

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***



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# American Lutheran Colleges and the Influenza Epidemic of 1918<sup>1</sup>

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The influenza epidemic of 1918–1919 has been called “America’s Forgotten Pandemic,” although it may well have taken fifty million lives worldwide, 675,000 of them in the United States.<sup>2</sup> In the midst of a truly global conflict, World War I, this pandemic touched almost every corner of the world and brought influenza into even the most isolated communities. Since this epidemic disproportionately affected young women and men between the ages of twenty and forty, and this population accounted for half the deaths, it is of interest to know how this epidemic affected the American Lutheran colleges.

This influenza was first seen in the United States in the spring of 1918, mainly in military camps and in cities in the northeast, such as Boston and Philadelphia, where it resulted in harsh but often quick outbreaks. America in that year was mobilized for war, and soldiers were on the move across the country and over to Europe, perfect conditions for the spread of an infectious disease like this. Crowded military camps and transports added to the contagion and contributed to the mortality in young adults. Without many effective resources, doctors were unable to do very much, and most of the medical care was provided by nurses. After scattered outbreaks through the summer of 1918, a tidal wave of infections hit during the fall of that year, spiking to highs in October and November, then receding almost as quickly as it arrived. Unlike many influenza outbreaks which are at their worst during the winter and early spring, this outbreak peaked in the fall, and only scattered outbreaks were seen afterward.

By the early twentieth century, American Lutherans had developed an extensive system of academies and colleges to meet the educational needs of their young people and to provide Lutheran denominations with educated pastoral candidates and other leaders.<sup>3</sup> The American entry into World War I set off a wave of xenophobia focused on the large waves of immigrants of the prior decades. Lutherans of all ethnic stripes rushed to demonstrate their patriotism, contributing to the war effort and supporting



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the troops. Many young Lutheran men and women joined the armed forces or auxiliaries.

The fact that so many young men were joining (or being drafted into) the armed forces was a significant problem for these American Lutheran colleges, many of which saw a significant decline in enrollment during the 1917–1918 school year, causing major financial hardships. Heading into the 1918–1919 academic year, things promised to be even harder, and it was unclear how much longer the war would last. Such issues meant that many Lutheran colleges were searching for a way to survive during the difficulties of wartime.

The US government established the Student Army Training Corps (SATC) in early 1918 to train young men for the military at colleges and universities around the country. SATC units were established at many of the Lutheran colleges in the fall of 1918. Although many colleges were relieved to have the additional students and the financial support that the program gave, there were a number of troubling issues that were occasioned by the establishment of the SATC programs on campus. This program requisitioned buildings and facilities for its own exclusive use and greatly disrupted the academic life of the community. All the elements of military life, bugles, drilling, and the like, dominated the colleges. Most of the units were commanded by young, outside Army officers who were usually not a part of the Lutheran community, and they were not always so concerned with education.

Another problem was the importation of military culture onto these campuses, including the rough-and-tumble morality of an army camp, quite different from the strict moral regimes that these colleges had observed heretofore. A number of the new students brought on campus were not Lutheran and did not fit well into the traditional campus culture. At Carthage College, Carthage, Illinois, President Hoover later related to his board of directors these problems: “Gambling, profanity, petty thievery, destruction of property and other forms of misconduct were permitted by the officers in charge to an extent that seemed to violate every college ideal which more than a half century of effort had formulated.”<sup>4</sup>

At the beginning of the fall term at the Lutheran colleges in September 1918, the influenza epidemic that had been popping up in military camps and eastern cities was definitely a worry, but it was not generally a present issue on campus. This was soon to change in a major way during the fall, as the influenza invaded the college campuses and peaked dramatically in October and November of that year. Given the fact that the influenza epidemic was seen initially in the military camps, it is reasonable to assume that one of the primary drivers of the epidemic came through the arrival on campus of the SATC students and their military instructor officers. Many of the initial reports of the influenza on campus were among the SATC students. But quickly this epidemic was seen widely throughout the general population, and it affected students, faculty, and staff alike.

At some of the schools, the epidemic began to hit home already in October. At Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois, two individuals died of the influenza during October: student Walter Grantz, and faculty member Andrew Kempe.<sup>5</sup> At Luther College student Selmer Knutson died on October 22, although not on campus.<sup>6</sup> But the epidemic seemed to hit the other campuses hardest in November, just in time for the celebrations of the European armistice on November 11. These celebrations had to be greatly limited by the epidemic and the restrictions that were meant to constrain it. Without definite information, it is hard to know exactly how many students came down with the influenza that fall. The experience of Luther College was typical; out of an enrollment of 241 students in the fall of 1918, 112 students were infected with the influenza, and two nurses and five faculty members caring for these students also developed the disease.<sup>7</sup> At St. Olaf College the influenza hit later, beginning in November; newly installed President Lars Boe wrote to the students on December 10, 1918: “For a while we considered ourselves fortunate . . . in not having a single case of influenza. But our turn came all of a sudden. Now we have had about one hundred cases and four deaths.”<sup>8</sup> Most worrisome to Boe was the fact that the epidemic had spread from the SATC barracks and now was to be found “among the girls.” Other campus notices mirrored these reports, saying that the epidemic seemed to develop very quickly, seemingly overnight.

During this fall, the epidemic hit hard in the communities in which these colleges were located and in which their faculty, staff, and many students resided. At Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota, seventy-eight people died in the town of Moorhead, but only one student, a young woman “who broke quarantine to go home.”<sup>9</sup> At Augustana College, Rock Island, the local county declared a ban on all gatherings in public places during that month, as did many other locations.<sup>10</sup> In Decorah, Iowa, and surrounding Winnesheik County (where Luther College was located), there was one quarantine ban after another, as well as other attempts to control the influenza, but still sixty-nine citizens of that county died in the epidemic that fall.<sup>11</sup> It is reported that about 195,000 Americans died of the influenza during the month of October 1918.

Lutheran college leaders did what they could to slow the speed and direction in which this epidemic spread. There were no effective medicines against the influenza, so public health measures were the only means of controlling this outbreak. The emphasis was on good hygiene and healthy habits. But these practices, by themselves, were not enough, and all colleges reported that some form of quarantine was instituted during that fall term. This meant confining students to campus and not allowing them to go into the local communities or take trips home. These measures also often meant additional internal forms of quarantine, separating the SATC students from the rest of the college populations and the students who had taken ill from the rest of the campus. A number of these colleges had only limited dormitory spaces, and traditionally some students had boarded at homes in the local

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communities; and their movements had to be restricted, as well. Sometimes the quarantine meant that classes, activities, and sporting events had to be cancelled.

One of the most difficult problems that these quarantines occasioned was the restricting of students to campus, which of course, raised the understandable anxieties of parents who thought that their students should come home instead. At St. Olaf College, President Lars Boe had his hands full “reassuring worried students, and firmly turning down all requests from students and their parents to allow the students to go home.”<sup>12</sup> These decisions were most certainly controversial, but probably the correct ones. The only student at Concordia College, Moorhead, who died was a young woman who left campus to go home, and at Augustana College, Rock Island, Walter Grantz, the only student fatality, died at home after attending the funeral of his brother.<sup>13</sup> Sometimes the full quarantine could not be observed. At Luther College, when SATC student Selmer Knutson took ill, his parents rushed to the college; the college newspaper reported: “During the last days of his life he was attended by his parents, who did all that loving hands could do to minister to his comfort, and who had the great solace of hearing . . . that he trusted with implicit faith in the presence of his Savior, Jesus Christ.”<sup>14</sup> The influenza struck suddenly and those who died often did so in a matter of days, which obviously greatly heightened the anxieties of all concerned.

These colleges were generally small, tight-knit communities with several hundred students, and the faculty and staff of the colleges were often closely involved in students’ lives, both academic and communal. When the epidemic hit hard on campus, faculty and staff were directly involved in caring for the students. The acknowledged leaders on these campuses were the college presidents, whose roles were quite a bit different than those today. The size of these colleges, and the presence of the presidents on campus meant that these men (often Lutheran pastors) had a close, parental relationship with many of the students. The imposition of quarantine and other restrictions were the decisions of the presidents, who were often closely involved in the care of the students. Of one college president, Lars Boe, it was later said: “Boe ignored the danger to his own health and was seen everywhere on campus, visiting the sick, issuing orders. He and Mr. P.O. Holland [the college treasurer] went to see each patient.”<sup>15</sup>

Similar reports are mentioned at other Lutheran colleges. Many faculty members and staff were closely involved in the care of the students who had become ill.

The epidemic and the quarantine restrictions, along with the disruptions of the SATC units on campus, meant that the normal rhythms and activities on campus were upended. Still, students attempted to make the best of things and to carry on as best as possible. Sports activities, especially football, were limited or canceled due to travel restrictions. The religious character of these colleges meant that religious organizations (Luther League, the Lutheran Brotherhood of America, the YMCA, and other student mission societies) were active on campus. Student organizations mobilized to assist in the war effort and in particular to provide services to the SATC units on campus. At Muhlenberg College, Allentown, Pennsylvania, the YMCA and

the Lutheran Brotherhood of America provided materials and entertainment for the cadets, and the college provided regular religious services.<sup>16</sup> At Bethany College, a “Soldier’s Club” was set up in a property adjacent to the college campus.<sup>17</sup> At Gettysburg College, a special “song fest,” was organized in the Chapel on October 26, 1918. The college newspaper reported: “The men entered into the singing with a wonderful spirit. The singing not only provided recreation for the men but also increases their range of voice thus making them more able to give commands as men should give them.”<sup>18</sup> Special activities, such as the yearly observances of the founding of the college, and the celebration of the Armistice that ended the First World War on November 11 were either cancelled or were held out-of-doors. The successful end of the war was something to be celebrated, to be sure, although the influenza epidemic certainly muted these activities.

The most difficult part of this fall most certainly were the deaths that occurred among the students and faculty of these colleges. In such tight-knit communities of young adults, epidemics and sudden death of this variety can be a real shock, and the restrictions of the quarantines surely made conditions even more difficult. In particular, funerals and memorial services were, though necessary, difficult to arrange. At Luther College, following the death of Selmer Knutson, a memorial service was conducted outside on the steps leading to one of the college buildings. The college newspaper reported, “The S.A.T.C. and cadet corps escorted the body to the College entrance, not being able to proceed farther on account of the quarantine, which was then in force.”<sup>19</sup> At Augustana College, Rock Island, the funeral of faculty member Andrew Kempe was held outdoors in mid-October on the front steps of the library building.<sup>20</sup> At St. Olaf College, long-time staff member Gertrude Hilleboe recounted many years later:

Another picture indelibly etched on one’s mind from those days is of a flag-draped coffin in a hearse just outside the Chapel (we were not allowed to hold any funeral services in the building), a five-minute sermonette and prayer by President Boe, the slow descent to the foot of the Hill accompanied by the Honor Guard, and then taps.<sup>21</sup>

In memorializing a Gettysburg College student who died during the epidemic, a writer in the college newspaper expressed sorrow and shock at the occurrence: “the mind is shocked when a life in the fullest vigor and activity is suddenly cut off and a future of valuable productiveness is apparently wasted.”<sup>22</sup> Though the numbers of actual deaths reported on these campuses were relatively small (the largest number reported was that of four students at St. Olaf College<sup>23</sup>), one can imagine that many of those who had been sick and survived saw this as a very sobering experience.

And then by the end of 1918, the war, the quarantine restrictions, and the epidemic itself came to an end, almost as quickly as they had arrived. On all these campuses, the SATC units were disbanded during November and December 1918, and the campuses began to revert to their former configurations. The lifting of quarantines happened at different times, depending on the course of the epidemic on campus. There seemed a palpable sense of release bordering on giddiness at the end of the war

and the seeming end of the epidemic, even as the toll of these events was still in the hearts and minds of many. The influenza epidemic that had peaked so dramatically during the fall of 1918 receded quickly, although there were still localized outbreaks in 1919.

There was a great anticipation of returning to “normal” once the colleges resumed their activities in early 1919. Yet whether the effect of the epidemic, the war, or both, there was also a common realization that things had changed, and their colleges had changed with them. College officials and historians have commented on the new spirit on their various campus, often in conjunction with the return of demobilized soldiers to the campuses. How long this lasted and how prevalent it was is beyond the scope of this study, but it seems almost certain that the fall of 1918 changed the American Lutheran colleges in important ways. They had risen to meet the twin challenges of war and epidemic and had survived.

With historical study it is often difficult to isolate cause and effect, and especially how a historical event effected subsequent history. Such is the case with the influenza epidemic of 1918. Indeed, one of the striking elements of this epidemic is the fact that it came and went so quickly, and it would seem not to have had a major effect on subsequent Lutheran history. One can scan the Lutheran periodicals for the several years after 1918, and rarely ever encounter any searching examination of the events of 1918 or their lingering aftermath. But this is not to say that the epidemic had no effects; indeed, the death of so many people, so many of whom were in the prime of life, cannot but have an effect. When this author was developing this article, a colleague mentioned to him that her mother had been born in the fall of 1918, in the midst of the crisis. This colleague suggested that her mother always carried this event with her, and it colored the way she lived her entire life.

One wonders how those young Lutheran women and men on these college campuses in the fall of 1918 were affected by this event – the quarantines, the loss of classmates, and other traumas. What we do know is that this generation of Lutherans produced a number of great missionaries who brought the gospel of Jesus Christ to peoples around the world before and after World War II. They had a seriousness to them, a focus, and a vision for service to the gospel. Without digging deeply into their life stories would be difficult to say what role the epidemic played in their individual, personal ministries. But such a brush with human mortality at the time of young adulthood is often formative, and it

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must be that the events of 1918 had an important impact on them. What we do know for sure is that after 1918, American Lutherans “stepped up to the plate” to take

responsibility for Lutheran missions worldwide, especially to take the place of European mission societies that were no longer able to support their mission stations after World War I. War and epidemic have a way of focusing one's mind and sharpening one's vocation, and certainly these events must have shaped a generation of young leaders.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This article is an abridgement of a longer article, first published in the *Journal of the Lutheran Historical Conference*, vol. 9, 2019, 135–152, and used by permission.

<sup>2</sup> For this history in the United States, see Alfred W. Crosby, *America's Forgotten Pandemic: The Influenza of 1918*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). This epidemic has sometimes been referred to as the "Spanish flu," although there is no reason to suppose that it originated in Spain.

<sup>3</sup> For a history of these educational institutions, see Richard Solberg, *Lutheran Higher Education in North America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in William Carl Spielman, *The Diamond Jubilee History of Carthage College, 1870–1945* (Carthage IL: Carthage College Historical Society, 1945), 106.

<sup>5</sup> Jamie Nelson, "1918 at Augustana: Soldiers and flu come and go." Accessed at [www.augustana.edu/about-us/sesquicentennial/1918-at-augustana](http://www.augustana.edu/about-us/sesquicentennial/1918-at-augustana)

<sup>6</sup> "Selmer Alfred Knutson," *College Chips*, 35 (7), October 1918.

<sup>7</sup> Nick Kelley, "Pandemic Influenza: Insights from the Past, Thoughts for the Future," *Agora* 19 (2), Spring 2007, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Lars Boe, "To the St. Olaf Students," *Manitou Messenger*, 32 (5), December 10, 1918, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Carroll Engelhardt, *On Firm Foundation Grounded: The First Century of Concordia College, 1891–1991*. (Moorhead, Minnesota: Concordia College, 1991), 21.

<sup>10</sup> Nelson.

<sup>11</sup> Kelley, 8.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph M. Shaw, *History of St. Olaf College, 1874–1974*. (Northfield, MN: St. Olaf College Press, 1974), 266.

<sup>13</sup> Engelhardt, 21, and Nelson. In a tragic turn, Grantz and his three siblings all died of the influenza that fall.

<sup>14</sup> "Selmer Alfred Knutson"

<sup>15</sup> Shaw, 266.

<sup>16</sup> "What the Lutheran Church Is Doing for the Boys at Muhlenberg" and "Religious Service Held at Muhlenberg Unit," *Muhlenberg Weekly*, 37 (2) October 30, 1918, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Emroy Lindquist, *Bethany in Kansas: The History of a College*. (Lindsborg, Kansas: Bethany College, 1975), 51.

<sup>18</sup> "Recreation for the S.A.T.C." *The Gettysburgian*, Wednesday, November 13, 1918. Given what is now known about the aerosol transmission of viruses, in retrospect, a song fest may not have been the best idea.

<sup>19</sup> "Selmer Alfred Knutson."

<sup>20</sup> Nelson.

<sup>21</sup> "Interview with Gertrude M. Hilleboe, July 1, 1970," in Shaw, 266.

<sup>22</sup> "Health Provisions," *The Gettysburgian*, Wednesday, November 13, 1918.

<sup>23</sup> "Four St. Olaf Men Succumb to the Flu," *Manitou Messenger*, 32 (5), December 10, 1918, 1.