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# WEEKEND BREAK

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# DEADLY SIEGE

## Flu pandemic slammed Pacific County 100 years ago

Centennial of one of mankind's most lethal disasters

By NATALIE ST. JOHN  
*Chinook Observer*

*This story is the first of a two-part series on the 100th anniversary of the 1918-19 flu pandemic and its local impacts.*

**L**ONG BEACH, Wash. — When 21-year-old soldier Carl Hall boarded the S.S. President Grant in Hoboken, New Jersey in September 1918, he was part of a 12-ship convoy bound for the war front in France. The South Bend native knew he was headed for danger, but he had no idea how quickly he'd find it.

Just a few days out of port, a deadly epidemic of Spanish Influenza broke out on the ships. Soon, the 50-bed hospital on the Grant had 700 patients. Surviving soldiers were working their fingers raw sewing the dead into their canvas shrouds. Hall later told the South Bend Journal the first few victims were given full military honors before their burials at sea, but soon, there were so many bodies that formal ceremonies became impractical.

Hall survived both the first lethal wave of the worldwide Spanish Influenza pandemic and the bloody battlefields in Europe. He came home to South Bend in February 1919, just in time to discover that the people of Pacific County were still under siege from flu.

### Plagues on a train

The Spanish flu wasn't Spanish. Historians now believe it probably originated near Fort Riley, Kansas, in March 1918, but it didn't stay there. The entire country was focused on winning the Great War and thousands of patriotic young men and women were daily moving around the state, across the country, and onto ships bound for France. In doing so, they unwittingly helped create a global pandemic that would kill tens of millions of people in the space of about a year.

Pacific County residents read about the pestilence sweeping through the big cities in the Midwest and East, and doubted that such a thing could happen in the isolated towns and deep green forests of western Washington. The editor of the Chinook Observer predicted the "sweet and wholesome" coastal air would keep it from gaining a foothold in Pacific County.

"Everybody comes to Chinook when the outside world is burdened with dangerous contagions," he wrote on Oct. 25.

In mid-September 1918, a trainload of sick soldiers from Philadelphia arrived at a naval yard on Puget Sound. Many of them continued on to Camp Lewis (now Joint Base Lewis-McChord), the Army's regional hub for training and operations. In wartime, thousands of soldiers passed through the Tacoma base on their way to other places, including the military installations in Pacific and Clatsop counties. In late September, Camp Lewis sent three trainloads of soldiers, some of whom were sick, to Fort Stevens, near Warrenton.

By Oct. 2, there were about 120 sick soldiers in the hospital at Fort Stevens, with new cases emerging every day.

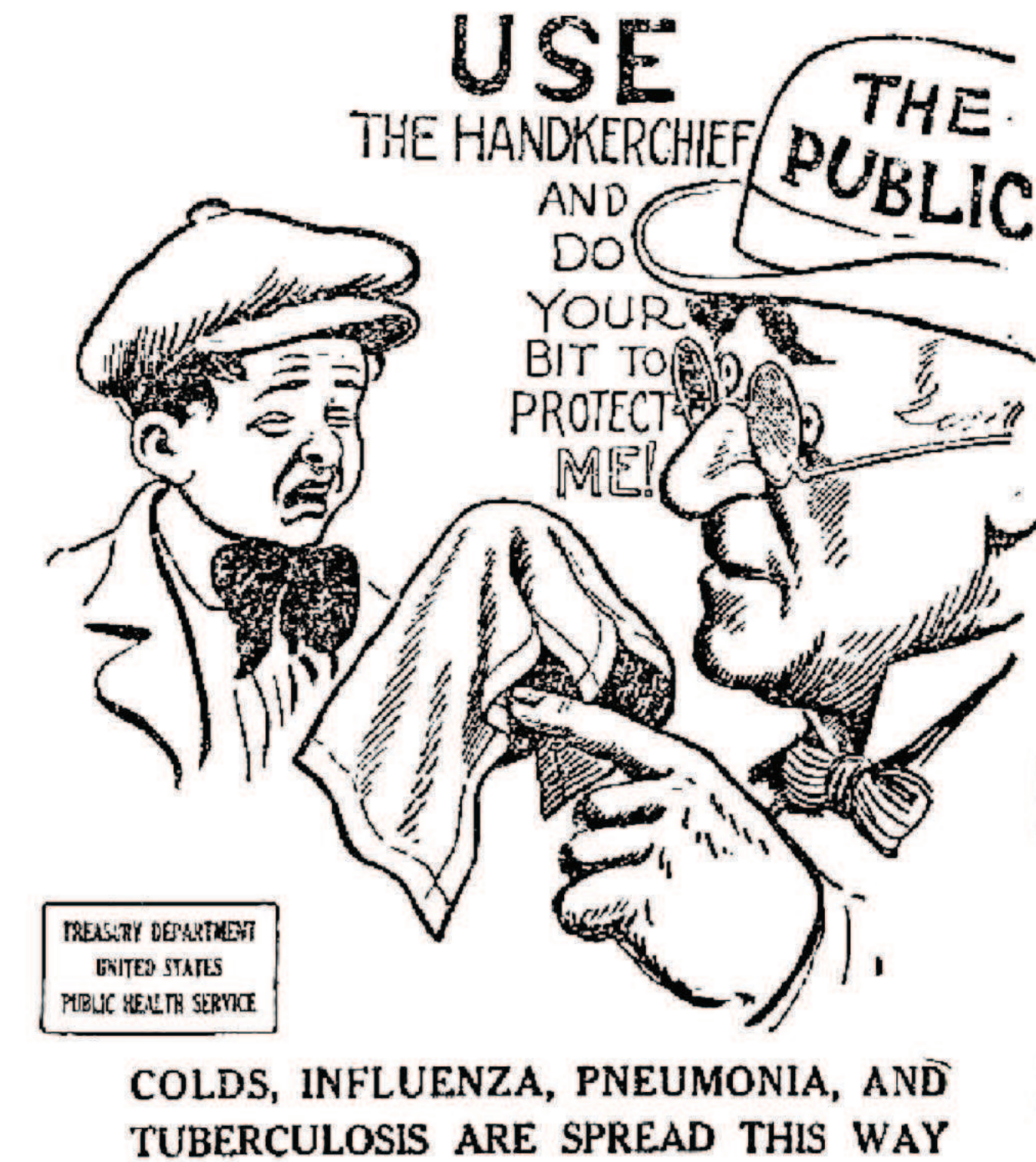
"At last Oregon has been infected with the plague," a Morning Astorian reporter wrote.

### Jumping the river

Fort Stevens was placed under a strict quarantine. Over the next two weeks, acting Astoria Mayor Charles Johnson took increasingly extreme measures to prevent the spread of flu. By mid-October, he had banned public gatherings of any kind. Ilwaco leaders responded quickly, too, shutting down the schools to prevent flu from spreading among children.

Among the first to die were Capt. Harold M. Craig, 40, William Grothaus, 20, and Hjalmar Johnson, 24, at Fort Stevens on Oct. 10. On the Washington side, Fort Canby was quarantined "with ironbound edicts" on the same day, according to the Observer.

Meanwhile, the shipyard and timber camps near Raymond and South Bend were running at full-tilt to support the



A U.S. government public service cartoon aimed to help Americans protect themselves against the deadly 1918 flu.

## Coughs and Sneezes Spread Diseases



As Dangerous as Poison Gas Shells

SPREAD OF SPANISH INFLUENZA  
MENACES OUR WAR PRODUCTION

U. S. Public Health Service Begins Na-  
tion-wide Health Campaign.

In less than a year, the 1918 flu pandemic killed more people than World War I, including many residents around the Columbia River estuary.

war effort. With hundreds of men living and working in close conditions, an outbreak was almost inevitable.

Raymond Mayor E.C. Lawler imposed the county's first full quarantine on Oct. 8 as a preventive measure. It was too late. Grocer Ernest Johnson, his wife, Juanna, and their 5-year-old daughter and 20-month-old son all fell ill at the same time. Reports of illness among the men of the Spruce Division — an army unit dedicated to harvesting timber — began to filter in from the woods.

### Viral stranger danger

A virus is a minuscule piece of DNA, encapsulated in a protein shell. In isolation, it's inert; not really even a living thing. Once it finds a host cell, however, it inserts its genetic material and takes over. The cell becomes a tiny factory, programmed to produce as many new viruses as possible.

The human body develops defenses against familiar viruses, and fights off most within a few days. But every so often, the flu virus mutates, and a novel strain is born. Humans have no immu-

nity to novel strains, and vaccines can't protect against them. As the citizens of Pacific County would find out over the six months between October 1918 and March 1919, an aggressive new flu strain can cause absolute devastation.

While most people who die of flu are very young, very old or already very sick when they become infected, the Spanish flu proved lethal to healthy young adults. It wasted no time in killing them, either. Across the country, newspapers gave stunned accounts of young flu patients who progressed to pneumonia in a matter of hours, turned blue from lack of oxygen, and suffocated as their lungs filled with fluid. Often, by the time a family learned that a loved one was sick, the victim was already dead.

### 'One large grave'

Josephine and Fred Gass had high hopes when they set out from Ord, Nebraska, in the second week of October. The military needed hundreds of new ships to get men and cargo to and from the war front, so New York-based shipbuilding firm Sanderson & Porter was contracted to set up a new shipyard. With its proximity to the Willapa River and thousands of acres of prime timberland, Raymond was an ideal location for building wooden ships, but there weren't enough men in the area to fill the estimated 1,000 new jobs. That created new opportunity for men like 32-year-old Fred, who worked as a steamfitter and plumber, according to census records.

Josephine's brother, Joe Drozda, was already living in Raymond, and had offered them a place to stay, so they decided to move west. But a stuffy, crowded train compartment was the perfect place for the deadly virus to find new hosts. Both caught flu on the trip to Washington. By the time they reached Raymond, Josephine, 29, was gravely ill. They stayed with her brother for two days, but it quickly became clear that the couple needed more care than he could provide. Both were admitted to Riverview Hospital. Josephine died on Oct. 13.

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