

WALLOWA QUARTERLY

Newsletter of the Wallowa History Center

Preserving Our Past for the Future

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IN THIS ISSUE

Wallowa Epidemics: Diphtheria and Influenza • Ladies' Progressive Club • Wallowa Fort • Wild Hog Ride

Wallowa Epidemics

Part 1 of 2: *The Strangling Angel*

Diphtheria (1878–1880)

“William Rinehart and wife of Summerville have within the last three weeks buried six children, their entire family, from diphtheria.” – *The Oregonian* (August 19, 1880)

Even if a disease cannot define a community, it can certainly shape it. Such was the case with Wallowa and other eastern Oregon towns when the diphtheria epidemic hit the region in 1878. Spread by airborne bacteria through personal contact, diphtheria was at the time the most feared and the most deadly childhood illness, killing one of every ten it infected, many of them younger than five. Among its symptoms—sore throat, high fever, barking cough, swollen glands—its most deadly feature was a thick “false membrane” that covered the back of the throat, blocking the airway and cutting off breathing. Consequently, it was known as “The Strangling Angel” of children. If you would find heartbreak in local history, you need look no further than the accounts of families wiped out within days by the suffocating deaths of their children, and the anguish left in the wake of this disease that many considered to be a death sentence.

• At last [the Powers family in 1878] reached the Grande Ronde Valley near La Grande. Here they learned that Indians [had] not entered the Grande Ronde or the Wallowa valleys. This news was, of course, very gratifying to the father and son, but in the next few sentences the informer told them that an epidemic of diphtheria had raged through the two valleys and had taken an estimated one-half of all the children who were under eighteen years of age.

General Howard had sent officers to advise people to organize for protection against the marauding Indians. Forts were built at convenient points where the greater percentage of the people resided. The fatality of children in these forts from diphtheria was appalling. There were many times more deaths than all the people that were killed in the Bannock Indian uprising. The Alexander B. [and Sarah Jane] Findley family...lost [six] children out of [seven], all passing within two weeks' time. – James W. Powers, *Frontier Days of Oregon* (1941)

• My dear brother and sister: I must try to write you, but it is with a sad and aching heart. I feel that life for me is over, nothing but darkness before me. Death has entered our home and all our children have been taken from us, but Florence, and she is very sick and has been for three weeks. I have been down, but am able to go around again. Diphtheria is taking nearly all the children in this and the Walla Walla country.

Everett was the first to take it. He took it on the sixth of July, Sammy took it on the eleventh, Florence and Johnnie took it on the fourteenth, Emma took it on the nineteenth, and little Lora on the twenty-ninth. George was the first to go. He died on the fifteenth in the morning, and Sammy died in the evening of the same day. Johnnie died the nineteenth and Everett the twenty-first. Emma died the twenty-eighth and Lora died the first of August.



We did all that we could to save them, but nothing seemed to do any good that we could do. We had two doctors come to see them, and some we doctored ourselves. But they are all gone, and such suffering I never saw before.

Poor George's neck and face swelled until he choked to death. The baby's neck was swollen very badly, but not as bad as George's. The others did not appear to suffer near so much. Everett was sick seventeen days, and was able to sit up most of the time. His throat got almost well, but his stomach became diseased, either from his throat, or from some other cause. The doctors did not seem to know. Nothing would lay on his stomach for several days before he died, not even water. Florence's throat is well, but her stomach is very much out of order. She can't sit up but a few minutes at a time.

The disease has broken out in the Grande Ronde Valley the past month, and it is worse than ever. Mr. Russell, the blacksmith, lost four of their children. Dr. Shores lost three of theirs. One of the Rhineharts lost eight. Oh! Sister Mary, you just can't realize what desolation reigns in this country unless you were here to see. People have had to huddle together on account of the Indians who caused the disease to spread all over the land. One poor man and woman, over on Birch Creek lost all nine of their children.

One thing I wish to say is that we never lacked for anything in all of our affliction and trouble, which love or money could do or get. One of our neighbors came and stayed with us 10 days and nights, until he got sick and had to go home. We never lacked for company. Both men and women were with us all the time. Dear kind friends who stayed and waited on my little children when I was sick and could not do it myself. May God bless them, forever, is my prayer. – Sarah Jane Findley, letter to her brother and his wife (August 4, 1878)

- Florence Findley moved with her parents to Wallowa Valley, locating between what is now Lostine and Wallowa. While living in the Middle Valley [in 1878], all her sisters and brothers died of diphtheria. She also had it, which left her quite deaf. She was one of the most charitable women that ever lived. – John H. Horner, *J. H. Horner Papers* (1953)

- Leave Lostine on OR Hwy. 82 going northwest toward Wallowa. 1.7 miles from Lostine turn left onto Allen Canyon Road and proceed 0.85 of a mile to the cemetery, which is uphill on the left. [Note: *This is private property.*] Started for eight or nine child diphtheria victims. The people at the town of Lostine were fearful of contamination if these were buried in the Lostine Cemetery. – James M. Healy, *Oregon Burial Site Guide: Wallowa County* (2000)

Perhaps the most extreme of home treatments for diphtheria involved using knives, needles, or even fingers to cut, puncture, or tear out the false membrane that covered the victim's throat and blocked breathing. But even when this was at first successful, the membrane could still grow back.

- Three children, whose family names are now unknown, are reported to be buried on the Victor homestead [on Smith Mountain]. The children died of diphtheria. – James M. Healy, *Oregon Burial Site Guide: Wallowa County* (2000)

- In the winter of 1878, Ben and Sarah [Ogle] saw six of their children die of diphtheria. Three of the girls died within 30 minutes of each other and were buried in the same grave. Someone told of seeing wooden coffins lined up on their front porch during that siege. Sarah saved her infant son's life by burning his throat. All his life he bore a scar on his neck that appeared as if his throat had been slit. – *Pioneer Trails*, Umatilla County Historical Society (Fall 1993)

- Mary E. Blacker was the mother of eight children, seven boys and one girl, three of whom are living. One child died at Auburn, Oregon, and four were taken by diphtheria during the diphtheria epidemic at Union in 1879. – Obituary for Mary E. Blacker of Union, Oregon (1920)

- In 1879 and 1880 the terrible disease of diphtheria settled in this happy family [Alpheus and Jane Terwilliger of Summerville], and from the fall to the spring carried off [five of their seven children], and they sleep now in the cemetery at Summerville. – *An Illustrated History of Union and Wallowa Counties* (1902)

- Thomas A. Ratcliff...had two grandchildren...who took the diphtheria during the epidemic...and as the doctors in the valley had lost all the children they had doctored, Grandmother Ratcliff said there was no use to send for a doctor as it would be too late when he got there as the children were gradually choking to death now and something had to be done immediately. Having plenty of rich pitch-wood, they shaved a lot of it and set it afire and held the children over the dense smoke and in breathing it, the phlegm in their throats became loosened, and they pulled it out with their fingers and it saved their lives. – John H. Horner, *J. H. Horner Papers* (1953)

Wallowa Epidemics

Part 2 of 2: *The Purple Death*

Influenza (1918–1920)

“Some victims [of the ‘Spanish influenza’] died within hours of their first symptoms. Others succumbed after a few days; their lungs filled with fluid, and they suffocated to death.” – National Archives

If diphtheria broke the hearts of Wallowans in 1878, then influenza chased them off the streets 40 years later. It was a time of closed businesses and quarantined families, of wearing masks and keeping distance from the pack of humanity with its sneezing and coughing. The consequences of *not* doing this were dire.

Even though incomplete or missing medical records make it impossible to come up with exact numbers of those affected by the “Spanish flu,” some estimates put the worldwide figure as high as 500 million infected—more than one-fourth of the world’s population of roughly 1.8 billion—with death rates ranging from 20 million to 100 million, with an average falling around 50 million, almost 3 percent of the world’s population.

In the United States, which had a population of almost 105 million at the time, more than one-fourth were infected with the flu—sometimes called “The Purple Death” because a lack of oxygen in victims’ blood could turn the skin purple—and at least 500,000 and as many as 675,000 died from it.

In Oregon, records are more precise: From a 1918 population of 763,000, more than 6 percent (48,146) were infected, and 3,675 (more than 7 percent of those who contracted the disease) died from it. Yet no matter what the final figures, the “Spanish flu” was the deadliest disease of the 20th century, and for more than two years, starting in the fall of 1918, Wallowa suffered along with the rest of the world.

“Spanish flu” has nothing at all to do with Spain, and a reason for the name is difficult to pin down. One guess is that in the early stages of the pandemic, Spain was one of the first countries to report the outbreak, and the name of the country became entangled with the name of the disease.

The Spanish Influenza (*The Wallowa Sun*, October 17, 1918) The same as the winter of 1889–1890 when the grip [common name for the flu, also “gripe” or “grippe”] swept through our country, now comes the Spanish influenza. Many authorities think they are the same. Naturally, it has been largely in the East that the disease has been raging, as being the seaboard where soldiers are coming and going. Prompt action has been taken in all suspected places, and every attempt is being made to stamp it out. The symptoms have been an acute onset, often very sudden, with bodily weakness and pains in the head, eyes, back, and elsewhere in the body. Vomiting may be a symptom at onset and dizziness if frequent. Chilly sensations are usual, and the temperature is from 100 to 104 degrees, the pulse remaining comparatively low. Sweating is not infrequent. The appetite is lost and prostration is marked. Constipation is the rule. Drowsiness and photophobia [extreme sensitivity to light] are common. The fever usually lasts from three to five days, but relapses are not uncommon, and complications, particularly pneumonia, are to be feared.

The death rate is usually given as extremely low, but in the latter periods of an outbreak an increased number of deaths, presumably due to complications, has been reported in Spain and in the United States. Besides bronchitis and pneumonia, inflammation of the middle ear and cardiac weakness may follow the disease.

The Spanish Flu Hits Wallowa (*The Wallowa Sun*, October 24, 1918) Spanish influenza has invaded Wallowa, reports City Health Officer Dr. John B. Gregory. Upon the appearance of the “flu” Wednesday morning, city officials, acting under orders from the State Board of Health and from the Surgeon General of the United States Bureau of Health, have closed all places of public gatherings in Wallowa for the present. The public schools were closed on the first appearance, and the students requested to stay off the streets. The moving picture show has cancelled all shows until further notice, and lodges and churches will hold no meetings till the cases in hand are out of danger.

It should be the duty of all citizens to assist in preventing the spread of the malady by keeping out of crowds, using precautions against colds, and keeping the general health good. Complete isolation should be practiced by those who contract the disease. The conduct of citizens individually and collectively only will determine how soon the plague will be stamped out of our midst. Follow instructions and in a week’s time the quarantine will be raised and everything opened as usual.

Two Hundred Fifty Cases in County (*The Wallowa Sun*, October 31, 1918) This morning, the county health officer reported 250 cases of Spanish influenza in the county. Dr. Gregory reports 18 cases in Wallowa and 60 in the country [near Wallowa] that he has visited. Most of the cases were of light form, though patients are very sick for a day or two. The first cases coming down are convalescent now, and some are entirely well and working at their usual vocations. It is hoped that the spreading of the contagion has passed its crest and from now on will die out and in another week business will be moving along at normal again. City officials have printed and posted signs reading:

**Prevent the Flu
DO NOT LOAF
Transact your business and
MOVE ON**

Quarantine Lifted Now in Wallowa (*The Wallowa Sun*, November 14, 1918) County and city health officers lifted the quarantine in Wallowa Tuesday, and business has resumed its normal conditions, people going and coming at will. The stores are now opening and closing at their regular hours. Dr. Taylor, county health officer, says, however, to use all precautions possible, stating that all children with colds, sore throats, and the like should stay at home until they have recovered. The influenza situation became so acute the first of last week that health officers put the city under stricter quarantine. Every family that was affected was quarantined. Three extra marshals were employed to enforce the rules. Miss Mitchell was engaged to act as visiting nurse, and the result has been that the disease has practically been stamped out.

Red Cross Local Work (*The Wallowa Sun*, November 14, 1918) The way the ladies of the local branch of the Red Cross handled the home work during the influenza epidemic calls for high praise to those in charge. No family that was in need of clothing or food was neglected in any way. The tactful way in which this part of the work was handled contributed in no small way to stamping out the scourge, and saved any unnecessary suffering.

Flu Deaths (*The Wallowa Sun*, December 12, 1918) The Flu has been, indeed, an epidemic in the eastern part of our country. In New York about 21,000 children have been made half or full orphans. It is estimated that the number of deaths in our nation is considerable over 100,000, and of these 18,000 were in the army.

Closures (*Wallowa Record Chieftain*, January 16, 1919) For three months the schools, the churches, the lodges, and the theatres have been closed, and a wet blanket thrown over every other sort of business, but that seems to be the extent of any effort to control the disease...Nothing apparently has been done to segregate and control individual cases. Sick people are free to come and go without hindrance...Such management is insufficient.

Spanish Flu Hits Wallowa Again (*The Wallowa Sun*, January 29, 1920) The flu quietly crept into our midst the first of the week, and today there are upwards of 50 cases reported by Drs. Gregory and Butler. All cases so far seem to be in a mild form, none of the patients being very sick, as we understand. It is hoped by placing a strict quarantine on all families where the flu is reported that the malady will be quickly stamped out, and everything will be running normally in another week or 10 days. Word comes from Enterprise that there are 140 cases there. La Grande and other towns on the branch all report cases in mild forms. The Portland papers report the prevalence of flu in all parts of the state.

PROCLAMATION.

In an effort to stamp out the Spanish Influenza which is spreading so rapidly in our town and community there will be no cessation of the precautions on the part of the City administration formerly announced. In addition we deem it absolutely necessary that all houses within the city limits where any case of Spanish Influenza has been reported will be under absolute quarantine until the Marshal has removed the Influenza placard by order of the City Health Officer. This means that all members of the family or any other tenants of the same building will be placed under an absolute state of quarantine and will not be permitted to mingle with or associate with other persons until notified of their release by the proper authorities.

All business houses must remain closed except from 9 a. m. until 3 p. m. All persons are requested to stay at home and do their shopping over the phone as much as possible.

Parents must keep their children at home and any group of children found together on the streets will be sent home by the City Marshal.

Loitering on the streets or any place of business is strictly prohibited.

All ingress to the city through such channels as the railroad is strictly prohibited, therefore, the O. W. R. R. & N. Co. officials have been notified not to sell tickets to this point until the ban has been lifted.

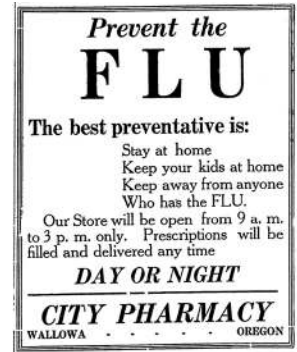
Members of any household residing outside the City limits where cases of Influenza exist or have been known to exist, will not be permitted to enter the City limits until the quarantine has been raised by order of the Mayor. Extra police help will be placed at the different entrances to the City to enforce this order.

We trust the above order will be observed by the general public to prevent the spreading of this dangerous malady.

J. B. GREGORY,
City Health Officer.

H. K. O'BRIEN,
Mayor.

Mayor's Proclamation (*The Wallowa Sun*, January 29, 1920) All meetings, public or private, shall be discontinued until further notice. Parents are directed to keep children off the streets and avoid visiting, keep out of crowds as much as possible. All houses within the city limits where any cases of Spanish influenza has been reported will be under absolute quarantine until the marshal has removed the influenza placard by order of the City Health Officer. This means that all members of the family or any other tenants of the same building will be placed under an absolute state of quarantine and will not be permitted to mingle with or associate with other persons until notified of their release by the proper authorities. If you feel sick and believe you have Spanish influenza, go to bed and send for the doctor.



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Ask the Wallowa History Center

Can you tell us more about the Ladies' Progressive Club?

*"You can't appreciate home until you have lost it, money till it's spent, or your wife till she's joined a club."
 – Ad for the Home Independent Telephone Company, The Wallowa Sun, February 20, 1913*

Unfortunately, virtually the only records we have of the club's activities and projects are contained in a handful of newspaper articles. We don't even know when or why the club disbanded. But one thing we do know is that, as it has been since the beginning, men of the era probably did most of the talking while women did most of the doing. As the saying goes: "Behind every successful man stands a woman rolling her eyes." Included here is a too-brief glimpse of this remarkable organization. (Also see *Wallowa Quarterly*, Spring 2020, pages 3-4.)

Ladies' Progressive Club

From *The Wallowa Sun*

Ladies' Club Organizes (November 28, 1912) By the organization of the Ladies' Progressive Club, Wallowa becomes the possessor of an institution with great possibilities for the up-building of the community. Although the organization has been in existence only about a month, results have already been accomplished, which bespeak for it the true spirit of progress, and prove that the club is working with a determination to do things. With the advent of the free reading room and library, the first goal of the club has been reached. Their first undertaking has been successful, and there is every reason to believe their subsequent efforts will result likewise. The city as a unit should bond together and render these ladies every assistance possible. For they are working for a greater and better Wallowa. They have taken the right course to succeed. Creed nor religion, politics nor factionism, petty jealousies nor self-elevation have entered into the organization. It is formed on a broad scale, and its accomplishment will be in accordance therewith.

Club Begins Library (November 28, 1912) Wallowa is to have a public library. This is the announcement made by the Ladies' Progressive Club, which has been working the past two weeks perfecting the arrangements. Part of the lower floor of the Tulley Building has been routed and is now being fitted up, and the opening will be either Saturday or Monday. A graveling library service has been secured, which will be augmented by books purchased or donated and owned by the local association. In connection to the library, a public reading room is planned. This is for the use of everyone, strangers and people living in the country being especially welcomed. The funds for maintenance have been arranged by popular subscription, and the furniture and inside fittings have practically all be secured. The reading room will be open from four to six o'clock in the afternoon, and from seven until ten o'clock at night. Members of the Progressive Club will take turns in keeping the room open.

Club Fund Raiser (February 20, 1913) The Ladies' Progressive Club of this city is planning a dancing party to be given at Morelock's Hall, Friday evening, for the purpose of raising money to buy a fountain and to help with the general improvement of the school grounds. These ladies recently started the free reading room and library here and have had the hearty support and cooperation of the people. They are working hard to make this party a success, and all are invited to attend. A dollar a ticket admission will be charged, and punch and refreshments will be sold.

WALLOWA QUARTERLY

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Wallowa History Center

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Wallowa Fort

Fort Completed From Mr. [Henry] Schaeffer of Wallowa, who paid our office a visit Wednesday, we learn that all the families except six have left the Wallowa and sought safety in our [Grande Ronde] valley. The fort is completed, and located in the Middle Valley. – *The Mountain Sentinel*, May 31, 1873

Wallowa Stockade James Tulley and Henry Schaeffer, said the above fort (or stockade) was built about two miles above the present site of Wallowa Town on the present Wolf place on a small creek that drained into the swamp, and that there was no cabin built inside it. But later, Sammy Francis built a small cabin inside it and lived there awhile.

But the settlers didn't move into this stockade, as they tried shooting at it and found they could shoot clear through it with their 50-caliber needle guns [Springfield rifles]. But some of the settlers did stay awhile in a double-hewed log house, which was built under the high cliff [possibly Tick Hill] just above the present site of Wallowa Town, on the east side of the Wallowa River, though they had no trouble with the Indians. – John H. Horner, "Wallowa River and Valley," *J. H. Horner Papers*, 1953

* * *

Wild Hog Ride

From *The Wallowa Sun*, (October 16, 1913)

Warn Boner, the 11-year-old son of Walter Boner, had the misfortune while riding a hog to be thrown violently, breaking his shoulder. [Warn, not the hog, broke his shoulder.]