City's women confronted influenza pandemic in 1917

Sacrifice and the Red Cross

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Lycoming County Women

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SUN-GAZETTE FILE PHOTOS

Left and top right, promotional displays encourage participating in local Red Cross campaigns. Above right, Red Cross nurses use the Motor Corps to assist community members in 1941. The catalyst for the Motor Corps was an influenza pandemic in 1917.

The local Red Cross, organized in 1917, was active in fighting World War I on the home front, as were chapters in surrounding areas.At the same time, the women were defending the local residents against the influenza epidemic of 1918, often referred to as the Spanish flu.

Lycoming County was under siege. Newspaper articles quoted doctors warning that they could not take care of all of the sick or provide all of the nurses needed to help with care. Winifred Maynard wrote in her 1918 diary that her local doctor was not available, as he had volunteered to fight the epidemic in Boston "before it got so bad here."

Saloons, pool halls and barrooms were closed, and churchgoers found the doors locked. Just as public places were opening up again, the next surge would close them down.

Patients were informed of conditions that lasted long after initial recovery, and the papers were filled with ads for over-the-counter tonics such as a cod liver–iron concoction sold by Hopkins Bros. on West Fourth Street. Articles did warn readers not to be taken in by scams, and it was often stated in these articles that exercise, fresh air, nutrition and cheerfulness were the best defenses.

Not all agreed on the proper approach to the crisis. School districts such as Jersey Shore rebelled

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against the Board of Health's recommendation to close the schools, and there was heated debate. Maynard, in her diary, wrote how much she missed attending worship in her "dear" church, Trinity Episcopal, and couldn't believe that that could be the source of the influenza spread.

Some felt that better results in controlling the epidemic could have been achieved had there been more efforts to quarantine ill individuals and place placards at homes where infected individuals lived.

Meeting the needs

In the midst of community tensions and fears, the Red Cross women took a pragmatic approach — if there was immediate need, they met it. A typical example was described in an article in the Dec. 4, 1918, Williamsport Sun. The story started with an earlier Sun article reporting that two families in Nice's Hollow outside Jersey Shore were in very serious condition because of the influenza. Within five minutes of receiving this news, the women of the Jersey Shore Red Cross had sent food, clothing and other necessary supplies to the families. The Dec. 4 article went on to report that, as of that writing, the chapter had supplied 122 meals to patients, delivered 70 pneumonia jackets and made 200 masks available for nurses.

The Motor Corps, under the direction of Ida Hayes McCormick, is described in the 1981 "Centennial History of the American Red Cross in Williamsport." The Corps transported doctors, nurses, and supplies to various locations as well as delivering food to residents. Organized in 1918, it had 22 active workers. Usually the women used their own cars; some had never learned to drive before, and others taught themselves how to repair and maintain their vehicles.

Sanitary Hospital and day nursery

To deal with the influenza emergency, the Red Cross opened Williamsport Sanitary Hospital in South Williamsport on very short notice, with all of the equipment furnished and paid for by the chapter. This included cots, mattresses, pillows, sheets, blankets and night clothes for patients, as well as uniforms, towels and kitchen supplies for the volunteers. An average of 32 patients were cared for daily, with Mrs. John Rogers, a graduate nurse, in charge. Practically every person providing care in this hospital contracted the disease, many with very serious outcomes.

The Red Cross met another immediate need with a day nursery to care for children whose parents had contracted influenza and were hospitalized. Maude Mackey organized the facility in Parish House, with nurse Elizabeth L. Fisher in charge. About 28 children, including many very young babies, were cared for daily.The canteen kitchen that prepared food for soldiers coming through Williamsport on the train also provided food for the ill. The Motor Corps delivered gallons of soup, broth, custards, fruit, milk, and ice cream to the nursery and hospital and to hundreds of individuals throughout the city each day.

Sacrifice Store

To raise funds for the Red Cross, a Sacrifice Store managed by Rebecca Foresman was established at 146 W. Fourth St. in June of 1918. The venture lasted seven months and earned a profit of $1,500. Homemakers were encouraged to clean house and donate items to the store, and some young children gave up their toys. One woman donated her wedding ring because she had nothing else to give to the cause. A June 15, 1918, article in the Williamsport Sun titled "Sacrifice Store has Host of Attractions" encouraged shoppers to take a look every day because the stock was constantly changing. They could find not only warm clothes, but also furniture, oil paintings, and other treasures. The "motor messenger girls" assisted with transportation of heavy items.

The store sponsored groups offering food for sale,such as homemade pies, muffins and potato salad. Women were praised for sacrificing their own household sugar for the baked goods sold in order to raise money for the cause.

Foresman provided constant oversight of the store during all the hours it was open. Until then, Foresman, born in Williamsport in 1885, had lived the everyday life typical of women with financial resources. She served on committees for the YWCA, was a member of the Clio Club and donated cribs to the Home for the Friendless. She could trace her ancestry back to the American Revolution. In 1915, she had been elected vice-chair of the local anti-suffrage movement; one wonders if she ever had second thoughts about that cause.

The word multitasking was not part of the 1918 vocabulary. However, it does describe the actions of the women of the local Red Cross and their "army of Service," joining the war effort as well as risking their own health and safety to support those suffering during the Great Influenza. Williamsport mayor Archibald Hoagland described these Red Cross volunteers as unselfish, vigorous and of high-class character. During this same period, many of these women were also pursuing the fight to win the right to vote — one more battle in which they proved successful, suggesting that one should never underestimate the strength and persistence of women, especially when they come together for a common cause.