The influenza pandemic of 1918-1919 killed more people than combat in World War I. Nearly 50 million people died worldwide from the virus, including 675,000 in the United States and 22,000 in the state of New Jersey alone. The American Army suffered 53,402 battlefield deaths and 63,000 deaths from influenza. The death toll in the US exceeded the total of all war deaths going back to the Revolution.

Epidemic disease was anticipated by leading American physicians, scientists, and medical officials in the armed forces. Historically, disease killed more soldiers than enemy bullets in time of war. In the Civil War, nearly 400,000 Civil War soldiers died from disease compared to 200,000 from combat.

Medical breakthroughs in the prewar era and deliberate planning and precautionary measures gave medical officers hope of minimizing the impact of disease in the military forces in this war. Physicians knew how to detect and minimize the impact of typhus and typhoid. Recruits were vaccinated for tetanus, typhoid and smallpox.

Once the influenza entered military camps and ships, however, overcrowding, poor personal hygiene, and massive movements of soldiers, sailors and civilians, combined with the unprecedented ferocity of the virus, meant that no place on earth – from Arctic villages to Pacific Islands – was left untouched.

Waves of Death

The strain of influenza that appeared in 1918 was extraordinary in several respects, and 100 years later is still the subject of scientific investigation. It is thought to have been the result of one or more avian influenza viruses going through what scientists call an “antigenic shift,” a major change that produces a new influenza subtype in humans that was not previously transmitted between people. And it was different:

- It killed young, healthy adults, a group usually least likely to die of influenza
- Its death rate was five to 20 times greater than previous influenza outbreaks, in part because it often led to rapid onset of severe pneumonia. Reports tell of people who were healthy one minute and dead within hours.
- It passed through global populations in three waves in less than a year
  - The first, according to many sources, began in a small town in western Kansas in January and by March it spread to Camp Funston in the eastern part of the state. From there, soldiers were shipped all over the US and to Europe, and took the disease with them, although most who took ill in the first wave survived
  - The second wave, from August to November, was extremely lethal and global in its impact, arising first in Brest, France; Sierra Leone in Africa, and Boston due to movement of troops; it quickly reached troops and communities all over Europe and the United States, as well as China and other places far from the war’s action
    - A steamship brought the disease to Tahiti, where, in Papeete, one seventh of the population died
    - Returning British troops brought influenza to India, where at least 12.5 million people died.
  - The third wave peaked in February – March of 1919 as the troops were preparing to leave for home, and tragically, some who had survived battle were killed by the disease
It came to be called the Spanish flu primarily because the pandemic received greater press attention after the Spanish King Alfonso XIII fell seriously ill with a form of influenza earlier that year. Spain was not involved in the war and had not imposed wartime censorship, so that country’s papers had widespread coverage of the pandemic.

In the US, coverage of the pandemic was guarded, as the Wilson administration enforced strict rules about any news that would demoralize the troops or the country.

The Influenza Pandemic in New Jersey

Like most East Coast cities with shipyards and ports into which Army and Navy troops flooded, Newark was hit hard by the influenza pandemic. The first cases were reported in early September 1918, with the Newark Evening News noting on Sept. 7, “Death Rate for Week in Newark Higher Than Last Week’s Figure.” Camp Dix was quarantined on Sept. 23, and five days later, the newspaper reported that there had been 74 deaths the previous day, and a total of 5,781 cases. At the Caldwell Rifle Range, a naval training facility, several dozen cases of influenza broke out in late September. Within two days the number of cases there jumped from 60 to about 150.

The New Jersey Department of Health quickly moved to address the pandemic threat and on Oct. 5 mandated statewide closings of all public gathering places including churches, theaters, movie houses, dance halls, saloons, and soda fountains, although this decision was not communicated directly to municipalities. Newark, however, under the leadership of Mayor Charles P. Gillen, with the agreement of Health Officer Charles Craster, decided that the closures were too broad, and saloons should stay open to provide bottled liquor “for medicinal purposes”. A fierce political battle ensued between the Mayor and the Governor, the Newark Police Commissioner and the State Health Department. Meanwhile, the number of cases climbed – the Newark Star Eagle cited 250 new cases a day on Oct. 1, and by the 12th some 9,200 cases had been reported and nearly 250 people had died. On Oct. 13, 1,626 people became ill, and the Newark Evening News reported a total of 11,000 cases. Of the 29,000 Newark residents who were stricken with the flu, 2,800 people died within three months of the disease or its complications. Over ten percent of the deaths from influenza in the state of New Jersey occurred in Newark.

Close to Home

Maplewood and South Orange residents reading The Home News saw scant mention of influenza because of a government-enforced policy to downplay negative information. Aside from the occasional obituary of someone who had died from the flu, there was little reference to it until an October 18, 1918 front-page announcement that South Orange District Schools would close for at least two weeks, along with village churches, which were closed “until further notice.” A Hilton barn dance was postponed from October to November “on account of the influenza.”

Soda fountains and saloons were ordered to stop selling drinks “over the counter,” and – much like the Newark rules – could dispense only bottled goods. Compared with Newark, South Orange -- which included much of Maplewood – fared well.

Dr. A.C. Benedict, village physician, told The Home News that there were about 100 cases of influenza, but they were progressing satisfactorily. “Considering the severity of the epidemic in other nearby municipalities,” he said, “South Orange is very fortunate.” On that same day, the paper ran a long article titled “Uncle Sam’s Advice on Flu,” a product of the government’s Committee on Public Information’s flood of news articles. The subhead noted “Epidemic Probably Not Spanish in Origin – Germ Still Unknown.”