It’s unlikely anyone remembers the Fall of 1918. Gauze masks were the fashion statement of the day as Influenza struck an unsuspecting Northern Arizona – the same devastating flu virus that was consuming the world. Overshadowed by events of World War I and subsequent global conflicts, many of today’s citizenry – worried about a virulent strain of Covid-19 (coronavirus) – have never heard about the 1918 influenza outbreak that was one of the quickest and deadliest events in history.

There had been other “flu” outbreaks – Hong Kong, Asian, and others – yet none was as traumatic as the 1918 epidemic. Also known as “Spanish flu,” Influenza was a zoonotic disease that affected birds and mammals prior to jumping species to humans. The disease was spread through coughing, sneezing, and even breathing.

The illness spread and developed at a horrifying rate with many becoming ill in the morning and dead by nightfall. Early symptoms were similar to those of a bad cold; therefore many did not know they had the flu until it was too late. The illness quickly turned into pneumonia of a severe type, with patients literally drowning from fluid accumulation in their lungs. The pandemic of 1918 hit the world killing more people overall than both world wars combined.

The first cases locally were noted on October 2, at the U.S. Army Hospital at Fort Whipple. Eight cases developed in a group of invalid soldiers who had recently arrived from Fort Dodge, Iowa. Due to the highly infectious nature of the illness, the fort was quarantined immediately. By October 8, the entire city of Prescott was under quarantine, with more than 40 cases reported. Hard hit were children with 125 high school students stricken.

Emergency measures included a makeshift hospital ward in the domestic science hall at the high school, a tent city for recovery was created, and hospital beds were laid out in open spaces. Many teachers at the high school were also included in the running of the hospital, and there was a major concern about the availability of nursing personnel.

The Influenza pandemic continued through December 1918, prior to tapering off and eventually ending. The illness was a major psychological trauma to the population of the world.

This year is somewhat reminiscent of that terrible time more than a century ago, as we have a particularly virulent type of virus hitting many. This, too, shall pass.

Parts of this Sharlot Hall Museum Days Past article were originally published in Jan. 2004.