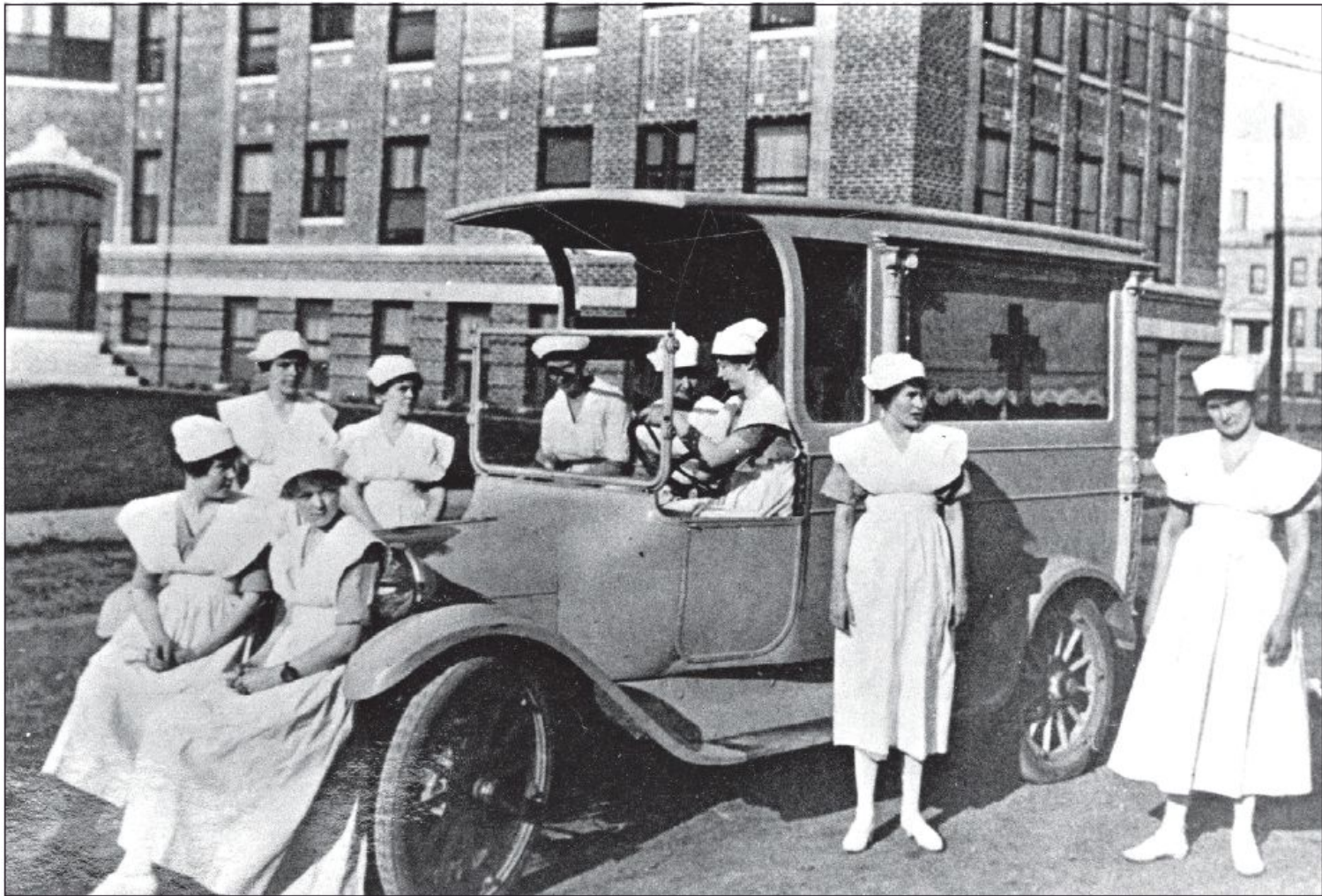


# Spanish Flu

South Plains struggled through 1918 pandemic



**Lubbock Sanitarium's first nursing class poses in front of the Sanitarium, 1918. The hospital treated many Spanish Flu patients. [PHOTO COURTESY OF SOUTHWEST COLLECTION, TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY]**



**Chuck Lanehart**

*Editor's Note: Caprock Chronicles is edited by Jack Becker, a Librarian at Texas Tech University Libraries. He can be reached at jack.becker@ttu.edu. This week's article, part 1 of 2, is by Chuck Lanehart on the history of the 1918 "Spanish Flu" pandemic in the Lubbock area and the challenges it brought to the community.*

Between 1918 and 1920, the "Spanish Flu" killed as many as 50 million people worldwide, one of the deadliest pandemics in history. A half million Americans died, including about 25,000 Texans. Residents of the Texas South Plains were struck hard by the virus.

No reliable statistical data has survived, so it is not known how many Lubbock and area residents fell ill from influenza, but at least 10



**A nurse takes a patient's pulse in the influenza ward at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, DC, Nov. 1, 1918.** [LIBRARY OF CONGRESS]

died. A review of local newspaper accounts illustrates an 18-month epic struggle with a silent killer in rural Texas.

Lubbock was a very small town in 1918, with a population of less than 4,000, and no more than 90,000 people occupied the 24 counties of the Texas South Plains. Most lived in farming communities.

Radio broadcasts would not reach the South Plains for several years, so newspapers were the only form of mass communication available to disseminate health warnings,

official proclamations and other essential information. The Lubbock Avalanche was published weekly, so updates were delayed.

World War I soldiers were the first Americans struck by the illness, and news of the impending crisis appeared in the Avalanche on Sept. 26, 1918. "Spanish influenza has made its appearance in at least 25 army camps over the country. The surgeon general's office announced tonight that the total number of cases has increased to 20,211, including 2,225 new

cases reported today. Seven camps reported influenza for the first time today."

On Oct. 10, several flu illnesses were reported in a dispatch from the Center community, and the first death in Lubbock was published in the Avalanche. "Mrs. D.R. Cypert died Friday afternoon of pneumonia, developing from a severe case of influenza. Deceased's husband was unable to accompany her remains, as he was also sick of the same trouble."

A week later, the epidemic forced local authorities to shutter the city for two weeks, as reported by the Avalanche. Mayor C.E. Parks ordered all public places and gatherings closed. "All public and private schools, music classes and other places of instruction, churches, societies, clubs, club-meeting, picture shows, lodges, club rooms, and pool and billiard halls shall be closed, and business and social entertainments, public gatherings and people gathering and congregating on the streets, in business houses, hotels

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and restaurants, except for the transaction of such business as shall be absolutely necessary, be and the same are hereby prohibited."

Grocers, hotels and restaurants remained open with specific instructions for sanitary services, including "articles shall be sterilized or boiled after using and before serving another person therewith."

When the shutdown ended, a front-page *Avalanche* article, "Epidemic Is Still Raging, But Physicians Believe Conditions Are Improved," outlined rules for healthy behavior.

Most rules reflected current-day flu health advice, but other rules now seem archaic.

"Have sufficient fire in the home to disperse the dampness. Open your windows at night. If cool weather prevails, add extra bed clothing. Boil all dishes."

An attempt to combat the crisis with war-time humor appeared in an Oct. 31 letter to the *Avalanche*: "I am just recovering from a severe attack of that fearful disease that the Kaiser has introduced in this country called the Spanish 'Influence.' How he can command so much 'badness' is more than I can understand. First it was the 'German Measles.' The next trouble I am looking for him to send over here is the 'Turkish Catarrh' and the 'Bulgarian Gout.' But what we most need right now is a 'Universal Peace' and a cessation of arms. Everybody in these parts are about over the 'Influence' and are busy saving their crops."

Lubbock schools re-opened in mid-November with a hopeful comment in the *Avalanche*, "It is the general opinion that all epidemic is well spent and the greatest danger is now passed."

The optimism soon faded, and the Dec. 12 *Avalanche* was filled with bad health news and multiple flu obituaries on the front page. The mayor reinstated a strict city shutdown through Dec. 29, with violators facing fines up to \$25.

When restrictions ended, the *Avalanche* reported "quite a number of flu cases developed," but public gatherings and church services resumed. Meanwhile, the newspaper itself was "badly handicapped," as employees were struck by influenza.

As the epidemic continued, an editorial in the Jan. 16, 1919,

*Avalanche* expressed frustration that the "very best authority was bested" by influenza. The newspaper questioned whether the Lubbock City Commission's restrictions were of any use. "It seems that it has had little effect on stamping the disease out of the community."

Over the next year, however, the *Avalanche* published only a smattering of news articles concerning the influenza epidemic, and there were no official announcements restricting schools, churches or public gatherings.

Advertisements for dubious patent medicine flu remedies were common, including "Scott's Emulsion, Peruna and Dr. Pierce's Pleasant Pellets."

By 1920, the Spanish flu epidemic was over, making way for the Roaring Twenties.