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*A DARK AND TERRIBLE MOMENT:
THE SPANISH FLU EPIDEMIC OF 1918
IN NEW MEXICO*

RICHARD MELZER

THE FIRST WORLD WAR was all but over by October 1918. The Allies' final military drive was about to triumph as 1.2 million American troops steadily advanced on a twenty-four-mile front in the Argonne Forest. The Germans were in full retreat. By 26 October Charles G. Dawes could write from Paris that peace was "near at hand."¹ Americans were ecstatic. The entire nation awaited news of the great victory over Kaiser Wilhelm and his hated German army.

But while Americans awaited the end of the war overseas, they were suddenly attacked by a new enemy on their shores. The new enemy invaded the United States via New York and Boston and proceeded to sweep across the North American continent with alarming speed and violent consequences. Twenty-six states were invaded by the alien force within the first ten days of its attack. Every state in the Union had been hit by the time Charles Dawes predicted an end to the conflict in Europe. The enemy indiscriminately struck large cities, remote villages, and numerous military encampments, leaving as many as 851 victims in one day in New York City and as many as 4,597 victims in a single week in Philadelphia. More than ten times as many Americans were killed by this savage force as were killed by German bombs and bullets in the Great War. The country fought gallantly in its weakened state after months of wartime sacrifice and hard labor, but the enemy gave no quarter and knew nothing of peace negotiations or armistice. It called for nothing less than an unconditional surrender. The enemy was the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918.²

The flu epidemic of 1918 has to be considered one of the worst epidemics in history. Comparing the high fatality rate and the vast area affected by this epidemic to afflictions of the past, a *London Times* medical correspondent went so far as to write that "never since the Black Death has such a plague swept over the world."³ It was estimated that one out of every five humans in the world suffered from the flu in 1918 and 1919. More than 21 million never recovered. In the words of the foremost authority on the epidemic, "it killed more humans than any other disease in a period of similar duration in the history of the world."⁴

The germ visited every corner of the globe, from Berlin, where 160,000 Germans succumbed, to the far-off islands of the South Pacific, where the flu took its greatest toll in proportion to the indigenous population. The rich and famous were as susceptible as the poor and destitute: Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany, King Alfonso XIII of Spain, Cardinal Gibbons of Boston, heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey, international banker Baron Lamber de Rothschild, a future president named Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Gen. John J. Pershing, Col. Edward House, President Woodrow Wilson, and nearly every national leader in the Allies' camp suffered from the misery of the flu in the fall of 1918. The epidemic was a worldwide disaster.⁵

Considering the epidemic's global impact, it was only a matter of time before New Mexico experienced the affliction. New Mexico was among the last states to be invaded by the germ, but neither its sparse population, its normally ideal climate, nor its relative isolation could halt the spread of the disease once it had crossed into the Southwest.

Since the flu was slow in coming to New Mexico, one might wonder if the state and its citizens were better prepared than other regions of the country to combat the treacherous new enemy. Also, what measures were taken to fight the flu and minimize human losses in New Mexico? Did officials emulate other cities and states in treating victims, or were unique methods of control attempted here? How many New Mexicans contracted the disease and how many died of it or of its feared companion, pneumonia? Was the death rate higher or lower in New Mexico than in the rest of the country? How did the epidemic affect the war effort in the closing

months of the world conflict? Finally, were New Mexicans satisfied with the public health care provided in this emergency, or did officials suffer a wave of criticism that produced reforms in the state's medical institutions and services? In short, what effect did the epidemic have on the future of public health care in New Mexico?

These questions take on additional importance when one realizes that histories of New Mexico are silent on the flu epidemic of 1918 although it undoubtedly claimed more lives than any other epidemic in the state's history.⁶ Historians of New Mexico are not alone in this neglect. With the rare exception of works like Duane Smith's *Rocky Mountain Boom Town: A History of Durango*,⁷ other state and local histories are seldom more informative. As Alfred Crosby points out, only one major U.S. history textbook "so much as mentions the pandemic."⁸ In addition, social histories of World War I add little to our knowledge of the disease; the most recent book on the period devotes no more than half a sentence and a partial footnote to the epidemic.⁹ What remains are three general histories of the epidemic, a few doctoral dissertations, and several small articles on the flu in the United States.¹⁰ William Noyes's description of the epidemic's history in the United States rings true for New Mexico as well: the epidemic's history is a "misplaced" or largely forgotten chapter in our national past.

News of the Spanish flu epidemic and its terrible death toll in the East reached New Mexico in scattered reports competing with news of the war and the Allies' impending victory. After months of reading long fatality lists and uncertain news from the European front, New Mexicans were eager for bulletins describing military advances and hope of final victory rather than reports of additional suffering from a strange new disease.

Even those who acknowledged the new threat tended to minimize its dangers to New Mexico. The *Santa Fe New Mexican*, for example, claimed that with "our salubrious . . . atmosphere" and our great distance from disease-infected ports there was "little likelihood that the Southwest will be visited by the epidemical malady."¹¹ The *Albuquerque Journal* meanwhile counseled caution rather than fear. "The greatest danger," wrote the editor of the *Journal*, "is from the panic of fear that is spreading over the country."

The disease is "nothing more nor less" than the gripe, the *Journal* argued, and cautioned, do not "allow yourself to be frightened into your coffin."¹² The arrival of Easterners who came to New Mexico to escape the disease served only to reenforce this naive view that calm thoughts and clean air would protect the Southwest.¹³

But calm thoughts and clean air could not prevent the inevitable. Although New Mexico was far from disease-infected seaports like New York and New Orleans, nothing could stop the overland spread of the flu. As the *Raton Range* noted, the Spanish influenza was highly contagious, and "its advance has always been equal to the rate and frequency of human travel."¹⁴ Soldiers home on leave, railroad workers, salesmen, traveling showmen, and, ironically, even those who came to New Mexico to escape the flu were all potential germ carriers.

It was in fact purported that Carlsbad and the southeastern portion of the state were first infected by the flu when an out-of-state circus came to town on 8 October 1918. Several showmen suffered from the disease, and one owner died of the illness during his circus's stay in town. The *Carlsbad Argus* reported that once the germ had arrived "it spread with almost lightning-like rapidity. . . . It was not three days before nearly every family and business house of the city had one or more members down."¹⁵ Learning of this development, several towns, including Albuquerque and Pecos, attempted to isolate their communities by "closely scrutinizing every stranger who happened to get off the train." Those who came from cities and states already afflicted by the flu were asked to "move on" despite their strenuous objections.¹⁶

Some towns took additional steps to prevent a more serious epidemic. On 5 October Albuquerque's city commissioners authorized the local board of health to do everything possible to contain the flu, including asking medical specialists be brought in from the East coast, as if these doctors were not already overburdened with flu victims in their hometowns. Stores and banks were shut down or kept open for only short periods in towns like Clovis, Roswell, and Gallup. Hampered in this way, business and commerce were badly disrupted.¹⁷

Other towns, including Taos and Dawson in the north, attempted to fight the flu by insisting that every citizen wear a gauze mask

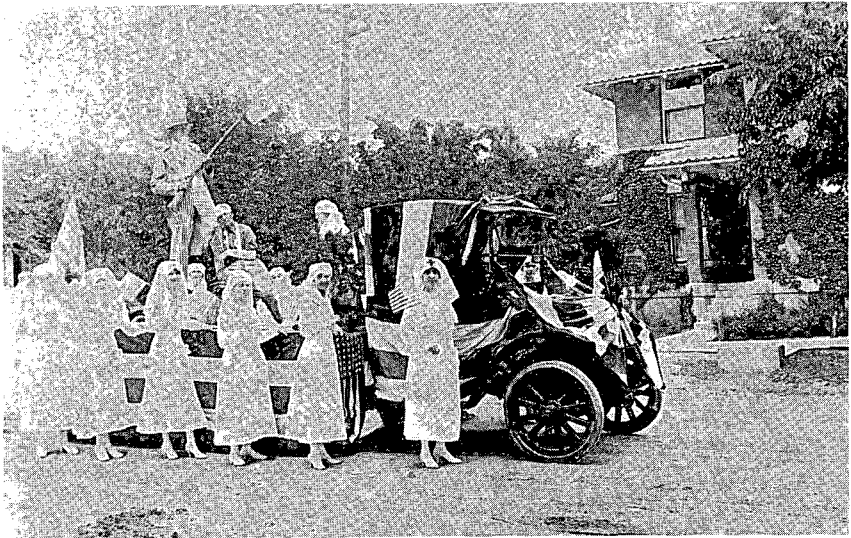
over his nose and mouth while in public. Many ridiculed the practice, saying that it did no good and looked foolish, but no one went so far as to organize an Anti-Mask League in New Mexico as was done in San Francisco. As a result, a great deal of the gauze material previously used to make bandages for the war was now used for the escalating battle at home.¹⁸

As the number of flu cases began to increase in the second and third weeks of October, city fathers throughout the state began to realize that their earlier blasé attitude and feeble initial attempts to deal with the disease had contributed little to the prevention or cure of the terrible illness. Forced to take more concerted action, schools, churches, courthouses, movie theaters, lodges, and dance halls were closed for the duration of the epidemic in a majority of towns and, after October 17, in New Mexico as a whole. Identifying the flu as a "crowd disease," doctors and public health officials cautioned that the best way to avoid the germ was to avoid crowds.¹⁹

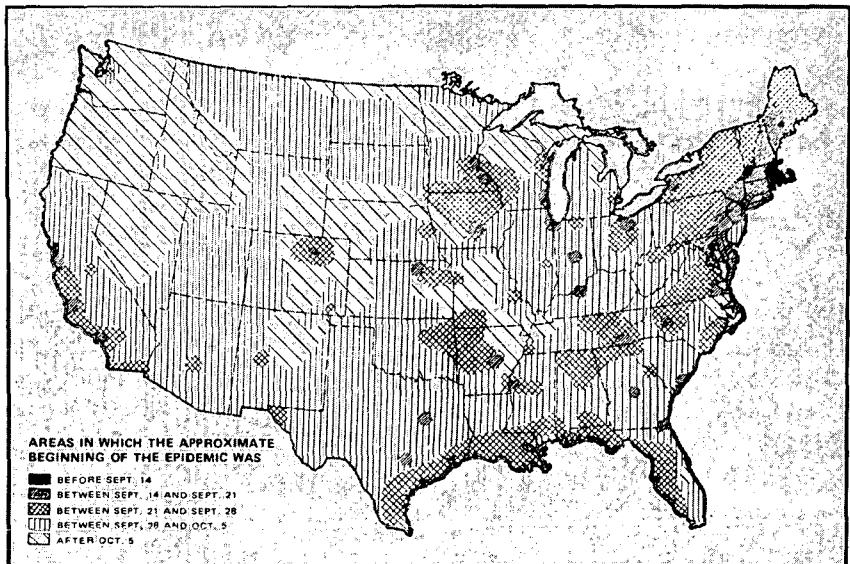
Responding to this warning, political leaders canceled most of their scheduled rallies for the fall elections. Twenty-two conventionaires had already succumbed to the flu after attending the Republican state convention in the early days of the campaign.²⁰ "A political convention," according to the *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, "is about as unsafe a kind of public gathering . . . as can be imagined" in the current crisis.²¹ The *Santa Fe New Mexican* predicted that without political rallies candidates would be forced to circulate pamphlets and printed propaganda "on a scale never before attempted."²² The upcoming campaign promised to be among the most unusual in recent memory.

Town officials also acted to prevent the spread of the flu germ by instructing New Mexicans on the best ways to avoid the extremely contagious disease. Handbills in both Spanish and English explained preventive measures, while lists of suggestions and rules were regularly published in the press. The *Raton Range* published the following "Ten Commandments for the Control of Influenza" on 24 October:

1. Keep away from the sick.
2. Avoid crowds.
3. Do not use cups, glasses or towels that anyone else has used.



Volunteer nurses parade in Santa Fe. Many of the same nurses who were mobilized in the war effort helped to fight the flu. Adela Collier Collection, State Records Center and Archives.



Alfred W. Crosby, *Epidemic and Peace*, 1918, p. 65. Courtesy of Crosby and Greenwood Press.

4. Get all of the fresh air, good food and exercise you can.
5. Wash your hands frequently.
6. Avoid the use of sprays, drugs, etc. for preventive purposes. They do no good and may do harm.
7. To protect your neighbor, cover your mouth and nose when you cough and sneeze. Cough and sneeze toward the floor or ground.
8. If you feel sick, when influenza is prevalent, go to bed and send for a doctor.
9. If you have the disease, stay in bed until entirely well. Pneumonia may result from getting up too soon.
10. Help your health officer fight the disease.²³

Many New Mexicans religiously followed these commandments, and no municipality was forced to resort to threats of fines and incarceration for those caught sneezing, coughing, or spitting in public, like those imposed in Chicago and in other parts of the United States. Only the citizens of Las Vegas, New Mexico, were subject to fines of up to twenty-five dollars if they were discovered entering quarantined dwellings or places of business with more than five customers on the premises at any one time.²⁴

Next, town leaders in New Mexico responded to the threatening flu by cooperating in a door-to-door search for nurses and an urgent call for additional doctors.²⁵ With many physicians away in the military, already overworked, or overwhelmed by the flu, doctors were in extremely short supply in the state.²⁶ The Luna County health officer, for example, was bed-ridden for a week by 15 October, Roy's two physicians were stricken by 17 October, and Dr. J. G. Moir of Deming was said to be "desperately ill at his home" by 18 October. Carlsbad's doctors often slept enroute while being driven from stricken house to house, although this only weakened their defense against the flu.²⁷ In a glowing tribute to these physicians, the *Carlsbad Argus* declared that "surely only a crown of glory can ever pay them for their noble efforts in alleviating the sickness of their fellow townsmen when they themselves were fit subjects for the sick bed."²⁸

The demand for nurses was equally great. By early November a Red Cross official lamented that "nurses are the scarcest thing in the state today."²⁹ The Red Cross recruited nurses from as far away

as Denver, Colorado, and even the inexperienced were encouraged to volunteer their services during this medical emergency. Dozens did, although several, including Sister Asmunda of Carlsbad and Sister Alma Louise Vogt of Albuquerque, succumbed to the disease they fought.³⁰ Meanwhile, with public schools closed and classrooms frequently converted into make-shift hospital rooms during the crisis, many teachers signed on as nurses and received their regular pay as compensation for their new duties.³¹

Doctors and nurses were sometimes able to prevent the spread of the flu with the help of a serum known as Prophylactic, which had been developed at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota. Although the serum was used with considerable success in several eastern mining camps, it was usually in short supply and seldom available for long periods in New Mexico.³² After a month of waiting for the serum's arrival in Albuquerque, only 325 people could be vaccinated by late November.³³ Many other drugs and treatments were concocted and advertised as sure cures for the flu. Medicine vendors peddled treatments with such unlikely names as Dr. Pierce's Pleasant Pellets, Dr. Pierce's Golden Medical Discovery, Wizard Oil, Foley's Honey and Tar, and Pe-ru-na.³⁴ In a typical ad of the day, the manufacturers of Dr. Pierce's Golden Medical Discovery advertised the virtues of their medicine in patriotic terms, claiming that with their product New Mexicans had no reason to fear "when fighting either a German or a Germ!"³⁵

Simple home concoctions were also publicized. The *Deming Graphic*, for instance, informed its readers that fresh lemons were extremely effective agents against the flu. Concerned that this news might cause a lemon shortage in the region, the *Graphic* prudently asked the public to conserve the valuable fruit and resort to using onions as a viable, albeit less socially amenable, alternative.³⁶ Others recommended the medicinal advantages of whiskey, although this "cure" may have been proposed by those who sought to postpone the enforcement of prohibition, which began in New Mexico at midnight on 1 October 1918.³⁷ Of course neither lemons, onions, nor whiskey helped to control the epidemic, but they served at least one important purpose in helping to calm nerves. The public thus had the feeling that *something* was being done in a period when little else seemed to be working well.³⁸

But the public's nerves were not calmed for long. Some towns, like Tucumcari, Albuquerque, and Raton, were extremely fortunate; few of their residents contracted the flu and died. Many other towns, however, were devastated by the epidemic. By 17 October the *Gallup Independent* went so far as to write that "the disease has taken on such dangerous proportions here as to make it as serious as the Bubonic Plague." Twelve hundred cases of the flu and 150 deaths attributed to the disease were reported in the western municipality by the end of the month.³⁹ Carpenters worked day and night to keep up with the demand for coffins. The situation was even worse in towns like Baldy, where the entire population of two hundred residents was ill; in Belen, where more than half the population was stricken; and in San Pedro, where forty-seven of the small town's fifty citizens were down with the flu. Church bells mourned the death of a new victim nearly every hour in Socorro.⁴⁰ To make matters worse, New Mexico experienced its coldest autumn and winter in more than twenty-five years as temperatures dropped to as low as thirty below.⁴¹

A majority of New Mexicans lost at least one family member or friend to the disease.⁴² The fear and anxiety of the period was best reflected in a rather primitive poem that appeared in the *Raton Range*:

The flu has got my nanny;
I'm skeered as skeered can be;
If I meet a guy a-sneezin'
I just quiver like a tree.

I've had three shots of serum,
And I'm wearin' of the mask,
But if I hear the people coughin'
I fairly hustle for the flask. . . .

I've lined out several boxes
For victims of the flu,
And you bet your bottom dollar
It makes a fellow blue. . . .

So if there is a remedy
That overlooked have I,
Please give it me most quickly,
For I do not want to die.⁴³

Every New Mexican shared these fears, but those of Mexican and Indian descent were particularly anxious because they seemed to be especially vulnerable to the disease. The *Albuquerque Journal* reported that Pueblo Indians were "dropping like flies" by mid-October.⁴⁴ Many other native Americans were stricken on the Zuni and Navajo reservations. As one contemporary observer noted, the disease swept the Indian country of New Mexico "like a grass fire. . . . Every day some one told of deaths. . . . The survivors . . . were thin and weak and pathetic. They asked for medicine, the strong medicine in the arm we had used for smallpox, or anything. It was help they wanted and we could do nothing."⁴⁵

Mexican Americans were just as vulnerable. The epidemic had been especially devastating in northern Mexico, where it was estimated that half a million Mexican nationals died of either the flu or pneumonia.⁴⁶ Those who survived became dangerous germ carriers when they crossed the border as migrant workers during the critical wartime labor shortage. Southern New Mexico towns, including Carlsbad, Clovis, Mesilla, and Deming, were particularly hard hit as a result of this migration. In Carlsbad, the Mexican American school was converted into a hospital and was "full to overflowing" by 18 October. One hundred and thirty new cases of the flu were reported "south of the tracks" in Deming on the same day.⁴⁷ As with every other immigrant group in the nation, these Mexican workers usually suffered a much higher death rate than those who were born in the United States.⁴⁸ Often the foreign-born lived in close, overcrowded conditions, where it was almost impossible to isolate sick patients from other members of large, poorly nourished families. Many deaths were, moreover, attributed to the Mexicans' hesitancy to contact physicians because they lacked the money to pay for a doctor or because, as illegal aliens, they feared discovery and deportation.⁴⁹ Finally, many Mexicans succumbed to the flu because they were in the prime age group to contract the disease. Unlike other diseases that tended to claim the lives of the very young and the very old, Spanish influenza was particularly dangerous for those between the ages of twenty and forty-five.⁵⁰ As the Army's Surgeon General explained, the infection, like the war, killed "young, vigorous, robust adults."⁵¹ In New Mexico it was estimated that more than 5,200 "young, vigorous, robust" Mexicans were prime candidates for the flu.⁵²

The flu germ spread quickly among the Mexicans and, as a result, among the residents of the communities they visited in New Mexico. The experience of Dawson, New Mexico, provides a tragic example. Mexican nationals from the southern portion of New Mexico and the northern region of old Mexico had been recruited to work in the Phelps Dodge coal camp.⁵³ Crowded into small temporary quarters, the migrants were particularly susceptible to the spread of disease. Many died soon after their arrival in town. Dawson's hospital, rescue station, and opera house were filled with victims of the dreaded disease. School teachers served as nurses in the camp's boarding houses where many unmarried male immigrants resided. Those who were well enough drove the sick in ambulances to the hospital or the dead in flatbed wagons to the cemetery. Seven or eight bodies were loaded on each wagon as the dead were buried in mass graves dug by members of their own families. Phelps Dodge officials closed Dawson's schools for six weeks, shut down its business district for extended periods, required employees to wear masks in public, and kept four company doctors on twenty-four-hour call, but to no avail.⁵⁴ The company's annual report for 1918 counted seventy-nine flu fatalities in the small town.⁵⁵ With an estimated population of six thousand, this conservative figure meant that 13.2 individuals out of every thousand in camp died of the flu that fall. Only New York's 10.4 per thousand and Pittsburgh's 10.0 per thousand came anywhere near this average among the forty-six American cities listed in Alfred Crosby's general history of the epidemic in the United States.⁵⁶ Having lost two of its residents in combat overseas, Dawson lost at least forty times that number to the flu at home. This great tragedy can not be blamed on the Mexican migration alone, but probably the death toll would not have been as great in the isolated coal camp if germ carriers had not been haphazardly recruited from flu infected regions of the Southwest.

Unfortunately, Dawson's tragedy was typical of many other small towns in New Mexico. Rural New Mexico was hit far worse than the state's larger urban centers, despite a contrary trend in the United States.⁵⁷ The Reverend E. J. Waltz could therefore report that in rural Chilili "there was not a single home where there were less than two sick and many times the number reached seven or eight. In one home we found eight children lying on the bare floor.

Three of these were dead and the others were so sick they were entirely helpless." Mass graves were dug outside the village, but Waltz still discovered corpses lying above ground "for want of a burial place."⁵⁸

More urban centers, like Raton and Albuquerque, provide good counter-examples to tragedy-ridden rural villages like Dawson and Chilili. In Raton, only 1.2 deaths were reported per thousand citizens compared to nearby Dawson's alarming 13.2 per thousand.⁵⁹ Albuquerque also fared much better than the remainder of Bernalillo County; by the end of November the flu had claimed almost twice as many victims in the county as it did in the city. Albuquerque's hospitals had, nevertheless, been full since 7 October.⁶⁰ The total number of influenza cases doubled (from 75 to 159) by 10 October and tripled (from 159 to 480) by 19 October (see Table 1). Despite this rapid increase in the number of cases reported, city leaders continued their earlier efforts to prevent the spread of panic and fear by remaining overtly optimistic. The *Evening Tribune* stressed that "fear and unpreparedness" were the major causes of the flu. Having "conquered" fear and prepared for the worst, the newspaper's editors declared that the situation in Albuquerque was "well under control" by 9 October.⁶¹

Taking more concrete steps to fight the flu, city leaders banned public meetings, discouraged coughing and sneezing in crowds, and insisted on placards to distinguish quarantined homes.⁶² Classes at the University of New Mexico were cancelled indefinitely, and the Chamber of Commerce's Bureau of Charity raised a thousand dollars to help needy families stricken by the flu.⁶³ Also, city leaders exercised extreme caution in deciding when to lift Albuquerque's ban on public indoor meetings; the city did not want to repeat Denver's on-again, off-again ban that served only to facilitate the spread of the flu. Despite the pressure applied by those who could profit from an early lifting of the ban, Albuquerque's city commissioners maintained their quarantine until 2 December, three weeks after most other cities in the state had chosen to lift bans on public gatherings.⁶⁴ Combining caution with at least outward calm, Albuquerque survived the epidemic better than did most other cities of a similar size in the nation.⁶⁵

The number of flu cases and deaths varied, then, from towns

TABLE I: Flu Cases and Fatalities in Albuquerque and New Mexico
7 October to 6 November 1918*

		Cumulative Number of Flu Cases in N.M.	Cumulative Number of Dead from the Flu or Pneumonia in N.M.	Cumulative Number of Flu Cases in Albuquerque	Cumulative Number of Dead from the Flu or Pneumonia in Albuquerque
October	7			23	
	8			75	
	9			100	
	10			159	
	11				
	12			180	
	13				
	14				
	15				
	16				
	17				
	18			460	
	19	7,371	237	480	69
	20	7,477	248		79
	21	7,565	280	500	85
	22	8,525	335	550	
	23	9,241	410	573	
November	24	10,199	456		
	25	10,613	540		
	26	10,893	567		91
	27	11,674	599		
	28	12,101	683		
	29	12,976	777		
	30	13,650	854		
	31	14,344	918		
	1	15,007	1,009		
	2	15,255	1,055		
	3				
	4				
	5				
	6			923	167

*Estimated Total New Mexico Population, September 1918 = 350,000.

Sources: J. W. Kerr to City and County Health Officers, East Las Vegas, New Mexico, 4 November 1918, Lindsey Papers; *Albuquerque Journal*, 7 October 1918; *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 12 October 1918; *Ft. Sumner Review*, 23 November 1918; *Las Vegas Optic*, 9 November 1918.

like Dawson, with its large immigrant population and high fatality rate, to places like the Los Alamos Boys' Ranch, with its very young population and its record of no deaths during the flu epidemic.⁶⁶ Factors including age, crowded conditions, under-nourishment from a wartime diet, physical exhaustion, ethnic origin, and poor health facilities contributed to the spread of this "silent foe" in the state. Any combination of two or more of these factors spelled almost certain disaster to the residents of many communities. The absence of these factors, on the other hand, meant a far easier time for many New Mexico towns in the months of October and November.

The flu epidemic of 1918 would have been terrible during any period of history, but its impact on the course of historical events was even greater because it struck at a critical moment in the concluding hours of World War I. With thousands ill from the flu, work in the nation's shipyards and vital munition factories was sharply curtailed, while the production of coal was "seriously hampered." The disease decimated military camps in the United States, transport ships bound for Europe, and combat troops on the front lines of battle.⁶⁷ Its death toll among American soldiers was "without parallel in army annals."⁶⁸ Forty-one of the ninety-four New Mexico troops killed in the war in fact died from the flu or of other disease rather than from combat injuries suffered abroad.⁶⁹

This "great and terrifying menace" also crippled the war effort in New Mexico. Draft calls were suspended for the first three weeks of October as civilian doctors could not be spared to examine incoming troops.⁷⁰ The drafting of 405 additional males was delayed, although 7,551 New Mexicans continued to serve in the Army as of 1 November.⁷¹ War bond campaigns were also affected by the epidemic, although most of the funds collected in the Fourth Liberty Bond drive had already been raised before the worst days of the epidemic. Towns like Dawson could, therefore, claim to have exceeded their campaign goals by as much as 300 percent, despite the flu and despite the news that the war was almost over in Europe.⁷² Open-air rallies, door-to-door canvassing, and Liberty Bond parades, however, helped spread the disease. As Crosby argues, the flu virus was "such an adept traveler that it really didn't need the help," but it took full advantage of bond drives and pa-

triotic rallies to make itself even more dangerous and more widespread.⁷³

Thousands of manpower hours were, moreover, lost just when the war demanded maximum efficiency and productivity from all citizens. Estimating that 400,000 Americans had died in the epidemic and that each would have worked an average of twenty-five additional years if he had lived, Henry Moir told the Association of Life Insurance Presidents that the epidemic had caused "an economic waste of ten million years" for the United States.⁷⁴ Applying this formula to New Mexico, where approximately five thousand people died, the state could claim to have suffered an economic loss of 125,000 years.

As a result of this terrible loss and other wartime hardships, many New Mexico counties experienced acute shortages in essential supplies. Otero County, for example, reported a supply of only twenty tons of coal, little food, and absolutely no surplus wool for ten thousand people facing a winter of sub-zero temperatures. Other counties were hit equally as hard; few could hope to ward off an epidemic, much less contribute more to the war effort under such adverse conditions.⁷⁵

On another front, New Mexico's largest military encampment, Camp Cody, was hit by the flu, although it weathered the epidemic far better than most forts in the country.⁷⁶ Quarantined as early as 4 October, the camp reported 500 cases of the flu and 125 cases of pneumonia, but only 21 dead among its 4000 troops prior to 23 October.⁷⁷ These figures skyrocketed, however, when 4,200 new troops entered the southern camp in the succeeding 2 weeks; 2,237 new cases of the flu, 431 new cases of pneumonia, and 107 additional deaths were listed in these 14 days alone.⁷⁸ From an average of approximately 5 deaths per thousand soldiers in the first 3 weeks of October, Camp Cody experienced 13 deaths per 1000 soldiers in the last week of October and the first week of November. Although Camp Cody was not hit as hard as other forts, it became the target of rumors exaggerating the extent of the epidemic and the number of fatalities. When it was rumored that 50 percent of the troops were seriously ill with the flu, with hundreds of the men "dropping like flies" each week, the camp's commander, Brig. Gen.

James R. Lindsey, referred to such stories as vicious lies "deliberately started and kept in circulation by German propagandists." The general went so far as to threaten to enforce the Espionage Act of 1917 against anyone who dared to "afford great comfort and encouragement to the enemy" through such lies.⁷⁹

General Lindsey was not the only patriot in New Mexico who suspected German foul play during the flu epidemic. German agents were, in fact, accused of bringing the flu germ to the United States as a form of their notorious germ warfare. "It is generally accepted," wrote the editors of the *Deming Graphic*, "that the epidemic has been spread by German agents, as it could hardly have traveled so swiftly by natural channels."⁸⁰ Federal officials dismissed these accusations as unfounded,⁸¹ but this did not prevent the postulation of flu-related theories even more absurd and unlikely. On 9 November the *Ft. Sumner Review* relayed a theory that "the world has been made ill as a result of 'a wave of hate.' " This mass hatred had accumulated during the Great War and had culminated by producing disease and suffering in the form of the terrible flu epidemic. The epidemic would end, supposedly, when love and peace had conquered hate and war or when the conflict was over in Europe.⁸²

The war in Europe did end soon after the worst of the epidemic had passed in New Mexico and just as the quarantine was lifted in most sections of the state. After a month or more of living in rather strict quarantine, New Mexicans celebrated their renewed freedom almost as much as they celebrated the armistice itself on Tuesday morning, 12 November. The excitement and relief of the time was well described in the *Deming Graphic*:

When the sun rose on a perfect day, the town went mad. Sane and ordinarily sedate men and women rushed about the streets, shouting, laughing, crying, beating each other on the back, waving flags. . . . Every motor horn in town needed throat medicine before the forenoon was half done, and each car, truck, wagon and horse was decorated with the national colors of the Allies and these United States.⁸³

This scene, or a similar one, was repeated in almost every town

and village of the state.⁸⁴ The war was over. The flu was largely conquered. The gloom had lifted. It was time to live again.

While the end of the flu epidemic produced joyous celebrations, it also created great controversies in New Mexico. Not the least of these controversies involved the state's poor medical health facilities. New Mexicans severely criticized state medical authorities for their disorganization and general unpreparedness in dealing with the recent epidemic. After the flu had "raged for months in Europe," the *Santa Fe New Mexican* insisted, in retrospect, that local medical authorities should have realized that the disease was "bound to visit these shores in the course of time."⁸⁵ Although ample opportunity occurred to organize and prepare for the onslaught of the flu, the New Mexico Public Health Association declared in December 1918 that "the outstanding feature of the situation was our absolute lack of health preparedness." The Public Health Association went on to explain that the State Board of Health was "powerless to act when the epidemic struck us" because the board's seven members

have no funds and no personnel at their disposal. They have a great deal of authority, but no means of using it and there is no connecting link between their board and the health boards of our various counties and communities. . . . Consequently, there is no standardization of work and no interchange of ideas. They are exactly in a position of a school board that has neither schools nor teachers, and no funds to build one or employ the other.⁸⁶

The state had had to rely on the Rocky Mountain Division of the International Red Cross and on Dr. J. W. Kerr of the U.S. Public Health Service to coordinate the sending of medical personnel and vital supplies to stricken communities. Fortunately, Dr. Kerr was well aware of the state's public health problems because he had completed a survey of public health conditions in New Mexico just prior to this epidemic. Ironically, Kerr had concluded his survey of September by stating that such an organization or state department of health was "essential and urgently needed."⁸⁷ As the Public Health Association lamented in proposing the creation of this agency, "we will never know how many . . . friends, relatives, and fellow

citizens . . . were sacrificed as a result of the lack of an official health organization, linking up the counties and towns of our state for efficient health protection and the prevention of diseases."⁸⁸

Those who lobbied for the establishment of a state department of health were especially critical of the methods used in collecting and reporting vital health statistics in New Mexico. Noting "our present slipshod methods of recording vital statistics," critics pointed to an inability to collect data regarding births and deaths during normal times, much less during crises. Dr. Kerr had found that the State Board of Health had "no records whatsoever" while city and county clerk records were "practically worthless."⁸⁹ Penalties involving fines and imprisonment for not reporting births and deaths were "practically a dead letter" because few officials ever bothered to enforce them in most areas of the state.⁹⁰ As a result, Santa Fe, with a population of nearly sixteen thousand, had only sixty-nine officially recorded births in 1917, while Albuquerque had but one.⁹¹ Kerr half facetiously remarked that in more than one city of New Mexico "the mayor himself could die and be buried and the event not be recorded as a part of the vital statistics of the community."⁹²

Critics concluded their case for the establishment of a new state department of health by arguing that the recent flu epidemic had merely highlighted the seriousness of a situation involving many fatal diseases over a period of many, many years. It was estimated that while 258 New Mexicans lost their lives "for the cause of democracy against . . . the 'Beast of Berlin' " from April 1917 to October 1918, more than two thousand New Mexican children died of preventable diseases during the same nineteen-month period.⁹³

A continued inability to record accurately much less control adequately the spread of disease in such "less enlightened communities" caused grave concern not only in New Mexico, but also in the neighboring states of Arizona, Texas, and Colorado. These states felt extremely vulnerable to New Mexico's afflictions as long as New Mexico lacked the proper organization, data gathering methods, and financial means to deal with its serious medical emergencies.⁹⁴ Without an efficient state department of health, New Mexico would be known as the sick sister of the southwestern states, reenforcing its prestatehood reputation as a less-than-civilized region. The fact that New Mexico was the only state in the Union without a state

department of health had become a great source of embarrassment by 1918.⁹⁵ No one wanted a new state agency that would interfere in an individual's "private life and home affairs," but an increasing number of New Mexicans saw the need for "a state department of health with . . . the means and the power to respond instantly and effectively to every report of a contagious disease" in the area.⁹⁶

Pressured by this considerable agitation, the New Mexico state legislature officially established a state department of health in a bill enacted on 15 March 1919. The department was created to serve as "the superior health authority of the State" with sufficient power "to investigate, control and abate the causes of diseases, especially epidemics." In addition, the department was charged with the responsibility of carefully collecting vital statistics on all births, deaths, and marriages. Putting teeth into the legislation, lawmakers provided that state courts could fine an individual as much as one hundred dollars for failing to report new births, deaths, and marriages to the new department.⁹⁷

It would be a mistake, however, to argue that the flu epidemic was the sole catalyst in the creation of a state department of health. Dr. Kerr's critical public health survey of 1918 had had a considerable impact on public opinion and had received widespread press coverage before the epidemic hit. Earlier reports by the American Medical Association and by the U.S. surgeon general were equally critical of New Mexico's public health program. The latter report was, in fact, commissioned to determine why so many New Mexicans were rejected for medical reasons as recruits in World War I.⁹⁸ One must conclude that while the flu epidemic was not the only cause for the creation of a new department of health, the tragic course of the epidemic *helped to highlight the need* for such a department. The facts and figures on the poor state of public health in New Mexico were all known prior to the epidemic, but the epidemic showed how bad things could be in a serious medical emergency.

The new department became an immediate source of pride and "resulted in a great deal of favorable publicity" for New Mexico at the national Red Cross convention held in April 1919: John Tombs, who had been instrumental in the creation of the department, proudly reported from the convention in Cincinnati that with its

excellent climate and a modern department of health, it was only a matter of time before New Mexico would "unquestionably" become "the healthiest state in the union."⁹⁹

The epidemic had thus produced some good. Moreover, compared to many other regions of the country, New Mexico had withstood the flu invasion relatively well (Table I). Nevertheless, it would be difficult to convince those who witnessed the death of several family members and friends that their great loss at home, at the very moment of victory overseas, produced anything but grief, pain, and deep frustration in their lives. Despite its important influence on the formation of a modern department of health, the Spanish influenza was destined to be remembered simply for what it was in the fall of 1918: a truly dark and terrible moment in New Mexico history.

NOTES

1. Charles G. Dawes, *A Journal of the Great War*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1921), 1:194.
2. Alfred W. Crosby, Jr. *Epidemic and Peace, 1918* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976), p. 76; Joseph E. Persico, "The Great Swine Flu Epidemic of 1918," *American Heritage* 27 (June 1976): 83; Dorothy Ann Pettit, "A Cruel Wind: America Experiences the Pandemic Influenza, 1918-20" (Ph.D. diss., University of New Hampshire, 1976), pp. 115, 267.
3. Quoted in the *New York Times*, 20 December 1918.
4. Crosby, 1918, p. 215.
5. Crosby, 1918, pp. 126, 152, 177, 187-94, 231-41, 322; *New York Times*, 4 October 1918; Persico, "Epidemic," p. 30; Irwin Ross, "The Great Plague of 1918," *American History Illustrated* 3 (July 1968): 16; A. A. Hoehling, *The Great Epidemic* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1961), pp. 19, 64-65, 109-11; Pettit, "Cruel Wind," pp. 187-96; William R. Noyes, "Influenza Epidemic, 1918-19: A Misplaced Chapter in U.S. Social and Institutional History" (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Los Angeles, 1968), p. 124.
6. See, for example, Warren A. Beck, *New Mexico: A History of Four Centuries* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962); Marc Simmons, *New Mexico: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977); Glen O. Ream, *Out of New Mexico's Past* (Santa Fe: Sundial Press, 1980).
7. Duane A. Smith, *Rocky Mountain Boom Town: A History of Durango* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1980), pp. 103-4.
8. Crosby, 1918, pp. 315, 326-27 n.

9. David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 189n, 198.

10. General histories on the flu include Crosby, 1918; Hoehling, *Great Epidemic*, and Richard Collier, *The Plague of the Spanish Land: The Influenza Pandemic of 1918–1919* (New York: Atheneum, 1974). Dissertations include Noyes, "Misplaced Chapter" and Pettit, "Cruel Wind." Articles and book chapters include Persico, "Epidemic"; Ross, "Plague"; Alfred W. Crosby, Jr., "The Influenza Pandemic of 1918" in *History, Science, and Politics: Influenza in America, 1918–1976*, ed. June E. Osborn (New York: Prodist, 1977), pp. 5–13; and Chapter 30 of Edward Robb Ellis, *Echoes of Distant Thunder: Life in the United States, 1914–18* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1975), pp. 462–77.

11. *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 28 September 1918.

12. *Albuquerque Journal*, 8 October 1918.

13. *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 18 October 1918. New Mexico had, of course, been known as a health haven for years. It was estimated in 1918 that 60 percent of all Anglos in the state "are there or came there originally for the health of some member of their family" (J. W. Kerr, "Public Health Administration in New Mexico," Washington E. Lindsey Papers, New Mexico State Records Center and Archives [SRCA], Santa Fe).

14. *Raton Range*, 18 October 1918.

15. *Carlsbad Argus*, 11 October 1918.

16. *Carlsbad Argus*, 8 November 1918; *Albuquerque Journal*, 5 October 1918.

17. *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 11, 18 October 1918.

18. *Las Vegas Optic*, 9 November 1918; *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 12 December 1918; interview with Donald Gibbs, 25 October 1978; interview with Grace M. Beddow, 12 August 1978; interview with N. H. Black, 5 August 1978; interview with William Saul, 21 October 1978.

19. *Deming Graphic*, 4, 25 October 1918; *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 5, 11, 15, 18 October 1918; *Gallup Independent*, 28 November 1918; *Albuquerque Journal*, 7, 16 October 1918; *Raton Range*, 29 November 1918; *Carlsbad Argus*, 11, 18 October 1918; *Ft. Sumner Review*, 26 October 1918; *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 5, 12, 18 October 1918.

20. *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 29 October 1918.

21. *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 18 October 1918.

22. *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 18 October 1918.

23. *Raton Range*, 24 October 1918.

24. *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 26 October, 23 November 1918; *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 9 October 1918.

25. *Carlsbad Argus*, 11 October 1918; *Gallup Independent*, 10 October 1918; *Deming Graphic*, 11 October 1918; *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 28 September 1918.

26. J. W. Kerr to Gov. Washington E. Lindsey, East Las Vegas, New Mexico, 6 November 1918, Lindsey Papers, SRCA; *Carlsbad Argus*, 11, 18 October 1918; *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 12, 21 October 1918; *Gallup Independent*, 24 October 1918.

27. *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 17 October 1917; *Deming Graphic*, 18 October 1918; *Carlsbad Argus*, 18 October 1918.
28. *Carlsbad Argus*, 18 October 1918.
29. John Tombs quoted in the *Ft. Sumner Review*, 23 November 1918.
30. *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 29 October, 18 December, 1918; *Gallup Independent*, 10 October 1918; *Deming Graphic*, 18 October 1918; *Carlsbad Argus*, 18 October 1918.
31. *Albuquerque Journal*, 17 October 1918; interview with Beddow.
32. *Gallup Independent*, 31 October 1918; *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 5 December 1918.
33. *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 28 November 1918.
34. *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 8 November, 4, 16 December 1918; *Ft. Sumner Review*, 23 November 1918; *Las Vegas Optic*, 2 November 1918; *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 5 November 1918; *Raton Range*, 25 October 1918; *Tucumcari News*, 12 December 1918.
35. *Ft. Sumner Review*, 30 November 1918.
36. *Deming Graphic*, 11 October 1918.
37. *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 30 September, 26 October 1918.
38. Crosby, 1918, p. 84.
39. *Gallup Independent*, 10, 17 October 1918; *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 9 October 1918; *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 28 October 1918.
40. *Albuquerque Journal*, 13, 17 October 1918; *Ft. Sumner Review*, 23 November 1918; *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 19, 29 October, 1 November 1918; *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 5 November 1918; interview with Clarence Hammel, 22 March 1981.
41. *Gallup Independent*, 2 January 1919.
42. *Carlsbad Argus*, 20 December 1918.
43. *Raton Range*, 16 January 1919.
44. *Albuquerque Journal*, 18 October 1918.
45. Hilda Faunce, *Desert Wife* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1934), p. 297.
46. Ross, "Great Plague," p. 12.
47. *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 1 November 1918; *Carlsbad Argus*, 11 October 1918; *Deming Graphic*, 18 October 1918.
48. Crosby, 1918, pp. 227-28.
49. Crosby, 1918, p. 228; *Deming Graphic*, 18 October 1918; interview with Fred Covert, 9 July 1978.
50. *New York Times*, 2, 6 December 1918; *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 19 December 1918; Persico, "Epidemic," p. 81; Crosby, 1918, pp. 207, 215-16.
51. Quoted in Crosby, 1918, p. 215.
52. *Las Vegas Optic*, 26 October 1918.
53. Interview with Fred Montoya, 2 September 1979; interview with Saul; interview with Covert; interview with Alberta McClary, 3 May 1978.
54. Interview with Saul; interview with Stadler; interview with Beddow; interview with Lucille H. Morrow, 14 July 1979; interview with Ted Shelton, 2

September 1978; interview with Hannah McGarvey, 13 June 1978; interview with Lloyd Lumsden, 8 July 1978; interview with Black; *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 5 November 1918.

55. Phelps Dodge Corporation, *Annual Report*, 1918, p. 33. *Annual Report* available to the author courtesy of the Phelps Dodge Corporation.

56. Crosby, 1918, pp. 60–61.

57. J. W. Kerr, Memorandum to the State Board of Health, East Las Vegas, 1 November 1918, Lindsey Papers, SRCA.

58. Quoted in the *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 12 December 1918.

59. *Raton Range*, 12 November 1918.

60. *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 7, 22 October, 27 November 1918.

61. *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 9 October 1918.

62. *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 26 October 1918.

63. *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 5, 17 October, 2 November 1918.

64. *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 23 November 1918.

65. *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 6 November 1918.

66. *Ft. Sumner Review*, 30 November 1918.

67. "Pushing the War Activities at Home," *Current History* 9 (November 1918): 239; "Emerging from War Conditions," *Current History* 9 (March 1919): 465; Noyes, "Misplaced Chapter," pp. 25–26, 212–14, 238–39; Persico, "Epidemic," p. 82; Hoehling, *Great Epidemic*, pp. 151–59; Crosby, 1918, pp. 121–201; Pettit, "Cruel Wind," pp. 96–99, 101–8, 114–15, 126–28, 166.

68. *New York Times*, 26 January 1919.

69. *Ft. Sumner Review*, 2 November 1918.

70. *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 21 October 1918; *Carlsbad Argus*, 1 November 1918; *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 21 October 1918.

71. *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 17 October 1918.

72. *Raton Range*, 25 October 1918.

73. Crosby, 1918, p. 53.

74. *New York Times*, 6 December 1918.

75. *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 27 December 1918.

76. *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 20 September 1918; Hoehling, *Great Epidemic*, p. 149.

77. *Deming Graphic*, 8 November 1918; *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 5 October 1918.

79. Quoted in *Deming Graphic*, 8 November 1918.

80. *Deming Graphic*, 4 October 1918.

81. *New York Times*, 24 October 1918. Edward Ellis nevertheless writes of the Germans' successful attempt to inject American horses and mules with glanders-causing germs. A contagious and fatal disease, glanders killed thousands of horses and mules intended for shipment to the Allies in Europe (Ellis, *Echoes*, p. 179).

82. *Ft. Sumner Review*, 9 November 1918. Other "theories" involving wartime sugar rationing, toxic vapor, cosmic rays, and the distemper of dogs and cats are

described in Persico, "Epidemic," p. 81, and the *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 4 November 1918.

83. *Deming Graphic*, 15 November 1918.

84. See, for example, the *Raton Range*, 12 November 1918; *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 11 November 1918.

85. *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 5 December 1918.

86. "Health Organization in New Mexico," and "The Influenza Epidemic in New Mexico," New Mexico Public Health Association Press Releases, SRCA; *Carlsbad Argus*, 29 November 1918.

87. J. W. Kerr, "Public Health Administration in New Mexico," p. 17, Lindsey Papers, SRCA. Kerr's survey was eventually published in U.S., Department of the Treasury, *Public Health Reports* 33, pt. 2 (15 November 1918): 1976-95.

88. "Influenza," New Mexico Public Health Association Press Release, SRCA; *Carlsbad Argus*, 29 November 1918.

89. "Influenza," New Mexico Public Health Association Press Releases, SRCA; Kerr, "Administration," p. 9.

90. Kerr, "Administration," p. 15.

91. *Deming Graphic*, 13 December 1918.

92. Kerr, "Administration," p. 15.

93. "The Public Health in Peace and War," New Mexico Public Health Association Press Releases, SRCA.

94. *Deming Graphic*, 13 December 1918.

95. Michael J. Burkhart to author, 6 January 1981. Burkhart is the current director of the Health Services Division of the New Mexico State Health and Environment Department.

96. *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 8 January 1918.

97. *Laws of the State of New Mexico Passed by the Fourth Regular Session of the Legislature of the State of New Mexico, 1919* (Albuquerque: Albright & Anderson, 1919), chapter 85, pp. 161-71.

98. Burkhart to author, 6 January 1981.

99. *Albuquerque Evening Herald*, 15 April 1919.