Think what it must have been like in 1918

The coronavirus of 2020 has been frightening enough to remain imprinted in the memory of most of us 21st century Americans. Imagine what it would be like if it was taking place in the middle of the most destructive war in all of history. That is exactly what Americans and people of other nations throughout the world experienced 102 years ago in 1918.

The headlines above on this page are typical of those which filled Connecticut newspapers day after day for much of that year and on into 1919 and 2020. Startling as the numbers in the headlines are, they are dwarfed by the combined slaughter in that era: first by warmongering European nations, then by a mysterious and deadly illness that struck mankind without warning all over the planet.

The killing began in September 1914. In the summer that year, all the kings and statesmen of Europe could not, or would not, settle peacefully the political dilemma arising from the assassination of one of their kind. Determined not to give an inch in diplomacy, the rulers of Europe followed each other one by one — almost as if it were a game — into World War I, which turned out to be a no-holds-barred massacre with weapons the likes of which had never before been seen.

The impact the war had on civilization is aptly summarized by Carol R. Byerly, one of the modern-day American historians of the two events. “When the European arms race exploded into war in 1914,” she wrote, “the empires shocked themselves and the world with the killing power of their artillery and machine guns, their U-boats, mines and poison gas. These new weapons generated new, horrible injuries that took life and limb in a flash or festered into gangrenous wounds ... The carnage traumatized some men into shellshock, and poison gases burned and suffocated others so horribly that nurses dreaded caring for them because they could provide little comfort. War diseases — notably the soldiers’ nemesis diarrhea, dysentery and typhus — flourished and the trenches offered new maladies such as trench foot, an infection caused by wearing sodden boots ... and trench fever, a debilitating fever transmitted by body lice.”

By the beginning of 1918, World War I had taken the lives of about 20 million com-
War-weary world beset by even more deadly illness

(Continued from page 1)

batants and civilians and had destroyed cities, villages and the countryside of much of central Europe. At that tragic moment whether by chance or fate — or perhaps the anger of the Almighty — there spread among the nations of the world a highly contagious respiratory disease far more deadly than manmade weapons. In a short time, the disease grew from an episode here and there into a pandemic flooding the Earth.

Exactly when and where the flu pandemic of 1918 began remains a mystery discussed and debated even to this day by medical researchers and historians.

Spain was blamed

The first reports of the pandemic that drew much attention came out of Spain, a country that remained neutral during the war and, therefore, was one of the few European nations that did not censor bad news. The warring nations — England, France, Germany, Austria, etc. — covered up such news because they feared it would encourage the enemy or negatively affect the morale of troops and citizens.

In February 1918, Spanish newspapers told of an unusual strain of influenza that was afflicting residents of the city of San Sebastian on the Bay of Biscay on the Spanish coast. Just three months later, a Madrid newspaper reported, “virtually all of Spain is in the grasp of a grip epidemic which is spreading with great virulence.”

The dispatch said thousands of Madrid residents were sick, including even Spain’s King Alfonso. The monarch survived, but, according to a later dispatch, “many persons afflicted with it have fallen in the streets in a fit.”

Barcelona, Zaragoza and other provinces also were badly afflicted, and in what was a particularly ominous early warning, the disease seemed to have actually leaped across the Strait of Gibraltar to Morocco on the northern shore of Africa.

Pacifist Spain has never been able to shed the “Spanish flu” tag, but evidence from recent research makes several other countries look like they may be the birthplaces of the 1918 pandemic.

English camp in France

One is a French village on the English Channel, 600 miles north of San Sebastian. Etaples had a population of only 5,000 at the start of World War I, but it was turned into a veritable city when England, just 20 miles away across the Strait of Dover, selected it as its main staging and transportation camp on the French coast.

During the war, more than a million English, Scottish, Irish, New Zealand and Australian troops passed through there on their way to the battlefront. At any given time, as many as 80,000 troops were there just temporarily in barracks and tents.

Etaples also became a vast medical center treating 30,000 wounded and disease-ridden soldiers at a time in 11 general hospitals, four Red Cross hospitals and a convalescent depot. More than 2,500 women served at the Etaples base as nurses, ambulance drivers and Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps bakers, clerks and telephone operators.

Today, British virologist John Oxford and military historian Douglas Gill contend that in 1915 and 1916, a deadly respiratory infection broke out among the troops at Etaples. In a dissertation about the pandemic Oxford writes, “We have identified long-neglected outbreaks of infection: outbreaks which, judged as minor at the time, can now be seen as increasingly important, and a portent of the disaster to come.”

Northern coast of China

Still another possible origin of the flu pandemic is China, on the far side of the world. Mark Humphries, a Newfoundland scholar, has pieced together a seemingly logical scenario.

In November 1917, months before the Spanish flare-up, a respiratory disease struck northern China. At the same time, England and France were negotiating with the Chinese government to hire 100,000 peasants to work in the war zone in Europe unloading ships, repairing roads and digging trenches so as to free up more British and French troops for the fighting.

The peasants, perhaps exposed to the disease, were housed in crowded barracks at the Chinese port of Weihaiwei in northeastern China and brought to Europe by ship. One route was through the Suez Canal in Egypt, then across the Mediterranean Sea, then by train to France. Another way was by ship to Vancouver on the west coast of Canada where they were then loaded onto railroad cars, taken to Halifax in Nova Scotia and shipped again to tents near the combat zones.

Wherever the pandemic may have originated, it left a trail of death across Europe, Africa, North and South America, Asia, Australia and such exotic locales as the Panama Canal zone, Guam, Western Samoa, and Alaska. It struck in three waves, first in early 1918, then from September through December 1918, and then early 1919.

Before it finally died out, the pandemic infected a third of the world’s people and killed an estimate of 50 to 100 million of them, far more than World War I itself.
Military camps were breeding places of influenza

The 1918 flu epidemic flourished in a world of overcrowded military training camps, equally crowded trains and ships that ferried soldiers back and forth to battlegrounds consisting of trenches separated by a no-man’s land usually of several hundred yards. Trapped in the trenches for days and nights, the troops were subject to unsanitary conditions, the constant danger of bombardment from a variety of weapons and diseases ranging from dysentery and typhoid fever to trench foot.

When the U.S. Senate on April 7, 1917, declared war on Germany, the nation was not prepared to go to war. The vote set in motion a flurry of activity to enroll as quickly as possible a huge military force, to train it, arm it and get it to the battlefield. The military draft went into effect and the federal government authorized the construction of 16 huge cantonments scattered over the nation where those drafted would be sent for training.

First U.S. Outbreak

One of the largest among the cantonments was Camp Funston in Kansas. It was built on the grounds of Fort Riley in the geographical center of the United States. In the summer of 1917, about 1,400 buildings — barracks, mess halls, social centers, infirmaries, etc. — were literally thrown together. By autumn that year, upwards of 40,000 troops from Midwestern states were in training at Funston. Winter that year brought record cold to Kansas and the troops were crowded in inadequately heated barracks and tents. In early spring 1918, Camp Funston was the first place in the United States to experience the flu epidemic. Ironically, the outbreak there occurred in March 1918, just a month after reports circulated of an unusual strain of influenza on the Bay of Biscay in northern Spain.

The Camp Funston outbreak is shrouded in mystery as are all the possible birthplaces of the disease. During the first week of March, it was reported that a few trainees were experiencing flu-like symptoms. Within a week the number multiplied to more than 500. An odd coincidence was a huge dust storm which on March 9 stirred up similar symptoms.

Within three weeks, 1,100 soldiers had a severe form of the influenza. Of them, 247 developed pneumonia, which was a hallmark of the 1918 pandemic, and 38 of them died. But the number of victims declined quickly and after a month, it appeared that the epidemic had ended.

What had not ended, but rather increased at a frantic pace was the revolving door arrival, training and departure of thousands of young men at Camp Funston. They left by the train load for other camps along the southern and eastern seaboard, and there were loaded into ships sailing for Europe.

Among the largest eastern U.S. cantonments was Camp Devens, a 5,000-acre camp located in Ayer, Massachusetts, 30 miles northwest of Boston. Devens opened while still under construction in August 1917 with 15,000 trainees. By early September, it was crammed with 45,000 recruits, even though its maximum was for only 36,000. At first, that seemed not to matter. The camp hospital had a capacity of more than 1,000 patients and only 84 beds were occupied.

Carnage at Camp Devens

Then the roof caved in. In the first week in September 40 soldiers from Company D, 42nd Infantry, were hospitalized with what was first thought to be meningitis but which turned out to be a very harsh influenza. Soon the disease spread to other companies. By Sept. 24, there were 12,700 cases.

Dr. Roy Grist, a physician at the base hospital, wrote a colleague on Sept. 29: “This epidemic started about four weeks ago and has developed so rapidly that the camp is demoralized ... These men start with what appears to be an ordinary attack of ‘lagripping’ or influenza, and when brought to the hospital they very rapidly develop the most vicious type of pneumonia that has ever been seen. Two hours after admission they have the mahogany spots over the cheek bones, and a few hours later you can begin to see a bluish discoloration of the skin and mucous membranes resulting from inadequate oxygenation of the blood extending from their ears and spreading all over the face ... It is only a matter of a few hours then until death comes ... We have been averaging about 100 deaths per day ... There is no doubt in my mind that there is a new mixed infection here ...”

Grist said the number of resident doctors had been increased from 25 to more than 250. “We have lost an outrageous number of nurses and doctors ... It takes special trains to carry away the dead. For several days there were no coffins and the bodies piled up ... An extra long barracks has been vacated for the use of the morgue ... We have no relief here, you get up in the morning at 5:30 and work steady till about 9:30 p.m., sleep, then go at it again.”

The contagion at Camp Devens appeared so dangerous that Army Surgeon General William C. Gorgas in Washington organized a team of four of the very best epidemiologists in the country to investigate. The four visited the camp, found that the situation was grave, and recommended 16 steps to get it under control.

The most important step was to halt any further transfers of soldiers in and out of Devens. To some extent that was already too late. In mid-September a contingent of
Not in battles in France

Norwich Bulletin, Sept. 30, 1918 — "Military service in France has not brought the death record to this district that Spanish influenza has caused among young men serving their country. Saturday four of them lay in their caskets here as the result of the epidemic raging in New England."

"Two new deaths were reported Saturday morning — those of Clarence A. Peckham, 29, ... and George R. Johnson, 29 ... Johnson died Friday and Peckham Saturday morning both at Camp Devens. Saturday there was received here from Newport, where he had been serving in the Navy, the body of Lawrence Prescott Bennett of Woodstock. The fourth death was that of Pvt. Joseph Monticci of East Putnam, whose body also arrived Saturday. Peckham, Monticci and Johnson were all selected men who left to go into service with the quota of July 25.

"It may be set down as premonition but at the time it was remarked by those who had become accustomed to see groups of men leaving for camp that more tears than common were shed by relatives when that contingent went. Certainly it has suffered more in the giving of lives than all the contingents that proceeded it into camp from this city..."

On Sept. 30, the Courant reported: "The first death from Spanish influenza of a Terryville soldier was that of Clemens Murawski at Camp Devens on Friday morning. Pvt. Murawski left here last October in the first draft contingent and has been at his cantonment since. Undertaker James J. Dunn of Bristol communicated several times yesterday regarding the shipping of the body here for burial."

On Sept. 26, "Middletown — A telegram was received here yesterday afternoon announcing the death at Camp Devens of Prof. Wesley E. Rich of the Department of Economics at Wesleyan University. Prof. Rich was one of the first men drafted from Middletown and although having a wife and two children, he waived all claim for exemption and entered the service. He graduated from Wesleyan in 1911..."

On Oct. 3, the Stafford Springs Press reported from Tolland: "The funeral of Pvt. Clifton Newman who died of pneumonia at Camp Devens was held from the Lee Methodist Church Monday at 2 o'clock. ... A number of Spanish War veterans from Rockville were the bearers. The deceased was the son of Mr. and Mrs. Frank T. Newman and is survived by two brothers, one, Carl who is fighting in France..."

On Oct. 4, the New Britain Herald reported: "Lee Timmons died at Camp Devens this morning of influenza. He was a native of South Carolina, but roomed at 138 Pleasant Street this city. He is survived by his mother Mrs. Carrie Timmons of South Carolina."

"The funeral of Pvt. Dennis Hogan, who died at Camp Devens will be held tomorrow morning at St. Joseph's Church ... Pvt. Hogan died of pneumonia after an illness with Spanish flu."

"The funeral of Pvt. Ferdinand Tinty of the National Army, who died at Camp Upton, will be held tomorrow afternoon at St. Joseph's Church ... Pvt. Tinty was 25 years of age ... Besides his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Marcello Tinty ... he leaves four brothers and three sisters ... His brother Leon Tinty arrived from the Great Lakes Naval Training Station to attend the funeral."

After announcing all the camp deaths and funerals, the New Britain newspaper that same day listed the grim statistics of the city: "The epidemic of Spanish influenza continues to rage and 42 new cases had been reported up to 2 o'clock this afternoon. These, added to the 220 cases, some of them old ones, reported yesterday, bring the total up to 826."
At the same time that numerous Connecticut soldiers were being exposed to the Spanish flu in a camp in north central Massachusetts, the people of southeastern Connecticut got a chilling introduction to the plague. It appeared in the first week of September 1918 in New London and its twin city, Groton, on the opposite side of the Thames River under conditions quite similar to those in army training camps.

Military facilities dotted the New London harbor and riverfront: the U.S. Navy's first submarine base in Groton; the Coast Guard Academy; a budding shipbuilding industry; docks for military and civilian ships; Fort Trumbull, a still operating fortress of Revolutionary War vintage; and a secretive new laboratory where government scientists worked with frenzy to develop underwater weapons to fight German U-Boats. All told, nearly 7,000 sailors, soldiers and longshoremen were billeted in barracks, hotels and civilian homes around the harbor.

Fortunately, New London had its own military hospital. When the submarine base opened in 1915, the government leased lock, stock and barrel the city's Memorial Hospital on Garfield Avenue. Military medicals replaced civilian staff and converted the hospital into a U.S Navy facility, undoubtedly confident that its 200 beds would be more than enough for any future crisis.

Sailors from Boston

According to Dr. John T. Black, the state commissioner of health at that time, the first several flu patients were brought to the hospital about Sept. 1. It was thought the disease arrived among 300 sailors and workers who were transferred from the Boston Navy Yard where the flu was already raging. Within a week, the New London Navy hospital had 100 flu patients, and on Sept. 11, the Submarine Base was put on quarantine. None of the troops and workers, who had been rooming in the city were allowed to leave the base.

By the end of September there were 900 flu cases. Cases were usually about three days in duration, but many patients suffered a second attack when near recovery. Black said it was the patriotic duty of those with the disease to isolate themselves at home and not go out until given permission. He was not just speaking patriotic jargon, but out of the hard reality that the pandemic could move with frightening speed and cunning not just to the houses down the street but to communities miles away.

On Sept. 20, nine deaths were recorded within 24 hours in three communities 10 miles from New London: five in Norwich, two in Baltic and in Montville. A few days later, the disease swept through nearby Yantic leaving 40 percent of the workers at the Ardmore Woolen Co. home sick.

The marketplace suggested all kinds of remedies for the flu pandemic.

During September the epidemic traveled rapidly another few miles north into Willimantic. By Sept. 29, there were not only 500 cases of flu and pneumonia there, but a crisis in caretakers. St. Joseph's Hospital was forced to turn away new patients because only three of the 20 nurses on the staff were not themselves sick. In addition, three of the city's 13 physicians were ill and the others on duty 18 to 20 hours a day.

Transportation utilities were both victims and spreaders of the pestilence. In the last week of September, 30 motormen and conductors had been felled by the flu on the branch railroad line linking towns in New London and Windham counties.

While the state's southeastern shore was inundated, a smaller and somewhat different bubble of flu struck Norwalk in Fairfield County on the southwestern coast. In two days during the last week of September, first 18 and then 13 cases were discovered on Slocum Street near an old fairgrounds.

The neighborhood was a crowded district inhabited mainly by Polish immigrants who were employed by the Muller-Gloria Lace Silk Mills. Five families were reported stricken in one house. Health officials were "making every effort and taking all precautions to check the disease before it spreads throughout the city," reported the newspapers. Schools, moving pictures, places of public gathering and the mill itself were ordered closed.

The containment effort was only partially successful for a week later 30 new flu cases were reported in one day by doctors in various parts of Norwalk. There were cases also in the Saugatuck district of neighboring Westport and by mid-October 800 cases and 22 deaths in Greenwich, the westernmost town on the Connecticut shore. The town's two hospitals were filled, more than half the nurses were sick and volunteers from the Red Cross were filling in for them.

Hopelessly in the grip

On Oct. 19, Dr. Black released a report of the situation statewide. A conservative estimate of the total cases, he said, was 70,000. "Some towns in the state," he announced, "are hopelessly in the grip of the epidemic. Collinsville has 2,000 cases, more than 60 percent of the population." A sampling throughout the state showed: Middletown, with 4,000 cases; New Britain, 4,221; Manchester, 3,110; Rockville, 1,500; Wallingford, 1,600; Willimantic, 3,107; Meriden, 2,230; Stonington, 1,600, Watertown, 500 and Bristol, 2,000.

Black reported, "Compared with some of the surrounding towns, Hartford is not suffering badly, 144 cases reported yesterday. The total of deaths is about 140." In mid-November, however, the cases in Hartford multiplied to 23,082 while the total in Connecticut was 99,991 cases with 6,101 deaths. Some cities were particularly hard hit with Waterbury suffering 900 deaths.

The most anguishing were the cases where entire families suffered. In Meriden on Nov. 9, it was reported: "Ross Hyde, 37, died today of pneumonia. His wife, 15-year-old daughter, a 2-year-old son, and his sister-in-law, Mrs. Martha Mason, who had been nursing the sick ones in the family have died from influenza in three weeks. Four Hyde children survive and Mrs. Mason left her husband and five children."

Connecticut was one of the earliest states attacked and one of those hardest hit. After November 1918, the disease lessened, but cases continued into spring 2019. Exact figures remain uncertain, but a final estimate was that more than 10 percent of the state's 1.2 million residents had the flu while more than 8,500 died.
Soldiers tribute

Stamford Advocate, Oct. 10, 1918 — The funeral of Mary Camilla Nurney of 12 Oak Hill St., who died Tuesday from influenza contracted while ministering to sick soldiers in the Stamford Hospital, was held this morning in St. John’s Church ...

A military escort of 25 men, led by the commander of Edgewood Arsenal, Lt. Jones, preceded the hearse in a double line, a burglar walking behind. When the church was reached, the soldiers lined up on either side of the steps. Between them first came a soldier carrying a beautiful America flag formed of red and white roses with violets for the field of blue. Next came the gray casket, surmounted by red and white tea-roses and white carnations. Behind that the relatives ... followed by the military escort ...

The church was crowded. After high Mass had been celebrated, Father Callahan spoke a few words concerning Miss Nurney. He said that although she had not been on the battlefield she was a soldier nonetheless, just as much as those who had gone to the conflict ...

Died caring for patients

New Britain Herald, Oct. 8, 1918 — Dr. Edward Grace, one of the youngest practicing physicians in this city died at 1:30 this morning from the Spanish influenza. Though ill himself, he continued to administer treatment to patients until last Friday morning at 11 o’clock when he was compelled to go to bed. His condition then became extremely critical and he hovered between life and death since Saturday.

Dr. Grace gave promise of being one of the leading physicians of the city. Though his death was expected hourly since Sunday, it was nevertheless a great shock to his wide circle of acquaintances. In the practice of his profession he was thorough and painstaking and he reflected that sense of duty in such service as he could render to his country, although not in the army. He gave freely of his service in the making of physical examinations of candidates for the national army.

Members of both the first and second district exemption boards expressed genuine sorrow upon being informed of Dr. Grace’s death and paid a high tribute to his services. He was one of the most efficient, faithful and conscientious examiners we had.

Army nurse in San Juan

Mary L. Flanagan, a resident of Fairfield and graduate of St. Vincent’s Hospital school of nursing in Bridgeport, enlisted in the U.S. Army nurses corps on Jan. 16, 1918. She was trained at Camp Merritt, N.J., and was assigned to the base hospital in San Juan, Puerto Rico. When she arrived there by ship on July 25, there were already about 2,000 cases of influenza.

In the fall, many civilians died and the base had the highest respiratory illness rate in the U.S. Army. On top of that, an October earthquake was followed by a tidal wave and a second destructive earthquake.

The epidemic continued in the island territory of the United States until early 1919 when it had suffered 250,00 cases and 10,888 deaths. One newspaper reported, “Many towns are without doctors or nurses and in many instances drug stores are closed owing to illness of pharmacists. The suffering in rural areas is intense.”

Flanagan returned home safely in early 1919. In the Connecticut veterans questionnaire she filled out after the war, she indicated that she herself had been a patient in the base hospital for a week in November 1918. She did not say so, but possibly she too had been an influenza pandemic victim, or at the least totally worn out. She did recover and went back to nursing at home.

Orphans rescued

Bridgeport Farmer, Jan. 6, 1919 — Fourteen nurses of this city ... went to New Haven several days ago, to assist in caring for 200 children and 26 sisters in the orphanage there who were recently stricken with influenza. On Christmas Day there was not a single case in the orphanage, but by New Year’s Day 300 children and the 26 nurse sisters had contracted the disease. It is supposed the disease had been brought into the orphanage by some children who had been sent out on errands.

Eight nurses were sent from St. Vincent’s hospital, two nurses were sent from the Visiting Nurses Association and the rest were school nurses.

Local nurses who responded were Elizabeth Collins, Margaret Partick, Anna Seagrue, Ella Yarriah, Mary Canfield, Mary Poud, Anna Cullen, Dorothy Preston, Ella Powers, Julia Reidy, Jane Allen, Theresa O’Brien, Lillian Carroll, Mary Foley.

School becomes hospital

Rockville, Oct. 12, 1918 — Good results are already apparent from the newly established emergency hospital in the Rockville High School ... At 5 o’clock last evening there were 75 patients in the emergency hospital ... The only real handicap yesterday was the lack of doctors. Two of Rockville’s doctors are ill. ... We have over 1,000 cases and only four doctors. All the industries of the city are working on government contracts for army cloth, envelopes and silk thread. We must have doctors and nurses or the death rate will be enormous.

Help from Ohio

Bristol, Oct. 13, 1918 — Ten minutes after his arrival here to assist the local physicians in combating the Spanish influenza, Dr. B. A. Dawley, of Toledo, Ohio, was visiting two homes with emergency needs. The coming of the public service physician brought relief to the city as six physicians are ill and there are now 1,000 reported cases. Dr. Dawley will have his headquarters at the Emergency Hospital where an attendant will answer calls at all times for him. He was secured by Mayor Dutton after several earnest appeals had been made to the state health board and after the first physician assigned to the city had been diverted to another place while on his way here.
**Shortage of coal, cars, phone operators**

As winter 1918-1919 approached, an alarming possibility was added to the misery throughout the nation. "From one coal mine after another," announced Thomas W. Russell, the U.S. fuel administrator for Connecticut, "comes the report that the reason for the falling off in shipments is that so many of the coal miners are ill with influenza.

"This makes an exceedingly serious situation, particularly (since) before the epidemic struck the number of anthracite coal miners had been reduced 15 to 20 percent by war conditions ..."

Russell suggested "that every household purchase at least one cord of wood and use this fuel as much as possible to reduce his consumption of coal ... This is particularly true in the rural communities where wood is accessible and can be substituted altogether for coal."

Homeowners also were urged to consider buckwheat as a substitute for wood to heat their homes. "Twenty-five percent of Nr. 1 buckwheat," Russell said, "may be used in domestic furnaces; the price is 50 cents."

Another concern was that thousands of gallons of gasoline were being wasted by drivers who left the motors running after parking. The practice was unpatriotic, Russell charged, because it defeated the government's goal of conserving gasoline for use in conducting the war abroad.

In every city and town both pleasure cars and commercial trucks were left running while the drivers made calls or delivered goods. "These men neglect to shut off their engines through carelessness or because they are too lazy to crank their cars," said Russell unwittingly revealing how much of a male world it was in 1918.

**Cars for nurses**

The fact that almost no women were drivers, much less owners, of cars, caused another serious problem in efforts to stamp out the flu epidemic. Nurses were in great demand, but even when enough were available, there were not enough automobiles to drive them to homes and other institutions where people were sick.

In October 1918, at the height of the emergency, the Bridgeport Motor Squad pleaded, "Do the people of Bridgeport realize the need of more cars to convey nurses from home to home during the influenza epidemic? We have been supplying from 12 to 15 cars a day. More cars are needed. Those who have chauffeurs who can be spared for part of one or two days a week are urged to send their names ..."

"Lives are at stake. Loaned automobiles will save many. One automobile enables a nurse to make three or four times as many calls as she otherwise could. Nurses are scarce, therefore we want to help those in Bridgeport to triple their work ..."

**Telephone girls**

By the second decade of the 20th century, the telephone had become part and parcel of life in the United States. Phones in homes and offices encouraged socializing but were also essential to deal with emergencies, organize events, make appointments and generally keep government and private business working. The one hitch in the phone system was that it depended on a third person — an operator — in every call.

When the flu epidemic struck, operators quickly became its victims. In every community in the state, the staffs of the Southern New England Telephone Company were decimated. "In some of the small offices the entire forces have been taken down with the ailment," SNET reported. "In other offices anywhere from 10 percent to 75 percent of the operators are ill and off duty, and the staffs have been reduced by the necessity of sending operators to the small towns to take the places of girls who are ill."

"Precautions against the spread of the disease have been taken ... The telephone operating rooms are filled with fresh air at frequent intervals and close attention is being given to the health of the girls for the first sign of this trouble. In addition, the transmitters used by the operators are disinfected every night."

The company pointed out that the government and businesses relied on phones to conduct wartime communications and urged patrons not to use their phones otherwise. "Use of the telephone for really necessary calls only would help ...," said SNET. "It is requested by the company that the telephone, recognized by the government as an essential of the first class, be regarded as such and that it be used for the time being for essential calls only. Social conversations, exchanges of views on minor neighborhood affairs and such like are out."

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**2 Connecticut soldiers among final victims**

Hartford Courant, Jan. 5, 1919 — Pvt. Harold T. Nonnon of Hartford went to France in June 1917 with the 3rd Machine Gun Battalion. The Courant published portions of a letter he wrote sometime after the Armistice on Nov. 11, 1918:

"My Dear Mother — It is so long since I wrote you last ... We were fighting all the time since September, moving from one front to another. You asked me if I was ever in the trenches. ... I should say I was and I saw the time I came near losing my life. I never did tell you, Mother, that I have been gassed, but probably you have heard about it. Well, I'm in a base hospital now with the influenza, but I am quickly getting over it and will soon be ready to leave the hospital ...

"I am glad this war is over. I guess my outfit is near Germany by now. I don't know if I will ever get back with them or not ... As this is the only sheet of paper I have I guess I will close. It won't be long before we see each other — Harold"

Bridgeport Farmer, April 24, 1919 — "William R. Smith Jr. died of influenza in France on April 11, according to a telegram received in the city yesterday."

Smith was born in Bridgeport in 1887, the son of William and Margaret Smith. William Sr. was a blacksmith, the son of English immigrants; his wife Margaret was a daughter of Irish immigrants.

William Jr. left Bridgeport and was a chauffeur in New York City before the war. He was married and had two children when he enlisted at Fort Slocum in New Rochelle on Dec. 13, 1917. He arrived in France in late April 1918 with the 307th Motor Truck Co. Until the end of the war, the 307th's assignment was to deliver supplies and ammunition to the artillery batteries on the front lines.

Five months after the Armistice, the 307th was still stationed in the city of St. Loubes, in southwestern France, when Smith contracted the disease and died of influenza and pneumonia. His remains were returned to Bridgeport and buried in the family plot in Lakeview Cemetery.
Editor’s note — Footnotes

This issue of The Shanachie is devoted entirely to recollections of Connecticut in 1918-1919 when Americans dealt with two huge tragedies: World War I and the misnamed “Spanish” Flu Epidemic. They were able to deal with that by declaring and meaning, “we are all in this together,” even though a huge national shortcoming — racism — remained in full and blatant bloom then and long after.

In researching and writing this issue, I have tried to emulate the “all in this together” spirit. Most articles are about Connecticut Irish, but among them also are retold the stories of suffering and heroism by Connecticut people of every race, ethnicity and nativity. The Pilgrim Church item reproduced here from the Connecticut Western News of Oct. 24, 1918, recalls that while churchgoing was interrupted because of the flu, one Congregational church in the small town of North Canaan used its bell to encourage people of all faiths or no faiths at all to pause and meditate. In this issue also, I have tried to indicate the sources of other newspaper items as they appear. Such items can be researched on www.genealogybank.com. by clicking on state, city and newspaper names. The Hartford Courant items are available on the Connecticut State Library website by clicking on databases, then letter H, then Hartford Courant.