This page was exported from - Shelburne Free Press
Export date: Fri Oct 30 2:57:15 2026 / +0000 GMT

Museum marks 100th anniversary of Spanish Flu pandemic

Written By **JASEN OBERMEYER**

Although 1918 is best known as the year the First World War ended, it was also the year of the Spanish Flu, one of the deadliest natural disasters and pandemics that swept across the entire world.

The Museum of Dufferin marked the 100th anniversary of this almost forgotten epidemic with a presentation at the Orangeville Mill Street Library last Thursday, Nov. 15, given by Archivist Laura Camilleri, focusing on the impact it had on Dufferin County. An online exhibit is also available on the museum's website.

?It started as a project that we had given to one of the students in the Digital Historian Project,? explained Julie McNevin, the museum's education programmer. ?From there it kind of got us curious.?

The Spanish Flu began in January 1918, and peaked from the end of the year to spring 1919. It infected 500 million people around the world, including remote areas such as the Arctic and Pacific islands, leaving almost no one safe or untouched. Though it gripped the world for a short time, it claimed 50 to 100 million lives ? three to five per cent of the world's population ? and was the first of two pandemics involving the H1N1 influenza virus.

With World War One dominating the headlines, censorship prevented the public from being informed of the influenza. ?They didn't want to create panic, it was still wartime. You really have to read between the lines to really uncover the true picture of what was happening,? described Ms. McNevin. The exact origin of the pandemic is not certain, but since Spain, neutral during the war, reported freely, it led to the widespread belief that the country was the source, hence its name.

A mass dispersion of civilians from the war-torn areas, and soldiers returning home helped to spread the virus rapidly. Victims were stricken with a sudden onset of shivering, severe headache, pains in their back and legs, and a general feeling of weakness. This was followed by a sore throat, cough and fever. Within as little as a few days to a week, pneumonia would set in, with death following a day or two later. It killed mostly healthy people in their prime, between the ages of 20 to 40, unusual given the typical flu hits the very young and old.

In Canada, some 30,000 to 50,000 were killed, with an estimated 9,000 of them in Ontario, and the Spanish Flu gaining a foothold in Dufferin by October 1918. The museum gained information from news reports from local papers, including the Orangeville Banner, Orangeville Sun and Shelburne Free Press. ?The information was really interesting,? commented Ms. McNevin. ?You would be hard-pressed to find a family with roots in Dufferin County that doesn't have a case of Spanish Influenza in their family history.?

Eight per cent of the population were infected in the County, and 35 people ? 1.94 population percentage ? died from the virus: six each in Amaranth, Mono, Orangeville, and Melancthon, three in Grand Valley, East Garafraxa, and Shelburne, and two in Mulmur. Mulmur had 67 cases, East Garafraxa, Grand Valley, and Shelburne each had 100, and Orangeville, Mono, Amaranth, and Melancthon had about 200 each.

The County sustained a high morbidity (rate of illness), but low mortality (rate of death), in comparison to more densely populated areas of Canada, such as Toronto or Montreal. ?Dufferin fit perfectly into that mould of what historians are saying,? noted Ms. McNevin.

For the survivors, the 1918 Flu left a lasting mark. Those recovering often found symptoms ranging from general weakness to nerve damage or heart conditions affecting their ability to return to a normal life. ?It had this cloud over the community for awhile, and that was something people were keen to forget about and move on,? Ms. McNevin explained.

She added that the virus ?really shut down our communities, towns, and villages,? both economically and socially, as during the height of the epidemic, many businesses, especially those related to entertainment, were closed down. Many suffered a loss of income, and made it difficult for the population as a whole during the Christmas shopping season.

Ms. McNevin said the Spanish Flu changed the medical system, leading to the establishment of the Canadian Department of Health, as before, health boards were left on their own with no protocol to make decisions on how to handle the virus. ?As a result, we have a Federal health organization that controls the messaging of what happens if there is a serious outbreak like this ever again.?

She noted, ?Orangeville had a relatively new hospital by the time the outbreak happened.?

She encourages others to share their stories on the Spanish Flu through a new social engagement platform, www. joinindufferin.ca, which will be launching soon, to help gain more information. ?It's a dark subject, but it was certainly fun to research.?