

The 1918 Flu Pandemic - An Interview with Gail Kemler

By Sarah Helferich

Gail Johnson Kemler was born October 28, 1917, in Brookfield, Illinois. When Kemler's mother became seriously ill four years later, she and her two sisters came to Rochester to live with relatives. After her mother recovered, the family moved to Pleasant Ridge, MI, but later returned to Rochester. Kemler graduated from Rochester High School in 1935.

In 1918, however, the world was experiencing a flu pandemic, which led to nearly 50 million deaths worldwide and about 675,000 deaths in the United States. Rochester-Avon Historical Society's First Vice President, Sarah Helferich, recently interviewed Kemler via video conference to ask about her family's experience with the 1918 flu and how it might compare to the current COVID-19 crisis.

SH: Were there widespread quarantines during the 1918 flu pandemic?

Kemler: No. Quarantines were limited to affected households only.

SH: Did many people lose their jobs?

Kemler: In rural areas like Rochester, no one really lost their job. But if someone needed help, neighbors were there to offer some assistance.

SH: Were goods and services restricted or scarce?

Kemler: In rural towns, what we knew was what we knew and, of course, people would help each other. But as far as goods becoming scarce? That just wasn't a real problem.

1918 Spanish flu:



IN THIS ISSUE

Cover Story – 1918 Flu Pandemic – page 1

President's Message – page 2

Cover Story Continued – page 3

Rochester Crossword – page 4

Contact Information – page 5

Business Sponsors – page 6



PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Recently, the Rochester-Avon Historical Society learned that Rewold & Sons has purchased the Elevator site on University Drive and Water Street in downtown Rochester. Rewold & Sons plan to donate the Elevator building to the City of Rochester. The historical society has been in contact with the City of Rochester to insist we be part of the conversation and to coordinate efforts to try, once again, to save the Elevator.

When the time comes, we will need the support of the community and RAHS members to help save this historic structure. According to city officials, the plan, if approved, is to move the Elevator to the Rochester Municipal Park, where it would replace the Kiwanis Shelter. Moving the Elevator will require it to be dismantled and rebuilt once funds are available through donations and grants.

The Elevator was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2010. Once it is dismantled, moved, and rebuilt at another location, the Elevator will lose its National Register status. That is a sobering fact. The historical society prefers to keep the Elevator on its current site but realizes that, inevitably, the building will be moved to make way for new development.

For over twenty-five years, RAHS has worked to save the Elevator. In the early 2000s, plans were made to move the structure intact to one of several possible sites. These sites included the parking lot directly across the street, on the nearby trails, or to the current farmers market lot to be used as an indoor market. Local architect and historic preservation expert John Dziurman drew renovation plans for the Elevator. However, lack of support from the City of Rochester, contamination of the Elevator site, and lack of funds hindered the society's efforts to save the structure intact.

RAHS will continue to work diligently to assist the city if and when relocation is finalized. This all depends on whether the city can secure a grant for site cleanup since the Elevator property has been exposed to years of soil contamination.

The society needs volunteers who can help save the Elevator. Currently, we have an open position on our board -- Director of Special Projects. This position would spearhead any and all Elevator-related projects. Membership dues will help ensure we have the means to continue fighting to save the Elevator. We encourage all who live in the City of Rochester to call the city or your city council representative or the Downtown Development Authority and express your concerns about moving the elevator and restoring it if taken apart.

We must be in this together.

Kindly,

Tiffany Dziurman
President



Rochester Elevator



Tiffany Dziurman
President
Rochester-Avon
Historical Society



UPCOMING DATES:

JULY 1 – Membership Dues Due 2019-2020

COVER STORY CONTINUED***SH: Was there a projected death toll?***

Kemler: For quite some time we never even heard about the flu pandemic. In those days you got postcard notifications and other correspondences. We eventually heard things about the flu on the radio when radio began broadcasting in the 1920s. But it wasn't for quite some time after the pandemic that we found out how many people it killed.



Gail Kemler

SH: Were there restrictions for different age groups?

Kemler: There were no specific restrictions for different age groups. It all depended on whether you had someone sick in your home at the time. If you had someone sick, they could've been sick with something else, but they would be quarantined and the whole house would be quarantined.

SH: Were there specific orders to follow?

Kemler: There was no time for towns to have specific orders. The flu swept through each community; killing whomever it was going to kill and then it would abruptly leave the community after the devastation.

SH: Were masks worn or sewn?

Kemler: In rural areas, like Rochester, no one wore mask or thought to sew masks because, again, it came from the East Coast and swept through the towns and left as fast as it came. People did wear masks in the larger cities, but not in smaller towns.

SH: How long did it take for things to return to normal?

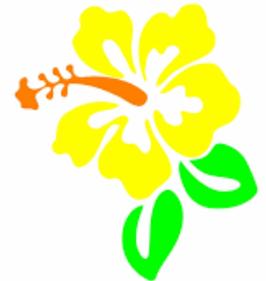
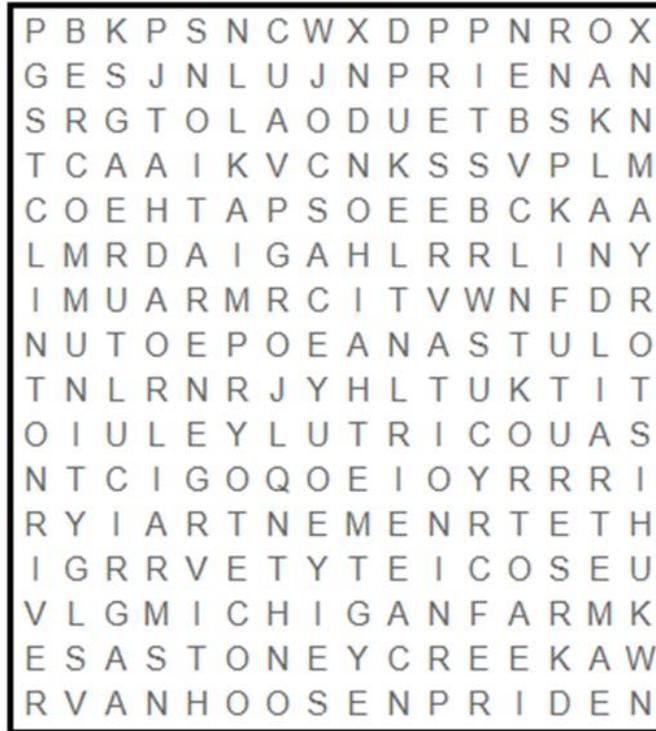
Kemler: Well, it wasn't long. Maybe a couple months or so, because I do remember my uncle Roy Alton -- his kids kept getting quarantined for one reason or the other -- not the flu, but maybe measles. My uncle Roy couldn't go home for six weeks! He'd either stay with a friend or set up a cot at the hardware store. As far as getting back to normal -- it didn't take all that long, but it did have a long-lasting effect. My parents knew a couple and the man's first wife had died from the flu and the man had two daughters. In those days, you went on and wed again. He remarried and she had a hard time being a mom to two girls in their teens.

SH: What do you remember most or what stories about the flu do you remember?

Kemler: The story I remember the most was about a baby born during the flu pandemic as it was sweeping through the nation. Michigan was only about the 27th in ranking for the flu, but of course we didn't know it then. It was years later when all the information was compiled. The baby's name was Dorothy and she was very, very, sick. She did live, but had run such a high temperature that she had brain damage, which, in those days, was labeled insanity. I remember people would go by her house just to see her. Her mother then put her up in the grandmother's bedroom, up in the attic, so people couldn't come by to see her and, perhaps, look at her as an oddity. She lived until she was 30 years old in 1948.



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