

Perspectives from the Past: The 1918 Flu Pandemic, WWI and NMH Bob Sparks, MH 64

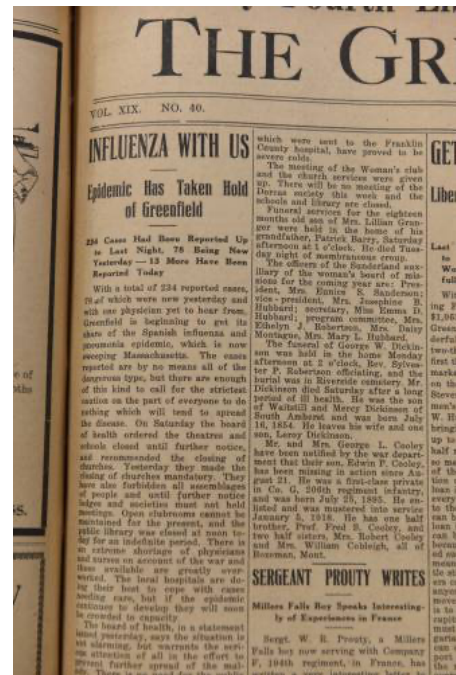
Dear NMH 64 Classmates: As we grapple with the social privations and the health and economic toll of the novel coronavirus COVID-19, it is perhaps useful to recall that our own grandparents (and in some cases our parents themselves) lived through similar circumstances during the 1918 Influenza Pandemic, as did our forebears at NMH. In these notes, I provide a brief overview of the Pandemic and the War effort in 1918 and NMH's response. Northfield and Mount Hermon were both quick to take action in response to the Flu and were able to limit its impact. Northfield had "little serious illness and no deaths." Mount Hermon lost one student and two alumni to the virus and 69 alumni to the War. By the end of the 1918-1919 school year, the campuses mostly returned to normal.

Brief Background – The 1918 Flu Pandemic and WWI

Epidemiologists disagree on the timing and global origins of the 1918 Flu (also known as the Spanish Flu), but it was first observed in the United States in January 1918 by a doctor in Haskell County, Kansas. On March 4, 1918, an Army Cook from Haskell County became the first officially recorded case in the US when he reported sick at Fort Riley, an Army base 270 miles to the northeast of Haskell, Kansas that was training troops for the war effort. The United States had entered the war on April 6, 1917 and full mobilization was underway nationwide. Within days, more than 500 additional men reported sick at the base, and by March 11th the virus reached Queens, New York.

The 1918 Flu was an H1N1 variant, similar to the 2009 "Swine Flu". Its spread was significantly enabled by WWI, both stateside and overseas. In Europe, reports of the virus were censored out of fears it would demoralize the troops and aid the enemy. It only became widely known when it showed up in Spain, a neutral country, after which it was mistakenly identified as the "Spanish Flu". Nevertheless, the close encampments and massed troop movements that were considered necessary for the conduct of the war proved to be an effective breeding ground for the virus, and poor nutrition, overcrowded medical facilities and poor hygiene exacerbated the problem and may have increased mutation.

Stateside, a more virulent strain showed up in August, 1918 in Boston and at Camp Devens, Ayer, Massachusetts (subsequently Fort Devens, now inactive) which was 56 miles due east of Northfield. The extensive road and rail systems in the US enabled military and civilian travelers alike to readily spread the virus. Major cities including Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Lowell, Chicago and New York were hit hard. The virus made its appearance in Fall term, 1918 at both the Northfield and Mount Hermon campuses.



Front page of the Greenfield Recorder October 2, 1918 references the Spanish Flu. Source: David Brooks, Staff Writer, Concord Monitor, 3/23/2020, Photo Credit, Paul Franz, Staff Photographer

The NMH Experience

The 1918-1919 reports of the Northfield and Mount Hermon school Principals describe the responses of the two institutions to the Flu Pandemic, and in the case of Mount Hermon, to the War as well. Rather than paraphrase, I have excerpted pertinent sections of the Reports (see information in *italics* below) to capture the Principals own voices. Both Schools chose to continue classes and instruction as best they could and to quarantine sick individuals. The War ended at 11:00 AM, November 11, 1918 when the Armistice, signed in the early morning hours at Le Francport near Compiègne, France, came into effect.

Northfield Seminary Principal's Report for 1918-19

Charles E. Dickerson

Student Body and Faculty Complement

September, 1918: 478 students; 32 more admitted at mid-year for total of 510; 49 faculty

Graduating class 1919: 42 students, 9 in the College Preparatory Course, 24 in English Course, 9 in General Course.

Health

"Throughout the anxious weeks of the influenza epidemic every effort was made to protect our students by rigid quarantine and careful living. There was the most hearty co-operation toward the establishment of a strict quarantine on the part of faculty and students, nurse, doctor, visitors, and towns people. It is with deep gratitude that we are able to report very little serious illness and no deaths.

In view of the serious interruption in school work in many institutions because of illness it is encouraging to report the following percentages of perfect attendance upon class appointments. (See Table below)

The usual lectures and recitals were seriously interrupted by the quarantine, certain engagements being cancelled at a late hour. Two thoroughly enjoyable recitals were given by the Department of Music near the close of the second term."

<u>For Fall Term</u>	<u>Winter Term</u>
Senior Class....44-2/17%.....	40-20/37%
Junior Class....51-11/39%.....	34-8/38%
I Academic.....22-149/221%.....	28-1/5%
II Academic.....26-7/13%.....	27-9/13%
II Preparatory..17-17/19%.....	18-1/2%
I Preparatory... 7-2/7%.....	23-2/3%

Mount Hermon Principal's Report for 1918-19

Henry Cutler

Student Body

September, 1918: 472 students (see explanation below)

Graduating class, 1919: 33 students (despite the war); 31 to enter college, 1 to enter theological seminary, 1 undecided,

Influenza

"Early in the fall term the influenza appeared, and we were obliged to use Camp Hall as an infirmary for some time in addition to Dwight's Home. Most of the teachers escaped the sickness and the work of the

class rooms was continued uninterruptedly. All of the cases recovered with the single exception of a Chinese boy who died as a result of complications in connection with a previous [condition] of quite long standing. We were fortunate in securing good nurses. Some of the cases were severe and developed into pneumonia, but all these recovered well, and we felt grateful to God for what we believed to be His care of us during those trying days."

Impact of the War

"The school year of 1918-1919 opened with an enrollment of 472 students. Of these only 183 were former students and 289 were new. The average age before the war was about 20 years. This meant, of course, that many of our students were of draft age. Nearly all of the students last year, who were old enough, either enlisted or were drafted. We did not receive applications from new students of soldier age so that we were obliged to admit younger students, or continue with a very small school. It was decided to lower the age limit temporarily with the following results in age of students at time of entering school this year:

Sixteen years and over	296
Under sixteen	<u>176</u>
	472
Of those under sixteen	
83 were fifteen	
48 " fourteen	
45 " under fourteen	
making a total of	176

With so many younger students, new methods of supervision and discipline were necessary. We did not try to separate the younger boys from the older boys feeling that it would be better to have them mingle together as closely as possible. A good many of the younger boys have done excellent work and we have been pleased in many ways with the temporary plan of taking the younger boys.

In the late winter and early spring, the soldier boys began coming back and the school at once felt their influence and began again to take on its former characteristics.

At no time during the year have the buildings been actually full, but the enrollment was much larger than we expected when so many of the old boys went away into service. In spite of the war we had a graduating class of 33 members. We have had a large number of applications for the fall term and the school will be full at the opening of the school year in September.

We shall, of course, retain the younger boys who were accepted during the past year, but no more will be accepted under the age limit of sixteen years unless sufficiently mature physically to meet the requirements of the school.

The war made its inroads into our teaching force. All of our unmarried teachers with one exception were in service and several of the married men either enlisted or were drafted.

The entire number of Mount Hermon present and former students in military service, so far as now known, was 1465. Out of this number 63 [later updated to 69] gave their lives for the cause. The enrollment was as follows:

<u>ARMY</u>	
Colonels.....	4
Majors.....	15
Captains.....	30
Lieutenants.....	196
Chaplains.....	11
Noncommissioned Officers.....	180
Privates.....	<u>691</u>

<u>NAVY</u>	
Lieutenants.....	3
Ensigns.....	21
Chaplains.....	3
All others.....	193
	220
TOTAL ARMY AND NAVY	1,347
Y. M. C. A.....	107
Red Cross.....	6
Salvation Army.....	1
War Camp Activities.....	1
Assistants in War Departments at Washington....	<u>3</u>
TOTAL	1,465

It was necessary to drop the study of German during the war years as there were so few students desiring it and it did not seem best to offer it in the schedule of studies. A good many schools introduced Spanish in place of German, but we have not yet done this here at Mount Hermon. The two foreign languages in the curriculum are Latin and French.

Since the beginning of the war every effort has been made here at Mount Hermon to increase the production of crops and products which were most needed. Large quantities of vegetables and fruits were produced last year. Last year, also, the farm produced about nine hundred tons of silage which is greater by several hundred tons than the production in any preceding year, while this year the quantity of silage produced will be about one thousand tons.

Epilogue

WWI and the Flu both took a devastating toll globally, although the Flu had the greater toll. In the US, an estimated 675,000 Americans are thought to have died from the Flu, whereas American fatalities in the War were reported as 116,516, and half of these were from the Flu itself and not combat.

NMH fared remarkably well during this very difficult and unprecedented period. Henry Cutler's comment that "we felt grateful to God for what we believed to be His care of us during those trying days", captures both the uncertainties and the resolve of the two NMH communities. Leave us hope that the School is similarly spared in the present context of COVID-19.

Thank you

I want to personally thank the NMH archivist, Peter Weis, for his help with researching this topic and sending me copies of the Principal's 1918-1919 reports, and pertinent information from the *Hermonite* and *NMH Magazine*. I am deeply grateful for his assistance.