

1918 All Over Again?



A new sight in the 20th century, protective masks like these, worn by Police officers in Seattle, Washington, were handed out by the American Red Cross. National Archives Photo

In 1918, during the height of World War I, one of the deadliest flu pandemics in the past 500 years struck humanity in the form of the Spanish flu. No part of the world was spared from the disease, and it spread rapidly. So the question we might ask ourselves today is, "Is the pandemic we're facing now as dangerous as what the world dealt with in 1918?"

There are several theories as to how and where the Spanish flu started more than a century ago. The most likely explanation is a farm in rural Kansas, where a type of swine flu spread from pigs to the local population and then to nearby military bases.

The world was at war, and for the first time, medical science was able to identify and track this disease. But neither side involved in the global conflict of the day wanted to let its enemy know that it was facing a deadly pandemic. So both sides censored the media in order to keep the news quiet. The only country reporting the disease was Spain, which at that time had a free press. (By the way, this is why the disease is called the Spanish flu.)

With all the movement involved in a global conflict, the disease was spread easily, from troops fighting on every continent to dock workers loading and unloading the

troop ships to the local communities where the dockworkers lived in countries around the world.

By December 1918, the entire world was infected. The cities and nations that shut down commerce fared the best. Cities like San Francisco, which closed schools and restaurants, quarantined military bases and imposed limits on public gatherings, suffered the least impact. But cities like Philadelphia, which continued with business as usual, had among the highest casualty rates in the United States.

By that point, approximately 30 percent of the world population – some 500 million people out of 1.8 billion – had become infected. Death rates are harder to pinpoint, but they range from a low estimate of 20 million to a high estimate of 50 million.

So is what we're experiencing now as bad as what happened in 1918?

No. The coronavirus, while infectious, is not nearly as deadly as the 1918 Spanish flu was. The world has responded as it should by limiting gatherings, closing schools and non-essential businesses, etc. And it is up to each of us to take self-quarantining and social distancing seriously. Even if the coronavirus isn't a threat to you personally, it's still possible for you to unknowingly transmit the virus to someone who could face serious health challenges if he or she came down with COVID-19.

The Smoky Mountain Relic Room has closed its brick-and-mortar operation for the time being, so we can do our part to help flatten the outbreak curve, which will ultimately spread out our medical-care resources more evenly. However, our website – www.therelicroom.com – is still up and running, and we have been spending this time continuing to grow our sales presence through our online store.

We also have an eBay store you can find by doing a Google search for "eBay Smoky Mountain Relic Room" and an Amazon store you can find by Googling "Amazon store Smoky Mountain Relic Room."

If you are self-quarantined at home and have realized that quantity doesn't equal quality on Netflix, you might also check out our YouTube Channel, "Chasing History," which offers more than 60 episodes that take you into the hands-on world of historical and archaeological discovery. We also just released a great two-part episode on the 1918 Spanish flu (as well as 70 other great episodes) for our podcast "Chasing History Radio," available wherever you get your podcasts. Finally, you keep up with the Relic Room on social media via Facebook and Instagram (@Smoky Mountain Relic Room).



Locals on a train platform with a sign "Wear a Mask or Go to Jail", emphasizing the seriousness of the pandemic in this community. National Archives photo

So while the coronavirus isn't as bad as the Spanish flu pandemic, this is still a bad situation. But the world moved on past 1918, just as we will in the year to come. We are all living out history right now. One day, people will look back at this time and our actions and judge us all by how we responded. So keep a journal for future historians and remind them how much Netflix sucked and how great Chasing History was on YouTube. Most of all, show future generations how we brought out the best of humanity by helping each other in this time of crisis. Be kind to others, don't hoard supplies, help friends and neighbors, love one another, wash your dang hands and remember to smile and laugh.

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