

A second look at the 1918 pandemic in Seaside

Quarantines, closures show parallels to coronavirus response

There was an excellent article in the March 29 Astorian newspaper about how Clatsop County and especially Astoria was affected by the 1918 flu pandemic, and recent articles in the Signal also chronicled those times in Seaside.

I did a little of my own research regarding the Spanish influenza pandemic, and how Seaside weathered the influenza through the lens of the Seaside Signal in 1918.

Leading up to the pandemic, World War I was the main subject on everyone’s minds.

For all of 1918, newspapers were full of patriotism, war bond fundraising and encouraging everyone to do their part. Almost every ad and article focused on the war effort. Seaside sent quite a few soldiers to the war and letters from the soldiers were posted weekly on the front page of the paper. The editor E.N. Hurd would mail the Seaside Signal overseas to the soldiers to keep them connected to home, and they usually wrote back giving updates from the front.

Seaside successfully raised more than double their allotment in war bonds and proudly flew an “over the top” flag in front of city hall to show how much they had



Seaside Signal

raised. They were asked to raise \$14,000 in 1918 and received over \$40,000 in pledges in just a few weeks time.

Children in Seaside were focused on “victory” or war gardens to do their part and in the spring it was noted that 92 kids in Seaside had war gardens. People were encouraged to go meat free and both sugar and flour were rationed. Sugar was limited to three pounds of sugar per person per month, including “dipped out of the bowl” at restaurants.

For every pound of flour purchased, a pound of cornmeal or other alternative was also to be purchased as supplement. The main promotion of movies in the movie theater were either war shorts or movies based around the



BETWEEN THE COVERS
ESTHER MOBERG

war although others like “The Little Princess” played as well.

In February there was a measles outbreak and the high school was briefly closed, with no outside visitors to Seaside.

In yet another parallel to recent events now, a solar eclipse occurred in June. People were encouraged to go out and view it, with no mention of protective eyewear or damage to eyes if someone looked straight at the sun.

In this context, influenza was introduced to Seaside.

According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, often referred to as “Spanish flu,” the pandemic of 1918 had high mortality rates in children under age 5, adults age 20 to 40 and those over 65.

In those days, only the very wealthy traveled overseas or those who were either in the Army or immigrating. Most people in the county did not go further than Portland or north Washington on trips, and those trips were usually planned to take several days if not weeks.

Because of limited travel, the 1918 flu was first spread by soldiers in the spring but did not

reach Clatsop County until that fall. Most deaths were noted as pneumonia back then so it was hard at first to separate the cause of death. It was interesting that many in their 30s in Seaside were mentioned as having the flu or influenza during this time.

Seaside City Council shut down the city on Oct. 12. For about five weeks, from Oct. 12 to Nov. 15, a quarantine order was in effect in Seaside. The schools closed and all forms of entertainment shut down as well as “congregations,” or group gatherings, not allowed. Locally stationed Army officers and city officials put out health information and closed businesses.

In the first few weeks, Astoria had about 500 cases and 20 deaths, while Seaside had 30 cases and one death. From what was mentioned in the newspaper, Astoria peaked around 2,000 sick total with 72 deaths while Seaside ended up with approximately 70 to 100 sick and five to 10 deaths from influenza recorded.

During the peak of the quarantine, the Oates Natatorium hotel was used for those who needed a place to convalesce. The Red Cross provided the beds with sheets and pillow cases but donations of sheets were also requested.

On Thursday, Nov. 14, at the top of the Seaside Signal front page, a black bannered notice was put out reading: “Quarantine raised Friday.”

“After an interview with the health and army officers, Mayor L.L. Paget announced today that the closing order that has been in effect in this city for the past five weeks will be lifted Friday.”

It was noted that “through strict observance of the quarantine laws, Seaside has about rid itself of the dreaded disease.”

There was also a statement that there were just four mild cases left in the city. In the Nov. 21 Seaside Signal: “Seaside is now free from the influenza and business is commencing to pick up once more after a standstill for several weeks.”

During that time the lists of deaths and people ill with influenza were posted on the front page of the Signal, most posted as ill usually a reassuring note that they were well on the way to recovery.

As the quarantine lifted, Seaside seemed to quickly recover and go back to the bustling coastal town it was before the pandemic.

Let us hope that our recovery from the current coronavirus pandemic be just as swift, with hopefully a little more knowledge regarding best practices, even as we follow social distancing practices similar to what were encouraged in 1918.

The best way to not spread germs still seems to hold true even after 100 years to keeping distance and allowing time for quarantining germs.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Avoiding pesticides almost impossible if sheltering in place

Pesticide notifications are meaningless if you are not able to leave your home to avoid the sprays when sheltering in place.

Industrial timber companies are required to notify households that spraying will commence at some point, but are not required to give 24 hour notice. Even though “notice to spray” often covers a very broad period of time, at least those notices have given at-risk individuals an opportunity to leave their homes or work places to avoid pesticides.

Now at a time of sheltering in place, however, those who have sought spray notifications in the past will not be able to go elsewhere without exposing themselves to potential coronavirus.

A 24-hour notice requirement was part of the proposed memorandum of agreement between timber corporations and environmental organizations. That agreement had to be temporarily put aside when the Oregon Legislature failed to achieve a quorum because Republican lawmakers walked out of the legislature.

North Coast Communities for Watershed Protection, along with the Native Fish Society, are asking the state to impose a spray

ban immediately as well as a ban on slash and prescribed burning. Many, perhaps most, people who have died from COVID-19 have had underlying health issues, usually compromised pulmonary function. Adding pesticides to the mix endangers those individuals, regardless of age, and creates risks for otherwise healthy individuals.

Citizens living on the Oregon Coast and in the coast range are concerned that with potential exposure to the novel coronavirus, toxic chemicals in the air from smoke and pesticide spraying puts health at even more risk. In many rural areas, aerial spraying is done near highly vulnerable populations, including near health care facilities,

long-term convalescent homes and communities with many people older than 60. NCCWP requests Governor Brown issue an executive order banning all prescribed burning and aerial pesticide spraying. Prescribed burning and aerial pesticide spraying are not essential activities, but merely cheap, quick ways to boost corporate profits. At this critical time, public health should outweigh profit-taking.

Write, email, or call Gov. Kate Brown and ask for an immediate statewide halt to aerial pesticide spraying, and initiate a statewide ban on prescribed burning.

Nancy Webster Rockaway

Rescue: Trained his whole life

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The ocean was rough and the victim couldn’t be seen without binoculars.

Seaside firefighters and Oregon State Police located the victim about 500 yards from shore in the rough ocean surf, and communicated the information to Rankin, a rescue swimmer.

Realizing there wasn’t time to wait for the Coast Guard to arrive, Rankin suited up and swam 300 yards through rough waters before spotting the victim near a sandbar.

“The day I went out in the ocean at first I didn’t think anything of it,” Rankin recalled. “We saw the person and I felt confident I could get out and get him. As I was swimming out there, I starting thinking, ‘This is crazy, what are you doing out here right now?’

““Oh, that’s right, you’ve trained for this type of thing your entire life,” he said. ““Someone is depending on you to help them, keep going,” he said. “Once I got out in the ocean it took me awhile to locate him and I initially I swam up to a floating tree.”

Once he got to it he got a little discouraged thinking maybe that’s what he had seen from the beach.

“Then I looked at the water and studied it for a second and realized I needed to go further north so I started swimming again.”

The heavy surf made it difficult to locate the victim, but Rankin was able to spot the individual near a sandbar.

As he swam, he came up over a wave. “The victim was right in front of me, so I just started yelling and waving and he turned and focused on me.”

People drowning need something to focus on to keep their drive going to stay alive, Rankin said.

“Once I got to him I hon-



Seaside Signal
Seaside Fire Department Division Chief David Rankin.

estly didn’t think we could make it back in to shore,” he said. “My plan was to pull my flotation and wait with him for the helicopter. But once I realized he wasn’t doing good, he showed all the signs of hypothermia. Beside shivering and not focusing, he seemed defeated and ready to give up. I figured I had to try and make it to shore.”

The victim held onto a rescue can while Rankin paddled toward the Gearhart side of the estuary, battling a heavy rip current and breaking waves.

Facing a heavy rip current, Rankin realized it would be easier to change direction and swim north. “So after I gave him instructions I gave it everything I had.”

Once they broke the rip current, it was an easy trip in, he said.

But the challenge wasn’t over.

“Once we were able to start walking he got worse and started talking about stopping and resting,” Rankin said. “We still were waist-to-chest deep so I kept going and telling him to hold me. I told him ‘We’re not done yet.’ As we got closer (firefighter) Josh Como from Gearhart waded out and helped me. By that

RECOGNITION AT CITY HALL

“Our public safety people are top notch, they’re well-trained and we’re very proud of them,” City Manager Mark Winstanley said at the Seaside’s Monday night electronic meeting.

“This is the caliber of people working for our fire department and working for our city,” City Councilor Tita Montero said. “We can’t thank them enough. We really can’t. Congratulations. He deserves every bit of the recognition.”

time it seemed like I was supporting him as much as I could give. We both grabbed under an arm and walked him in.”

Gearhart Fire was there to meet Rankin and transport the victim.

Although “exhausted and cold,” fire officials said at the time, the 17-year-old was conscious and able to walk out on his own.

Rankin later received an email from a firefighter in eastern Washington telling him they were friends with the patient and they were all “extremely thankful,” Rankin said. “A week or so later I received an email from the father thanking me, but otherwise I haven’t been in communication with them.”

Rankin is a full-time firefighter and division chief of operations with Seaside Fire and Rescue since October 2012. The medal will be delivered at a ceremony later this year.

“Today I’ve had people from all over the state and country send messages,” he said. “It feels good ... but I think anyone with the same training, experience and equipment would have done what I did that day.”

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