

EPIDEMICS and NMU

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The coronavirus is not the first pandemic to hit Northern Michigan University. The most serious one in the past to invade Marquette and the campus was the Spanish influenza of 1918-1919, which ultimately killed 650,000 Americans. As with the covid-19 outbreak, Marquette and the Upper Peninsula were not hit as hard as elsewhere in the country, but action was taken to halt the spread. The flu hit the campus a few weeks after the fall semester began and President Kaye closed the campus and students were sent home.

In 1918 President Kaye was able to get the Student Army Training Corps on campus. Through faculty visits across the Upper Peninsula, Kaye was able to notify the Army that there were 104 young men ready to be trained for World War I. They were housed in the abandoned dormitory, where St. Michael church stands, and Northern was paid to train regular Army privates. However due to the flu pandemic the men were quarantined and wore masks when they left the building. Their biggest complaint was that they could not date the college girls across the street on campus as they were looking forward to doing.

The campus was fortunate that not a student died of the flu. This was not the case of some of the alumni both in the UP and the United States who succumbed to it. The only faculty member to die was Samuel D. Magers (1860-1919) who came to Northern in the fall of 1911 and served as professor of Natural Sciences and inspired many students to achieve successful careers as scientists and educators. Around his busy schedule he found time to analyze water samples for the city of Marquette health department, engaged in a soil-testing program and tested milk for local and Peninsula dairies. He served as chair of the research committee, which prepared the way for the commission form of government in Marquette. He also promoted national Prohibition. The main bout of the flu had passed since its October highpoint. Then suddenly in January 1919 Professor Magers was stricken and succumbed to bronchial pneumonia complicated by heart-lung problems.

In 1954, the Cambium Club of Northern established an annual award – “Samuel D. Magers Memorial Trophy,” for the purpose of encouraging new techniques in the effective presentation of technical knowledge to the general public.” The trophy was provided by his daughter Dr. Mildred Magers, the first female professor at Northern to get a Ph.D. in 1944. A plaque honoring Professor Magers is located in the Biology Department.

The main wave of the flu declined, so that Northern reopened in the winter of 1919. President Kaye and the faculty were concerned about the lost semester. So they took action so that students were able to make up the lost work and they graduated on time in June.

There were other minor epidemics that hit campus. One year, students were kept on campus due to a typhus outbreak in the Lower Peninsula during the Thanksgiving break. In 1930, there was a fear of a smallpox epidemic and the entire student body was vaccinated. It was a different time in the 1920s and 1930s. A student was suffering meningitis in his boarding house room. Not seeing him for days, the land lady called the dean of men, Don Bottum who had to break into the room and found the fellow unconscious. He was sent to the hospital and recovered. His grateful family from Chippewa County sent the dean a carload of fruit and vegetables.

Polio shots were administered in 1957 as part of a national immunization program and at the same time a smallpox prevention program was initiated on campus. Twenty years later in 1977, in November a “mild epidemic” of stomach flu sent 133 students to the Health Center and 23 to the hospital. In December 1968 an outbreak of viral illnesses sent 400-500 students to the Health Center within four days. Since the 1980s HIV infections and other diseases are monitored by the Health Center. Varieties of the regular flu continuously plague the campus during the winter months and both personnel and students are encouraged to take flu shots.

To date, Northern’s personnel have done outstanding work preparing the campus for the opening of classes in the fall of 2020. To date the campus has successfully remained open to both regular and distant learning classes and COVID infections carefully monitored. A thanks is in order to the Board of Trustees, President Fritz Erickson and the faculty, administrators and students who made this happen.

Thank you and Stay Safe.