

# Spanish Influenza Epidemic in Osceola 1918-1919

## INTRODUCTION

It is no secret that I was disappointed after completing both volumes of *Osceola From the Beginning*. After researching all sources that I knew to be available, I could provide only a very limited summary of the Spanish Influenza epidemic that hit Osceola between October 1918 and March 1919. I stopped looking for new information after completing that portion of Volume II. This was such a traumatic time for Osceola and the rest of the world really. There was a typhoid fever epidemic the year before and the world was at war (WWI). In fact, the armistice for World War I was signed in the middle of the epidemic in Osceola.

After I had completed my latest research on the subject, The Pennsylvania General Assembly passed a law that Death Certificates should not be confidential indefinitely, and could be made public after a period of 50 years. As a result, the Pa Department of Health, along with the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, made public all Pennsylvania Death Certificates from 1906 to 1963. 1906 was the first year that Death Certificates were required and 1963 was the last year of availability under the law passed in 2014. This law was patterned after the federal law which keeps all US Census data confidential for a period of 72 years.

I was unaware that this information had been made public until, after finishing *Osceola Mills From the Beginning*, I returned to my genealogy hobby. Shortly after the law was passed the Museum Commission made available to Ancestry.com almost 2000 cartons of Death Certificates. These documents were scanned and made available several months ago to those with a Ancestry.com membership.

After receiving an email from Ancestry.com concerning this new data base, I began checking it out and found out that it was extremely useful in researching data missing for some of my ancestors. Although the format for the death certificate changed slightly over the years, the following information is included.

Full Name	Age and marital status
Sex	Place of Birth and Death
Race	Occupation
Father's name and place of birth	Date of death
Mother's maiden name and place of birth	Cause of death
Other contributing factors	Place of burial

It didn't take long for it to "dawn" on me that it might be possible for me to isolate the number of deaths attributable to the Spanish Flu in Osceola, Rush and Decatur Townships. Also, it would be possible to make other inferences from the data as well. It wasn't the easiest task I have ever undertaken, but eventually I succeeded in gathering the data. The Ancestry.com search function was very

useful, but it was not possible to design a search that would be narrow enough to isolate victims of the Spanish Influenza epidemic. The more facts you know the smaller the list that satisfies the criteria. However, I often had to sift through several thousand records to find victims of the flu. I basically knew the place of death (County, and/or Borough or Township) and that the deaths occurred in two different years, 1918 and 1919. The search function automatically expands your request, for years of death for example, which also gave me an even larger list of indexed records.

I don't claim to be 100% correct. However, I feel the tables provided are pretty close to the actual numbers. Some errors in the data are bound to occur due to the handwriting of the person filling out the form and the knowledge of the person providing the data, usually a spouse, son or daughter. Spelling of the names is usually as bad as Census takers and in some instances the data is not known, such as the birth places of the mother and father and the maiden name of the mother. To give an example, the biggest stumbling block in my family tree is that my maternal grandfather always listed his place of birth as simply Wales. You can imagine how many John Jones were born in Wales in any year; usually 2000 to 3000. In the case of the flu epidemic, I had to work backwards from other points of data to a name

Other anomalies of the data occurred when a person died in Osceola, Decatur Township or Rush Township but they were not a resident. They might have been visiting a son, daughter or parent. Of course, there were most likely some deaths that occurred where residents of Osceola died while out of town. Perhaps these numbers offset or are at least similar in number. Also, without a doubt, nearby residents of Rush and Decatur Township would have been brought to the Osceola school when it served as a hospital. The Death Certificate was filed under the municipality where a person died, even if it wasn't their usual residence. I found some of these cases, but surely I may have missed a few. Also, a factor relating to the overall impact of the flu epidemic were the cases where a mother or father born or still living in Osceola, Decatur Township or Rush Township lost a son or daughter with a permanent residence outside the area. I found several cases like this as well. Of course, these cases were not included as Osceola fatalities. The same situation occurred when I researched the Osceola World War fatalities.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Spanish Flu is often called the forgotten or overlooked Pandemic. It is usually not a part of the American History curriculum. At least it was never included in any history course I took in high school or college. My interest in

researching the topic came about by the stories that my father told me. He was a 10 year old boy during the Spanish Flu epidemic and had a very vivid memory of that time period. Luckily he lived on a farm at the time and thus had a limited risk of exposure. There were more deaths from the Spanish Flu than the Plague which lasted 4 years between 1347 and 1351. More people died from the Spanish Flu than have died from Aids in the past 25 years. About 500 million people worldwide were affected, which was 3% to 5% of the world population. Without accurate records in many areas of the world, it can only be estimated statistically that 50 to 100 million people died between January 1918 to December 1920, the generally accepted length of the epidemic.

The epidemic swept through the Osceola area between October 1918 and March 1919. The Philadelphia area was just coming out the epidemic with a very high mortality rate. That could be expected with such a high concentration of people in that geographical area.

The first recorded case in the US was in Haskell County, Kansas in January 1918. Two months later a cook at Fort Riley, Kansas became ill with the flu on March 4, 1918. A week later on the 11<sup>th</sup> of March, there were 100 soldiers in the hospital and a few days later the number of cases rose to 512. This demonstrates how highly contagious this strain of the flu was. Again, the close quarters and concentrated movements of the soldiers worsened the situation. With travel being relatively easy in those days, the disease reached Queens, New York a week later. It is somewhat of an oddity that the Spanish Flu did not hit the Osceola area until almost 7 months later in October 1918.

Just before the virus reached the Osceola area, it mutated into a more virulent strain that was first found in France and Sierra Leone in August 1918. As this new virus was later sweeping through Spain, the media got it wrong again by calling it the Spanish Influenza.

Influenza cases or epidemics were not new. However, those most vulnerable were usually the young, the very old and those with preexisting conditions that reduced their resistance. The victims of the Spanish Flu were mostly young adults between the ages of 18 and 40. Pregnant women were especially vulnerable. The deaths that occurred in the Osceola area followed that pattern.

Osceola was not alone in being unprepared for the epidemic, even though there was a reasonable advance warning. Flu cases peaked at about 750 in the Osceola area very quickly in the fall of 1918. It is quite possible that the total number of cases was somewhere between 1000 and 2000. The epidemic moved so rapidly and there were no systems in place to handle anything close to such a large number of cases. Obviously, there was a shortage of Doctors, nurses, undertakers and even grave diggers. There were cases where patients died

before they even had an opportunity to see a Doctor. Imagine a few Doctors trying to treat so many flu patients. There were only 3 doctors treating patients in the Osceola and nearby portions of Decatur and Rush Townships. Drs. George Ricketts and Robert Jackson treated most of the patients and Dr. Austin Lynn was involved to a lesser degree. All Doctors worked tirelessly. Dr. Jackson was eventually taken ill himself but he survived.

The school and all the businesses were closed in October 1918. A few of the businesses opened for the Christmas season, but the school did not reopen until early 1919. The school was turned into a hospital that handled up to 50 patients at one time. It is not known how many total patients were treated at the school during the approximately three months it served as a hospital. Imagine a few Doctors trying to make house calls to families stricken by the flu. It was not unusual for the flu to have worked its way through entire families or with entire large families being ill at the same time. I can't think of an easy method to estimate the number of children who lost a parent; often the head of household or main wage earner. I am sure the list would be extensive.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

It should be noted that Influenza was very seldom the actual cause of death during the epidemic. The flu, which lasted for 3 to 5 days, left a person's immune system in a weakened state leading to pneumonia which became the actual cause of death in a vast majority of the cases. There was no real treatment for pneumonia. You were kept comfortable with cold compresses and like treatments for the fever. You either survived the fever brought on by the fluid in your lungs or you died. The fatality rate for pneumonia was very high. In fact, pneumonia was one of the highest, if not the highest, cause of death before and after the Spanish Flu epidemic. This makes it difficult to make an accurate list of Spanish Influenza victims. For nearly all the victims I document, pneumonia was listed as the cause of death with influenza as a contributing factor. The few exceptions are a few names that were published in newspapers as victims of the Spanish Influenza. Often the cause of death was listed as simply "Influenza followed by pneumonia." The biggest weakness of this research is there were many cases where pneumonia was listed as cause of death and Influenza was not listed as a contributing factor. Therefore, any error in my numbers is on the low side.

Based on my research, I have developed a list of 140 victims of the Spanish Influenza: 57 in the Borough of Osceola, 41 in Decatur Township and 42 in Rush Township. Of the 140, 87 were male and 53 were female. For ease of reference, I have included three tables all with different sorts. Table 1 is sorted by municipality and date of death within that municipality. Place of residence didn't matter to the person filling out the death certificate. It was where the person died,

not where they may have resided. Table 2 is sorted by date of death only and Table 3 is an alphabetical sort of names. Table 2 allows you to draw several conclusions about the death toll over time. Consider the following data;

<b>Week of 1918/1919</b>	<b>Number of deaths due to Spanish Flu</b>
Oct. 6 – 12	1
Oct. 13 – 19	8
Oct. 20 – 26	21
Oct. 27 – Nov. 2	26
Nov. 3 – 9	10
Nov. 10 – 16	6
Nov. 17 – 23	1
Nov. 24 – 30	5
Dec. 1 – 7	4
Dec 8 – 14	12
Dec. 15 – 21	11
Dec. 22 – 28	6
Dec. 29 – Jan. 4	9
Jan. 5 – 11	4
Jan. 12 – 18	5
Jan. 19 – 25	1
Jan 26 – Feb. 1	0
Feb. 2 – 8	2
Feb. 9 – 15	1
Feb. 16 – 22	0
Feb. 23 – 28	0
Mar. 1 – 7	3
Mar 8 – 14	1
Mar 15 – 21	2
Mar 22 – 28	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>140</b>

The first Spanish Influenza Osceola area fatality (Robert Hamilton Kroft from Osceola) occurred on October 8, 1918. As can be seen from the above data and an examination of Table 2, the epidemic peaked very early with 47 deaths in the two weeks between October 20<sup>th</sup> and November 2<sup>nd</sup>. This accounts for about a third of total deaths. The deaths began to decrease in the subsequent weeks with another peak occurring during the two week period between December 8<sup>th</sup>

and December 21<sup>st</sup>. The 23 deaths during this time account for about one sixth of the total deaths. There were 5 deaths on a single day on October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> and December 13<sup>th</sup>.

Using census data and the few newspaper accounts available, further research on families provided the following information. Too much happened between 1910 and 1920 Censuses to research all the families and children affected.

Miles Hoover and his two sons: Lawrence, age 18 and Edward, age 14 all died from influenza followed by pneumonia. Agnes Hoover was left with at least three other children under the age of 18. Approximately ages were 9, 12 and 15. There were at least three other adult children.

John and Mary McGrath, who lived in Decatur Township, lost three children to Influenza; Agnes and Sarah, both aged 15 and James Francis, age 19. The McGraths had two other children in 1918 that survived

Although it could not be independently verified by Census data, Max and Peter Brillo, both age 16 and Mike Brillo, age 27, were listed on the Death Certificates and sons of a John Brillo. Mike Brillo may have had his own family.

Eliot Buckwalter, age 26 and his wife Mae, age 25, were both victims of the Spanish Flu.

Annie, age 7 months, and Mike Coleman, age 2 were the children of John Coleman.

Laura and Zenoviah Cowher were sisters and both were teachers.

William Patrick, age 23, and Thomas Edward, age 19, were sons of Patrick and Ellen Hughes Foley. They had 4 other children in 1918 and at least 4 other children were born after the Spanish Flu epidemic. They lived on Mill Street in Osceola.

Margaret Keller, age 23, had a baby prematurely. Actually, it was aborted. The abortion was done to try to save the mother who was suffering from the effects of influenza. Both the mother and the baby boy died. The cause of death of both the mother and son was recorded as influenza.

**Anthony, age 7, Thomas and Nellie, both age 2, were the children of John and Mary Malinowski. The Malinowskis had 5 other children in 1918 that survived and another child was born after 1918.**

**Edna Williams was the daughter of Milo Hoyt, the original builder and owner of the Osceola House. Edna was the wife of Melvin Williams and their son was Clayton Williams of Stumptown.**

**Edward Yingling, age 7 months and William Yingling, age 1 were the children of Theodore and Helen Mays Yingling. The Yinglings had one other child in 1918 and he survived the epidemic. They had at least 5 other children after 1918 and the family moved to Indiana, Pa sometime after 1920.**

**There are several other common last names where no definite relationship could be found. They would have been cousins, aunts, or uncles at most since Death Certificates did not list the same fathers name or a father/mother/child relationship could not be established. Also, they could have been related only by marriage. They include:**

**The Graboskis; Jacob, age 10, Helen, age 27 and Jessie, age 34**

**The Pearsons; Fannie McPhail, age 39, Oscar, age 26, and Allen Leonard, age 2,**

**The Richards; Josiah, age 68, Newton E., age 38, and Christina, age 32.**

**The Roachs; Patrick, age 33 and Tressa, age 87. Tressa, by far, was the oldest victim of the epidemic.**

**The Wades; Orlando, age 30, and William Lawrence, age 11 months.**

**Edna Williams mentioned above, age 42, and Harriet May Williams, age 29.**

**Albert Wilson, age 47 and James Brown Wilson, age 39.**

## **OTHER DEATHS**

Since I was already checking every Death Certificate for residents of Osceola and Decatur and Rush Townships, it took a little more work but I developed a fairly complete necrology for the Osceola Area. There were a total of 84 deaths that occurred during the same time period as the Spanish Influenza epidemic. That time period was from October 1, 1918 to March 31, 1919. Therefore, the total of all deaths during this six month period was 224.

The 84 deaths can be broken down into the following causes:

<b>Pneumonia</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Stillborn births</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Gastro enteritis</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Heart disease</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Burns/Explosion</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Premature births</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Apoplexy</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Tuberculosis</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Mine Accidents</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Railroad Accidents</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Meningitis</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Nephritis</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Cancer</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Convulsions</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Brickyard Accident</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Drowning</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Infection</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Cholera</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Hernia</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Brights Disease</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Cerebral Hemorrhage</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Colitis</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Food Poisoning</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>84</b>

The first obvious observation of the additional 84 deaths is that pneumonia far exceeds any other cause. The 28 pneumonia deaths account for exactly one third of the total of 84. I have no doubt that some of the 28 pneumonia deaths

were preceded by the Spanish Influenza. The number of pneumonia deaths was always high, but a full one third seems higher than normal after having looked at countless Death Certificates. However, if the Doctor couldn't bring himself to add Influenza as a contributing factor, I certainly can't. Often the Doctor signing the Death Certificate only saw the patient on the day they died or a few days before they died. They were past the influenza stage and already had advanced pneumonia.

## **CONCLUSION**

Osceola and the surrounding area suffered great loss during this time period. Looking at a sample of Death Certificates between 1915 and 1920 gave a good picture of the dangerous conditions facing every family. Three of the deaths of the 84 summarized above were Brillo children of Rush Township, ages 8, 7 and 5 who died in a bonfire that got out of control. There were horrific accidents, both in the mines and on railroad facilities. The number of stillborn and premature children was very high. In fact, the infant mortality (say birth to 2 years) was higher than any other age group.

Another interesting fact was that Lt. Harry B. Peters was killed in action in France on October 15, 1918. This was just as the Spanish Influenza epidemic was beginning to peak here at home. His parents were not officially notified until January 1919.