

CENTENNIAL GAZETTE

St. James Cathedral, Seattle

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FEAR & FACE MASKS: THE FLU EPIDEMIC IN SEATTLE

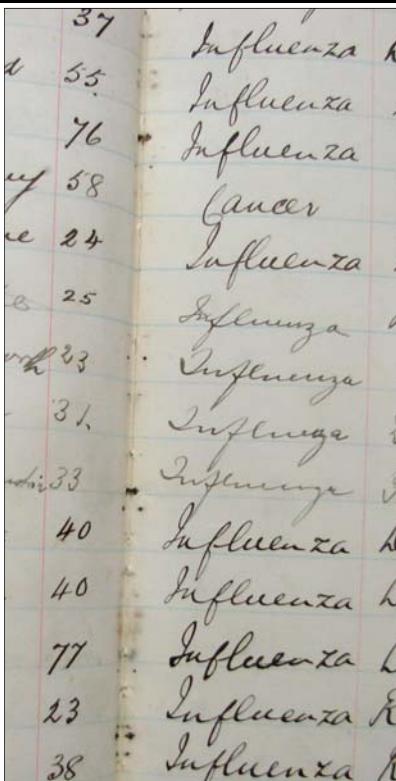
Fall, 1918. The world was tired out with a war that seemed to have been going on forever. The peace talks in Paris dragged on without visible progress. Seattle was preparing for yet another draft. No end was in sight.

Meanwhile, as the troops moved from one military base to another—a normal happening in wartime—they carried with them a deadly virus called the “Spanish influenza.” Within weeks the influenza had spread from coast to coast.

For Seattleites, it all seemed far away—until, on September 29, it was reported that influenza had broken out at Camp Lewis. Seattle’s mayor, Ole Hanson, and State Commissioner of Health Thomas Tuttle responded swiftly. All public gatherings were banned. Churches, theaters, schools, and all but a few restaurants had to close. People were forbidden to congregate in the few places that remained open. Spitting was strictly prohibited. Anyone who ventured out into public was required to wear a face mask—six layers of gauze which (as scientists discovered later) did nothing at all to protect them from influenza.

The ordinances had a severe impact on the churches. With the exception of funerals, all services were forbidden. Said Mayor Hanson, “Religion which won’t keep for two weeks is not worth having.”

But the Cathedral Parish found a way around the ordinances. The Sisters of the Holy Names wrote in their chronicle on October 6, 1918: “Because of the flu epidemic, this morning found the steps of the school, across the street from our convent home, arranged as an out-door chapel for the celebration of the Holy Mass. Along the narrow parkings in front of the school and in front of our house, benches and chairs were placed and our lawn was covered with seats improvised for the convenience of the crowds of people who assembled to assist at the Holy Sacrifice. Seven Masses were celebrated and all were well attended, though after the second Mass a slight rain began to fall, obliging the worshipers to hold umbrellas.” The Sisters were much edified: “This striking spectacle of the true Catholic



In this facsimile of the Death Register of St. James Cathedral, we see entries from those deadly weeks at the end of 1918. Note the ages at the left: many struck by influenza were young people in the prime of life.

Faith was very impressive and left memories with us of what depth the soul reaches in misfortune.”

Not everyone in Seattle found that first Sunday so uplifting. A headline in the P-I read: *Gloomy Sunday Is Result of the Influenza Ban On All Places of Amusement*. “There were aimless, peevish crowds that strolled up and down Second and Third avenues Sunday afternoon, sat in hotel lobbies and collected in doorways and on street corners. They toiled not, neither did they spin, yet they were arrayed just as though they were going somewhere. They talked about the war and they said it surely would rain, but most of all they lambasted the mayor and the board of health.”

In spite of the general discontent, the ordinances remained in effect for more than a month. The prohibitions came to an end in an unexpected way.

Late at night on November 10, 1918, news of the Armistice reached Seattle. Jubilant crowds filled the streets. Horns honked, church bells rang, trolley whistles blew. Boys grabbed trash can

lids and banged them together. Complete strangers hugged each other. People sang and shouted for joy. The flu was forgotten. “Not a gauze mask was visible in the big crowds and no attempt was made by the police to see that they were,” reported the P-I. When Mayor Hanson was informed that thousands were celebrating, unmasked, in the streets, he remarked, “Who could blame them on this occasion. But they *should* wear the mask.”

The very next day the ban on public gatherings was lifted, not because the pandemic was over, but simply because the ordinances could no longer be enforced.

On November 12, a P-I editorial observed, “we of Seattle have reason to be thankful and reason to be grateful. We have come through a trying time with some losses, losses of life and losses of wealth, but we have found out something about ourselves that is worth knowing.” The Sisters of the Holy Names put it in another way in their chronicle. “When face to face with the awful terrors of even a physical calamity how quickly we realize that our sole hope lies in Him ‘Who can save’ and Who will always protect those who turn to Him in every need of soul and body.”

—Corinna Laughlin