

The 1918-1919 Pneumonic Influenza Pandemic in Goulburn and Surrounding Areas

By Madeline Young



Figure 1. Nurses at Kenmore Mental Hospital during Influenza Pandemic, Courtesy of Goulburn Mulwaree Library

The 1918-1919 pneumonic influenza outbreak or “Spanish Flu” was one of the worst medical disasters in global history. The virus that originated in Europe killed more people worldwide than World War One itself¹. The 1918-1919 pandemic swept through Australia when the country was at its lowest. As crowded ships carrying soldiers returned from the European front, the virus had the perfect environment to spread and mutate among the ships inhabitants, many of whom already had compromised immune systems from malnourishment, injury, and stress.

Australia, due to its location, had months to prepare for a probable outbreak of pneumonic influenza. Countries such as New Zealand, the US and British-controlled nations were ravaged by the disease in 1918, giving Australia a chance to learn from successes and mistakes of other nations. Despite strict quarantining regulations imposed by the Federation in late 1918, the pandemic came ashore in January, 1919 in Melbourne, Victoria².

Due to Federations willingness to enforce strict containment measures to combat the spread of the disease³, and the distribution of a free vaccine created by the newly established Commonwealth Serum Laboratories to over 3 million people⁴, Australia had a relatively low mortality rate when compared to other countries. According to State Records and Archives of New South Wales, pneumonic Influenza killed 6387 residents of NSW and up to 20,000 cases were reported in 1919, though this number is probably far higher. Crowded metropolitan areas like Sydney suffered greatly through the epidemic; with low socioeconomic areas hit the hardest, possibly due to wartime financial conditions lowering the standard of living.⁵

Goulburn was quick to ensure that all possible preparations were made for the spread of the virus. An inoculation centre was opened at the Town Hall on the 30th of January, and in the following four days, 2908 people were inoculated with the vaccine.

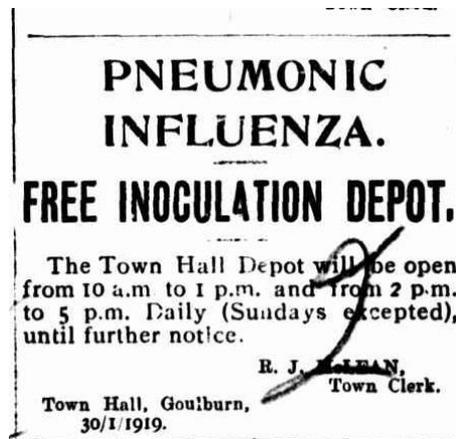


Figure 2. - Advert taken from the Goulburn Evening Penny Post 30 January, 1919

Notices were placed at the railway station prohibiting travel on trains without wearing a mask.⁶ A meeting of Council empowered the Mayor at the time, Alderman Charles Rogers, the Town Clerk R.J. McLean, and the Health Inspector J.R. Biddle with the authority to make decisions regarding the pandemic without the normal due process.⁷ A special isolation ward was created in the Goulburn Hospital for influenza patients, as well as dedicated nursing staff.

Despite the proactive stance of the town officials, there was still some resistance from the public. All race meetings were to be suspended, due to the close contact of the public at horse racing events and the fact that it would bring people from infected metropolitan cities to the area. However, representatives of Race Club came to a special meeting of the Town Council to appeal the ban suggested by the Minister of Health, given that no other enclosed entertainment in town, namely the picture theatres, had been subject to gathering restrictions. Council relented, and Race Meetings could continue as long as face masks were worn by the public.⁸ This reluctance to ban close quarter entertainment was echoed throughout New South Wales during the first, and less lethal, wave of the pandemic.

Even being a central hub, Goulburn did not get its first case of pneumonic influenza until March. Earlier in February, a retired railway man named Peter Moran had come down with a particularly malicious variety of influenza, resulting in the patient being isolated in hospital and his household being quarantined⁹ but he was released on the 3rd of March with a clean bill of health and public assurances that he did not suffer from pneumonic influenza.¹⁰

John Stead, a labourer from Redfern, became Goulburn's first registered case of Pneumonic Influenza, arriving in Goulburn from Sydney on the 18th of March, 1919. Two days later, he was quarantined to the specialist isolation ward in the Goulburn Hospital. From this point on, the epidemic would slowly take hold of Goulburn and its surrounds. Adding to the problems faced by officials, was the outbreak of an extremely virulent form of ordinary influenza that was striking down a large portion of the population. While not deadly, town officials were exercising extreme caution, and any illness presenting like influenza resulted in strict quarantining orders.

On the 29th of March, a labourer from Cook's Cutting named John Joseph Donnolly, was admitted into quarantine, becoming Goulburn's second case. Two cases arose in Braidwood, and by early April, several more cases were put into isolation, including Eva May Strangman, and her newborn infant, Evelyn. Within days of entering the isolation ward, both Eva May and Evelyn would become the first victims of the influenza pandemic in Goulburn, dying on the 17th of April, 1919. Eva May was only 32.¹¹ Mortality rates were highest in pregnant women, and only marginally more positive in post-partum women¹²

The 24th of April was a turning point for Goulburn and the Influenza Pandemic. The city was officially declared infected on this day by government proclamation, and justifiably so. There were eleven fresh cases on influenza placed in the isolation ward, and people were being urged to undertake in-home quarantine if in doubt. Approximately fifty people were undergoing mandated quarantine. It was also on this day that the virus would claim its second victim, 29 year old George Slatyer. On the 29th of April, the whole hospital was set aside for Pneumonic Influenza patients, and a temporary hospital set up in nearby St Saviours Church Hall.¹³

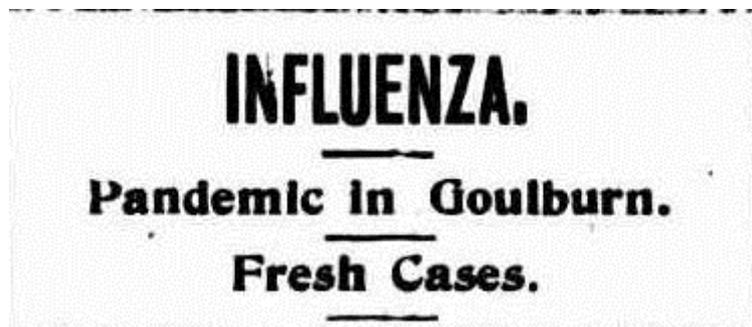


Figure 3 - An all too frequent headline in the Goulburn Evening Penny Post in the early parts of 1919

The next 37 days would have the highest mortality rates of the pandemic in Goulburn. By the 31st of May, six weeks after Goulburn's first fatality, 35 people had died, and 131 people had been treated for Pneumonic Influenza in the hospital, including twelve nurses. Additional nurses had to be shipped in from Sydney to replace the local nursing staff that had been run ragged, completing hospital duties as well as doing house calls to quarantined homes.¹⁴ The Health Inspector, J.R. Biddle, finally succumbed to the illness on the 15th of May, after diligently trying to combat the severity of the disease in Goulburn from the outset.

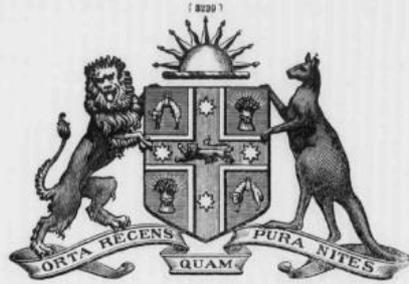
By the time the emergency hospital was dismantled and the general wards of the hospital were reopened on the 9th of September, 1919, 42 people had died from pneumonic influenza.



Figure 4 - The Headstone of Emma Stephenson. Goulburn man Joseph Stephenson lost his wife, daughter and son to the Pneumonic Influenza pandemic.

The community was shaken. The vast majority of people who had succumbed to the virus had been between the ages of 25 and 45, and of a normal, healthy disposition. The impact on families was immense. Of the deaths, two thirds had been men, bread winners for their families and sole income earners during already tough financial times. Many families lost sons in the war and then daughters to the Flu Pandemic, compounding the tragedy of this virulent enemy. Institutions such as Kenmore Mental Hospital and the Goulburn Gaol were not spared, with inmates of both being struck down by the disease.¹⁵ Business suffered, especially those in the indoor entertainment sector, as well as churches and other congregations.¹⁶

The effects of the pandemic lasted longer than the manifestation of symptoms. For years afterwards, news of a death from pneumonic influenza was greeted with a sweeping fear in the community. While we had more time to prepare than most other regions due to our central location, we were not immune from its ravages.



(8229)

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No. 139.]

FRIDAY, 6 JUNE.

[1919.

PROCLAMATION

NEW SOUTH WALES, } By His Excellency Sir WALTER EDWARD DAVIDSON, Knight Commander of
to wit. } the Most Distinguished Order of Saint Michael and Saint George, Governor of
(L.S.) } the State of New South Wales and its Dependencies, in the Commonwealth of
W. E. DAVIDSON, }
Governor, } Australia.

WHEREAS in order to prevent the spread within the State of New South Wales of the infectious disease Pneumonic Influenza, it has been necessary in the public interest, and for the public safety, to cut off all communication between persons infected with such disease and others of His Majesty's subjects: Now, therefore, I, Sir WALTER EDWARD DAVIDSON, the Governor aforesaid, with the advice of the Executive Council, do hereby declare that so much of the provisions of the Proclamation of the twenty-eighth day of April, 1919, as declares the municipal area of Goulburn to be an area infected with the said disease, in terms of the Proclamation of the twenty-fourth day of April, 1919, be hereby cancelled.

Given under my Hand and Seal, at Sydney, this sixth day of June, in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and nineteen, and in the tenth year of His Majesty's Reign.

By His Excellency's Command,
GEORGE W. FULLER.

GOD SAVE THE KING!

SYDNEY.

Printed and Published by WILLIAM ASPENBATH GULLICK, Government Printer and Publisher of the State of New South Wales, at Philip-street, 6th June, 1919.

Figure 5 - Cancellation of Infection Protocol for the Municipality of Goulburn, June 1919

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