

1918 flu pandemic in Canada: A look back

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As World War I was drawing to a close, the virulent Spanish flu spread around the globe, killing thousands in Canada and millions worldwide. As Canadians and the world face COVID-19 today, here's a look back at what life in Canada

looked like during this major health crisis.



2/21 SLIDES © Société d'histoire de Victoriaville

Thousands gather, unaware of what is to come

In the fall of 1918, the first civilian cases of the Spanish flu in Canada were reported at the Collège commercial after thousands gathered unaware in Victoriaville, Quebec, for the [Eucharistic Congress](#).



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The first wave

The Spanish flu hit Canada in multiple waves. The country got an early taste of what was to come in the spring of 1918, when the hospital ship *Araguayan* arrived at Halifax Harbour from England—23 per cent of its passengers and crew were sick with the virus.



4/21 SLIDES © Library and Archives Canada

Awaiting the looming pandemic

Farmers in Alberta wearing masks brace themselves for the devastation to come. The pandemic first arrived in Canada via the port cities of [Quebec City](#), [Montreal](#), and [Halifax](#), before spreading westward.



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Wearing masks

Telephone operators in [High River](#), Alberta, wear masks to protect themselves from the flu during the outbreak. Some 4,000 Albertans died of the Spanish influenza between 1918 and 1920.



6/21 SLIDES © Centre d'archives de la région de Thetford – Fonds galerie de nos ancêtres de l'or blanc, Donateur: ...

Tending to sick children

Teachers take care of children sick with the Spanish flu at Collège La Salle in Thetford Mines, Quebec. Unlike today's COVID-19 that affects primarily the elderly and those with underlying medical issues, the Spanish flu claimed mainly young and healthy men and women, between the ages of [20 and 45](#).

EPIDEMIC INFLUENZA (SPANISH)

**This Disease is Highly Communicable.
It May Develop Into a Severe Pneumonia.**

There is no medicine which will prevent it.

Keep away from public meetings, theatres and other places where crowds are assembled.

Keep the mouth and nose covered while coughing or sneezing.

When a member of the household becomes ill, place him in a room by himself.

The room should be warm, but well ventilated.

The attendant should put on a mask before entering the room of those ill of the disease.

TO MAKE A MASK



Take a piece of ordinary cheesecloth 8 x 16 inches, fold it to make it 8 x 8 inches. Next fold this to make it 8 x 4 inches. Tie cords about 10 inches long at each corner. Apply over mouth and nose as shown in the picture.



ISSUED BY THE PROVINCIAL BOARD OF HEALTH

Take warning

The [Spanish flu](#) was highly contagious and spread easily among the population due to "inadequate quarantine measures" and a "lack of coordinated efforts from health authorities."



8/21 SLIDES © Glenbow Archives

Working at an isolation hospital

Large numbers of "nurses, volunteers, and members of charitable organizations risked their lives" to save the sick. Pictured here are nurses and teachers volunteering as nurses working at an isolation hospital in Lloydminster.



9/21 SLIDES © Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain

Burying the dead

Residents of North River, Labrador, bury victims of the Spanish flu. Roughly [55,000 Canadians](#) died of the virus between 1918 and 1920, nearly as many who died in the First World War. The global pandemic killed an estimated [50 million](#) people worldwide.



10/21 SLIDES © City of Edmonton Archives

Defying orders against public gatherings...

When the war finally came to an end, [celebrations broke out](#) across Canada despite orders against public gatherings. Armistice Day proved to be especially deadly during the second wave of the Spanish flu, with big numbers of deaths following the surge in large gatherings. Here crowds congregate to celebrate the end of World War I in Edmonton.



11/21 SLIDES © Photographer J. Howard A. Chapman. BC Archives Call No. F-05514. Catalogue No. HP094248 Courtesy Ro...

Crowds gather to celebrate Armistice Day

The second wave occurred in the fall of 1918, when the virus mutated into an "extremely [contagious](#), virulent, and deadly form of the disease," responsible for 90 per cent of the deaths during the pandemic. Here nearly a thousand people gather in [Victoria](#) to celebrate peace after the long war.



12/21 SLIDES © View of Oak 1902. Archives and Special Collections (Coll. 345 1.01.017), Queen Elizabeth II Library ...

Indigenous and remote communities are hardest hit

Indigenous Canadians in isolated northern communities were some of the hardest hit by the virus. According to a [1919 federal report](#), "Indigenous Canadians living on reserves died from the pandemic at more than five times the national average." The death toll was so high in the Inuit community of Okak, Newfoundland, that the settlement was abandoned in 1919.

STANLEY CUP OFF; TEAM IN HOSPITAL WILDE

STANLEY CUP SERIES IS OFF

Five Canadiens and Manager Are Very Ill With Influenza

EACH TEAM WINS TWICE

Lalonde, Hall, Couture, Berliquette and McDonald Have Temperature of 101-5

Seattle, April 1.—Five of the Canadian hockey team are seriously ill with influenza and the deciding game for the Stanley Cup with Seattle will not be played.



"It will be two or three weeks before the visiting boys will be back on their feet again able to play. Consequently the series has been called off, with two games to the credit of each team. To-night's game would have decided the title," the arena management said.

Canadiens, Most of Whom Are in Seattle Hospital



Back row, from left to right—George Kennedy, manager; Pitre, Berliquette, Couture, McDonald, and trainer. Front row—Lalonde, O. Cleghorn, Corbenu, Hall and Veary.

"A MAN CAN BUT DO HIS BEST"
Scott.
Sayings and Doings of the Sportsmen of the Times

MUCH RACING FOR WESTERN CANADA

Fifteen Meetings at Some of

13/21 SLIDES © The Globe and Mail, April 2, 1919

The Stanley Cup is cancelled

It takes a lot for Canadians to cancel the [Stanley Cup finals](#). The first time in history that the finals were cancelled was during the 1918–19 season, when the Spanish flu infected the Montreal Canadiens locker room. The disease claimed the lives of Hall of Fame defenceman Joe "Bad Joe" Hall and team owner George Kennedy.



14/21 SLIDES © Glenbow Archives

Bringing the country to a standstill

During the second wave, normal life all but [shut down](#) in Canada. "Schools, churches, and places of entertainment shut down, business was disrupted, and doctors overwhelmed."

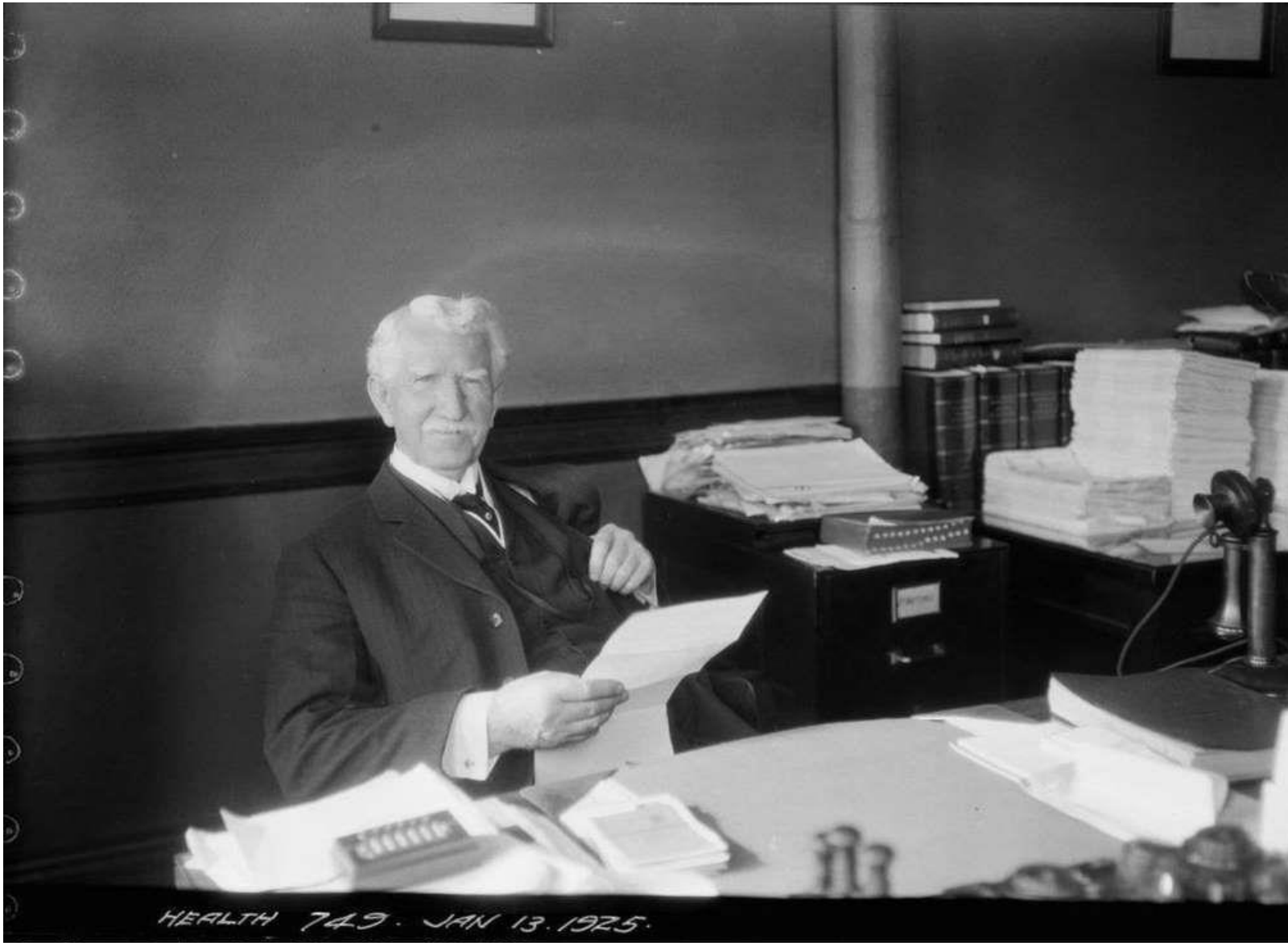
Pictured here are staff wearing masks at the Calgary Canadian Bank of Commerce. In an effort to slow the outbreak, the Alberta government ordered people to wear masks outside their homes. Coughing, sneezing, and spitting in public were deemed finable offences in Regina.



15/21 SLIDES © University of Waterloo

The Spanish flu reaches the West Coast

In October 1918, during the second wave, the Spanish flu arrived at B.C.'s coast. Just three months later, Greater Vancouver was one of the three areas of North America with the highest [percentage of deaths](#).



City of Toronto Archives, Series 372, s0372_ss0032_it0749

16/21 SLIDES © City of Toronto Archives

Social distancing, school closures, and hoarding

The measures we're seeing today, such as social distancing and school closures, are nothing new. The head of Toronto Public Health, Chief Medical Officer [Charles Hastings](#) (pictured), took swift action, ordering schools and theatres to close, cancelling conventions, and encouraging businesses to operate with flexible hours to discourage crowds. He also promoted walking instead of taking streetcars. Although some hoarded goods, most followed instructions.



Cartoon from the 26 October 1918 issue of the *Calgary Herald* satirizing the Department of Health's order forcing all citizens to wear masks when outside their homes.

17/21 SLIDES © Calgary Daily Herald, October 26, 1918

Many underestimate the deadly virus

A cartoon in the *Calgary Daily Herald* made light of Alberta's mask-wearing law. In 1918, many Canadians underestimated the power of this particular flu, with many assuming it was just the "common winter illness" that they had seen before.



18/21 SLIDES © Alice Perrault collection, Them Days Archives

“Residential schools were death traps”

Sanitation and medical care were already a problem at Canada’s [residential schools](#), which had previously battled tuberculosis. When the Spanish flu hit, “they became charnel houses.” Pictured are residents of Okak, an Inuit community in Labrador that was abandoned in 1919 due to the flu.



19/21 SLIDES © L.B. Foote Collection, No.189/Archives of Manitoba

Travelling by train

Today, much of the COVID-19 spread has been by plane. One hundred years ago, train was a major vector. All it took was two soldiers with the Spanish flu stopping in Winnipeg. As a result, [1,200](#) others died in the prairie city.



20/21 SLIDES © Handout Copy Photo, The Hamilton Spectator

Nurses congregate outside a relief hospital in Hamilton, Ontario

Unlike today's pandemic, the Spanish flu hit hard and fast—"with many dying within a day of realizing they had been infected." In Hamilton, streetcars ran with all windows open, schools and theatres were shut down, store hours were restricted, church services were cancelled, and public funerals prohibited.



City of Toronto Archives, Series 372, s0372_ss0058_i10760

21/21 SLIDES © City of Toronto Archives

Construction continues in Toronto

As the [Spanish flu](#) ravaged Toronto, major construction projects continued, like the Bloor Viaduct. As a result, the virus killed disproportionately more construction workers than other professions.

<https://www.msn.com/en-ca/news/photos/1918-flu-pandemic-in-canada-a-look-back/ss-BB1bsvhy?ocid=msedgdhp#image=1>

Jurek, Cortes Island 2020-11-30

- Jurek -