

War on the Home Front

El Paso suffered heavy losses fighting the Spanish flu just as WWI came to an end

Story by Lisa Kay Tate

One hundred years ago, El Paso celebrated the end of World War I — but was still fighting another war that claimed far more lives.

More than 600 people died in El Paso from the Spanish flu from September 1918 through early 1919. In one month, more Americans died from the flu than all 117,000 U.S. servicemen killed in the war. Worldwide, the flu killed tens of millions of people in a matter of months, more than the number of deaths blamed on the war, which lasted over four years and ended Nov. 11, 1918.

Technically known as the H1N1 virus, the Spanish influenza has been called “the greatest medical holocaust in history.” Unlike most flu outbreaks, this particular strain targeted people in the prime of life, and none were more vulnerable than soldiers living in camps like Fort Bliss or residents of poor, crowded neighborhoods like El Paso’s Chihuahuita.

“The vulnerability of healthy young adults and the lack of vaccines and treatments created a major public health crisis, causing at least 50 million deaths worldwide, including approximately 675,000 in the United States,” according to the Centers for Disease Control.

A century later, the pandemic remains the dominant event of modern times for public health professionals, and its memory is scarred upon the history of El Paso.

Chihuahuita suffered most

By 1918, El Paso’s population had risen to 75,000, having grown rapidly ever since the railroads a generation earlier had turned the town into a major crossroads of America. More recently, refugee migration from the Mexican Revolution and the growth of Fort Bliss had also spurred the city’s growth.

The first cases of Spanish flu were reported in January 1918. By August, a second, more deadly strain was detected. A month later, the pandemic hit El Paso.

Author Janine Young, former Chief Operating Officer for the Foundation for

the Diocese of El Paso, researched the impact of the Spanish flu while she was writing the centennial history of the Catholic diocese in 2013.

“Influenza arrived in El Paso in September 1918 and quickly spread throughout the region,” Young wrote in an article published by the El Paso Times. “By early October, the city was in full crisis with hospitals filled to capacity and doctors, difficult to find as they were, increasingly out of their offices tending to the sick.

“El Paso was one of the hardest hit cities in the U.S.,” Young said. “Especially hard hit was Chihuahuita which was already suffering from a whooping cough epidemic among its children.”

Chihuahuita, nestled south of downtown El Paso next to the border, is one of the city’s oldest neighborhoods and home of its poorest immigrants from Mexico.

Another reason many in Chihuahuita, as well as the rest of South El Paso, were hardest hit was that few residents sought help at hospitals or could afford to pay for doctor visits to their homes.

In Chihuahuita “ambulances had come to the area four or five times a day to transport the ill and dying to makeshift hospitals,” El Paso historian Fred Morales said in a “Footnotes in Texas History” article written by Shannon Oelrich in 2009.

Oelrich said several factors made El Paso particularly susceptible.

“(El Paso had) a large population with a dense urban core,” she wrote, “overcrowded Mexican-American neighborhoods that did not have hospitals or other health services; and Fort Bliss, which housed soldiers in close quarters, many of whom had recently returned from Europe where the flu had already taken hold as fighting raged in the battles of World War I.”

The epidemic had become so strong that on Oct. 3, 1918, El Paso Mayor Charles Davis ordered the closure of all El Paso schools, churches, courts and public gatherings and meetings. Sunday masses at St. Patrick Cathedral were ordered to be held



Army bases were ground zero for the worst onslaught of the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic. In El Paso, casualties were greatest at Fort Bliss and Chihuahuita.

Spanish flu timeline

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has a section of its website devoted to the 100-year commemoration of the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic. Search for “History of 1918 Flu” at www.cdc.gov.

Here are some of the key events listed of the CDC’s timeline of the pandemic:

- **March 1918:** Flu-line outbreaks first detected in the United States, including more than 100 soldiers at Camp Funston in Fort Riley, Kansas. Flu activity begins to spread throughout the country, as well in Europe and possibly Asia.
- **April 1918:** First mention of the flu appears in a weekly public health report, where information officials listed 18 severe cases and three deaths in Haskell, Kansas.
- **May 1918:** Hundreds of thousands of soldiers are traveling across the Atlantic each month for World War I deployment.
- **September 1918:** Second wave of flu begins to peak (lasting until November)

in the United States, and New York City’s Board of Health adds flu to list of reportable diseases, requiring flu cases be isolated at home or in a hospital.

- **October 1918:** An estimated 195,000 Americans were killed by the pandemic virus this month alone. Cities around the country closed movie houses, schools and other gathering places. Also that month:
 - The nation faced a shortage of professional nurses,
 - Cold-storage plants had to be used as temporary morgues in major cities such as Philadelphia.
- **November 1918:** World War I ended, and most of the virus had run its course. Unfortunately a combination of people celebrating Armistice Day and soldiers demobilizing spurred a resurgence of flu.
- **December 1918:** Public health officials begin education programs and publicity about dangers of coughing and sneezing, and careless disposal of “nasal discharges.”
- **January 1919:** Third wave of influenza hits, but subsides by the summer.

outside on the lawn next to the church, but by the next week influenza had spread throughout the city, and Bishop Anthony J. Schuler ordered cancellation of all masses at area churches, which did not resume again until the next month.

“What was especially tragic about the influenza epidemic is that most of its victims were very young,” Young wrote. “One of the victims (was) a 15-year-old student at St. Joseph’s Academy who died in the middle of October. She was buried at Evergreen Cemetery with her classmates serving as pallbearers.”

A few days later, one of the teen’s teachers also died of the disease and was buried

just a few yards from her.

Young said still today a walk through historic Concordia Cemetery’s “Infant Nursery” reveals the harsh reality of all ages being hit by the disease.

“There is a portion of Concordia Cemetery that has burials of children who died during the epidemic with many of the graves unmarked,” Young said.

“In one week alone, 229 deaths were recorded of whom 144 were residents of the South Side,” she said. “Before the epidemic began to abate in late January 1919, an estimated 1 out of 10 El Pasoans had fallen sick and more than 600 had died.”

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