The 1918 Influenza Epidemic in Mower County
by Dean Ulland

It must have been discouraging to pick up a newspaper in late 1918. There was bad news everywhere. The war dominated headlines, with heavy fighting at the Meuse-Argonne, and most editions carried the names of local casualties. On October 12, a forest fire moved through the Cloquet-Moose Lake area in northern Minnesota, where over 450 people were killed, and property damage ran in the millions. To make matters worse, influenza, by then a global pandemic, swept through every community, sickening, and sometimes killing residents.

In a cruel twist, the disease was particularly deadly to young people, those in the prime of their lives. Millions of people in their 20s and early 30s died worldwide. Fatality rates were highest in the healthiest populations. Today, scientists think they understand why, although at the time they were baffled. It was awful to witness a robust young person afflicted with fever, hemorrhaging, and pneumonia, drowning, as their lungs filled with fluid.

Although often referred to as “Spanish Influenza,” it did not originate in Spain. Even today, scientists do not agree on the source. The first cases in the United States appeared among soldiers at Fort Riley Kansas in January 1918. By spring, the flu had spread to thousands of troops, sickening many, and killing some. As soldiers were shipped overseas, they brought the disease with them. When it exploded in Europe and the United States in August and September doctors had no effective treatment beyond rest, warmth, and hoping that patients did not develop pneumonia. Influenza sickened 20% to 40% of all U.S. Army and Navy personnel, home and abroad from September to November 1918, rendering hundreds of thousands of military personnel ineffective. Resources, especially during the Meuse-Argonne campaign, were diverted from fighting the war, to caring for the sick and dead.

Thirty-six of the 64 Mower County servicemen who died during the war, died of disease, 27 of those in stateside camps. Peter Mullenbach, an Adams area draftee, did not even make it to a training camp. He entered service October 24, 1918 and died enroute to Camp Cody in New Mexico. Not every death from disease was caused by the flu, but most were. Camp Dodge, where many Mower County soldiers trained, had one of the worst records, with many hospitalizations and 700 deaths.

In October, the Minnesota State Board of Health adopted drastic measures to stop the spread of the disease. Only private funerals were allowed. All public gatherings at theaters, churches, and lodges were banned. Even auctions were cancelled. Many schools were closed. (continued on page 9, see influenza)
Listen to That Ragtime

By Randal J. Forster, MCHS Executive Director

Needless to say the last few months have been extremely interesting. My grandmother used to say, “everything is going to hell in a handbasket” and lately I couldn’t agree with her more. So I took a deep breath and reminded myself, that we can’t control everything, no matter how much we try to convince ourselves that we can. Sometimes things just happen.

As I was surfing Youtube one day, I came across a video clip from a Broadway musical I saw years ago. The show was Ragtime and I knew it was based on a book. I needed to learn more about this historical novel. I immediately called Lisa Deyo at Sweet Reads to see if she had a copy in stock and she did not. She ordered it for me and I waited patiently. In the meantime I watched like a zillion more clips from the musical and really tried to absorb the beautiful music and wonderful staging of the show. When I finally got a copy of the book into my hands, I could not put it down.

The back of the book cover explains it all ~

This shimmering masterpiece by E.L. Doctorow is set in the years before the First World War. One lazy Sunday afternoon in New Rochelle, New York, the famous escape artist Harry Houdini swerves his car into a telephone pole outside the home of an affluent American family. Almost magically, the line between real and invented characters, disappears.

This is the era of Henry Ford and his Model T; of Emma Goldman the revolutionary; of J.P. Morgan, the great tycoon; of Evelyn Nesbit, the former chorus girl, for whom some lovers pine and others die. All of them cross paths with Doctorow’s brilliant fictional creations, including Tateh, an immigrant Jewish peddler, and Coalhouse Walker, Jr., a ragtime pianist from Harlem whose insistence on a point of justice brings this spellbinding classic to a shocking climax.

Are you hooked yet? I certainly was, especially after seeing the musical. It was fascinating to see how all of the real people, were intertwined with the fictional characters. It was also very clear to see how people were labeled and kept in their own little groups at the turn of the century. To quote directly from the book and the musical. “There were no Negros, There were no Immigrants.”

Say whaaaaat? Were these people blind? Oh yeah, Racism was a thing back then...

As I read on, it finally struck me. Racism is not a thing of the past. The events in this “story” are happening today. Racism is real. Some people might disagree with me, but racism is part of history and we can not re-write history. However, we can educate ourselves, learn from the past, and commit to doing better. A wise woman on facebook once posted, “You can’t change what you refuse to confront.” Historical events do change us. Some people are changed for the better and some are not.

We are living in a time of extreme political polarization, intense civil unrest, great uncertainty, and a global pandemic. History is happening around us everyday! What has really changed over the past 100 years? AND what can we learn from a historical novel and a Broadway musical? Plenty.

Near the end of Ragtime, the musical, Mother sings about how she truly has changed.

There was a time our happiness seemed neverending,
I was so sure that where we headed was right.
Life was a road so certain and straight and unbending,
Our little road with never a crossroad in sight.
Back in the day when we spoke in civilized voices.
Women in white with sturdy young men at the ore.
Back in the days when I let you make all my choices.
We can never go back to before.
There are people out there, unafraid to feel sorrow,
Unafraid of tomorrow, Unafraid to be weak, Unafraid to be strong.
We can never go back to before.

How will you change? Will you be on the right side of History?
Upcoming Events

Most special events are cancelled or postposed at this time. Please continue to monitor our Facebook page, website, and local media for more information.

August 27 12:00 Noon
Lunchbox History Series
Pioneer Building at MCHS
guest speaker Dean Ulland
“Henry Sibley’s Expedition to Mower County in 1841”

September 7 Labor Day

September 12 10:00-2:00
Fall Open House at the G.A.R.
Grand Meadow, MN
Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the G.A.R. Hall is one of only two remaining in Minnesota. Booth Post 130 was constructed in 1891 and currently houses Civil War Memorabilia

September 24 12:00 Noon
Lunchbox History Series
Pioneer Building at MCHS
guest speaker TBA

September 26 Drive-Up
Fall Harvest Celebration
Pre-Order Bake Sale

SAVE THE DATES
AND
WATCH FOR UPDATES

Pillars of the City 2020

The latest Pillars of the City were unveiled during a special “virtual ceremony” near the flood wall in downtown Austin on July 3, 2020. Congratulations to all of the honorees.

Patricia K. Piper

Pat Piper arrived in Austin in the 1960’s as a Franciscan Sister. She taught primary grades at St. Augustine’s School and later taught courses at Austin Community College. She eventually left the religious order and founded the Christian Education Center in Austin in 1968. She served as its director until 1994. As a friend to everybody, especially little children, poor people, the downtrodden, and newly arrived refugees in the community, she actively worked with the Salvation Army, YMCA, Sheriff’s Youth Ranch, and the United Way of Austin, where she also served as its President. Pat served in the Minnesota Legislature from 1983-2001, first in the House of Representatives and later in the Senate where she was influential in helping to pass several early childhood education bills and legislation to help children.

Geraldine A. Rasmussen
March 26, 1895 – August 11, 1987

While on vacation, in 1919, Geraldine Rasmussen and her husband purchased the Mower County Transcript-Republican, a weekly newspaper. In 1920, they sold that paper and joined forces with the Daily Herald as partners, with Geraldine soon becoming the business manager for the paper. Mrs. Rasmussen was a founding member of the Mower County Historical Society and in 1953, she purchased the old Christ Episcopal Church and had it moved to the fairgrounds as an art exhibit venue. She was the first woman to serve on the board of directors for the Austin Chamber of Commerce. As a civic leader, she actively contributed to the city of Austin volunteering with the following organizations: Austin YMCA, Business and Professional Women’s Club, Art and Travel Club, Ladies Floral Club, St. Olaf Hospital Auxiliary, and the League of Women Voters.

Larry L. Dolphin

Larry Dolphin moved to Austin in 1988 to become the Director at the Jay C. Hormel Nature Center. As a self-proclaimed naturalist, he quickly became a leader on local environmental issues and worked with area science teachers to create a dedicated curriculum for elementary students with a focus on nature. This partnership between the Nature Center and local schools emphasizes the importance of “getting kids outside” and provides students the opportunity to participate in annual field trips to the Nature Center. Through his leadership, the Friends of the Hormel Nature Center raised funds to acquire and restore land, design and build the Ruby Rupner Auditorium, log cabin, and new Interpretive Center that opened six months after his retirement. Larry volunteers with the Izaak Walton League and the Audubon Society.
A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT
Barbara K. Lewis - MCHS President

It’s hard to believe that summer is finally here, especially after what has seemed like a lifetime during the past 3 months. The coronavirus certainly has changed the world as we know it and it will certainly continue to change the way we live as we adjust to a “new” normal. The MCHS museum, research library, and office may have been closed to the public, however everyone has been working hard “remotely” and maintaining a proper social distance from one another. I even learned how to ZOOM! I must admit it’s not as scary as it seems, but it does take a little getting used to.

On a serious note, I must let you know that the Historical Society has decided not to participate in the Mower County Fair this year, even if the fair board continues with trying to hold the fair. As an organization, we did not make this decision lightly. We feel it would be irresponsible to ask our volunteers to monitor exhibit buildings and park cars at such a large social gathering as the fair. We want everyone to stay healthy and safe. We are still offering small group tours this summer by appointment. So if you are interested in visiting, please give the office a call. This will allow our staff & volunteers to effectively plan for your visit and allow everyone to experience the Historical Society safely.

We are also making plans to do things a little differently for our annual Fall Harvest Celebration in September. In order to maintain proper social distancing, most of our traditional activities will be put on hold until next year. I am pleased to announce that the Bake Sale will continue as a pre-order event. Our bakers are committed to making delicious baked goods, and we will have them ready for you to pick up on Saturday, September 26th. Please fill out the enclosed Pre-Order FORM as soon as possible to make sure you don’t miss out. Quantities are limited.

Finally, I want to thank everyone who contributed to our Annual Donation Appeal. Your generosity, especially during these challenging times, is greatly appreciated. Thanks for supporting YOUR Historical Society! ~ Barb

Fall Harvest Pre-Order BAKE SALE
September 26, 2020
Order early so, you don’t miss out!
FREE cookbook if order is placed by August 1st

A special THANK YOU to the following Townships for supporting MCHS in 2020
~Nevada Township
~Udolpho Township
~Lansing Township
~Racine Township
~Windom Township
~Bennington Township
~Pleasant Valley Township
~Marshall Township
~Adams Township
~Dexter Township
~Clayton Township
~Red Rock Township
~Grand Meadow Township
~Township Officers Association

Your support is greatly appreciated!
Thank You

for supporting our 2020 Annual Donation Appeal


We have currently raised $11,080 and exceeded our goal of $10,000 - Congrats!

No donation is too small or too large.

All funds help to support the day to day operations of the Mower County Historical Society. Please contact the MCHS office to make a contribution. Thank you for your generosity!
Graduate of the 1920’s
by Sue Doocy, Research and Archives Manager

Hilda Koloen of Adams left behind a charming scrapbook from her high school senior year which gives us a glimpse into her high school days in Adams with her 17 classmates.

Hilda graduated on May 29, 1925 from Adams High School, her second graduation ceremony. The first in 1921 was her eighth grade graduation, along with 127 other students from the county.

In the well preserved pages of the scrapbook, there are warm messages from friends preparing to become “dignified seniors” who were “about to launch on life’s restless seas”, citing memories of an Easter Sunday ride in a “Coupe”, hoping the memory would “be a little spark of love still burning for each other.”

Ragnald remembers Hilda’s laughter during a visit at Mrs. Ulven’s house one afternoon, while Cille Harrington remembers the “wink when something good is pulled”, while hoping Hilda would not forget her friends when she moves to Minneapolis after graduation.

The school presented the play “Backbone” in April at the Opera House, and the class play “Adam and Eve” was performed in May in the high school auditorium.

Hilda attended surprise parties for friends, Nora and Alice, where there was music and a mock wedding in which Alice was the bride and Hilda the groom, while other girls portrayed the mother and father of the bride. Adding to the entertainment, the popular dice game Bunco was played.

Hilda had the opportunity to travel with her mother to Sioux Falls, South Dakota and to Fargo to visit friends and relatives. Later, she joined 14 of her friends motoring to Oak Dale on a Monday evening for a picnic. Could this be the famous park created by Cy Thomson in his infamous embezzlement scam that was discovered in 1921, when the gig was up?

This is a truly remarkable scrapbook with several photographs to highlight life with friends in every imaginable setting: such as Ada Coulter sitting in front of an automobile; Al and Flora standing next to a white limestone gravestone; Hilda and her dog, Spot, standing in front of a house with a front porch with four white pillars; Francis and Hilda sitting in the shade with their backs to the camera; and Hilda sitting on a fence or bridge with a boy with the caption of “U don’t say?” You can just imagine the conversations they must have had.

Seniors attended the Baccalaureate Services on May 24 at the Lutheran Church which added to their schedule leading up to graduation. A Senior Picnic was held at the Masonic Park in Spring Valley and a Senior Banquet was held on May 29th at the high school with decorations of pink and white, where a five course meal was served to 45 guests. After the toast and program, guests played Bunco. The scrapbook includes newspaper clippings and programs with tissue paper decorations and ribbons from these events with details including the meal served, speakers, and program presented.

On May 29, 1925, the graduation ceremony was held at the Opera House. It opened with a song by the Glee Club before Hilda gave her salutatorian address, followed by Ella Knutson reading the Class Prophecy. The commentator saw Hilda Koloen living like a queen in the South Sea Islands watching natives dive for pearls, having the time of her life and other humorous adventures predicted for her classmates.

Along with graduation cards, ribbons, and a coupon for 5 cents for the return of an empty bottle, Hilda saved wrappers from Wrigley’s spearmint gum and Pepo-o-mint LifeSavers candy, mementos that reminded her of a wonderful senior year.
Sanford Tanner was born in 1798 in Rensselaerville, New York, son of Moses and Catherine (Sanford) Tanner. He spent much of his life as a laborer, building “miles of stone fence”, helping construct the Erie canal, and selling fanning mills he built. Tanner was about 60 years old when he came to Mower County in the spring of 1858 to stay with his cousin Sinai Tanner Beach in Lyle township.

Arriving with cash in hand, Tanner soon amassed a small fortune lending money throughout Mower, Freeborn and Mitchell counties. Newspapers in the area show dozens of foreclosure cases brought by Tanner against non-paying borrowers. In 1875, Tanner was listed as one of the largest taxpayers in Freeborn county. When the Lansing Mill burned in 1883, the insurance was just enough to cover the $2,000 mortgage to none other than Sanford Tanner. When the Mower County Bank folded in 1886, Tanner was by far the largest individual depositor with $6,900 in cash deposits (nearly $190,000 in 2020 dollars).

Tanner had a strange personality which, combined with his position as a wealthy money lender, made him unpopular:

“[Sanford Tanner] is a selfish, miserly man and otherwise is secretive, suspicious and eccentric.”

Tanner lived like a pauper. Shortly after establishing his presence in Mower County, Tanner had left the Beach home near Lyle and became essentially homeless, walking miles throughout the three-county area staying briefly with the families that owed him money. By having no official residence he attempted to avoid taxation in all the counties in which he did business. He was a bachelor with little family and fewer friends, no home of his own and almost no possessions:

“[Sanford Tanner] made his appearance in the county, a gray-headed man, in plain, weather-beaten clothes and a cotton umbrella under his arm. He preferred walking to riding and expended nothing for stage fare. He visited around with those to whom he had loaned and spent nothing for board except his own labor…”

Tanner’s money and unusual behaviors made him a target. Known to carry large amounts of cash and a folio of investments, Tanner was robbed and swindled on numerous occasions. The most bizarre event happened in the winter of 1887 when a man dressed as a woman robbed Tanner of $20,000 in certificates of deposits and $1,400 in cash. The story piqued public interest and Tanner’s embarrassing misery became a headline sensation throughout Minnesota and nationally, as far away as Pennsylvania, Vermont and North Carolina. “Uncle Tanner” became somewhat of a novelty and was often mocked in the local newspapers.

Tanner continued unchanged in his ways, staying briefly near Austin, Mona, St. Ansgar, Albert Lea and Glenville as he grew old. In December 1891, Tanner was found lying beside the train tracks, unconscious and freezing cold. He was taken to a hotel in nearby Albert Lea where he was revived. But he refused dinner that night because he had only 50 cents and “wished to keep it for breakfast and lodging cost.” Sanford Tanner never recovered and died on January 24, 1892 at the age of 93.

Tanner’s body was laid to rest in Woodbury cemetery next to the Beach farm near Lyle in a $300 steel casket wearing a brand-new suit tailored for the occasion:

“If his bones do not turn over in the coffin in rebellion at such extravagance it will be because the spirit which once inhabited them has wholly lost its ability to resent it.”

News of Tanner’s death was widely reported throughout the United States and estimates of his estate ranged from $100,000 to $500,000 (about $2.8 million to over $14 million in 2020 dollars, adjusted for inflation). Tanner left no will, but nieces and nephews were located from Pennsylvania and New York who came to claim the body and split the large estate. Tanner’s body was exhumed from Woodbury cemetery and taken back east.

The Beach family went on to become prominent citizens of Mower County, but despite his notoriety and wealth, no mention is made of strange Uncle Tanner in any of the county histories from Mower, Freeborn and Mitchell counties. As a widely-disliked man with no real home, no town ever really claimed him as their own. Yet dozens, maybe hundreds, of people got their start thanks to a loan from Sanford Tanner, our local Ebenezer Scrooge.
Collections Corner: #Humpdayhistory LIVE
By: Jaimie Timm, MCHS Curator

With the spread of the corona virus, we haven’t been able to work or meet in person to share our history in the usual ways. All programming, including my Historic Treasures presentations, came to a halt. During our quarantine, we began holding video meetings with the staff at the Hormel Historic Home (thanks to Holly for setting them up!) to brainstorm ways that we could work together to continue to share our history in a new and safe manner. Since we couldn’t safely lead in-person tours, social media became our new focus.

Enter #humpdayhistory LIVE on Facebook!

The goal of our live videos is to share a behind-the-scenes peek at places that we think are interesting or notable. The first weeks featured sites we are more familiar with – the second story of the Headquarters Building at MCHS and the attic at HHH. Now, we’ve been branching out into the community a bit more – the projection room at the Paramount Theatre, exploring St. Augustine’s bell tower and newly-renovated sanctuary, and Hasting’s Shoes & Repair in downtown Austin. The videos are truly live – interruptions from the Hormel noon whistle, a semi-truck driving by, and losing our train of thought in the middle of a sentence are all regular occurrences.

We’ve really enjoyed “finding our feet” within the world of video and filming. The videos are available live every Wednesday on both the Hormel Historic Home’s and the Historical Society’s Facebook pages. You can watch them anytime on both of our pages or you can view them on the Hormel Historic Home’s Youtube page.

#Humpdayhistory LIVE has been so much fun, that we have plans to go beyond our initial eight week commitment. We are hoping to safely branch out of Austin a bit more, especially as everything begins to “open up” a bit more. Videos are tentatively planned for at least mid-July and we are always looking for suggestions of places that feel comfortable letting us film. Be sure to like and following our Facebook page for more information!
Influenza  (continued from page 1)

In Austin, the disease was deadly, and efforts to control it were controversial. The issue was whether schools and businesses should be closed, and for how long. Citizens were divided. School officials and the local Board of Health felt that students were better off in school where they could be supervised by the school nurse. Not everyone agreed. The Austin City Council passed a resolution ordering that public gatherings be prohibited “among which was the closing of schools.” The Mower County Transcript-Republican described it this way: “The Board of Health closed all but the schools and with the advice of the State Board of Health the schools still remain in session. This has developed a merry war which we hope will be settled for the best interests of the public in general. In many instances schools have been closed in other towns.”

Tempers were short. The city council wanted Health Director Dr. C.F. Lewis to resign over Lewis’ refusal to close the schools. Lewis would not quit. The chairman of the State Board of Health backed Lewis, going so far as to suggest that if Hirsch wanted everything closed, he should close the packinghouse and his own store!

The situation degenerated, there was even a fistfight on main street between Hirsh and Lewis. One day in late October, Lewis noticed the Mayor on main street near his store. He got out of his car and confronted Hirsch. Hot words were exchanged. Hirsch called Lewis a liar and the fight was on. The incident was widely reported, even statewide in the Minneapolis Tribune. It made the front page of the Austin Weekly Herald: “The clash between mayor Hirsch and Dr. C. F. Lewis, chairman of the city Board of Health reached a climax today when doctor Lewis drew off and hit the mayor a blow on the side of the face and got a comeback blow on the arm from the mayor.”

It was all embarrassing, Hirsch and Lewis were both dedicated public servants, honorable men, tireless in service to their community. Perhaps the stress of dealing with the war and the pandemic lead to the main street fisticuffs.

By October 1918, the flu was everywhere, and it was deadly. Many schools, town and country alike, closed, often not reopening until after the holidays. Every issue of local newspapers carried the sad news of more young influenza victims.

The flu continued into 1919, people still died. It was less virulent than it had been 1918. As servicemen were sent home, and camps depopulated, the virus had less fuel to work with. The twin scourges of war and influenza ended, but their impact was long lasting.

Before it was over, the virus infected about 500 million people worldwide. Mortality estimates vary widely, from 17 to 50 million or more. While the actual number is unknown, it was devastating, one of the worst pandemics in history.

It is often said that “History repeats itself”, in cycles over and over again.

Notice any similarities to the COVID-19 pandemic that we are living through today?  
Has much really changed in 100 years?
Thanks to all our Ag Sponsors!

Join MCHS for a “Virtual” Tractor Show

Submit pictures of your antique tractors along with its model number/year/owner information. We will create a special video presentation to showcase your tractors on our Facebook page and MCHS website starting on August 10, 2020.

*All photo images must be submitted digitally by July 24, 2020

RSVP by calling 507-437-6082 OR director@mowercountyhistory.org

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Upcoming Events:

August 27
w/ guest speaker
Dean Ulland
“Henry Sibley’s Expedition to Mower County in 1841”

September 24
Speaker & Topic TBA

October 22
Speaker & Topic TBA

All events are FREE and held in the Pioneer Building on the grounds of the Historical Society at 12:00 Noon the Fourth Thursday of the month.

“Bring your lunch & Bring a friend!”

Please watch our website, www.mowercountyhistory.org and Facebook page for future updates.
Thank You to those who joined the MCHS or renewed their membership!

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Thank for being a member of the Mower County Historical Society

*** memberships listed are from 2nd Quarter only
April 1, 2020 - June 30, 2020

Please contact the office if you are unsure about when to pay your membership dues.
Memberships are for 1 year and include your subscription to the Mower History Scribe!

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Sign up to TODAY to receive the newsletter digitally.
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“The mission of the Mower County Historical Society is to discover, collect, preserve, and share the history of Mower County and relate it to the history of Minnesota.”

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