

## See you April 15 at Trails Lounge for the annual dinner meeting

Portage Historical Society dinner and annual meeting will be on Monday, April 15. This year the presenter is Marc Seals, PhD, from UW Baraboo who will present a program on “The History and Reception of Zona Gale’s Miss Lulu Bett as Novel, Play and Film. He has been on the faculty at the Baraboo campus since 2006, and was previously on the faculty of the University of South Florida. He teaches courses on American literature, film and composition.

The evening will begin with a social hour at 5 pm, followed by dinner at 6 pm, a short business meeting, and then the

program at 7 pm. The dinner menu options are pot roast with carrots and potatoes; or cod with baked potato, or chicken with orange and ginger and baked potato. All dinners include salad, roll and butter, coffee and dessert. All dinners are \$20 and include tax and gratuity.

At the business meeting, members will be asked to vote on an **amendment to the bylaws**. See the insert in this newsletter for details of the proposed change to the bylaws.

To make a reservation with your dinner selection call Melody Brooks-Taylor at 742-6082 or Sarah Mautz at 742-1319. Reservations must be made by noon, Friday, April 12.



The Museum at the Portage will re-open on April 4. Museum hours will be 1-4 pm on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday in April and May. In June, July, and August the Museum will be open Tuesday—Saturday from 1-4 pm.

Portage Historical Society  
804 MacFarlane Rd.  
PO Box 727  
Portage, WI 53901

March 2019



## Portage Historical Society Museum at the Portage

804 MacFarlane Rd., Portage, WI

## When The Spanish Lady visited in 1918

One hundred years ago, Wisconsinites were still remembering the relief they felt on Armistice Day, November 11, 1918. But some were still living under the shadow of the pandemic that took the lives of many soldiers and civilians. Worldwide, 500 million — 1/3 of the world’s population — were infected, and at least 50 million worldwide died, 675,000 of them in the U.S. In Wisconsin, over 100,000 were ill from the flu, and 8,500 died.

The scourge had several names: the flu, influenza, Spanish flu, The Spanish Lady and La Grippe. The Spanish Lady was depicted as a skeletal woman in a black dress, wearing a mantilla and carrying a fan, and was born on the heels of an outbreak in Spain that affected King Alfonso and other government officials. He survived, and so did the image of The Spanish Lady.



In the U.S., the flu first appeared at military installations where young, previously healthy men were in training to go to Europe to aid allies in fending off the German army. Many enlisted men from Wisconsin went to Camp Funston in Texas or Camp Grant in Illinois for training. In Pandemic 1918, author Catharine Arnold states that on one day at Camp Funston, “a steady stream of sick men formed an orderly queue” awaiting treatment, and the overwhelmed medical officer called for more help; 107 sick men had been seen by noon, and by the end of the day there were 522 sick men at Camp Funston.

Similar numbers were recorded at Camp Grant on the outskirts of Rockford. A total of 10,713 were treated for influenza at the base, and 1,060 died. In a wide-ranging oral history recorded in 1980 by Frank DeLoughery of Wisconsin Historical Society with Glenn

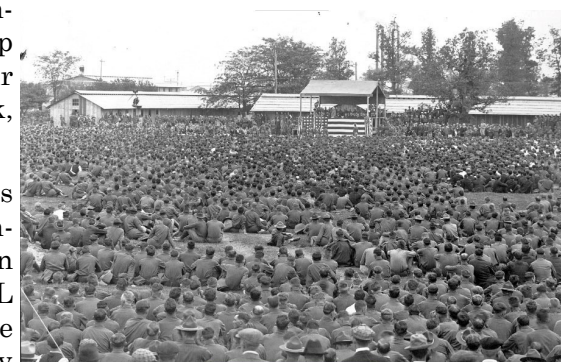
Harman, longtime Portage area resident, Harman reported that he too was at Camp Grant and had the flu, but “not too bad.” He said that the troop train he was on stopped at Camp Grant, and on the second day, 90 men died.

Local newspapers from the second half of 1918 tell of the sad end to young lives. On Sept. 30, Mr. and Mrs. Clark Rose were summoned to Camp Grant as their son was very ill with the flu. Ten days earlier, Elmer Morrison (23) of Morrisonville and Robert Coats (29) of Merrimac died at Camp Grant. Other men from the area died at other training facilities: Cheny A. Byam, died at officer’s training quarters at Camp Taylor in Louisville, KY, Ole Evans at Camp Lee, VA, and Dr. Walter Reinhardt at Camp Custer, near Battle Creek, MI.

Great Lakes Naval Training Center in Evanston, IL was the site for many Wisconsin men who joined the military. The Portage

newspaper reported on Sept. 23 that “Alvin Leeg of Portage is critically ill with Spanish influenza,” and “it is presumed that the Spanish Influenza was brought [to U.S.] by the Kaiser’s submarine.” One hundred deaths were reported at Great Lakes in September, 1918.

An Oct. 17 letter from Freeland Van Epps to his mother was reprinted in the newspaper. He was at Beloit College for army training and noted that the flu had arrived there but the men were quarantined. “The

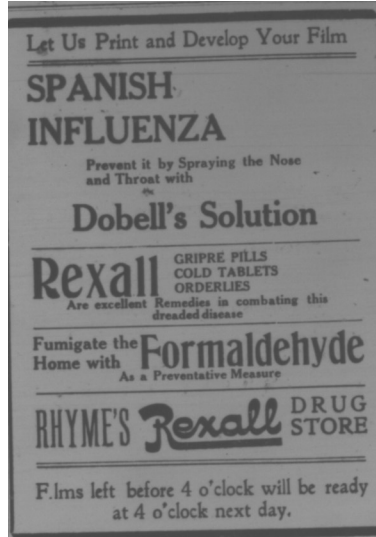


Senior staff are addressing group of new soldiers at Camp Grant. More than 27,000 soldiers from the Badger State trained there.

US Army Center of Military History

grub is good and they have taken good care of us.” The flu, he wrote to his mother, is “just about conquered.”

Keith Morris of Kilbourn was “laid low by pneumonia following influenza” in Portsmouth, England. A communication to his mother following his death may have provided some solace. “I can assure you he was cared for in his last hours by a competent and sympathetic staff of surgeons and nurses,” wrote Lt. A.W. McMillan who also wrote that the soldier’s final resting spot in Winchester “is a beautiful spot overlooking many miles of this lovely English countryside and many of his comrades who also gave their lives are buried beside him.”



A review of the Portage newspaper from the second half of 1918 marks the progress of influenza in the civilian population. On Sept. 25, the newspaper reported that there were several cases of influenza in the city. Rhyme’s Drug Store had been advertising “inner tube bargains” on September 20 but within a few weeks was advertising products to prevent the spread of influenza.

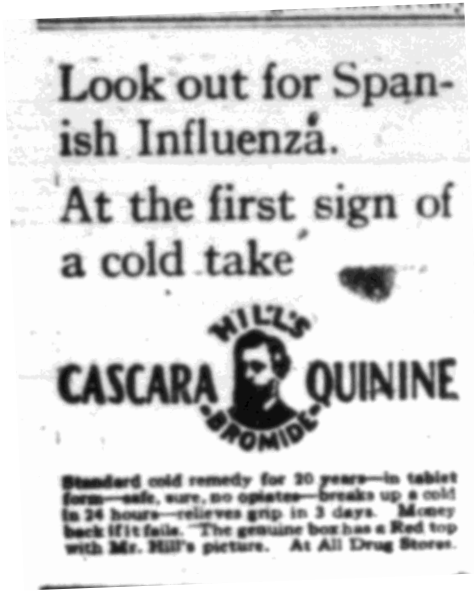
Similar ads continued through the season, including several from Vick’s VapoRub which was relatively new on the market. A national ad in late October proclaimed that the order for 1.25 million jars the previous week completely sold out, and that “today’s order alone is for 932,459 jars.”

### Influenza strikes rural areas too

Populous metropolitan areas were easy targets for the contagious disease — in Philadelphia 12,000 died in less than five weeks — but rural areas and small towns were visited by the Spanish Lady too, and Columbia County was no exception. Mrs. Laura Roundy died of influenza/pneumonia at the Wyocena home in mid-October. All seven of her children were afflicted, and four of them so ill that they were taken to the county home. Mail clerk Thomas Ford (37) of Rio died a few days later, also of pneumonia following influenza. A young (23) dentist died in Baraboo, and on Oct. 24 a mother and daughter near Columbus died, and the nurse who was summoned to provide care for them also died. Frank Pelski (28) died in Portage, and his wife and three children were also reported ill. Annie Brown (24) of Lowville died the same day. Alice Haley (17), formerly of Portage, died in South Dakota and was brought back to Portage for burial. Mrs. Sabins of Pardeeville died of the same illness. Margaret Williams of Portage died in October, and her parents and sister

were ill with influenza. Miss Williams was a graduate nurse and had been practicing her profession up until the time of her illness. The disease was also fatal to Mrs. J. Grady, another Portage resident. Mrs. Peter Rasmussen, 37, died at her Lewiston home after a week of illness with pneumonia/influenza. Railroad clerk John Duehling was confined to his home with the flu, and railroad conductor Elon Wyman was also stricken with the flu. The chatty columns of news, normally recounting the comings and goings in small communities of the county, now carried the news of illness and death from influenza and subsequent pneumonia,

In the 1960s, Dr. C.W.Henney, longtime Portage physician and later U.S. congressman, wrote a series of columns for the *Portage Daily Register* recounting his experiences providing care in the Portage area. In a column published Jan. 21, 1963, he recalled visiting four homes in Briggsville afflicted with the flu. One family had lost the mother just a few days earlier, and when Dr. Henney saw the family a “dangerously ill” father was lying on a cot beside the kitchen stove, with the oldest of the seven children pleading for his father to recover so the children wouldn’t be orphaned. The father eventually recovered and the young family was spared another heartbreaking loss.



### Mayor takes action to reduce risk

On Oct. 12, Mayor S.H. Peck issued a proclamation banning public events other than open air gatherings. As a result schools were closed, and church services, club meetings, and social events were halted. People were advised to not spit on the sidewalk, and the mayor recommended that children be confined to home. Citizens were to refrain from visiting the sick. One of the events that was permitted was the county fair — it being an open air event — and attendance was sufficient enough to allow the fair board to pay its bills. The newspaper reported on Oct. 25 that the precautions would remain in place until further notice. It was noted that Red Cross visitors from Chicago complimented local authorities on the steps they had taken (including flushing the streets), and also cited the citizens for their cooperation, resulting in

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### Coloring book features historic homes

Twelve historic Portage homes are featured in the coloring book published by the Portage Historic Preservation Commission. Information from “Early Portage Photographs” published by the Portage Historical Society was incorporated in coloring book. The first run of 500 copies were quickly gone, and a 2nd run was authorized in January. Copies were available at city hall, Chamber of Commerce office and public library, and it is hoped that sufficient copies will be available for distribution at the Museum at the Portage when it opens in April. Copies of “Early Portage Photographs” featuring 66 homes from the early 1900s, and information about the architectural style and owners is also available for purchase at the museum.

### Influenza (con’t from page 2)

low contagion rate. The Red Cross distributed gauze masks at no cost, and recommended that only one person in a home be designated to provide care for sick person.

Reports of illness and death continued into 1919, but the rate of infection was slowing, and by December 1918 newspaper ads promoting products to prevent the flu were replaced with ads aimed at shoppers looking for Christmas gifts.

In an article in *Wisconsin Magazine of History* (Autumn, 2000) writer Steven Burg reports that Wisconsin was the only state to meet the flu threat with “uniform, statewide measures that were unusual both for their aggressiveness and the public’s willingness to comply with them.” He acknowledges that the state’s low population density and the relatively late arrival of the flu to the state contributed to the low death rate, but Wisconsin was better prepared than other states “because of the state’s foresight in making public health a policy priority.”

#### Sources:

- [Pandemic 1918: Eyewitness Accounts from the Greatest Medical Holocaust in Modern History](#) by Catharine Arnold
- WHS Oral History interview with Glen Harman, 1980-81
- Wisconsin and the Great Spanish Flu Epidemic of 1918* by Steven Burg (*Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Vol 84 #1)
- Obituary Index Portage Newspapers, 1908-1949 compiled by Anna Mae Axness
- [A Military History of Portage](#) by Dr. J. Robert Curtis
- Portage Daily Register* various issues Jul 1918—Apr 1919
- Exhibit: “Staggering Losses: World War I and the Influenza Pandemic of 1918” UW Ebling Library, Historical Reading Room, Madison, WI (through May 2019)
- Henney material, Portage His Soc archives

### Longtime supporter tenders resignation

Kathryn Curtis has been a familiar figure at the Museum at the Portage since its inception in the mid 1990s. Along with her late husband, J. R. “Doc” Curtis, who served as first president of the Portage Historical Society, she was closely involved with the evolution of the library on MacFarlane Rd into the Museum at the Portage, helping to plan and set up exhibits, encourage membership, and provide invaluable support services. Both Kathryn and “Doc” were key contributors when the sesquicentennial history of Portage was published in 2004, and she was her husband’s right hand assistant when he authored [A Military History of Portage](#). Kathryn joined the Portage Historical Society board in 2013 and has been active in that capacity until early this year when she retired from the board. Thank you, Kathryn, for your many years of support!

### Can you spare a few hours on April 2?

Willing workers are needed on Tuesday, April 2, to help get the Museum at the Portage spruced up and ready for opening on April 4. With help from members and supporters, it will be a “fun and productive day” of spring cleaning starting at 10 am. Weather permitting, outside clean-up will be April 30.



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