

FIRST DRAFT

Gunnison quarantine likely slowed spread of 1918 virus

In October of 1918, the virus known as Spanish influenza was already rampaging across the globe. It had killed hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, as troops and civilians on the move in World War I helped spread it almost everywhere.

In Colorado, as in other states, communities took action they hoped would stem the spread of the virulent disease that seemed to hit young adults harder than anyone.

The governor issued a proclamation on Oct. 15 urging communities to close schools, churches, government buildings and anywhere people gathered in large numbers. Most towns did just that.

Businesses in Denver were ordered closed on two different occasions. People who showed any sign of the disease were ordered quarantined in most communities, along with their families. And "Not Welcome" signs were hung in a number of locales to discourage visitors.

Few areas, however, imposed quarantine restrictions as strict as Gunnison County and the town of Gunnison.

After the Gunnison County commissioners and Gunnison town officials gave him authority to implement a quarantine in late October, county physician Dr. F.P. Hanson ordered what he called "a strict quarantine to be placed on Gunnison County against the world. Barricades and fences have been erected on all main highways near the county lines."

Perhaps more importantly, railroad passengers were closely monitored. They could only disembark in Gunnison if they agreed to a four-day quarantine at the La Veta Hotel in the town.

A Montrose man who was returning home from the Front Range reported that "when his train approached the railway station in Gunnison, the conductor entered the coach in which he and many others were riding and announced that any person who alighted the train, and even stepped on the platform there, would be escorted by an officer to quarantine," according to the Cañon City Record.

When a clergyman from Salida arrived in Gunnison in early November, 1918, to conduct a funeral for a former parishioner who died of influenza near Gunnison, he received special treatment.

"He was taken in charge by a policeman, put into an automobile, conducted to the residence, and after the service, taken back to the depot and held under guard until the train for Salida departed," the Salida Mail reported.

And when a Grand Junction man who died of the flu was sent to be buried near his mother in Gunnison, other protections were enacted.

"The remains, in a hermetically sealed casket, will be taken from the train in Iola (a small town later buried by Blue Mesa Reservoir)," the Montrose Daily Press reported.

There, the body was to be met by a hearse "and conveyed around Gunnison to the



BOB SILBERNAGEL



NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Emergency hospital at Brookline, Massachusetts, to care for influenza cases.

cemetery without passing thru Gunnison."

A traveling optometrist named E.F. Burnett was prompted to take out an advertisement in a Crested Butte newspaper in late November to inform prospective patients he was still coming.

"I am taking quarantine detention in Gunnison and will be at the Elk Mountain Hotel, Crested Butte," beginning the following Sunday afternoon through Monday afternoon, he wrote.

Even locals had trouble returning to Gunnison if they left. Another Montrose Daily Press story told of Sam Staples, an official of a coal mine near Gunnison who visited Montrose in mid-November of 1918.

"He can't get back into Gunnison County on account of the rigid flu quarantine," the paper said. "While people are allowed to pass thru the county, no one is allowed to come and remain."

Still, the Montrose newspaper found much to admire in the Gunnison quarantine as influenza deaths mounted to near 100 in Montrose County.

On Dec. 27, 1918, it published "A Call to Montrose," urging citizens of that community to enact quarantine rules like those in Gunnison and neighboring Delta County.

"These rules have been followed very largely in Gunnison and Delta, two of the towns in Colorado where there have been the smallest number of fatalities — Gunnison with two deaths at last accounts, and Delta with 20 at last reports," the Press noted.

It's not clear whether Montrose enacted rules exactly like Gunnison. But late in the year, Montrose County posted armed guards at Colona to turn back travelers from Ouray and Silverton, where the flu outbreak had been particularly severe.

In Grand Junction in early October, the Mesa County Board of Health ordered all "schools, churches and other public meeting places" closed.

The edict came after the first death from the influenza was recorded in Mesa County.

On Oct. 31, the American Red



The conductors and passengers on a Seattle streetcar wore cloth masks to protect themselves from infection during the 1918-1919 influenza outbreak.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Cross opened an emergency hospital in Grand Junction to treat and quarantine flu patients, and the director of the hospital made a public plea through The Daily Sentinel for local women to volunteer at the hospital.

The emergency measures were lifted in Grand Junction and in Gunnison by February of 1919, when the worst of the influenza outbreak had passed. A recurrence in the fall of 1919 was not as fast-spreading nor as deadly.

Even so, in less than two years, the influenza outbreak of 1918-1919 killed at least 20 million people worldwide. Some estimates placed the number as high as 100 million. Because of poor recordkeeping in many areas, the true figures are impossible to know.

No other epidemic, including the Black Plague of the Middle Ages, has killed so many people so rapidly. The flu of 1918-1919 killed more people than the 15 million soldiers, sailors and civilians who died in World War I.

It had been dubbed the "Spanish Flu" or "Spanish Influenza" because the first cases of the disease were reported in San Sebastián, Spain, in February of 1918.

Nobody is certain where the disease actually originated, although Asia, France, Germany and even a small town on the Colorado-Kansas border have all been suggested as places where the influenza originated.

Although some recent accounts of the 1918 Gunnison quarantine say the county restrictions, combined with good luck, prevented any influenza fatalities in Gunnison, newspaper articles of the time tell a somewhat different story.

As noted above, the Montrose Daily Press said in November 1918 that there had been two fatalities in Gunnison by then.

Other contemporary newspa-



pers reported influenza deaths in "West Gunnison," at Jack's Cabin between Gunnison and Crested Butte, and a number of deaths in Sargents, east of Gunnison, and in Cimarron, to the west.

Even so, the strict quarantine enacted by the county no doubt helped Gunnison keep the influenza outbreak in check. As the Elk Mountain Pilot of Crested Butte put it when the county enacted the regulations, "We have been practically immune up to the present, and it is deemed wise to adopt the most stringent rules and rigidly enforce them while the danger exists."

Sources: *Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection*; "Gunnison Colorado: the town that dodged the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic," by Rory Carroll, *The Guardian*, March 1, 2020; "1918 Spanish flu attacked Junction," by Bob Silbernagel, *The Daily Sentinel*, Oct. 8, 2018.

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A Call to Montrose

With the Spanish influenza epidemic raging unbridled in our community, with between 75 and 100 deaths already, with five funerals in a day here, with six of our young and strong business men lost to us, with wives and mothers and children leaving us forever, and no telling from day to day where the epidemic will hit next and who it will take away—it may be your dear one or it may be mine—The Press begs of you people of Montrose to be up and doing to stamp out this terrible epidemic, this disease that is claiming such a heavy toll from our population, and The Press believes, in many instances, unnecessary toll.

COLORADO HISTORIC NEWSPAPER COLLECTION

The headline and opening paragraph of a Dec. 27, 1918, Montrose Daily Press editorial imploring citizens of the need to enact strict quarantine rules such as those in Gunnison County.

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MESA COUNTY PUBLIC HEALTH

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