The 1918 Influenza Pandemic

“In 1918, a new influenza virus emerged. During this same time period World War I was taking place. The conditions of World War I (overcrowding and global troop movement) helped the 1918 flu spread. The first case of the new flu in the US occurred in March 1918 at Camp Funston in Fort Reilly, Kansas. Within a few days hundreds of soldiers training at the camp were ill. The virus spread unevenly for the next six months. Between September and November, a second wave of flu peaked in the United States. This second wave was highly fatal, and responsible for most of the deaths attributed to the pandemic. The end of World War I enabled a resurgence of influenza as people celebrated Armistice Day and soldiers began to demobilize.”

Impact in New Mexico

New Mexico was spared infection in the first wave. The second wave came unexpectedly and spread rapidly through the state. Albuquerque closed all churches, schools, theaters, and all other places of public gathering on October 5 following two deaths from Spanish influenza within the preceding twenty-four hours. Santa Fe closed the Paris theater on October 8 but allowed schools and churches with proper ventilation to stay open. The virus spread quickly, and deaths increased far beyond expectation. Churches were closed on October 20, 1918. The influenza headline in the Santa Fe New Mexican on October 19, 1918 was:

First Time in Centuries, the City of the Holy Faith Will Say Its Prayers at Home
Flu is Still Raging Over the State
Santa Feans To Suffer A Famine Of All Sunday Sermons Tomorrow

The churches were allowed to reopen on November 24, 1918.
Even in the face of overcrowded understaffed hospitals and rapidly increasing deaths in their communities, Americans focused on World War I in anticipation of its end. The front page of the Santa Fe New Mexican was covered with the most recent news from the front lines and the peace negotiations. The second page was devoted to those who were serving in the armed services. It was not until the third page that influenza updates appeared. Sometimes more space was devoted to social activities than to the pandemic. Yet an article in the Santa Fe New Mexican on January 28, 1919 stated, “Flu killed more Americans last fall than were killed in all the American battles with Germany.”

Rev B. Z. McCullough and family at Santa Fe’s Plaza in 1917

First Presbyterian Church in 1918

In those days, the church year ran from April 1 through March 31 and the Annual Congregational Meeting was held in April. The minutes of the 1918 and 1919 Annual Meetings, the annual reports of the “departments” of the church, minutes of the Session and Board of Trustees, and various articles and advertisements from the Santa Fe New Mexican show us what was happening at First Presbyterian as the 1918 Influenza Pandemic raged through the U.S., World War I ended, and demobilization began.
Worship and Sunday School
The regular weekly schedule included Sunday School (9:45 am), Worship (11:00 am), Christian Endeavor (youth/young adults 6:45 pm), and Evening Sermon (7:45 pm) on Sunday and a Wednesday Evening Prayer Service. The congregation met in the Brick Church that was built in 1882. It occupied about the same area as the current sanctuary.

This photo shows the interior of the Brick Church decorated for Children’s Day which was held each year. The Sunday School had an enrollment of 157 pupils and 19 officers and teachers in April 1918; the attendance on Children’s Day was 182. During this time, students at the Allison School and the U. S. Indian School attended Sunday School and Worship at FPC. The Allison

School was a Presbyterian mission school for girls located on the property now occupied by the new Santa Fe County building. The U. S. Indian School was on Cerrillos Road. The patriotic theme of the decorations may indicate the photo was taken during World War I.
Two New Pastors in One Year

The 1918 Annual Congregational Meeting minutes begin, “In the absence of a pastor...” The church had been without a pastor for most of 1917 with the departure of B. Z. McCullough. A search committee completed its work in December 1917. The new pastor, Rev. J. F. Horton arrived in January 1918 and was received enthusiastically by the congregation and Santa Fe community. His sermons were attracting more people to services. But this revitalization didn’t last long. In late February Horton was called away to Chicago where his son was going to have surgery. He never returned to Santa Fe and never explained why. The Session spent many weeks trying to locate him and find out what his intentions were. They could not find Horton’s son or verify his medical condition. At the April 1918 Annual Meeting they had received information about his whereabouts but had no communication from him. The congregation was told that his return was unlikely. Just three days after the meeting, Horton sent a telegram from Texas to tell them that his resignation was in the mail. The next day the Session accepted his resignation even though they had not yet received it.

A search committee was formed to find the second new pastor of 1918. On May 30, the Santa Fe New Mexican reported that at a meeting the night before, the congregation had voted to call Rev. J.W. Hamblin, who had preached at First Presbyterian for several Sundays in May: “If he accepts the call, he will return to Santa Fe in time to fill the pulpit at the quarterly communion service on the second Sunday in July, bringing his family with him and taking immediate possession of the Manse. The Presbyterian church of Santa Fe is considered the most influential in the state and in numbers and financial standing has an unusual record.”
Finances
To prepare for Rev. Hamblin’s arrival the church held a War Savings and Liberty Bond Sunday and an Every Member Canvass. On Saturday, June 29, 1918 the Santa Fe New Mexican reported on these fund-raising efforts to prepare for Hamblin’s upcoming arrival: “It is proposed to have his pastorate commence with a clean financial slate and enough pledges to carry on the work of the church and its benevolences for an entire year.”

War Efforts
The congregation supported war efforts in many ways:
• The Session contributed benevolence funds to “Presbyterian work with soldiers” in 1918.

• The Ladies Aid Society held banquets to raise money and purchased a $100 Liberty Bond. Liberty Bonds were advertised daily in the Santa Fe New Mexican. Everyone was encouraged to be thrifty and put aside daily savings to purchase as much in Liberty Bonds as they could. The national goal was to raise $74 billion to fund the war.

• The church was enjoying increased attendance and the session and trustees had been discussing adding a balcony to increase the seating capacity of the church. The church asked members to donate their War Savings and Liberty Bonds to create a future building fund.

• The Ladies Aid Society and Ladies Missionary Society participated in Red Cross work. At first, they did this work at their meetings, but as the influenza pandemic made the needs more complicated – masks and gowns had to be made in addition to bandages – the women went to the Red Cross rooms to help.

• The Trustees moved mid-week prayer services from the sanctuary to the manse in order to reduce fuel usage in accordance with requests from the national Fuel Administration.

• In August 1918 Rev. Hamblin drafted a resolution adopted by the Santa Fe Presbytery: “Be it resolved that the Santa Fe Presbytery endorses a vigorous prosecution of the war until Prussian militarism is crushed; and be it further resolved, that the churches of our Presbytery strenuously oppose all efforts for a premature peace which endangers a real democratic and permanent peace by failure to bring the Huns to unconditional surrender.”
The Service Flag, now frequently called a Blue Star or Gold Star (Mother’s or Family) Flag, was designed and patented in 1917 and was quickly adopted by families and organizations to honor those who were in the armed services in World War I. Blue stars represent those who were in active duty; the gold star represents one who died in battle. The Christian Endeavor Society of First Presbyterian Church, an organization of youth/young adults, purchased this Service Flag in 1917. The flag was dedicated at a patriotic service on February 10, 1918 and displayed on the rostrum. After World War 1, the display of Service Flags was limited to families. This flag was stored in the former manse of the church. This photo was taken in 2010 when the History Committee prepared the flag for preservation in the FPC Archives.
Influenza

The April 1919 Annual Reports covering April 1918 – March 1919, most of the time that the pandemic was raging in the U.S, mention the Influenza Pandemic only briefly. The Sunday school reported it had been closed for five weeks and the Ladies Aid Society reported missing three of its regular monthly meetings. The annual meeting minutes and reports during this time do not include specific information about deaths that occurred in 1918. When the Every Member Canvass was done, over 100 people were removed from the rolls because of “lack of a bond with the church” or unknown addresses. Some of these people may have been deceased, but the rolls were reduced in the summer, well before the emergence of the flu in Santa Fe in the fall.

References
