History Center
San Luis Obispo County

The Spanish Flu of 1918-19

No public gatherings
Board of Health Order Churches and Amusement Places Closed
(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 downtown 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
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](https://campaign-ui.constantcontact.com/campaign/campaigns/list3 of 8 6/26/2020, 10:32 AM).

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.
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 Hordige:

"Whereas, there is now prevalent in the county of San Luis Obispo, as well as throughout the state of California, an epidemic of a 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 avoind contamination 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 25, 1918, at 10 a. m., for the purpose of taking some action or such action as is necessary as a means of avoiding contamination 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 Togni, seconded by Supervisor Verden, the following applicants were made for the County Board of Health:

Dr. R. A. Brown, Arroyo Grande; C. F. Holliman, Paso Robles; A. D. Togni, Cayucos; Dr. R. H. Pelton, Cambria; C. J. Freer, Santa Maria; Dr. C. M. 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 printed 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, to any assembly of persons of any kind of the 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 so

VICTORY QUells FLu AS WELL 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.

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.
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