

The Spanish Flu

In the fall of 1918, San Diego children skipped rope to a newly popular rhyme:

*I had a little bird
Its name was Enza
I opened the window
And in-flew-enza*

In the last weeks of World War I and in the months that followed, an influenza outbreak swept the world, infecting a billion people and killing as many as 50 million. It was one of the deadliest pandemics in history.

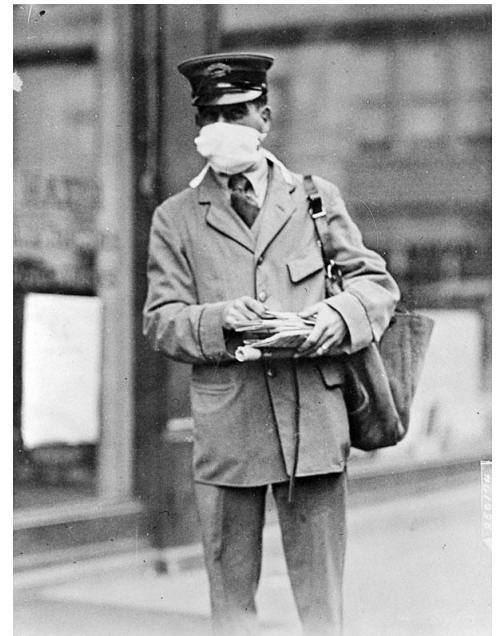
The flu appeared in America at Fort Riley, Kansas in the early spring. Outbreaks in other U.S. military camps followed but few took notice until a well-publicized wave in Spain infected several million and gave the world its name: “the Spanish Flu.” By the fall of 1918 the disease was spreading across the United States.

In San Diego the scourge reached epidemic proportions in November and December of 1918. There were 4,392 cases that year out of a population of about 70,000; 324 people died.

Nobody in San Diego saw it coming. “La Grippe”—as the flu was commonly known—was familiar but hardly worrisome. Years earlier, the City Health Officer, Dr. David Gochenauer, had stated that the local climate was “too mild for [influenza] to have a very bad effect.” Dr. Peter Remondino took the boast a step further, declaring that San Diego had “an absolute immunity from any active intestinal or gastric disease of any kind.”

But the Spanish flu was different. Far more deadly than the common “grippe,” the new form of the disease killed up to 20% of those infected. And strangely, it struck down the young and fit—typically, people between ages 20 and 40, instead of children and the elderly.

New York City postman wearing the gauze. *National Archives.*



When the disease struck San Diego in October 1918, the city’s Board of Health urged the public to “keep out of crowds.” As a precautionary measure, the City Council ordered the closure of all indoor public places. Theaters, moving picture shows, churches, dance halls, schools, and libraries were closed. Coronado, National City, and other neighboring communities followed with similar rules.

The public submitted gracefully to the new mandates. While library reading rooms were closed, the public was permitted to check out books. Circulation numbers at the downtown Public

Library soared. When outdoor activities were encouraged--since "open air" was thought to be beneficial--people flocked to the beaches and the back country. With only 63 cases of the flu reported by October 15, pleased health officials predicted it would only be a short time before the flu was entirely checked in San Diego.

The optimism would quickly fade. By the end of the third week in October, the number of cases had risen to over 200 and deaths were being reported daily. Dr. Ernest Chartres-Martin, the City Health Officer, announced: "We do not wish to unduly alarm people, but we have a situation which must be recognized. The influenza has not been stopped, or even been curbed."

Outside the city limits the flu hit hard. The army's Camp Kearny was put under strict quarantine. South of San Diego the flu felled workers building the Lower Otay Dam on the Sweetwater River. East of the city in the high desert of the Carrizo Gorge, construction on the San Diego Arizona Railway nearly halted when the flu struck. One hundred cases were reported in the work camps in October, twelve of them fatal.

City health officials urged a variety of measures to fight the epidemic. Avoiding close personal contact was the primary suggestion. Doctors also encouraged the use of an antiseptic spray of "bisulphate of quinine" for the nose and throat. Used after meals, the spray was thought to "preclude much danger from the malady."

There was a novel effort to wash away germs in city streets, based on "excellent results" from Brawley in the Imperial Valley. "San Diego will resemble a sheep farm tomorrow morning in odor at least," reported the Los Angeles *Times* on December 20. "The principal city streets will be washed in sheep dip by the health department as a preventive measure for the flu."

A vaccine that arrived from a lab in Berkeley seemed hopeful. "Injection of this vaccine is a certain protection against influenza," Dr. Chartes-Martin promised. But the shots, in fact, provided little help.

The most important weapon against the flu would be gauze masks. Convinced that the disease was a bacterial infection, the doctors thought masks covering the nose and mouth were "a certain preventative of contagion." Compulsory wearing of masks was ordered on October 18 for factory and office workers, or where workers were brought into close contact with the public. The local Red Cross chapter made and distributed the masks, and instructions for sewing gauze masks at home were published in the newspapers. "Those with even an elementary knowledge of the art of sewing may make their own masks," reported the *Union*.

On December 10, the City Council passed an ordinance "requiring the universal use of gauze masks within the City of San Diego." People were reminded of the law with a new rhyme:

*Obey the laws
And wear the gauze
Protect your jaws
From Septic Paws*

Citizens that ignored the ordinance risked a hundred dollar fine and thirty days in jail. More than 500 were arrested but most escaped with a five dollar fine. In the main, San Diegans "grinned

and bore it,” according to the *Union*. “Men wore ‘em. Women wore ‘em. Even the newsboys running through the streets, yelled their wares through white gauze, four-ply thick.”

In December, the influenza peaked with 2,039 cases and 188 deaths in that month alone. Then quite suddenly, the disease receded. School, libraries, and public buildings reopened. The compulsory wearing of gauze masks ended at midnight on Christmas Eve. City health officials proclaimed victory, with most of the credit going to those 4-ply gauze masks.



Seattle policemen in December 1918. *National Archives*.

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