

Then & Now

The 1918 Pandemic, Princeton, Massachusetts:

How a doctor's wife, a "ridiculous" woman, a "handsome, full of fun" car collector, and community, fought the "Spanish" Flu in 1918.

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As with the current COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, it is impossible to consider the small town of Princeton, Massachusetts in isolation without acknowledging the worldwide impact of the 1918 "Spanish" flu. From 1918-1919, estimates range that from 20 to 50 million people died worldwide from this fast-moving scourge. It was mistakenly called the *Spanish* flu because common belief was that it originated in Spain. There is no evidence to support this theory, but the name is used to this day.

A frightening characteristic of the 1918 flu is that people were stricken with little warning and many succumbed within twenty-four hours of contracting the disease. Even today's experts at the Center for Disease Control (CDC) agree that "the properties that made it so devastating are not well understood. With no vaccine to protect against influenza infection and no antibiotics to treat secondary bacterial infections that can be associated with influenza infections, control efforts worldwide were limited to non-pharmaceutical interventions such as isolation, quarantine, good personal hygiene, use of disinfectants, and limitations of public gatherings, which were applied unevenly." In other words, communities, like Princeton, were effectively on their own with precious little time to prepare or to treat sick people.

In Massachusetts, the flu was first identified from sailors on a receiving ship in Boston Harbor on August 28th, 1918. By mid-September, 2,000 additional sailors were infected (including a cluster in nearby Camp Devens), and hundreds of civilian cases erupted in the city. By the end of the month, recorded deaths spiked from 19 to 334, and hospitals were overwhelmed with sick patients. The medical response was additionally burdened by a lack of medical personnel due to WWI deployments. This order in 1918 from then Massachusetts Governor, Samuel McCall, has a familiar refrain from the ongoing COVID-19 orders issued by our current Massachusetts' Governor, Charlie Baker:

"On September 24, 1918, Massachusetts Governor, Samuel McCall, issued a proclamation, asking every able-bodied person across the state with medical training to offer his or her aid in fighting the epidemic, and urging local authorities to close schools, places of amusement, churches, and other places where people gathered."

The constrained resources and call to citizenry by Samuel McCall have a strong correlation to the experience of the small town of Princeton, Massachusetts. Although Princeton's population isn't specified, the 1918 Annual Report notes that there were 97 total votes in the state election in September 1918, which handily elected Calvin Coolidge for Governor (1918 was 3-years shy of women getting the right to vote). There were six deaths in Princeton in the autumn of 1918 and, surprisingly considering the raging pandemic, not one was attributed to the flu. In fact, the details for the likely reason for this low death rate is captured by, Catherine Lewis Lennehan in a talk she gave in 1976. Ultimately *a birth* and not deaths, due to a handful of tireless "able-bodied" and resourceful people, is the best representation of Princeton's 1918 flu experience.

The story elements that follow are excerpts of Ms. Lennehan's remembrances of her stepmother, Mrs. Catherine Lewis' role, as well as her two unlikely comrades, Ms. Margaret Jackson and Mr. Carlton Dole, in saving many lives during the 1918 flu pandemic in Princeton.

According to the 1918 Annual Report, "Dr. Elisha S. Lewis" was the "Physician to, and Agent for the Board of Health". Dr. Lewis was Princeton's town doctor (as well as the father of Ms. Lennehan), but like many medical personnel during WWI, he had enlisted and was deployed by the Army. As a doctor's wife, Mrs. Lewis of 18 Mountain Rd. was very familiar with medical practices due to her often accompanying her husband on his medical calls. In fact, she and he were known to read medical journals to each other at the end of the day in their leisure time. So, it was Mrs. Lewis who was called by the very agitated Mrs. Beaman in East Princeton after she checked on her young neighbors, Chester, and his wife, Elinor Drury, because there hadn't been "signs of life for two days".

"Looking in the window she saw them lying on the bed looking almost black. She was too frightened to go in and rushed back to call for help."

Mrs. Lewis immediately drove there to see what she could do. The Drury's "had no phone and were too sick to get out of bed. They had lain there for days without food, water or heat. Mrs. Lewis tried to get them to take sips of water, but was worried if they were left alone, they would certainly die. Also, Mrs. Drury was several months pregnant." Mrs. Lewis phoned her stepdaughter and asked her to locate someone to help the couple, but after many repeated attempts, "everyone had some excuse" and said no.

"Then the phone rang, it was Margaret Jackson of 46 Hubbardston Road who said she heard that I was looking for someone to stay with a sick person and she would be very willing to go." It is worth noting that Margaret Jackson was a bit out of the ordinary for the Princeton folks, and by Ms. Linnehan's description it appears that many, including Mrs. Lewis, thought her odd and didn't take her or her offer to help seriously:

"She spent time in Paris each year and walked about town in short walking skirts wearing two silk sweaters of contrasting colors of purple and gold or rose and navy blue...her gloves always had the cuffs turned back and she carried a cane. At home she lounged in lovely robes and smoked from a long cigarette holder."

Mrs. Lewis immediately rejected this "ridiculous" offer from Margaret for such a serious matter, but realized it was to be her (and the Drury's!) only option. She went to pick up Margaret that evening and it was very dark when she and Margaret arrived at the Drury's. There was little response from the couple, although they were still breathing. Mrs. Lewis directed Margaret to "just sit here and give this hypodermic of strychnine into the arm of the first one who looks as if they are dying." Margaret responded that she "brought a flask of whiskey and cigarettes", so she could make out.

Mrs. Lewis returned the next morning to both Mr. and Mrs. Drury alive. Margaret reported that "2 or 3 times during the night, she thought one or the other was dying, and she gave them a bit of whiskey and the went into the shed for a bit herself." She did not use the strychnine. In Princeton's Annual Report, on December 8, 1918 (3 months later), Rodney C. Drury was born to Chester C. and Elinor P. (Gates) Drury. Father, mother and son were reported to have lived long lives.

Carlton Dole, who lived in what is now Connor Lane, described as “tall, handsome and full of fun” by Ms. Lennehan, and known for his love of cars, heard of Mrs. Lewis’ dogged efforts and “felt she should not go out on calls alone at night and so became her chauffeur.” For weeks, this unlikely threesome of Margaret Jackson, Carlton Dole, and Mrs. Lewis “covered the town night and day caring for those sick with the flu.” In one instance, a “rugged Lithuanian” seventeen-year-old who lived on Mountain Road was delirious with a high fever and Margaret stayed with him for sixty-three hours straight despite his throwing things at her continuously.

Many took sick and the healthy community members responded generously to help the families of the sick by offering labor and also food donations: oranges, juice, fresh fruit, and quarts of chicken broth. All of these were picked up by Carleton Dole and delivered on Mrs. Lewis’ next call.

Chest congestion was a significant threat from the flu and Mrs. Lewis relied on onion poultices to relieve congestion. Mr. Reed of Mountain Road had a very high fever and congested chest. Onions were procured from the Gregory Store, peeled, fried and then put in flannel cloths for poultices. These poultices were kept on his chest throughout the night. He too survived.

Mrs. Lewis was a strong believer in the proactive use of masks. She helped organized “girls” in town to make gauze masks, which she felt “necessary to be worn by those caring for the sick as well as those in the family.”

According to Ms. Lennehan, there were a total of sixty-nine cases of flu in Princeton and not one death. This is likely because of the resolve and hard work of this dedicated threesome going to homes night and day to take care of their neighbors.

Some interesting facts:

- According to the town report, schools were closed for the 122 students from Sept 28-Oct 28.
- Board of Health was appropriated \$300 for 1918 and spent just \$149.5 leaving a balance of \$150.5
- The 1918 World Series between the Boston Red Sox and the Chicago Cubs was played in early-September because of the war, as Boston’s influenza epidemic situation worsened dramatically. The Red Sox won, a feat they wouldn’t repeat for another 86 years.

References:

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Town of Princeton 1918 Annual Report

Catherine Lewis Lennehan, recollections of 1918 influenza, Princeton, Mass. May, 1976