

Exploring the Cemetery: The Spanish Flu

As a microbiologist married to a physician, I've been interested in looking at the cemetery in terms of mortality and how that has changed over the years. If one looks at early (pre-1906) obituaries, the cause of death is frequently stated to be "complications" or "apoplexy" or "conditions of old age." Given the level of medical sophistication at the time, these diagnoses translate to "we don't know," "stroke or heart attack," or "got old."

By 1906, the state required that a death certificate be issued, and the level of medical knowledge had improved enough to allow some insight into the cause of death. Death certificates from 1906 to 1965 are part of the public record and can be searched for cause of death, which I have done for virtually everyone in the cemetery.

The notorious Spanish Flu of 1918 probably came out of the Midwest, despite its name, but spread rapidly through the military population and in the trenches of World War I. In late September 1918 Pennsylvania authorities were not terribly concerned because the outbreak was limited to the Philadelphia area. Within a week, they declared an emergency because of the wildfire spread of the disease.

In 1918, three young people died of influenza or "broncho-pneumonia" and were buried in the Rothsville cemetery. Carrie Haines was the first to die on October 10. She was the daughter of William and Emma Amelia (Carvell) Mumma and was married to Milton Haines. She was 29 at the time of her death and had just given birth to a stillborn child on Sept. 23. The second, on October 27, was Harry Ravegum, son of Henry and Sarah Ellen (Rathman) Ravegum. He was 26 years old and worked on a farm. He died after just three days of sickness. On December 11, Caleb Spangler died. His obituary is below.

Lititz Record, Thurs., Dec. 19, 1918, p. 4:
"Caleb W. Spangler died Wednesday night at his home near Clay of pneumonia, following an attack of influenza. He was twenty-nine years of age and was a son of Mr. and Mrs. Abram Spangler, of near Clay. His wife, Mrs. Beulah Shreiner Spangler, his parents, his parents, and the following brothers and sisters survive: Elsie, wife of Stephen Levan, Rothsville; Verna, wife of Benjamin Weidler, Tenville; Susan, wife of John Miller, near Lititz; Dora, wife of Jay Lupold, Lincoln; John, near Lincoln; Mazie, wife of William Young, Brunnerville; Maud, wife of Jacob Garner, Ephrata, and Lizzie and Katherine, at home. He was a member of the Lutheran church. The funeral was held Monday morning and was private, with interment in the Lutheran cemetery at Rothsville."

The flu continued throughout the winter, but the epidemic was worse in population centers. The next incidence I could identify was Emma Hess, daughter of Christian and Lizzie Messner and wife of Abraham Hess, who got influenza on top of other conditions. The last was Dorothy Leed, daughter of Sherman and Lillian Levering Leed, 6 months old, who died of pneumonia. By the summer of 1919, the epidemic was over.

Today we think of flu as hitting the elderly first. But this flu was different because it seemed to strike young people hard, and pregnant women even harder. Modern scientific techniques have led to a possible explanation for this phenomenon. It appears that a less virulent, but related, form of the virus circulated in the late 19th century. As a result, many older people had some immunity to the virus due to earlier exposure.

