

Durango's Response to Infectious Diseases, 1881-1929

How contagion affected Durango and how the City responded



Smallpox, scarlet fever, typhoid, whooping cough and Spanish flu

~~See also ... a walking tour of 1918/19 burials at Greenmount Cemetery~~

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(above: aerial view of Durango ca. Nov. 1910)

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Durango's Response to Infectious Diseases, 1881-1929

Durango has grappled with epidemics before

Durango has not been exempt from the spread of contagious diseases that have gripped the world from time to time—but tends to not have suffered as much from them. Throughout Durango's history, its elected officials have been caring, proactive and involved when their constituents were in need. Durango had a Health Committee from its inception in 1881 until at least 1911. On September 25, 1894 "Alderman Prewitt from the Committee on Health and Police reported: that upon investigation he found that it would cost the City \$100.00 to have an analysis made of the North Durango spring water. [In 2020 dollars that would be \$3,008.] Whereupon Alderman Rose stated that from inquires [sic] made in regard to this matter he found that nearly every case of Typhoid was with persons who used the hydrant water."¹²

One example of the human concern emanating from the City Council was on February 4, 1896 when it "allowed the sum of One (\$1) dollar per day for a period of two weeks to look after the needs of the Rowe family," and instructed the Committee on Health "to personally make all purchases hereafter for the Rowe family." (The cause of the need was not mentioned.)

This booklet presents documentation of how the City, led by its Council, responded to a number of outbreaks of contagious disease in its first half century—smallpox, scarlet fever, a few mentions of typhoid and whooping cough, and especially (in 1918-1919) influenza.

Smallpox

According to the Centers for Disease Control, "Smallpox was a devastating disease. On average, 3 out of every 10 people who got it died. Those who survived were usually left with scars, which were sometimes severe."³ The CDC further notes that



¹ The minutes of January 5, 1915 reported that Dr. William Mitchell of Denver analyzed City water taken from Shear Creek and from City water pipes. The Shear Creek sample contained some *bacillus coli communis*, but neither sample showed typhoid.

² Sometimes it was called the Committee on Health and Police. Its full name in 1881 was the Committee on Health, Police and Fire Department. This was one of only four standing committees, annually appointed, that was established by the Board of Trustees of the Town of Durango, meeting in the parlor of the West End Hotel on Tuesday evening, May 17, 1881. The other three were the Committee on Finance, the Committee on Streets, Alleys and Bridges, and the Committee on Licenses and Saloons.

³ Smallpox was known around the world from as early as the time of the Egyptian Empire in about the 3rd century BC. Its eradication in 1980 "is considered the biggest achievement in international public health." <https://www.cdc.gov/smallpox/history/history.html> (page last reviewed August 30, 2016; viewed 3/26/2020).

Before smallpox was eradicated, it was mainly spread by direct and fairly prolonged face-to-face contact between people. Smallpox patients became contagious once the first sores appeared in their mouth and throat ([early rash stage](#)). They spread the virus when they coughed or sneezed and droplets from their nose or mouth spread to other people. They remained contagious until their last smallpox scab fell off. These scabs and the fluid found in the patient's sores also contained the variola virus. The virus can spread through these materials or through the objects contaminated by them, such as bedding or clothing. People who cared for smallpox patients and washed their bedding or clothing had to wear gloves and take care to not get infected. Rarely, smallpox has spread through the air in enclosed settings, such as a building (airborne route).⁴

Durango was grappling with how to contain smallpox as early as 1883 and as recently as 1929—at a time when some of its functions, but not all, were understood. At its regular meeting on October 6, 1883, Council instructed the Town Clerk [Durango was a Town until July of 1886] to bill the County for moneys the Town had paid out “in the Small Pox case.” This was the start of a collaborative effort by La Plata County and Durango to prevent the spread of infectious disease—and it was the start of a challenge of how each government entity would pay its fair share of doing so.

At a specially called meeting on May 7, 1884 the Council adopted a resolution to protect the public health, because there were at least five cases of smallpox within the Town of Durango. This was the first of at least a handful of resolutions City Council has adopted in the past 136 years in the course of battling contagion in Durango. This first Resolution asked the Board of Directors of the Public Schools to close the schools, and “the heads of families in whose houses the inmates thereof may be stricken with the disease are hereby instructed to use all necessary measures to prevent the spread of the disease.” Another part of the Council’s response to this health danger was to activate the Health Committee, employ a Town Physician, and consider vaccinations.

Ten days later, on May 17, 1884, the Health Committee reported to Council, which had appointed Dr. W. R. Winters to act temporarily as the Town Physician and health officer, and had adopted Ordinance #72, “Regulating the Appointment of a Town Physician and Prescribing His Duties.”⁵ The Town Physician’s written report was included in the meeting’s minutes. His report, quoted below, indicates that he had a strong grip on how to protect the population--much like steps being taken in modern times here.

⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/smallpox/transmission/index.html> (page last reviewed June 7, 2016; viewed 3/26/2020).

⁵ Durango’s ordinances were numbered in a strict numerical sequence until fairly recently. This was the 72nd ordinance since the founding of the Town of Durango in 1881. The number reached 1,375 before it started re-setting at 1 in January of each year, effective January of 1982. This explains why we have a four-digit Ordinance Number field in the City’s electronic records management database.

The report to Council on May 17th noted that he, Dr. Winters, had acted as the Town's health officer since May 7th, by request of the Health Committee. He reported that

there have been five undoubted cases of Small Pox; of these, two (2) have died. Two (2) are recovering, while the termination of one is still a matter of doubt. Nothing that proper and earnest medical attention could give has been neglected and this, coupled with the energetic action of Your Town Marshall [sic] has had a most positive result in averting what might easily have been a disastrous epidemic, and I now announce to Your Honorable Board that not a single case of smallpox exists within the Town limits, and I should adopt a continuation of the precautionary measures. A number of exposed people are under strict surveillance and rigid quarantine and while it is probably that one or two more cases may develop among these people, the perfect control now had will prevent any spread beyond those who have already been exposed. W. R. Winters, M.D.

Durango had plans in place for quarantining infected persons since at least 1884. It was called the Pest House (as shown by a \$4.00 expense for it, included in the Bills Allowed at the February 2, 1884 City Council meeting). On June 20, 1899 an attending physician stated that "the small pox patients now in the Pest House would have to remain there for two weeks."

At its regular meeting on April 6, 1889 Council approved the bills relating to the cases of smallpox, including \$100 to Mr. W. R. Winters "as per his contract to vaccinate the people of the City." The Council agreed that all the Aldermen who were continuing in office would attend the April 8th meeting of the County Commissioners to settle small pox claims and accept the County Commissioners' proposition that the County would pay two-thirds of the expense. Meeting ten days later, Council approved payment of \$678.52 to the County regarding the City's share of expenses in caring for smallpox cases.

Sometimes, the City would pay for clothing for smallpox patients (whose original clothing probably had to be burned). On September 3, 1889 Council referred to its Finance Committee a bill from A. Rapp "for clothing for Saulsbury, a small pox patient."

On May 4, 1897 Council delayed deciding whether to pay a bill from Mrs. Dominic for expenses she incurred while the Jordan house was quarantined due to scarlet fever. A suspected case of contagious disease in a family on Third Avenue turned out to be chicken pox.

On November 15, 1898 the Alderman for the Committee reported a case of smallpox in the city and advised taking action to prevent its spread.

On July 7, 1899 Alderman Sisson of the Committee "stated that the small pox patients now outside the City limits were being attended to by the County...[and] that the County desired to have a conference with the City concerning the appointment of a health officer to act for both County and

City.” As it often did, Council authorized the Committee to take such actions as it deemed proper.

In response to an inquiry from the Mayor at the meeting on June 20, 1899 Marshal Bennett related that “the attending physician [had informed him] that the small pox patient now in the pest house would have to remain there for two weeks from this date.”

On September 5, 1899 Council approved payment of \$3.20 to C. Widemayer for merchandise for the Pest House.

Determinations as to whether the La Plata County government or the City was responsible for certain types of expenses was an early issue of Council. On December 4, 1900 the Council heard a report from Alderman Gallotti of the Health and Police Committee “that there was one case of small pox now at the Pest house, and the rooms occupied by the patient in the City, prior to his removal to the pest house, had been fumigated, and bedding used by him burned. Alderman Rivers then asked for information, as to whether the City or County was responsible for the expense of caring for small pox patients, in response to which inquiry, the City Attorney stated that the County was liable for the entire expense, even if it the same was contracted by the City.” (At that time, the City Council had a Mayor and 8 Aldermen.)

The City seems to have had an orderly method of addressing the needs during an epidemic, early on, although (as ever) quick decisions were not always reached. On January 2, 1901, “Alderman Patterson reported that the 4 cases of small pox now at the pest house were all doing nicely. He also stated that the Health and Police Committee might think it necessary to employ a physician to act in place of Dr. Haggart while he was temporarily absent from the City, and after discussion the matter was left with the Health and Police Committee. The question of the City either buying, renting, or building another or additional pest house was discussed generally by members, but no definite action taken.”

The City hired temporary labor as needed to respond during epidemics (though it sometimes balked at paying them). On February 5, 1901, Council discussed whether to retain the services of James Miller, who had formerly been employed by the Health and Police Committee. Council authorized the Committee to decide the matter, and also to decide on orders of goods and supplies for the Pest House or for quarantine patients—and appointed a special committee to formulate and recommend a plan or method of keeping accounts that would do away with the necessity of the continual transfer of funds to the present Emergency Fund.⁶

⁶ Early on, City Council would form a special committee (usually, one or two members of Council itself—in addition to its four standing committees) to handle a particular matter.

The March 5, 1901 minutes explain, indirectly, how the City marked quarantined houses. Council approved a motion to instruct the Health Officer "to remove no flags that had been put up at houses in which there were cases of Small pox or scarlet fever, until such houses are properly fumigated by the owners or occupants thereof."

On April 2, 1901 Alderman Patterson of the Committee reported that County Commissioner Bradley had requested that all claims of the City against the County [on] account of Small Pox be filed at once with the County Clerk, and the City Clerk was so instructed."

The City's leaders apparently believed that keeping the dust down in the City's dirt streets would restrain the expansion of diseases. On May 21, 1901 the Council heard a report from one of its members, "who had been appointed by the Mayor to act as agent for the City in the matter of purchasing a Street Sprinkler." He found a 600-gallon Studebaker for about \$566 (5% discount if paid within 30 days), or one could be built in Durango for about \$140, but that would take longer. After hearing that Denver recommended the Studebaker, Council voted to spend the extra money for that. It is not clear whether keeping the dust down in the City's dirt streets was related to its next topic at that meeting: "that all Small Pox flags had been removed, and quarantine raised, and that the man in the employ of the City in connection with cases of contagious diseases had been discharged and the Pest House closed."

On June 4, 1901 Council disallowed a bill from William R. Cox "for services claimed to have been rendered at the Pest House"—and purchased a horse and a harness for operating the new street sprinkler. Mr. Cox persisted in his claim "for service as Nurse at the Pest House." On August 6th the Council heard "what he claimed to be the facts with reference to his stay at the Pest House some months ago" and referred it to the Committee. On October 1st it allowed him \$50 "in full settlement of his claims against the City of \$75 for services rendered at the Pest House in April and May of 1901."

On July 2, 1901 Council considered a letter from US Indian Agent J. O. Smith regarding the City's \$100 bill to the federal government for the City's care of Paniuese, a Ute smallpox patient, and instructed the City Clerk to prepare and forward to the Agent "an itemized and explanatory statement of the case."

On October 7, 1902 "a communication ... from the State Board of Health [was read to the Council,] stating that they had been informed that Archie Forbes of this City had violated the quarantine regulations for small pox and that the officials refused to assist the City Health Officer in maintaining quarantine and asked that the council give the Health Officer every support necessary for the control of contagious disease." Council took no action in

the matter at the time of that meeting; there seems to be no record in the minutes as to how this played out.

On May 3, 1904, "The committee on Health and Police reported that there were four small pox patients at the Pest House and that all were doing nicely." (These seemed to be a standard report.)

On June 21, 1904 the Council referred "the bill of Mrs. Winfield for services rendered as nurse in small pox cases...to the Finance Committee for investigation and with instructions to confer with the Board of County Commissioners. (On July 5 the Council disallowed her bill, after conferring with them.) It allowed "the bill of Mrs. Will for articles taken to Pest House" but Council "instructed the City Health Officer to confer with the Committee on Health and Police before incurring any expense to the City."

Fighting epidemics was costly then, as it is now. On August 2, 1904, Council approved a transfer of \$1,785.27 from the General Fund to the Emergency Fund. That would be \$51,888.77 in 2020 dollars (and Durango then was a fraction of its current size). Council also decided to charge to that fund all expenses connected with the sprinkling department, including the driver of the team and the feed for the horses pulling the sprinkler. Also, it told the Mayor and the Clerk to pay Mrs. Kate Winfield \$100 as "full [settlement] of all demands against the City on account of nursing smallpox patients."

On June 7, 1905 Council held a special meeting "for the purpose of meeting with the Board of County Commissioners of La Plata County to consider the matter in relation to the health of the City and particularly small pox. County Physician Haggart informed the council regarding the two cases of small pox now confined in the Pest House while City Physician Dr. Turrell made recommendations regarding the prevention of the spreading of the disease." Alderman West moved "that the question of securing the necessary supplies and looking after the conveniences of the patients now at the Pest House be left to the City and County physicians. The motion passed, with six aldermen voting "Aye" and Alderman Rivers "Nay." (The eighth alderman, Mr. Dobbins, was absent.) Alderman Casey then moved "that all expenses incurred in connection with small pox cases be paid jointly by the City and the County. That motion also passed; five aldermen voted for it; Aldermen Berndt and West opposed it.

On July 6, 1905, Council "instructed [the Police Marshal (predecessor of today's Police Chief)] to arrest Mr. Eycler for breaking the small pox quarantine."

On November 21, 1905, Council decided to take no action regarding Dr. Lefurgey's bill "for services rendered small pox patients," and voided its

payment of \$232 to him, because the County Commissioners "had taken the matter into their own hands and had settled" with him for \$638.

Scarlet Fever (and smallpox)

At the Council's meeting on May 18, 1909 Health Officer L. C. Hurd reported on the

number of scarlet fever cases in city and stated that at this time there were but five families in quarantine and a total of six cases. That there had been three deaths from said disease within the city. That all rumors to the effect that there were a great number of cases in the City were unfounded. He further reported that all cases were being promptly reported by attending physicians and that all reported cases were promptly quarantined and so kept for the required length of time and when quarantine was raised all dwellings were properly and carefully disinfected and that all precautions were being taken to prevent a spread of said disease.

On June 15, 1909 "Alderman Turner of the ...Committee advised the Council by written report that the County Commissioners had agreed to allow the City the use of the pest house when same was not full, the City to pay expenses incurred by them in caring for cases, also that the City could move what ever furniture they own into the same."

On June 18, 1909, Dr. L. C. Hurd asked Council to approve a \$20 claim of "C. E. Stacey, who nursed the scarlet fever patient Chris Larson... for four days."

On March 4, 1910 Council authorized the Committee to "procure such articles of clothing as is necessary for Laithe Miller and C. E. Stacey before they are released from the Pest House; that cost of such clothing as is needed by Stacey by heed [sic] [be paid?] out of his salary as a nurse."

On November 23, 1910 Health Officer Hurd informed Council that there were four cases of smallpox in the city and one of varioloid (a modified, mild form of smallpox, occurring in persons who had been vaccinated or who had previously had smallpox), and that these patients had been properly quarantined.

On December 6, 1910 Health Officer Hurd reported "six cases of smallpox in existence[:] 3 in [the] County pest house, 1 in [the] Brick yard pest house [it seems, the brick yard was south of town] and two in private houses. Alderman Cummins stated that the Health Committee had found it necessary to rent a small house opposite Edwards brick yard for use as a pest house for women patients, and that there was one patient now confined to said house, he also reported that [the] Committee had hired a woman nurse at [the] rate of \$2.50 per day."

On January 9, 1911 "Health Officer Hurd reported the existence of five case of small pox in the Pest House and four cases under quarantine within the City limits. He further reported two lodging houses in fourteen day quarantine and stated that some action should be taken by the City to provide the inmates with provisions, etc." Council referred the matter to the Health Committee, the Health Officer and the City Attorney to decide what provisions to procure "as was necessary to supply the wants of these persons in quarantine if it was found that the City should provide same."

On February 7, 1911 "Alderman Graden made complaint to the effect that J. J. Patterson, who was an inmate of the Pest House and had been released therefrom on condition that he leave the City and take residence upon his ranch below the City, had failed to leave the City as agreed and he, Alderman Graden, thought some action should be taken in the matter. Mayor Goodman ordered City Attorney Ellis to investigate the matter and to take such steps as were found to be necessary."

On February 14, 1911 Health Officer Hurd reported 4 cases of small pox under quarantine in the City and in pest houses and stated that Animas City had a number of cases under quarantine. In order to more effectively stamp out the disease, Alderman Cummins made motion (approved without dissent) that the City Attorney prepare and submit a set of health rules and regulations and ordinances and that [the] City Health Officer and [the] Health Committee assist him and that they take such action as the case warrants." Also, "City Attorney Ellis advised Council that the County was not liable for any of the expense of care of small pox patients by the City unless they had given specific instructions for the same; he also reported that he had prepared and was ready to introduce a tree spraying ordinance as instructed therefor." Council adopted Ordinance No. 503, An Ordinance in Relation to Weeds and Trees. Three of the Aldermen voted "Aye;" Alderman Nelson voted "Nay." Mr. F. Wentzel promptly "made a protest against the passage of such an ordinance, claiming that it is not practicable to enforce the spraying of trees." [His protest apparently was to no effect.]

The City Council minutes lack an explanation of a connection between diseases in Durango and the need to spray trees. It seems to have been based on a hypothesis that has since then been disproved. A few months earlier, on October 4, 1910, it considered "a communication signed by 'Ordinance Committee' of the 'Civic Club'" asking the City Council to investigate source of typhoid fever, to appoint a Pure food Inspector and to purchase a sprayer for the preservation of shade trees, same to be at the disposal of private citizens at a minimum rental."

On February 21, 1911 Alderman Cummins of the H & P Committee informed Council "that no cases of small pox had originated either in Durango or in Animas City since [the] last report and that there is [sic] but 5 cases in

Animas City now, all of which are properly quarantined.” By Resolution, Council unanimously voted the adoption of these Health Regulations:

Whereas the presence of a number of cases of small pox in the City within the last few months renders necessary strict supervision in the interest of the public health;

And, whereas several such cases now exist and, in the opinion of the Board of Health of the City of Durango, it is necessary that the following precautions be taken to prevent the spread of such disease, and new cases arising,

Now, therefore, it is ordered that the regulations and recommendations of the State Board of Health, in such cases, be immediately enforced for the care and supervision of small pox cases, including the prompt isolation of all suspected cases and the vaccination of all person infected or exposed to infection,

It is further ordered that the school children of the City be immediately vaccinated, and that upon the failure of parents or guardians to have school children vaccinated, the public schools will be ordered to be closed or non-vaccinated children refused admission to the schools until a certificate of vaccination is produced, subject to further consideration and action of the City Board of Health.

All other persons in the City, who have not recently been vaccinated, are urged to be vaccinated immediately, and the owners or proprietors of all moving picture shows, theatres and places of public gathering are warned to urge or require such vaccination as the condition for admission into such places, and the exhibition of a certificate of vaccination is evidence thereof, or such places will be liable to be suppressed during the continuance of small pox in the City, at the discretion of the Board of Health of the City of Durango.

The Health Officer of the City of Durango is hereby instructed to cause prompt isolation and vaccination of all persons who have been exposed to small pox, as required by Section Nine (9) of Ordinance #343 of the City of Durango, in relation to the public health.

The Health Officer of the City is hereby further instructed to establish and enforce a strict quarantine of all persons or places where small pox or other communicable disease may exist and, if necessary to make such quarantine effective, the City Health Officer shall place guards around such places, and the Health Officer shall warn the Public by notice or flags posted thereon, of the presence of such disease.

The Health Officer is hereby directed to immediately arrest and cause the prosecution of any person or persons violating any quarantine so established by him.

A discussion about awarding a contract for spraying, trimming and vitalizing of trees immediately followed the adoption of the health regulations on 2/21/1911; the tree spraying ordinance was “not ready for adoption.”

The tree spraying and the pest house were adjacent items again at the April 17, 1911 meeting as well. “Mayor Goodman submitted letters and telegram received in reference to spraying of trees under contract of The Colorado Forestry and Landscape Co., and he stated that he had been unable to con-

fer with County Horticulturalist Taylor until Saturday (15th); that after an inspection of the work Mr. Taylor had advised the re-spraying of all trees done under the contract." The outgoing Council voted to turn over the entire matter to the incoming board. Next, "Alderman Cummins made motion that three months rent be paid C. A. Pike for rental on [a] house situate near the Edwards Brick Yard and used by [the] City as [an] ancillary pest house, and that the rate of rental be \$5.00 per month." All agreed.

On July 5, 1911 Health Officer Driver asked Council for "instructions regarding the fumigating of houses where chicken pox patients had been confined and recently discharged." Driver also "called attention to existing custom of 'slop' men in drawing through the streets and alleys with their slop wagons and containers open and of allowing their outfits to be in a leaky condition, all of which is bad for the good health of the citizens of this City."

In the early days, City Council reviewed every bill payable. On February 20, 1917 [the City's minutes were now being typed, and are much more legible] Council reconsidered "the matter of Henry Mienke's bill for nursing a case of Small Pox amounting to \$140.00, which was cut to \$84.00 at the last regular meeting," and unanimously decided to reimburse him the full \$140. Similarly, on January 15, 1918 the Council agreed to pay James Edwards his bill of \$105 "for his services as attendant upon the small-pox patient." On April 2, 1918 instructed the City Attorney "to interview the County Commissioners while they were in session," regarding "the matter of the county reimbursing the City for half the cost of the recent smallpox case."

On November 20, 1917 the Council took "up the matter of City Health Officer and Milk Inspector [an apparent addition to the title] [after] Mayor Jackson stated that he had appointed Dr. Lingenfelter subject to the ratification of the Council," which it promptly did. Next, "Commissioner Ritter presented the matter of two cases of typhoid fever having come to his knowledge recently and suggested that now that we have a health officer we can give him something to do by having him make investigations and ascertain if possible the cause of these cases." The good doctor would be busy for years to come.

The Spanish Flu

The disease with the worst effects worldwide was The Great Influenza of 1918, which reached Southwest Colorado in October of that year. Durango survived better than many municipalities.

Guy Walton, a retired nurse of Durango, explains that "it began with the typical flu symptoms – chills, fever and body aches. But it could take one of two deadly paths. It could kill rapidly with victims coughing up blood, devel-

oping purplish blisters and black limbs from oxygen-starved skin. The other lethal form developed after a prolonged illness that ended in pneumonia.”⁷

Around a half a million people in the US died from the Spanish flu or from complications from it in 1918 and 1919. More Americans died from the influenza than were killed in battle in both world wars. “Especially remarkable was the 1918 flu’s predilection for taking the lives of otherwise healthy young adults, as opposed to children and the elderly, who usually suffer most.”⁸

In Colorado, around 7,800 people died (nearly 1,500 of them in Denver) between September 1918 and June 1919. The virus likely originated in the United States (not in Spain) in the spring of 1918. It took on the nickname “Spanish influenza” because Spain had suffered from it early on and Spain was neutral in World War I and therefore its press could report more freely on this pandemic that was hitting in the waning days of the Great War. It has been reported that Colorado’s first flu cases were in Boulder—transmitted by soldiers who arrived from Montana to train at the University of Colorado in September.⁹

Towns that essentially self-quarantined for months suffered fewer deaths than those, like Denver, that did not restrict public gatherings and the use of public transportation. Most municipalities quickly advised the public to implement proper hand washing techniques and to cover their coughs, and most or many ordered the closure of schools, churches, and places of amusement.

Rural areas that had few doctors and medical services were hit hard.¹⁰ Silverton lost ten percent of its population (246 died); the flu was transmitted at a public gathering. In contrast, only one or two persons died of it in Gunnison County, whose officials closed schools and businesses for up to

⁷ Guy Walton, “In 1918, flu pandemic ravaged Southwest Colorado: More than 200 deaths in La Plata County; Silverton lost 10% of its population,” *Durango Herald*, 9/30/2018, viewed 3/13/2020 at <https://durangoherald.com/articles/243538>

⁸ Richard Gunderman, “Ten Myths About the 1918 Flu Pandemic,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, 1/12/2018, viewed 3/13/2020 at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/ten-myths-about-1918-flu-pandemic-180967810/>

⁹ Carol Taylor, “Boulder County History: Spanish flu ensnared Boulder during the 1918 holidays,” *Boulder Daily Camera*, 12/31/2018, viewed 3/13/2020 at <https://www.dailycamera.com/2018/12/31/boulder-county-history-spanish-flu-ensnared-boulder-during-1918-holidays/>

¹⁰ Leigh Jeremias, Digital Collections Coordinator at the [Colorado State Library](https://www.coloradovirtuallibrary.org/digital-colorado/colorado-historic-newspapers-collection/topics-in-history-1918-1919-influenza-pandemic-in-colorado/) “Topics in History: 1918 1919 Influenza Pandemic in Colorado,” 11/15/2016, viewed 3/13/2020 at <https://www.coloradovirtuallibrary.org/digital-colorado/colorado-historic-newspapers-collection/topics-in-history-1918-1919-influenza-pandemic-in-colorado/> The 1918 flu may have originated in the US: “it was first reported in an American military, Camp Funston, Fort Riley, in troops preparing for WW1 and receiving 25 vaccinations. According to the CDC, the same flu strain appeared only one other time: in 1976. This was again at a US army base, Fort Dix, and again, was seen in recently vaccinated troops, and only in them.” (Melanie Grimes, “Homeopathy Successfully Treated Flu Epidemic of 1918,” *Natural News*, viewed 3/13/2020 at <https://www.organicconsumers.org/news/homeopathy-successfully-treated-flu-epidemic-1918>

four months and required everyone who wanted to enter the county to be quarantined for two days. When a third wave of the pandemic spread in March of 1919, the authorities had relaxed the rules and the number of cases in Gunnison County was at least 100; at least five residents, all of them young, died.¹¹

In his excellent *Durango Herald* article about the flu pandemic, Guy Walton estimates that "In La Plata County, there were more than 200 deaths from an approximate population of 11,000." He notes that

Bessie Finnegan was a nurse in Durango when the flu struck. In a 1976 interview with Fort Lewis College professor Duane Smith, almost 60 years after the fact, she recalls the nightmare. "You should have seen it ... There was nobody in the streets ... The whole town was in mourning. Everything in town was shut down," she said. Every nurse she knew came down with the disease and two of them died. Mercy Hospital appealed to its sister hospital in Denver for nurses and physicians. The Durango City Council asked the Red Cross to open an emergency hospital in the Durango Exchange on Main Avenue.¹²

The first mention of the Spanish flu in the Durango City Council meeting minutes is in the minutes of October 15, 1918, when "City Health Officer D. Lingenfelter being present some discussion took place in regard to the influenza epidemic. The clerk was instructed to publish a notice requesting all water consumers to sprinkle the streets in front of their properties as a health measure."

A week later, Council met in special session on October 23rd

for the purpose of discussing steps necessary to stop the spread of Spanish Influenza. The Mayor also advised the Council that Dr. Turrell had called on him this afternoon and advised that unless some steps were taken in that direction the disease would be with us the rest of the winter. After considerable discussion it appeared to be the concensus [sic] of opinion of the Council that the most propitious action that could be taken would be to cause all houses where the disease existed to be placarded and the patients be kept to themselves and that the health officer see that all rooms and residences where such patients had been confined be thoroughly fumigated at once upon a cure having been effected or the patient having died. Commissioner Ritter suggested that the Mayor and Health Officer issue a proclamation giving a list of suggestions that in their opinion would be most conducive to guard against the spread of the disease. Commissioner Ritter suggested that the City Health Officer be instructed and authorized to see that all residences and rooms where influenza existed be placarded and the patients kept to themselves, and that all places where such patients had been confined be thoroughly fumigated upon a cure having been effected or death resulting, and that the Health Officer is further authorized to employ such assistance as is necessary to cary [sic] out these instructions.

¹¹ "Why did Gunnison escape flu pandemic in 1918?", 9/16/2007, viewed 3/13/2010 at <https://flutrackers.com/forum/welcome-to-the-scientific-library/-1918-pandemic-data-stories-history/25405-colorado-us-why-did-gunnison-escape-flu-pandemic-in-1918>

¹² Walton, Ibid.

In answer to the roll call on the motion, all members present voted "AYE."

On November 5th "A general discussion took place in regard to the influenza epidemic and it being the concensus [sic] of opinion of the Council that a strict quarantine be make [sic] Commissioner Ritter moved that the City be quarantined and that the City Health officer and the City Attorney be instructed to draft the necessary regulations and cause a proclamation to be made to that effect, seconded by Commissioner Tyler and duly carrier [sic] by all members present voting "AYE" in answer to roll call."

Not everyone was happy about how the rules were imposed. On December 3rd Mr. Chas. Fleck of the Savoy Hotel was present and addressing the Council desired to know why it was that the traveling men were restricted to the quarantine regulations, when the train men were a [sic] liberty to go and come as they pleased. Mr. Fleck was advised that it was due to the fact that the railroad employees were employees of the government and consequently out of the jurisdiction of the Council. City Health Officer Lingenfelter being present a general discussion took place in regard to the influenza epidemic and quarantine enforcement and regulations. No further action was taken."

On the last day of 1918 Council met in regular adjourned session. The minutes reported that "considerable discussion took place in regard to the Influenza Epidemic. Dr. Lingenfelter being present reported that there were seven cases in town at present...in two families. Dr. Lingenfelter stated that there had been much complaint to him regard to the restriction on Church services and after discussing the matter Commissioner Ritter made motion that Dr. Lingenfelter be authorized to advise the Church officers that they could hold the regular Church Services, but not festivities nor Sunday School," and the motion was adopted unanimously.

On January 7, 1919, the first regular meeting of Council for the new year, "Some discussion took place in regard to permitting public dances and it being the concensus [sic] of opinion of the Council that this was a very dangerous means of spreading The Influenza the matter was passed up to be taken up with the Health Officer." City Manager Hood (a mortician by trade) was granted his request of a week's vacation.

The City's leaders were looking at neighboring cities and considering how to protect Durango's residents from the diseases there. The following week, Council met in special session

called for the purpose of considering a quarantine against the City of Telluride, where it appeared there was [a] second epidemic of Influenza. ... After considerable discussion Commissioner Herr mad [sic] motion `that the City of Durango be quarantined against the City of Telluride; that the City Health Officer be instructed to notify the proper railroad officials to stop selling tickets for passage from Telluride to Durango; and that said officials be requested to notify the Conductors not to accept passengers, excepting

returning soldiers and sailors, en route from Telluride to Durango; that if any such passengers come into Durango in contradiction to this regulation the City Health Officer be and he hereby is authorized to quarantine said passengers for a period of 5 days.'

The Council unanimously adopted the motion and instructed the City Health Officer and the Clerk to send a telegram to the General Passenger Agent.

Four days later, on January 17th, Council met again in special session and had "a general discussion...in regard to Influenza conditions at Telluride, Rico and Montrose and the adviseability [sic] of imposing a more strict quarantine on the Rio Grande Souther [sic] Railroad. There was also some discussion in regard to the conditions at Alamosa, and the City Health Officer talked with the Mayor of Alamosa over the phone and was advised that there were no cases of Influenza at present in Alamosa." After a thorough discussion, Council approved a motion that "a strict quarantine be established as to all passengers, trainmen and others coming in on the Rio Grande Southern Railroad and that all be detained in quarantine and not be permitted to go to their homes or else where in the City, than the place of quarantine, for the period of three days, with the exception of the trainmen who will be permitted to take their train out upon call, if after inspection they are found to be in good health.'" Council also agreed to a proclamation "that the Rio Grande Southern Railroad be required to make proper fumigation of all passenger cars at both terminals, namely, Telluride and Durango." Thirdly, Council authorized the City Manager "to employ a special officer or officers to enforce this order and that the City Manager and Health Officer be empowered to arrange for a quarantine station" and instructed the City Clerk to publish the quarantine notice in both Durango newspapers.

The President (that was the title of the City's Mayor in those days, when presiding over the five-member Council; the other members were then called Commissioners) called Council to meet in special session five days later (1/22/1919) because

we have made certain restrictions but have not taken into consideration any discrimination, that all knew that anything that has a definite purpose must cause some individual inconvenience. We have understood that the Rio Grande Souther [sic] railroad employees have not been satisfied with the quarantine and restrictions imposed upon them. ¶ Mr. Grant Sanders acting as spokesman for the railroad men stated, that [they] `were heartily in favor of doing anything that they can in the way of stamping out this disease and that they realized the seriousness of this purpose and in behalf of the railroad men asked that the quarantine regulations be modified so that the men could go home when they came in off their run and remain there until called for their next run when they would go direct to their cars.'" ¶ Dr. Turrell stated the danger of this[,] showing why it would not be adviseable [sic]. He explained the means of carrying the infection[,] the advantage of quarantine as a means of mitigating exposures etc. * * * * *;that he was satisfied that if the City Council could get the co-operation of the railroad men they could prevent the horrors that we went through awhile back, and that the only way

he believed it could be done was by strict quarantine. ¶ Commissioner Ritter stated, that, 'the Commissioners had taken the matter of quarantine up with the doctors and that they had recommended the course that was being taken and that they ought [sic] to know what would be best to do and that the City Council did not want to take any chances on exposing any one else.' ¶ Attorney Reese told the trainmen the details of the quarantine regulations and further stated, that, 'the only exception was made in favor of the trainmen and that was that they could go out on their next run if found, after inspections[,] to be in good health.' ¶ Dr. A. L. Davis also, stated, 'the danger of the disease, the various ways it could be communicated and the advisability of maintaining a strict quarantine to lessen the dangers of the spread of the disease.' ¶ The railroad men advised the Council that the conditions at the detention center were not good, i.e. they could not get their meals whenever they wanted them; that other people were allowed to mingle with them and go to and from the building; and that there was not enough room to take care of all the railroad men and that Mr. Edelman was turning them away. ¶ After due discussion Commissioner Ritter made motion, that, 'the Mayor be authorized to make such arrangements as he is able, to improve conditions with request to the detention station and if necessary arrange for the entire Southern Hotel and such other quarters as he may find for that purpose.'"

All members present voted "AYE." Finally, "There was some discussion in regard to the advisability [sic] of closing the Picture show and the Pool Rooms, but no action was taken."

In special session again the very next day (1/23/1919), Council looked south, discussing the possibility "of extending the Quarantine to the Farmington Branch of the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad as it was reported that there were a great many cases of Influenza at Farmington." After another thorough discussion, Council agreed to do so. Again they discussed "the matter of closing the Picture Show and the Pool Rooms...but no action was taken." Regarding the men working on the railroads, "Commissioner Ritter suggested that the City make arrangements for the McNeily rooming house and that the Railroad men be permitted to eat at The Southern Hotel." Mr. Ritter also suggested "that it might be well to ask Mr. Carpenter, Superintendent, of the Rio Grande Southern [sic] Railroad to instruct all his Passenger Agents and Trainmen to advise all, that if they were going to Durango that they will be quarantined for three Days." Council reconsidered "the matter of discontinuing the Sunday Schools...and the Health Officer was requested to ask the Pastors to keep a careful watch for Colds among the Children and close the Sunday School if there appeared to be any danger if increase to close them. [This latter phrase was handwritten onto the typescript of the minutes.]

On February 18, "Dr. Lingenfelter reported that there were six new cases of 'Flu' in town: three at the Frank Foley residence; one at 866 Third Avenue; one in north Durango; and one at the Phenev residence.

At its regular meeting on March 4, 1919, Dr. Lingenfelter gave Council the good news "that there had been no new cases of Influenza since a week tomorrow. ¶ The Council then discussed the matter of taking the ban from Public dance and funerals and it appearing to be the concensus [sic] of opinion of the Council that there was little danger now[,] Commissioner Ritter made motion that the Ban from dances and public funerals, excepting in case of death from contagious disease, be removed," and the motion passed unanimously.

Later in that same meeting, "Council took up the matter of Quarantine expenses and as to what should be done in the case of the Railroad men who had refused to pay the bills incurred at the Hotels or Quarantine Stations, and which bills had heretofore been paid by The City of Durango. After due consideration it being the concensus of opinion that some action should be taken[,] Commissioner Ritter made motion, that, `The City Clerk be instructed to notify all of the persons for whom expenses of quarantine had been paid by the City that unless the respective bills or claims against them were paid within five days from date of notice the same would be placed in the hands of the City Attorney with instructions to institute suit for collection of all expenses incurred," and Council adopted that measure as well.

The last City Council meeting minutes of 1919 to include a mention of the flu appears to have been May 6th, when "Dr. Lingenfelter reported that there were two cases of Chicken Pox and two of Scarlet Fever in the City, but that there were no cases of Influenza."

A resurgence of the flu nationwide, months later, is recorded in the City Council minutes of January 28, 1920 when Council was meeting in special session "to take precautionary measures to prevent the spread of Spanish Influenza, which was found to exist in our City, whereupon Dr. H. C. Turrell appeared before the Council and stated there were several cases of the Influenza in the City, and thought it advisable to take immediate steps to prevent its further spreading[,] so far as was possible. ¶ It was therefore moved by Commissioner Perkins and seconded by Commissioner Ayres and carried by all members present voting "Aye" in answer to Roll Call that the following proclamation be and is hereby approved and adopted, to wit: -

`Mayor's Proclamation'

Whereas an epidemic of Influenza is raging in certain other parts of the United States, and

Whereas several cases of Influenza have developed in Durango, sufficient to give warning of the possible approach of the dread disease in epidemic form, it therefore seems advisable to take due cognizance of the threatened danger before it reaches the condition of an epidemic.

BE IT THEREFORE ORDERED that the operation of all Theaters, Picture Shows, and Public Dances be suspended on and after January 29th, until further notice.

This is done as a preventative measure with hope of warding off the danger which may obviate the necessity of more strenuous measures of quarantine later.”

Another mention of the flu in City Council minutes is regarding the regular meeting of October 1, 1957, when Council unanimously voted that all City employees be vaccinated for Asiatic Flu at City expense—and recommended that they do so.

On May 6, 1919 “Dr. Lingenfelter reported that there were two cases of Chicken Pox and two of Scarlet fever in the City, but that there no cases of Influenza.”

On January 20, 1920 Mr. Rowe Pingrey of the School District No. 9 School Board asked Council “to co-operate with the School Board in enforcing the mandate of the said School Board,” which “had ordered that all students of the Durango Schools should be vaccinated [sic] or furnish satisfactory proof of same, before they would be allowed to continue going to school.” The Council adopted a Resolution agreeing to the measure, because “an epidemic of smallpox is prvelent [sic] in the City of Durango and vicinity and it has become necessary to take steps to prevent spread of this loathsome disease and to eradicate the same as far as possible.” Council went further and extended the mandate to students in private schools, and made no provision for exemptions for those who had religious convictions that would prevent them from willingly allowing vaccination. (Also, by this time the City had sold its Street Sprinkler to the town of Cortez, but had been unable thus far to collect payment for it.)

On July 6, 1920 “the Health Officer (Dr. H. A. Lingenfelter) appeared before the Council and made a verbal report of milk examined & ect [sic]. He also reported that some cases of Whooping Cough had appeared in the City and one baby dying from same. Also that one new case of Small Pox had appeared in the case of one Arthur Whitney up near the Park School.”

And on September 19, 1929 “Doctor Lingenfelter-Health Officer for the City Appeared before the Council and made a verbal report of certain Small-Pox cases and that a family unable to pay for vacination [sic] should be vacinated [sic], whereupon Commissioner Thomas moved that the City allow Dr. Lingenfelter be authorized [sic] to expend the sum of \$5.00 for this purpose, which motion was seconded by Commissioner Fields and carried by all members present voting “aye” in answer to Roll-Call.” (See also the related previous resolutions of 5/7/1884 and 2/21/1911.) Dr. Lingenfelter also took the opportunity of his presence before Council to request a salary increase.

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Thus ends this synthesis of the record of the early Durango City Council minutes regarding how the City responded to outbreaks of contagious disease.

Durango: Where the mountains meet the desert

This is one of a number of booklets produced by the Durango City Clerk's Office to inform, educate, and entertain those who live in Durango, visit it, or want to know more about a corner of the U.S. that has a lively, well-documented past and a vibrant current environment.

Visit the City's public online records portal at

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for informational eBooks like this one, and thousands of primary source documents (ordinances, resolutions, minutes, agendas, etc.) from 1881 to the present.



(above: Main Avenue Durango ca. 1903)

City website: <http://www.durangogov.org/>