

The College Archives, COVID-19, and the Flu Pandemic of 1918

We usually require the benefit of hindsight to recognize when we have lived through an historic moment. This COVID-19 pandemic is an exception. Across the country and around the world, archives are reaching out to their communities to document people's experiences during this unusual time so that we can remember, share, and learn.

That wasn't the case during the 1918 flu pandemic. At that moment in Dickinson's history, there were 277 students on campus and 15 faculty members. The college's administration was much smaller, and there was no established archives for the college. Shortly after the beginning of the fall 1918 semester, state and local health authorities ordered the closure of all schools, public entertainments, and some other businesses. The 252 young men enrolled in the Student Army Training Corps (SATC), a First World War program to fast-track military training on college campuses, remained under quarantine.

Dickinson's historical records are fairly silent on this moment in history. The meeting minutes of the college faculty do not even mention the college being forced to close in early October. However, five weeks later they do include a brief reference about the process for excusing absences of students who may have been late in returning to campus for the restart of classes on Wednesday, November 5. Due to the upheaval of both the flu pandemic and the war's impact on enrollment, students did not publish any issues of the *Dickinsonian* newspaper during the fall of 1918, and there was no *Microcosm* yearbook produced at the end of the academic year.

Early in the twentieth century, the administration had begun distributing occasional "Dickinson College Bulletins" to students, parents, and alumni to keep them informed of college news. (The college's alumni magazine did not begin publication until 1923.) The bulletin issued in late November 1918 references the epidemic under the heading "THE INFLUENZA," giving the dates during which "operations were forbidden by the local health authorities" and mentioning how the SATC unit fared during the outbreak. A second paragraph relates the sad news that one Dickinson student, a junior named Marvie Boice, had arrived for the start of the semester already unwell, and that she died in early October in Carlisle shortly after the college closed.

One Dickinson student, Walter Harnish, lived in Carlisle and was also enrolled in the SATC program. He kept a diary, and on October 2, 1918 he wrote:

"Lt. Hall got sick early after drill and I went down to his Mansion House to see him. Near dinner we had a formation at which the Lt. gave us information that the camp was under Quarantine and that some of the fellows might possibly have the Spanish Influenza. Well, at this word 8 men flopped down out of ranks. Army doctors were called to assist, nurses called in & South College used as a hospital. I had a detail of men to put up bunks or rather hospital beds."

This diary is currently the only personal account of Dickinsonians' experiences during the 1918 pandemic that has been donated to the college archives. Any other information about what happened at the college during this time needs to be gleaned from the local newspapers.

Because there is so little preserved in the college records, it is difficult to know how the flu pandemic impacted day-to-day life. We have many questions that might never be answered about how students and college employees, and their families, coped with the illness and quarantine.

Today we have the advantage of digital technologies to assist us not only in staying connected and informed, but also in documenting our experiences in various ways. The proliferation of online tools allows us to create and share information quickly and easily with different audiences. These technologies provide us with the opportunity to capture this moment in words, images, audio, and video so that future generations (and we ourselves) may reflect on this time to better understand the impact of the pandemic on our lives.

The Archives and Special Collections staff has created an online form to allow members of the Dickinson community to share their personal stories about the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted their lives. Submissions will be permanently preserved in the college archives, and they will be made available for research and study by Dickinson students and other archives patrons.

To learn more about this project and to submit your story, visit this page on the archives website: <http://archives.dickinson.edu/pandemic-form>.