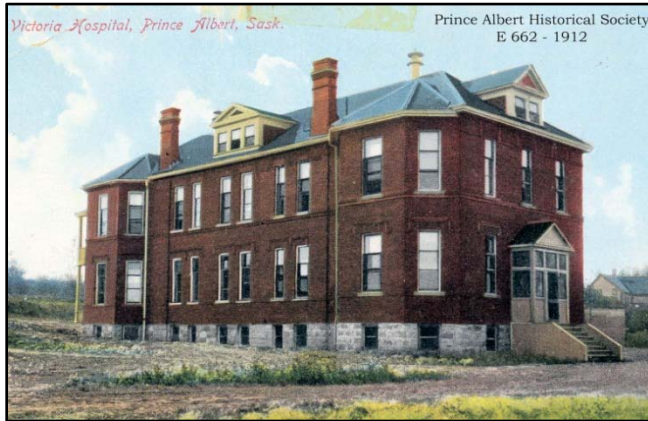


Museum Musings: The Spanish Influenza



On the front page of the October 18th, 1918 edition of the Prince Albert Daily Herald, the citizens of Prince Albert were advised in bold type that Prince Albert would close down for the epidemic. The epidemic was, of course, the Spanish Influenza.

First identified in Spain, the influenza had crossed the Atlantic Ocean onto the North American continent with returning American forces. To the beginning of October 1918, there had been few stories about the epidemic in the local newspaper, most of which had languished on the inside pages. That remained the case until October 8th, 1918, when a front-page story referenced the rise in the number of cases in Canadian cities such as Halifax, Toronto, and Quebec, as well as American cities such as Atlanta, Boston, and Columbus, Ohio.

On October 15th, Dr. McMillan, the Public Health Officer in Prince Albert, was reported as having been advised that the influenza was spreading over Western Canada, and he urged citizens to exercise more care and, if possible, not to come in contact with visitors to the city. On the same date, October 15th, it was reported that the malady had been identified in the City of Saskatoon. Locally, no definite cases had been reported, but one case was suspected in a family who had returned from a visit to Edmonton.

On October 16th, the newspaper advised local citizens that all cases of influenza must be reported, although few cases were believed to exist in the city. On the same date, Bishop Pascal of the Roman Catholic Dioceses of Prince Albert, approved and issued an order requesting that special prayers be offered against the epidemic.

The following day, five cases of the Spanish Grippe were reported in Prince Albert, three of which were serious and were being confined in the Isolation Hospital. At that point, it was not considered advisable to close the schools, but the public was being urged to take precautions, report suspected cases, and to maintain their general good health through sanitation and fresh air.

In bold print on October 18th, citizens of Prince Albert were told that “All places of public assembly in Prince Albert are to be closed this midnight by order of the public health committee to prevent a spread of the Spanish Grippe. The places to be closed include public schools, theatres, churches, pool rooms, dance halls, and every other place of public assembly.”

There had been sixteen new cases of the Spanish ‘Flu’ reported in the City in the previous 24 hours, making the situation quite serious. The infection was not prevalent in any specific part of the community, but had been reported in the east, the west, the south, and in the business district. The majority of the cases to that point were being treated within the homes of those infected. Dr. McMillan was appealing again to residents to take every precaution to isolate any possible cases.

The next day in The Daily Herald there was a paid City Notice from Mayor William Knox, who had been authorised by an Order in Council promulgated by the Provincial Government “calculated to prevent the spread of the Spanish Influenza” and ordering all schools, places of amusement and entertainment, including theatres, picture theatres, pool rooms, bowling alleys, dance halls and such like, to be closed, and public meetings of any character to be prohibited in the City of Prince Albert from and after 12 o’clock midnight, 18th October 1918, until further notice.

This led to what the newspaper referred to as the ‘first churchless Sunday’ ever in Prince Albert. It was noted that the Salvation Army did conduct an open-air service that day with a “sick call”, and that Sacred Heart Cathedral was open for private devotions. By the end of the weekend, 53 cases had been reported, with 20 of them hospitalised.

The following days resulted in news stories of a rollercoaster variety. A headline in the October 24th newspaper read “Flu Dying Out In Prince Albert” while in the October 25th newspaper the headline read “Flu Is Worse”. It would appear that the health officials were working hard to keep the citizenry positive about the work that they were doing, but that this only resulted in the people of Prince Albert becoming complacent. That complacency appears to have resulted in the people relaxing their efforts to protect against the influenza.

Before the end of October, the local court was postponed, and the health committee made a decision to expend between \$500 and \$600 to renovate the upper floor of the Isolation Hospital in order to create additional bed space. A decision was also made to allocate part of the Collegiate for use as an Emergency Hospital.

On November 2nd, it was announced that enough anti-influenza vaccine was received for distribution to local doctors. The serum would allow for 700 inoculations. Dr. McMillan was reported to have said that the situation was still serious but was nearing its apex.

Meanwhile, the school closure was requiring parents and students to do their studies at home. The boys from the Collegiate had been organised to cut wood and tend to fires for those suffering from illness, and volunteer nurses were providing assistance to families who were coping with the influenza in their homes. A.C. Howard, the local undertaker and ambulance operator had announced that all calls for patient removal to hospital would receive top priority and that as a result, funerals would occur as time permitted. “No definite arrangements can be made.”

By November 4th, the Sanitary Inspector had made arrangements for the use of the Fire Hall vehicle, so that he could provide immediate attention to all new cases suffering from the influenza. Citizens were being advised to call at General Delivery to check about letters as postal delivery had become irregular due to five Post Office staff and three letter carriers being ill. The Post Office hours were also being reduced.

The third “churchless Sunday” had come and gone, and on November 11th the Armistice was signed, ending the Great War. Jervois Newnham, the Anglican Bishop of Saskatchewan, called for a Service of Thanksgiving to be held at St. Alban’s Pro-Cathedral to celebrate the end of the war. The service was to be held on November 13th. However, the ban on public gatherings was still in place, so the service was postponed.

On November 14th, it was announced that the ban on public gatherings would be lifted at 12:00 midnight on the following Saturday. The Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Roman Catholics, as well as the Salvation Army, determined that they would hold services, but the Methodists and Baptists chose not to do so.

The Emergency Hospital at the Collegiate was closed on November 14th, and the four remaining patients were transferred to the Isolation Hospital. Local schools, including the Collegiate, were re-opened on December 2nd after all received a major cleaning and sanitising.

On November 19th, it was indicated that the influenza was controlled in Prince Albert. However, the hospitals were still dealing with cases being brought in from the rural areas.

In the local newspaper on December 18, it was reported that from October 12th to December 17th, a total of 742 cases of Spanish Influenza had been reported, with 58 deaths. Of these deaths, 18 were from the rural areas, resulting in 40 deaths of Prince Albert residents occurring. In his book *Prince Albert: The First Century 1866 – 1966*, Gary Abrahms indicated that the final Prince Albert death total, as reported in the January 21st, 1919 issue of the Prince Albert Daily Herald was fifty citizens.

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