A couple of weeks ago regional columnist Marc Johnson pulled a collection of quotes from Idaho newspapers circa 1918 demonstrating it did not go unremarked at the time, and that the responses then included many of the same we experience now: Social distancing and shutting down group activities whether commercial, educational, religious or otherwise.

There are even indicators the measures taken then were more restrictive in some ways than those taken today. Consider this from the Dec. 27, 1918, Salmon Recorder: "The epidemic appeared last week in the stoutly quarantined community of Challis, where it is said more than a score of cases in pronounced form were reported. It was said the disease was conveyed to the town by an enterprising traveler who forded the river in order to get by the quarantine guards."

A short essay put together by the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare is one of the better overview reports on the World War I-era pandemic in Idaho. Starting (apparently) in Canyon County in September 1918, it spread swiftly to more than a dozen of the larger communities all over the state, from Boise to Wallace to Pocatello, in a pattern that roughly resembles that of COVID-19 today.

The report quoted Paris, Idaho, resident Russell Clark as recalling, "There was a feeling of depression and sadness because neighbors, you see, were passing away." He wasn't exaggerating: "The mortality rate was nearly 50 percent in Paris, Idaho. State officials and newspapers urged calm. In Rexburg, the local paper insisted that there was 'no occasion for panic' but then went on to discuss the need to

enforce the town's quarantine. The Northern Idaho News of Sandpoint also urged calm, but then noted that, as a precautionary measure, schools would be closed indefinitely, and churches, picture shows and all public gatherings of every kind would be prohibited."

All of that may sound familiar to us today, but remember those quarantine guards outside Challis? The flu had spread just about everywhere there were people.

The shutdown of 1918-19 was not well liked, and plenty of people complained that their rights were being trampled. But the more prevalent view seemed to be that of a businessman in Preston who noted his county had been "closed tight" but "in looking up similar conditions in other towns, we find that the said towns have been opened in spite of the prevalence of the epidemic. And reviewing these cases, we find that the conditions in those places have been much worse than what we have had in this section."

History, as they say, may not repeat exactly, but it does rhyme.

The Spanish flu in Idaho as elsewhere came in waves, before finally running its course and dissipating in mid-1919.

How well will we do this time? And how will our response be remembered?

Randy Stapilus is a former Idaho newspaper reporter and editor and blogs at www.ridenbaugh.com. He can be reached at stapilus@ridenbaugh.com.