



HISTORY CENTER

SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY

The Spanish Flu of 1918-19



(From Sunday's Daily)

The board of health held a session yesterday morning at 10:30 o'clock at which it was decided to close for an indefinite period all churches, pool rooms, bowling alleys, fraternal society meetings and indoor gatherings of all kinds. This order goes into effect this morning, so there will be no services in the churches today. The schools, however, are to remain open for the present, and are to be under constant medical supervision.

The regulations in regard to spitting on the sidewalks and on the floors and stairs of buildings will be rigidly enforced, and the co-operation of the public is asked to make them effective.

This morning the streets of the down town section of the town will be flushed and cleaned, as a preventative.

There have been no new cases of influenza reported for the last forty-eight hours, and investigation by the

eight hours, and investigation by the board of health shows that there are not more than six authenticated cases of the disease in this city.

Notice from the Public Health Department published in the semi-weekly San Luis Obispo Tribune on October 22, 1918.

What Happened in 1918?

We have been repeatedly asked by the public to share the local story of the Spanish Flu epidemic, which took place in the latter years of the 1910s. So we have gone back through the newspapers of San Luis Obispo of the era, both the semi-weekly Tribune and the Daily Telegram, to find the story as it happened. We will not claim that this is an exhaustive, definitive edition - if anyone wants to write that book, we would certainly want to read it. We are simply trying to achieve a dip into those waters, so that in these modern days of COVID-19 we can all learn from what happened before. The subject line of this email is a quote attributed to Mark Twain - he probably didn't say it, but it's too good of a line not to cite again: "History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes."

You can view scans of all articles referenced here, and more, [on our website](#).

The Public Health Department met in extraordinary session on Sunday, October 20th, 1918, and called for a halt to all public gatherings, including churches, pool halls, bowling alleys, and more. The disease known as Spanish Flu had been ravaging the world since the spring of that year, but had yet to arrive in San Luis Obispo County. The first local death from the disease did not occur for another week, when on October 27th a man named William Gibson succumbed.

FIRST DEATH FROM INFLUENZA

Two More Cases Re-
ported--Red Cross to
Aid Sufferers

(From Sunday's Daily)

Only two new cases of influenza were reported yesterday, but the first death from the epidemic occurred when William Gibson succumbed to pneumonia.

The local chapter of the Red Cross is arranging to give every assistance in event the epidemic is not checked immediately. All women who will volunteer to take care of the sick, either with or without pay for services, are requested to register promptly with Mrs. J. H. Hollister Jr., secretary of civic relief division of the Red Cross. Phone 221-J.

It is not necessary that the registrants should be trained nurses, but women who have had some practical experience in nursing are badly

Jr., secretary of civic relief division of the Red Cross. Phone 221-J.

It is not necessary that the registrants should be trained nurses, but women who have had some practical experience in nursing are badly needed, and are urged to register.

Mrs. Motz, who has in charge the making of the masks, is most urgently requesting the women of this city to assist in this work. There will be a session at headquarters in Marsh street this afternoon from one till five, and on Monday, beginning at 1 o'clock, and an evening session beginning at 7. All women are requested to come and aid in the work of making the masks.

The Canteen Committee of the Red Cross has notified the Tribune that they want it understood that they stand ready to make broths and custards for the families ill with the influenza, and who have no way of getting it for themselves.

The Board of Supervisors had acted the day before, passing an ordinance requiring the wearing of masks. It was unlawful "for any person to appear on the public street, or in any public place, or in any assemblage of persons, or in any place where two or more persons are congregated (except in homes where only the members of the family are present and when eating meals) **without wearing a mask over the nose and mouth.**"

MUST WEAR THE MASKS

Supervisors Adopt Ordinance and Create Health Board

(From Sunday's Daily)

The Board of Supervisors met in special session yesterday morning, when all members were present, when the following was read by Clerk Rordrigues:

"Whereas, there is now prevalent in the county of San Luis Obispo, as well as throughout the state of California, an epidemic of so-called "Spanish influenza," of exceptional violence and virulence, and a large number of persons are now suffering with said epidemic; and

"Whereas, the Board of Supervisors of the county of San Luis Obispo are of the opinion that some action should be taken as a means of avoiding contagion and the spreading of said epidemic.

"Now, therefore, we, the members of the Board of Supervisors of the County of San Luis Obispo hereby call a special meeting of said Board to be held at the chambers of said Board in the county court house in the city of San Luis Obispo on October 26, 1918, at 10 a. m., for the purpose of taking some action or such action as is necessary as a means of voiding contagion and the spreading of said epidemic by the enacting of a proper ordinance, and the appointment of additional health officers or a board of health in order that the public health may be better preserved and guarded."

On motion of Supervisor Tognazini, seconded by Supervisor Iversen, the following appointees were made for the County Board of Health:

Dr. R. S. Brown, Arroyo Grande; C. F. Hollinger, Paso Robles; A. B. Tognini, Cayucos; Dr. B. H. Pelton, Cambria; C. J. Freeborn, Santa Margarita; Dr. C. J. McGovern, San Luis Obispo.

Thereafter the Board adopted an ordinance in compliance with the call, which was ordered published in the local papers, and which will be found in another column of the Tribune this morning. By the provisions of the ordinance it is unlawful for any person to appear on the public street, or in any public place, or in any assemblage of persons or in any place where two or more persons are congregated (except in homes where only the members of the family are present and when eating meals) without wearing a mask over the nose and mouth in accordance with the provisions of the ordinance adopted.

VICTORY QUELLS FLU AS WEL AS HUN

(By Universal Service)

WASHINGTON, Nov. 16.—The great victory celebration throughout the country practically killed the flu germ, according to the opinion of high medical officers. Since the event fewer cases and deaths have been reported.

Just a few weeks later in mid-November, the euphoria from victory in World War I pushed concern for the flu out of the headlines

DRASTIC FLU ORDINANCE PASSED BY SUPERVISORS IN EFFECT IMMEDIATELY

Supervisors this afternoon passed an ordinance requiring the wearing of masks, closing of schools, theaters and the churches, and prohibiting all public gatherings.

Saloons may be kept open for the sale of bulk goods only, and not more than three people are to be allowed therein at one time.

Fraternal societies may hold meetings for the transaction of business, but not more than a minimum quorum is to be allowed to attend.

Physicians are required to isolate all flu patients and to post a notice that an influenza patient is in the house.

Not more than three people are allowed to congregate in any school room, theater, picture show, church, saloon, fraternal hall, lodge room, pool hall, card room, library, reading room or other place of social intercourse or pleasure.

Ordinance goes into effect immediately.

The county health officer is to appoint deputies in various localities of the county to carry out the provisions of the ordinance.

Dr. H. A. Gowman stated this afternoon that the City Council will probably meet tomorrow to pass a similar ordinance for the city. The county ordinance passed today is effective throughout the county with the exception of the cities of San Luis Obispo, Paso Robles and Arroyo Grande.

Present at the meeting of the board this morning were Supervisors Black, Iverson, Sworhout and Norton, District Attorney Van Wormer, County Clerk Rodriguez, San Luis Obispo City Commissioners Gowman and Sinsheimer, County Health Officer Dr. C. J. McGovern, City Health Officer Cook, Drs. H. S. Walters and L. T. Wade, and E. D. Sworhout of the city Board of Health.

Arroyo Grande was represented by Mayor F. E. Bennett, Councilmen Geo. Orish, H. E. Cox and W. F. Poole, and City Clerk B. F. Stewart.

Paso Robles was not represented.

City Health Officer Cook stated that the epidemic is increasing in this city, that twenty-seven cases had been reported to him between Saturday after-

noon and last night. He also said that more children are being reported than formerly.

Commissioner of Public Health and Safety Dr. H. A. Gowman said he believed a mask ordinance might be of benefit. When masks were worn people were cautious. As soon as masks were discontinued people threw caution to the winds and became careless. He preferred the wearing of masks to the closing of schools, theaters, churches and other public gatherings.

City Clerk B. F. Stewart of Arroyo Grande said he knew of no cases in that city.

Dr. Gowman, speaking again, said the city would take such action as taken by the county. He suggested that other restrictions be included.

Supervisor Norton suggested that houses in which flu exists should be quarantined.

Commissioner Sinsheimer said he favored doing everything possible to stop the spread of the disease. If masks, closing public meetings, quarantine or any other action would help he was in favor of it.

"I believe the action should be willing to undergo any inconvenience in order to wipe out contagion. Any individual would be willing to do so and a community should be just as willing."

E. D. Sworhout said the City Council

(Turn to Page 4, Column 4.)

By January 1919, the post-war optimism had faded. New, more drastic ordinances were passed, closing all schools and theaters, prohibiting all public gatherings, and enforcing social distancing.

New local cases were popping up not just one or two at a time, but by the dozens. During the period from December 11th through the 31st, there were 123 diagnoses. In the first 18 days of January, there were 194 new cases. In the words of the Tribune at the time, "it is useless to longer delude ourselves that the situation is not serious."

Across the state, cases were surging. The week ending January 4th saw roughly 10,000 cases in California. The week after almost doubled, to nearly 19,000.

We at the History Center do not have exact numbers for how many residents of our county were sickened or killed by the Spanish Flu. We do know that the disease eventually passed out of our community and life returned to normal.

In this particular moment of historic rhyming, we wish safety and good health to all our friends and neighbors.

[You can view all of these articles and more on our website.](#)

DRASTIC ACTION IS NEEDED

Individual Prejudice and Financial Gain Must Give Way to Health of All

Don't get scared over the flu situation and contract the disease. Fear and worry have killed as many people as disease.

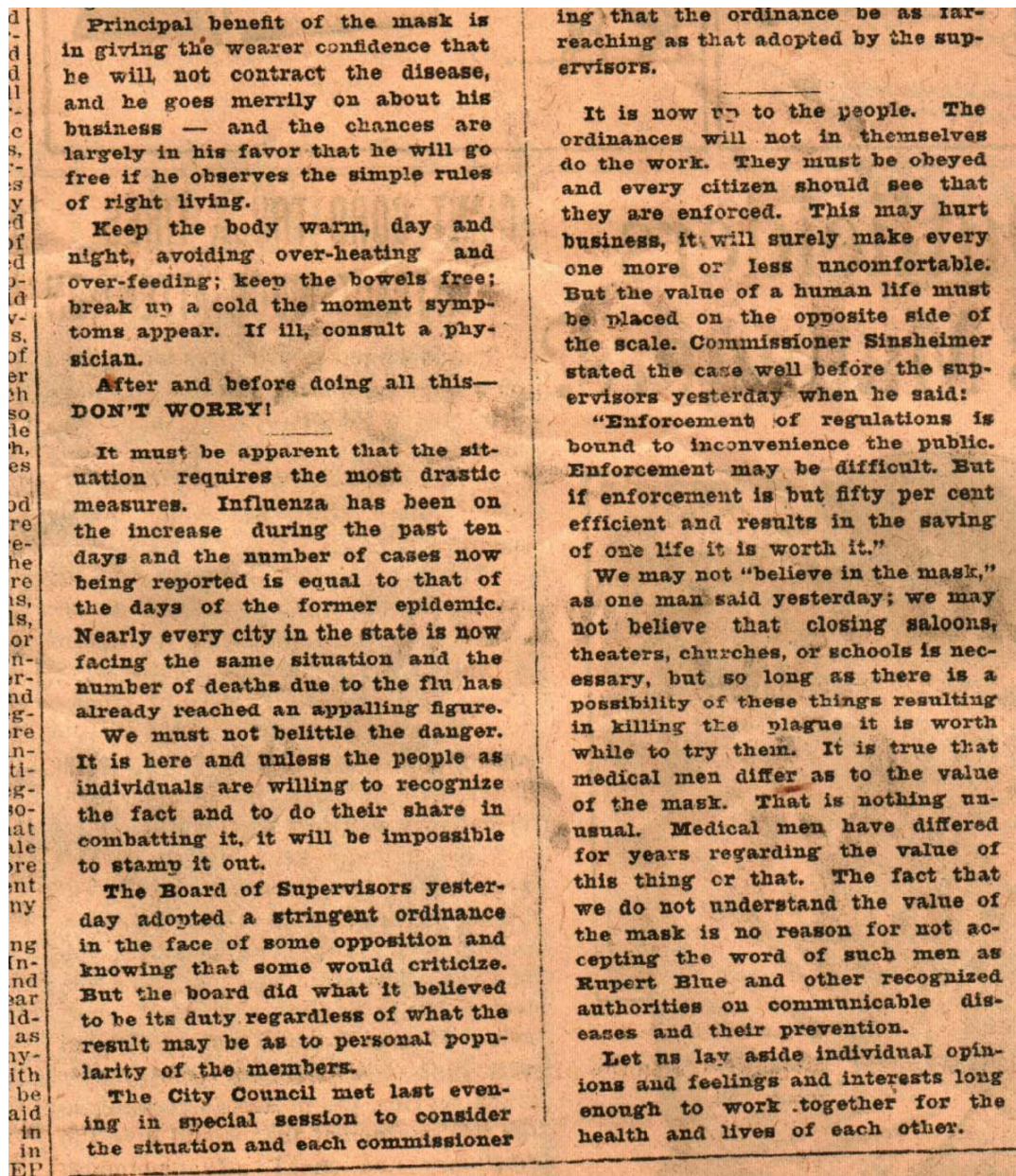
It is to combat fear that the supervisors and city council are enacting drastic ordinances.

Principal benefit of the mask is in giving the wearer confidence that he will not contract the disease,

expressed the opinion that drastic action should be taken at once.

City Attorney Kaetzel was instructed to draw an ordinance that will be presented at another special session this evening.

Many people in the city are urging that the ordinance be as far-reaching as that adopted by the supervisors.



Looking for more to do?

- Follow us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), or [Instagram](#). In addition to our regular Theme Monday and Throwback Thursday posts, we'll now be posting every weekday with photos from our collection that will inspire activities you can try in your very own homes.
- Take a [virtual walking tour](#) of historic San Luis Obispo. These video series feature short vignettes about significant local landmarks.

If you have any ideas of content you'd like to see, share it with us! And if you enjoy what we share with you, and if you are able to, would you please consider [supporting us](#)?

Thank you for being a part of our community. Everybody stay healthy and safe.

Sincerely,

Thomas Kessler

Executive Director

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