



The Army, Rock Island Arsenal and Influenza

(Continued from last week....) Local accounts of the disease are important to understand how the flu was treated in the Quad Cities area and Rock Island Arsenal (RIA). During WWI, RIA produced a paper known as the *Arsenal Record*. The first known cases of flu on RIA were reported by the *Record* on 15 October 1918. Arsenal leaders were concerned about the impact on Arsenal readiness, as ill workers would slow down or stop munitions production. Remember that we did not know the war would be over in less than a month. Workers were warned by Major C.H. Clark, Arsenal surgeon, to follow certain practices to stop the spread of the disease. The “antidote” was to “avoid needless crowding, to smother your cough and sneezes.” Additionally “remember the three “C’s” Clean mouth, Clean skin and Clean clothes. Your fate may be in your own hands, wash your hands.” The most serious complication were pneumonia. He noted most patients had recovered in three to four days but were entirely incapacitated for duty during that time. Lastly, the article strongly encouraged civilian employees who showed any of the symptoms to remain at home and to be cleared by a civilian hospital prior to a return to work. He understood that the disease could easily pass between people before the symptoms were fully exhibited. For the influenza, symptoms could appear as soon as 48-72 hours after exposure.

Davenport’s *The Daily Times* reported on 21 October that a large public meeting [emphasis added] had been held at the Davenport Board of Health to discuss possible new restrictions. The Arsenal Commander, COL L.T. Hillman, appealed to the patriotism of the crowd at the meeting to help stamp out the flu. “The seriousness of the matter cannot be impressed too strongly upon the people.” At the time of the meeting 20 civilian workers and several Soldiers were reported with influenza, some with serious cases of pneumonia. The following day the *Arsenal Record* reported that passes/leaves for officers and enlisted Soldiers at the Arsenal were discontinued. Additionally, Soldiers reporting to the Arsenal were to be quarantined for 14 days. The first Arsenal Soldiers to die from the disease were reported on 23 and 24 October. Both Soldiers were reported to have been in excellent health prior to contracting influenza but they ultimately succumbed.

A sense of urgency accelerated among local leaders despite an *Arsenal Record* report on 29 October that in CONUS Army cases of influenza had fallen from new daily reported cases total of 7,271 on 13 October to 6,498 on the 14th with 889 deaths. Despite that national drop, on the same day city officials ordered that only essential business were allowed to be open, with shortened hours, and large public events were being restricted. Visitors were no longer being allowed on the Arsenal. Residents and businesses complained that officials were overreacting with too extreme of action, including the closure of whole towns, because not that many people had died. By the second week of November it was being reported that city-wide closures and quarantines had been successful. New cases of influenza were dropping in Davenport as well as at the Arsenal. Despite the disapproval of health officials, on 7 November restrictions were approved to be lifted. At the same time the deaths of Arsenal workers were still being reported in the *Arsenal Record*. Never-the-less, people went back to work and crowded local bars.

Suddenly, in mid and late November the number and severity of cases spiked again in the area. It is suspected that lifting the restrictions combined with huge gatherings and parades that took place celebrating the end of the war created the surge. Not only were there celebrations on 11 November, but there were celebrations based on false rumors starting on 8 November and continuing each day until the 11th. One city physician said that "all precautions, which the board urged the public to take, had apparently been forgotten in the excitement which

resulted from the fake message that peace was at hand and that hostilities had ceased." A week later the spike hit hard across the region. The earlier city wide and Arsenal restrictions were reinstituted with more restrictive measures added. These included: a limit to total passengers on street cars within the cities, excluding transport to the Arsenal; requiring the wearing of masks that covered the nose and mouth; and the closure of all schools, public gatherings, and businesses. This second spike was more severe and wide spread. On 8 December COL Hillman attended another public meeting at the Health Board to discuss the restrictions. Within the next two days Hillman was on TDY traveling by train to Washington D.C. to work on post-war contraction of the Army’s industrial base. He returned to RIA by rail on 18 December and, although he complained he was not feeling well, worked in his office on the 19th. On 29 December COL Hillman died of pneumonia. Local newspapers would later report his death being a result of the flu.

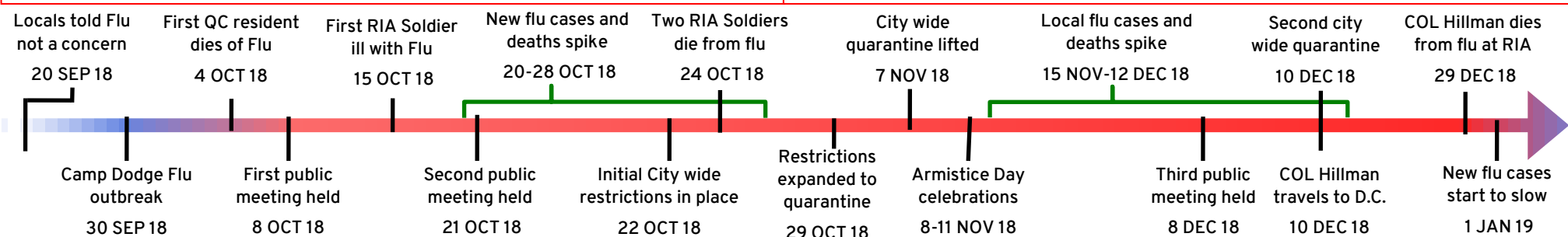
By the start of 1919 new cases of influenza had again subsided and the local restrictions were being removed. At the end 1918, Davenport reported 4,475 cases of flu, with 270 deaths. The city of Rock Island had 3,167 cases and 114 deaths. RIA had 5 or 6 soldiers die from the flu. Leaders at the time believed those totals were likely underestimated. New cases of the flu subsided until the end of January 1919 when the *Daily Times* reported a resurgence of about five to six new cases per day. This is suspected to been a new strain of flu that did not lead typically lead to pneumonia and was the third and final major wave to be witnessed.

The current COVID-19 virus is not an unprecedented event, nor is our response to it. The lessons of the 1918 flu are important to demonstrate the useful, if imperfect, measures attempted to curb the rise in infection rates and deaths, as well as the impact of lifting restrictions too soon. A simple first lesson: a virus is a living thing that takes us time to understand. It can also can mutate making it harder to fight. Secondly, viruses are usually more widespread than initially understood because of lack of testing or precise confirmation of the cause of symptoms. Many people do not have as severe symptoms and are often not initially reported. Third, drastic interventions can work. The decreased deaths after the Rock Island Arsenal and surrounding area quarantines at the start of November 1918 were at least partly successful until the Armistice Day celebrations (fake and real) that followed. Early reporting of successes, as well as public and business concerns about the impact of restrictions, should not be relied upon to lift restrictions. Many of the common sense precautions announced in 1918 as the same as today. Avoid gatherings. Close businesses. Stay at home if you do not feel well. Cover your mouth and nose. WASH YOUR HANDS!

(Next week: Case studies of restrictions and results in Philadelphia and St Louis.)



RIA Employees Celebrating the Armistice. 11 NOV 1918



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