



Buffalo Tales



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Winter of Death: Ravenna's Victims of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic By Valerie Lee Vierk

On March 11, 1918, the first soldiers at Ft. Riley, Kansas, started entering the infirmary with flu symptoms. Shortly after, several other military establishments nationwide reported many sick men. (Flu epidemics were also reported in parts of Europe and other parts of the world.) The "flu" was nothing new; it appeared every year, and besides, there was a war to win. This early wave of the influenza sickened many, but did not have a high death rate. Historians state that the epidemic disappeared as quickly as it appeared, although careful research reveals that the flu was not totally dormant throughout the summer. What no one knew was that the virus was mutating into a monstrous killer . . .

Early October 1918 was a turbulent, yet hopeful time. American soldiers and their allies were engaged in the great battle in the Argonne Forest of France, but the word was that the Allies were pushing the Germans back. Most accounts stated that the war in Europe would soon be over, and the boys would be coming home! Yes, five from the Ravenna area had died, and one was missing, but the great majority of the approximately 139 men and one woman who enlisted would be coming home. What the people of Ravenna, population about 1,700, didn't know was that something even more lethal than the war was lurking in their little town.

The October 11 (Friday) edition of the Ravenna News first mentioned that the flu had arrived in town; estimates were that 60-75 cases of it had appeared earlier in the week. The same edition stated that the schools, churches, and other places of public assembly had closed on Monday to try to stop the spread of the disease. Editor C.B. Cass advised that there was "little fear of serious consequences if proper precautions were taken." Most likely, Cass was trying to calm the people.

The October 11 edition of the Ravenna News also announced that soldier Norman Nilsen, 24, of Hazard, had died of influenza at Camp Grant at Rockford, Illinois, on October 7. His parents were summoned when he was gravely ill, traveled there, and were horrified when they entered his barracks to see long rows of sick young men on cots so densely clustered they could hardly walk through. They reached their son just before he died. Norman's body was brought home and buried in the Norwegian cemetery south of Hazard a few days later.

Then on October 13, George Harriman, 29, of Ravenna, died of the flu! Large headlines in the October 18, 1918, Ravenna News proclaimed the shocking news: **GEORGE HARRIMAN DEAD**. In smaller type below was the notice of the death of Frances Avery, 7. George had been an operator for the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad. He had been in good health, but after nine days illness, he had succumbed. Reverend Bennett of the Methodist Episcopal church officiated at the funeral held at the deceased's home and he was buried in Ravenna's Highland cemetery. George left a wife and a daughter, age three.

Frances Ellen Avery, 7, died on October 16, "about the midnight" as editor Cass wrote. She and her family lived in Ravenna. Frances and her three siblings had been suffering from whooping cough, and in her already weakened condition, little Frances fell easy prey to the influenza, which had developed only 24 hours previously. Besides her parents, she was survived by siblings Will, 9, Ethel 4, and Lois 2. The little girl was buried in Highland cemetery a few feet from George Harriman.

(continued on Page 2)

Director's Report

Winter is wrapping up and 2008 is in full swing! We have the Abraham Lincoln casket replica on display through February 27, and March will be preparation time for the Annual Meeting (to be held Sunday April 6) and Kidz Explore (see our booth there on April 12-13). Also, we will be getting the grounds ready for the school children that come through our doors in spring. There is always a need for volunteers for these events: working a booth, volunteering in a building, giving tours to school kids, playing games with the children, or even displaying an exhibit/craft.

If you enjoy working on web sites, we need a volunteer to assist us. Also, I would like to find someone interested in education. There are three main projects dealing with education. 1. Trunk Tales—checking them in and out, booking them, and possibly prepping the fourth themed trunk 2. Preparing for school groups—lining up guides, volunteers, crafts for the kids 3. Hands-on activities—I would like to see at least one hands-on activity per building to help educate folks about our history. There is a UNK student already working on some ideas. All of these educational functions have been started, but more help is needed to make them run smoother.

My door is open so please let me know what I can do for you! We are here to serve you.

Sincerely, Jennifer

(continued from Page 1)

A wave of apprehension swept through Ravenna. Who would be next—or could the epidemic be over? The people read the papers, and learned that many on the East Coast had died. They didn't have long to wait and worry.

On October 19, Dr. Walter Nichols, 36, the local veterinarian, succumbed after eight days of illness. He had been feeling a little better, and had been persuaded to answer an urgent call from one of his customers near Pleasanton. This caused a relapse, and his eventual death. Dr. Nichols left a wife. The funeral was held at the deceased's home with Reverend Bennett officiating. He was buried in Highland cemetery.

Also on October 19, Martin Enevoldson, 40, of the little community of Poole, five miles southwest of Ravenna, died after a few day's illness. Besides his wife Lotty May, he left six children. Other survivors included his parents, six brothers, and three sisters. His funeral was held at the United Brethren church in Pleasanton, with Reverend A.S. Beshore officiating. Martin was buried in Majors cemetery a few miles north of Pleasanton.

On October 22 at 7:00 a.m., Phrania McDonald, 18, only child of James and Maggie McDonald of Ravenna, succumbed to pneumonia. Phrania's mother had been very ill with the flu, and although the newspaper listed Phrania's cause of death as pneumonia, she will be listed as a flu death because it was known she had contracted the flu first. Editor Cass wrote, "Perhaps no death in Ravenna in late years has caused more universal sorrow than that of Phrania MacDonald . . ." The young woman had graduated from the local high school that spring with honors. She had a beautiful voice, and had delighted the community with her singing for years. Immediately before her death, she reportedly sat up in bed, sang a verse of a popular hymn, then fell back on her pillow dead. It was truly a swan's song. (The author's grandmother, Myrl Mahoney, was a year younger than Phrania and attended school with her. Myrl told the story of Phrania's swan's song to her children years

after the event.) Like Phranta, most of the flu victims became delirious from the high fevers. Her funeral was held in the local Congregation church with Reverend George Weber officiating. The teenager was buried in Highland. Her mother recovered.

On October 22, Ludine Sparks, 5, of Ravenna succumbed. She had been sick a few days. As all members of her family were also ill with the flu, there was no public funeral, and the little girl's body was taken to Austin, in Sherman County, for burial. Local undertaker, O.L. Miller and Reverend Bennett accompanied the body.

On October 24, Arthur B. Hall, 24, succumbed to influenza. He was a flagman in the employ of the local railroad. He had been sick for a week to ten days. He suffered heart failure caused by flu complications. He left a young wife.

On November 1, Anthony J. O'Connor, 30, died. He and his family lived about 12 miles southeast of Ravenna in the area called Sometown. Anthony was a successful farmer, and had grown up in the little community of St. Michael, nine miles east of Ravenna. He was survived by his wife and two children, Kenneth, age 6, and Nolla Belle, age 5. Other survivors were his father, Michael, five brothers and two sisters. Anthony was buried in Grand Island next to his mother.

On November 2, Lilly Hosek, 21, succumbed at her mother's home in Ravenna. She had contracted influenza, but heart failure was given as the immediate cause of death. Lilly was a 1917 graduate of the Ravenna High School. That fall she taught rural school near Ravenna, and in September 1918 began teaching school in Sheridan County, but when the schools there were closed due to the epidemic, she returned to Ravenna where she contracted the flu. Her condition had not been considered serious until a few hours before she died. Father Macourek of the local St. Mary's church conducted a brief service in the Hosek home on Wednesday morning, then Lily was buried in Ravenna's Mt. Calvary cemetery. A funeral mass would be conducted at the local St. Mary's church at a later date.

Also on November 2, the railroad families of Ravenna suffered another loss when Violet Nelson, 46, wife of engineer Carl Nelson, died. She was taken to Lincoln's Wyuka for burial. Her obituary was brief as she wasn't well known in Ravenna and apparently the family didn't submit much information to editor Cass.



A pristine snow blankets the grave of Allen Hempleman in December 2007.

On November 9, Allen Hempleman, 9, son of Mr. and Mrs. Fred Hempleman of Ravenna died. He had contracted influenza about two weeks before, and serious complications developed. Editor Cass wrote: "Up to the time of his last illness, Allen full of youthful energy and merriment, was the life of every group of children with whom he was associated." Cass also noted that the little boy was a faithful member of the Methodist Sunday school, "... and in every way was the joy and hope of his doting parents, and his death has been a crushing blow to them." He was buried in Highland near the previous flu victims.

On November 11, 1918, the Great War officially ended. When word reached Ravenna the huge steam locomotives started sounding their whistles, and woke the townspeople. By dawn, the people went out into the streets to celebrate, as did others all across America and Europe. But there was no celebrating in the Sylvester Stansberry farmhouse near Poole. On November 11, two-year-old Clyde Stansberry died. His entire family, mother, father, and two other siblings were all ill with the influenza. One of his father's brothers came to help the family, but he fell ill too. Several of the neighbors also came in to minister to the sick, including Mrs. J.C. (Dolly) Mahoney and her sixteen-year-old daughter, Myrl (previously mentioned) who lived in Poole. Fortunately, the Mahoney nurses did not become ill. Little Clyde was buried in Highland. Four days after his death, his

father, Sylvester, 26, also died. He was buried next to his son.

The November 22 edition of the Ravenna News printed the headlines: Baby Roberts Dead. Fern Maxine, fifteen months, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. William Roberts of Sweetwater had died at her home on November 25. She had been ill about a week. Besides her parents, the little girl was survived by five brothers and four sisters. A short service was held at the Roberts home the next day after her death, with Rev. Bennett officiating. The child was buried at Highland. Her death was also mentioned in the Neighborhood News of Sweetwater in the December 6 issue of the Ravenna News. The following short poem was printed:

*Sleep, baby, sleep
Not in thy cradle bed,
Nor on thy Mother's breast,
But with the quiet dead;
May angels watch over thee.*

After the death of the Roberts child, there was a lull in deaths. Could the scourge have passed? Could the residents of Ravenna and nearby area hope to celebrate Christmas free of new funerals to attend?

Unfortunately the answer was no. On December 5, Arthur Jergensen, 26, of Poole died after an illness of a little over a week. His friend, Walter Duncan, sat with his body all night as was customary in those days that the deceased not be left alone before his burial. Arthur left a pregnant wife, Emma, 23, and an infant son, Bernard. The second son, Arthur, was born a few months after his father's death. The funeral was held under the auspices of the Masonic order with Reverend Bennett officiating. Arthur was buried in Highland.

On December 13, Mrs. W. H. Reese (formerly Kate Myers), 25, of Poole died. Besides her husband Walter, she left two children, age two and four. She was buried in the churchyard of the German Lutheran church in Cedar township with Rev. Kistemann officiating. Just a day later on December 14, Walter Shrader, 24, of Ravenna succumbed to influenza. He had been ill for eight days. He was buried in Highland with Reverend Bennett officiating.

On December 25, Christmas morning at 5:15 a.m., Jay Gould, 24, died. He had worked for the railroad as an assistant boilermaker in the roundhouse and had only lived in Ravenna a year. He left a wife and three small children. His funeral was held in Ravenna's Congregational church and burial was in neighboring Cairo. Another railroader, Garfield Gier, 23, died the next day after an illness of ten days. Garfield was buried in Highland with Reverend Bennett officiating. Survivors included his wife Cecil, his parents, four brothers and one sister.

And so the old year, the terrible year, 1918, passed into the history books. No doubt the people of Ravenna hoped for better in the new year, hoped the faceless killer, influenza, would pass too, perhaps killed by the cold Nebraska winter. It wasn't to be. On January 13, 1919, Frank Crifffield, 38, of nearby Hazard, succumbed to influenza. He was survived by wife Lydia and four children.

Frank's funeral was held in the Methodist church with Reverend Bennett officiating. Burial was in Highland cemetery, next to his little son, Ollie, who had died in October 1909. The rest of January passed without new graves being dug—at least for flu victims. The people began to yearn for spring—and relief from this travail.

February came on, and was nearly spent when on February 24, Vivian Asher, 2, finally lost her three-month struggle with complications from influenza. Her desperate parents, Otis and Kevlia, had taken her to the Methodist hospital in Omaha three weeks previously, hoping something more could be done for her. But it wasn't to be. She died at the hospital. The undertaker's records listed the cause of death as basilar meningitis. Her bereaved parents brought her little body home and laid her to rest in Highland.



Vivian Asher's marker in summer 2000.

On March 31, 1919, May Lillie Lund, (called Lillie) 36, wife of Martin Lund of Sweetwater, died of influenza. In January 1919, she gave birth to a son, but he died on March 28 at three months. Editor Cass wrote in Lillie's obituary: "The entire family was taken down with the influenza a couple of months ago, and the dear mother watched over and nursed her children night and day until it took her strength, so she sacrificed her life, almost, in order to care for her dear ones." Survivor's included her husband Martin and six children, some of whom were of a "tender age." Lillie was buried in the Sweetwater cemetery.

In early April the word came that soldier Harry Kyne, 31, who had grown up in St. Michael, had died at Camp Merritt, New Jersey, of influenza. It was a bitter irony that he had survived the battlefields of France to die upon reaching the shores of his homeland. Harry was buried in Ravenna's Mt. Calvary cemetery on April 12, 1919.

On April 12, Emil Kubik, 29, died of influenza at his farm home fourteen miles south of Ravenna. He left a wife and three children, the youngest only 2. He was buried at the Bohemian cemetery, St. Wenceslaus, located seven miles south and two east of Ravenna. Just a few days later on April 15, Otto Harris, 20, died at Ravenna after an illness of about a week. He was buried in the Sodtown cemetery southeast of Ravenna.

By mid-April, spring was bursting forth across the land, unmindful of the winter of death. Most Ravenna residents probably thought the deaths were surely over. It was not to be. The May 2, 1919, edition of the Ravenna News published more bad news. Ruby Moody, 23, wife of another Burlington employee, Edwin I. Moody, died on April 25 of complications from influenza. She had given birth to a child a few days before, and the child died too. Her body was taken to Westerville, where the funeral took place on Sunday, April 27.

By June the dying was finally over. The grim tally of influenza deaths in the Ravenna area stood at 25. (This did not include the two soldiers who died while away from home). Five more from the Ravenna area, two infants and three adults under 34, had died of pneumonia between December 1918 and April 1919. Statewide, almost 1,500 Nebraskans died in this most deathly pandemic in history.

This brief article cannot capture the smells and sounds of the dying, nor the anguish of the victims and their families. Most of the victims became delirious from the high fever. Monstrous headaches plagued them. Pneumonia often developed after the initial flu virus invaded the body. The air sacs in the lungs became saturated, rendering breathing increasingly difficult. The victims' skin often turned a ghastly shade of blue, called cyanosis, as there was no oxygen in their blood. The victims drowned when liquid clogged their lungs and they could not breathe. Many influenza victims succumbed within a few hours, but those of the Ravenna area lingered several days according to the newspaper accounts. Antibiotics were not available then, and there was little the doctors could do to help their patients.

Fortunately, the jubilant ending of the war and the return of the veterans must have distracted the residents of my little town from dwelling on the winter of death. Possibly too, the people of this age were more used to death as many children and considerable young adults succumbed to various ailments. In the account of "Decoration Day" in May 1919, not a word was written about the flu victims, only mention of the war dead. Not until nearly 90 years later would a list of the victims' names be tallied. We remember them as we endure another flu season ourselves, but we have armament against the flu now—flu vaccines and antibiotics. Still, about 36,000 Americans die of influenza each year. It appears that the flu will always be with us.

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Dr. Mark R. Ellis, Editor

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*We have replaced the word 'Basic' to 'Family'.**

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