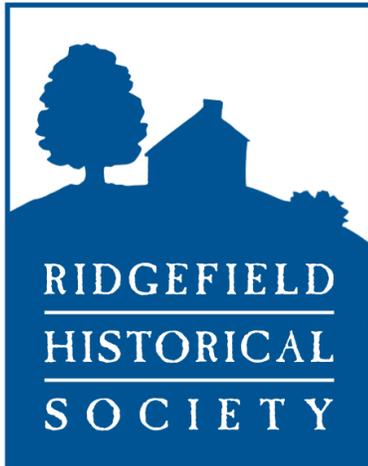


SCOTT HOUSE JOURNAL



President's Message

As I assumed the office of President of the Ridgefield Historical Society March 1, my first thoughts were how was I going to follow in Sharon Dunphy's footsteps. We all owe Sharon a debt of gratitude for her energetic able leadership of our organization for three and a half years. Thank you, Sharon.

However, within days of the transition, we were confronted with a new reality: what should the Historical Society do in light of what was being characterized as an oncoming pandemic. We immediately realized we should close our historic Scott House to visitors, and, shortly thereafter, it became clear that we should arrange for our staff and volunteers to work from home, while paying minimal necessary attention to

The 'Spanish flu' in Ridgefield:

A small town confronts a worldwide scourge

A little over a century ago, a pandemic swept through countries around the world, striking in the midst of the World War. How was that outbreak of disease felt in Ridgefield? We've traced what happened in Ridgefield through The Ridgefield Press; bound copies and microfilm of the paper are available for that time. (The Ridgefield Historical Society preserves the bound editions in its vault at the Scott House.)

The 1918 influenza pandemic that swept the world began in the spring, with one of the larger outbreaks in this country at Fort Riley in Kansas, where thousands of soldiers were training for combat. The flu spread easily in crowded military camps and in Europe where the camps and battlefield trenches were ideal breeding grounds for the virus.

The outbreak had slowed by summer but hit hard in the fall, both here and in Europe and aboard the ships carrying fresh troops to the front lines as well as those bringing doughboys home.

CTHistory.org, a program of CTHumanities, says in its account of the epidemic that the first case recorded in Connecticut was in September in New London:

“In Connecticut, the state's busy ports, and particularly New London's Navy base, provided an easy point of entry for the disease. The state's first recorded case of influenza appeared among Navy personnel in [New London](#) on September 11, 1918.”

preserving our historic property with its important archival collections.

So our thoughts about our role in the community in the future were postponed while we all cope with COVID 19. However, we do have two suggestions for you while you are “stuck” at home. The first is to start (or catch up) on family history projects. As you clean out closets and drawers, be sure to keep family mementos, records and pictures. To the extent you can identify people, occasions and places in the photos, write them on the back on each photo. If you haven’t begun to record your family genealogy, this is a good time to record your ancestors. As you read this newsletter’s feature article, try to determine which of your ancestors were alive during the 1918-19 pandemic. If you haven’t begun tracking your ancestors, organizing your family records is a good place to start. When we can use our building again, as part of my vision for my term as President, I hope we can help members of our community actively preserve the history of their own families.

Second, as we think about today’s events being tomorrow’s history, we encourage all of you to collect your thoughts, perhaps in diaries or copies of letters or emails, relating to how we are coping with the COVID 19 pandemic. We will be calling for you to contribute them to the Historical Society when we reopen for business. For the time being, as you

The disease eventually infected 115,000 in the state, killing nearly 9,000, according to State Historian Walt Woodward.

Cities with international ports were especially vulnerable to the spread of the disease as sailors and passengers came ashore from Europe. So not only New London, with its large U.S. Navy presence, but Boston, with its large port, and Providence, near numerous military bases, were quickly hot spots in the Northeast.

It appears that the first Ridgefielder to contract the so-called “Spanish flu” (the disease was erroneously believed to have originated in Spain) may have been young Edward M. Roach, described by The Ridgefield Press as “a traveling auditor, employed by the New Haven road [railroad].”

Mr. Roach had come home from Boston, “feeling ill,” on Friday, Sept. 13, and by Sunday he was bedridden with pneumonia and on Thursday, Sept. 19, he died.

It was a particularly hard blow to young Mr. Roach’s family. According to The Press, “Last year he was one of the first of Ridgefield’s young men of the Selective Service to go to Camp Devens [near Boston]. During the winter, he fell victim to pneumonia and his life was despaired of for some time. He recovered after a long struggle, but never fully regained his strength and was finally granted an honorable discharge from the army.

“After a brief rest, Mr. Roach resumed his employment with the New Haven road and was made a traveling auditor, which position he held at the time of his death. He was 26 years of age.”

A son of Edward J. Roach of north Main Street, Edward M. Roach was active in his church community, St. Mary’s, and “was a popular young man and prominent in Knight of Columbus circles. For several years he was financial secretary of

come across items that describe how we reacted to the virus, put them aside for our Ridgefield Responds to COVID 19 Collection. We will let you know when we are ready for you to get them to us. Meanwhile, please follow all official instructions and stay safe.

**Sara Champion,
President,
Ridgefield Historical Society**

Marquette Council and handled its accounts in first class business shape. As a token of appreciation of his efficient ... services a gold watch was presented to him by Marquette Council,” said The Ridgefield Press’s account of his death.

Two weeks later, on Oct. 1, the newspaper reported: “Peter Fred Roach, aged 24 years, theological student, and son of Edward J. Roach, died Thursday [Sept. 26] of pneumonia, following an illness lasting about one week. “He is the second member of his family to be called within a few days.

“Peter Fred Roach was a quiet studious youth. He had completed his course at St. Thomas’, Hartford, and later studied theology at St. Bernard’s Rochester. At the time of

his death he was attending St. Mary’s Seminary at Baltimore.

“During the past summer he spent his vacation at agricultural work, instead of enjoying his leisure, believing it was his patriotic duty to serve in that manner. He would have resumed his studies this week had he lived.



The Roach family monument in St. Mary’s Cemetery.

“Mr. Roach and family have tasted the bitterness of unusual affliction and may our Gracious God sustain them in their flood of sorrow; may He grant them consolation under their heavy burden, and the return to health of the family now seriously ill.

“The heartfelt sympathy of the community goes out to the stricken family in their bereavement.” The Rev. Richard E. Shortell of St. Mary’s Church officiated at funerals for both men, who were survived by their father and two sisters, Barbara and Marie Roach, and two brothers, John and Clement Roach, according to The Press. Another brother, Joseph Aloysius Roach, was at the time a prisoner of war. Private Roach, first listed as missing in action, later was able to get a card to his father saying that he had been wounded and was being held at Camp Limburg in Germany. By Sept. 10, he was reported to be held at Camp Munster.

Dick Venus, a childhood neighbor of the Roach

family, recalled later (in his Ridgefield Press column, Dick's Dispatch), that the father of the family, who was known as Ned, was a stone mason, who carved tombstones. Many members of the family suffered from "consumption" (tuberculosis), Mr. Venus said; presumably, the brothers who died may have had some weakness that made them more susceptible to the influenza outbreak, if they were indeed the first to contract it. The Ridgefield Press of Sept. 24 had reported that Barbara, Marie and Peter Fred Roach were all "dangerously ill" with pneumonia. Also in that week's paper, it was noted that "Dr. [Howard P.] Mansfield [is] laid up with pneumonia."

Many more young adult Ridgefielders would die before the flu epidemic came to an end, but the coverage in the local newspaper was low-key and the townspeople continued about their business throughout the fall.

Public health authorities had issued advice about avoiding the contagion, but no statewide school closure was ordered, Dr. Woodward reported. Rules for gatherings warned against sneezing and coughing in public and advertising warning against spitting was common.

Patent medicine manufacturers began buying space in newspapers: in The Ridgefield Press, the new Vicks Vapo-Rub was promoted as both a preventive and a medicine to soothe symptoms.

By early October, the influenza epidemic had become such a concern that the Danbury Fair was canceled, only two days before its Monday opening would have celebrated the Fair's 50th anniversary.

"DANBURY FAIR CALLED OFF TO AID BATTLE OF INFLUENZA" said the lead headline in the Oct. 8, 1918, Ridgefield Press. "Fair Association Announced Abandonment of Annual Fixtures, after Discussion with Town and State Health Officers — Preparations for Event Had Continued up to 9 O'clock Friday Night."

The story reported:

"The Danbury Fair will not be held this year.

"Up to 9 o'clock Friday night all plans for the greatest and biggest fair in the history of the Danbury Agricultural Association, which was to hold its 50th celebration to have commenced on Monday, were under way. Then came officially the announcement, following a conference of Town Health Officer Lemmer of Danbury and the State Health Authorities, that the fair would not be held this week.

...

"The fair grounds have already become occupied with those who were to make the Danbury Fair the biggest ever staged. Agricultural machinery, with tractors, were to be staged in the fields in operation. Browning machine guns to show what our boys were using in the trenches were to be a main exhibit. German trophies from the battlefields, a model of a battleship and other things calculated to enthrall for the Fourth Liberty Loan were there.

"Dogs, poultry and cattle including the most valuable bull in the world, 'Mighty Monarch,' were due to arrive Saturday. And the midway was to be marvelous.

“The association will suffer a tremendous loss, and thousands and thousands of people who had planned to take their vacations Danbury Fair week will be greatly disappointed. In some towns to the county, stores were closed on certain days in order that the residents might go in a body to Danbury and have the day named after their town.

“The fair is not only postponed. It is omitted entirely this year.

“Danbury’s schools were ordered closed Thursday owing to the influenza.”

In that Oct. 8 issue of The Press, were these Local Briefs:

Miss Grace Wilson, who went to Bridgeport two weeks ago to accept a clerical position in the Remington Arms plant, contracted pleuro-pneumonia soon after her arrival there. Her death occurred Sunday.

John Sturges died Monday following an illness of a week’s duration.

In the paper’s Connecticut State Briefs:

Because of a steady increase in the number of influenza cases at New Haven Hospital, the authorities have decided to quarantine the entire institution for an indefinite period.

According to State Historian Woodward, the epidemic peaked in Fairfield County on Oct. 23; Bridgeport, with its large population, industries and public transportation was particularly hard-hit.

The threat of influenza apparently was not enough to prevent a huge Ridgefield gathering on Oct. 12. The Oct. 15 Ridgefield Press devoted much of its front page to an account of a rally and parade that raised \$225,000 in Liberty Bonds for the war effort. First Selectman Orville Holmes led the parade; other groups who marched included the Boy Scouts, the Knights of Columbus, Webelo, Camp Fire Girls, the National League for Woman’s Service, the Grange, the Carpenters & Joiners Union, and the Italian American Citizens Political Union & Mutual Aid Society.

The same Oct. 15 issue also recorded five deaths attributed to pneumonia or the flu: ages ranged from 15 to 55. There was also an article headlined “Uncle Sam’s Advice on the Flu.” The following week, Oct. 22, the obituary column appeared on page one, with eight deaths listed, nearly all people in their 30s, of pneumonia. Only for an 81-year-old woman was no cause given.

In the Oct. 22 Local Briefs, a young woman was reported seriously ill, but there was the good news that “Robert E. Richardson, who has been at the Pelham Bay base hospital for the past three weeks with Spanish influenza, has returned to his training regiment....”

No mention of Ridgefield’s schools closing appeared in The Ridgefield Press and the town continued with its activities: Local Briefs in the Oct. 29 edition of the paper did include these

items, interspersed with reports of new employment and accounts of meetings, performances, etc.:

Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Robert are victims of the grippe [as influenza was also known].

...

First Selectman Orville W. Holmes is confined to his home on account of the prevailing epidemic.

...

An Italian, seriously ill with a high fever, was taken to the Danbury hospital Monday night by Constable Taylor. The man appears to be an industrious, quiet fellow.

...

Rev. R.E. Shortell, who has been suffering from a severe cold, is reported as much improved.



Harry Bennett, in his late teens. He died of influenza at the age of 30, leaving a wife and two daughters and a son yet to be born, who was named for him.

That week, the Obituary column included Miss Ruth Gillum, 23, a Ridgefielder who had been doing government work in New York City and died of influenza. There was also a young father whose family had deep roots in Ridgefield, Harry Bennett, who died at the age of 30. Frances Kiernan Patterson, 25, a daughter of Ridgefielders, died on Staten Island 10 days after her husband Andrew had died. She left two children and sadly, a week later, The Press recorded the death of the infant child of the Pattersons. In the Nov. 5 paper, there were seven more deaths, nearly all people in their 20s.

Neither George Rockwell nor Silvio Bedini devoted space to the influenza pandemic in their histories of Ridgefield, but in his book, *Impact: The Historical Account of the Italian Immigrants of Ridgefield, Connecticut*, Aldo P. Biagiotti included several firsthand stories told by survivors of “La Spagnola” as the Spanish flu was known in the Italian community.

“Siamo stati tutti ammalati con la spagnola (We were all sick with the Spanish influenza),” he quoted Esterina Franceschini.

Many remedies and preventives were recommended, Mr. Biagiotti recounted, from nightly spoonfuls of alcohol to broth made with a sheep’s head. Fred Montanari told the author of one particularly difficult preventive:

“In order to protect herself, Domenica Travaglini, who was pregnant, was told to drink several teaspoons of kerosene a day by Doctor [Henry W.] Allen [of Main Street]. Since pregnant women were very susceptible to the Spanish influenza, Domenica did as the doctor ordered. She did not contract the disease and gave birth to a healthy child, Louis.”

Louis Travaglini, one of the brothers nicknamed “Squash,” had a long career in public service, as a dispatcher for the Connecticut State Police and later the Ridgefield Police Department. His brother Aldo, owned the very popular Ridgefield Office Supply on Main Street (Squash’s) for many years.

In his history, Wilton, Connecticut, Three Centuries of People, Places, and Progress, Robert H. Russell reported Wilton’s first flu-related death as Katherine DeNike, 41, on Sept. 25, 1918. The Wilton Health Officer, Strong Comstock, recorded 149 cases of influenza in October and November 1918.

The Ridgefield Press reported no deaths in its Nov. 12 and 19 editions: the big news, of course, was the end of the World War, which brought townspeople out for celebration.

A 15-year-old student at the Ridgefield School was reported to have died of “heart failure” and a 33-year-old woman died, with no cause of death mentioned, in the Nov. 26 Press. The next week came the death of a 30-year-old woman from pneumonia and in the pages of The Press, was a story headlined “U.S. Health Service Issues Warning — Increase in All Respiratory Diseases after the Influenza Epidemic Probable.”

Meanwhile, the Dec. 5 paper noted that “Thomas Scott is seriously ill” and Arthur Thomas, Willis Boyce and D. Harvey Valden, all clerks at the Ridgefield Post Office, were ill, Mr. Boyce with pneumonia. The death of a former resident was reported, attributed to bronchial pneumonia.

On Dec. 10, two young women, students at Hamilton High (as Ridgefield’s high school was then known) were reported to be ill: Miss Luella Hull with influenza and Miss Anna Rux with “an attack of the grip”.

The incidence of influenza in the community had declined by late December, when the schools closed for the Christmas holiday. The Hamilton High School students presented a program at town hall, which was followed by “exchange of presents, dancing and music. It was a happy occasion,” reported the Ridgefield Press.

In the Dec. 31 edition of the paper, the Connecticut State Briefs noted “The cases of influenza now being reported are, for the most part, merely the grip colds usually prevalent at this time of year.” Dr. Charles F. Botsford, superintendent of the health department, said, “We are not having any noticeable increase in the number of deaths.”

But the deaths from influenza continued in Ridgefield, although at a slower pace. A popular teacher at the Scotland School, Miss Lila Gilbert, 26, died in early January. Her brother had died in 1918 in France. The winter, noted The Press in February, was remarkably mild and one for the record books. In mid-February, the Wilton briefs column in The Ridgefield Press reported that “the influenza has been raging in Bald Hill this past week,

nearly every home having some one ill.” (Bald Hill is just south of Ridgefield on Route 33/Ridgefield Road.)

All told, by the end of March, about three dozen Ridgefielders had died of pneumonia or influenza, according to the newspaper accounts, and many more had been ill. The population at the time was under 3000, having dropped from 3118 in 1910; it was recorded at 2707 in the 1920 census.

With the warm weather of late spring, the influenza virus receded and never again reached the rates of infection that were seen in 1918-19.

Sources:

The Ridgefield Press; Impact: The Historical Account of the Italian Immigrants of Ridgefield, Connecticut by Aldo P. Biagiotti; Wilton Connecticut, Three Centuries of People, Places, and Progress by Robert H. Russell; CThistory.org.

Ridgefield Historical Society

The Scott House, 4 Sunset Lane

203-438-5821

ridgefieldhistoricalsociety.org

Headquarters closed to the public until further notice because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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