Into the West: The Movement of Spanish Flu into Far West New South Wales Border Towns and Beyond

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The 'Spanish' influenza pandemic spread throughout the world as soldiers returned from World War I service. The maritime quarantine imposed from 17 October 1918 limited the 'pneumonic influenza', as it was known here, to one Australian entry point, Melbourne.[1] The interstate railway networks helped the virus spread rapidly, transporting it to new localities within hours, and bringing people into close contact with one another.[2] This mobility helped the virus to reach Sydney and Adelaide even before Victoria had officially proclaimed itself an infected state.[3] These big-picture movements of the influenza pandemic demonstrate how the virus spread between capital cities, but less clear is how the virus travelled within a state and across borders, away from the major transit routes.

Early spread of the virus

A South Australian study recently charted flu cases from 1919 and concluded that, '[t]he infection appeared to spread from the major hubs and towns situated on the coast of the state following the main transport routes to locations within the South Australia interior'.[4] Adelaide was declared infected on 5 February 1919.[5] Renmark, located close to the NSW and Victorian borders—and connected by rail to Adelaide via nearby Barmera—reported its first case of flu just over two weeks later.[6] Transport networks also helped influenza to spread quickly in Victoria, where railways connected Melbourne to the extremes of the state. Victoria was declared infected on 28 January, and in just over two weeks, cases appeared in the border regions of Swan Hill, Mildura and Kerang.[7]

In comparison with their neighbours in Victoria and South Australia, the far western border towns of Wentworth and Balranald escaped the early outbreaks of the virus. Neither town was located on a railway line, with the nearest NSW stations some distance away in Hay and Broken Hill. Unlike towns closer to Sydney, border towns in the far west of the state were less worried about the virus radiating out from the state capital, and much more concerned about the threat of infection from Victoria.

Initial cross-border solidarity

On 30 January 1919, three days after declaring it was infected, NSW closed the border to Victorian residents. This meant that NSW residents returning from Victoria, and residing within ten miles of the border, needed to wait for seven days in a non-infected area (this was later relaxed to four days and a valid medical certificate).[8] Similar proclamations followed for the border with South Australia.[9] Despite this division, the district level relationship between the border towns of Mildura and Wentworth, built up over decades, remained cordial at first. As the quarantine was announced, Mildura Shire councillors agreed to petition Victorian health authorities for 'free intercourse' between the district's towns across the border. Wentworth councillors agreed to make a similar petition to NSW authorities, subject to individuals satisfying health checks at the Abbotsford punt, the established crossing point on the Murray River.[10]

This initial show of solidarity evaporated, however, when the first reports of pneumonic influenza outbreaks in the Mildura district arose about a week later. The alarm prompted a public meeting in Wentworth, where concerned citizens met to deal with the realised threat at their doorstep. Mayor Alderman Sykes reported that he had telegraphed the Health Department in Sydney for the 'discontinuance of all passenger traffic between Mildura and Merbein [the nearest Victorian border towns] to Wentworth'.[11] The meeting resolved to contact the local state member, Brian Doe, to ensure that Wentworth was 'isolated from Victoria'.[12]

Impact of border quarantine

These restrictions had other impacts. During the summer school holidays, it was common for border families, 'to make their usual holiday to the Victorian
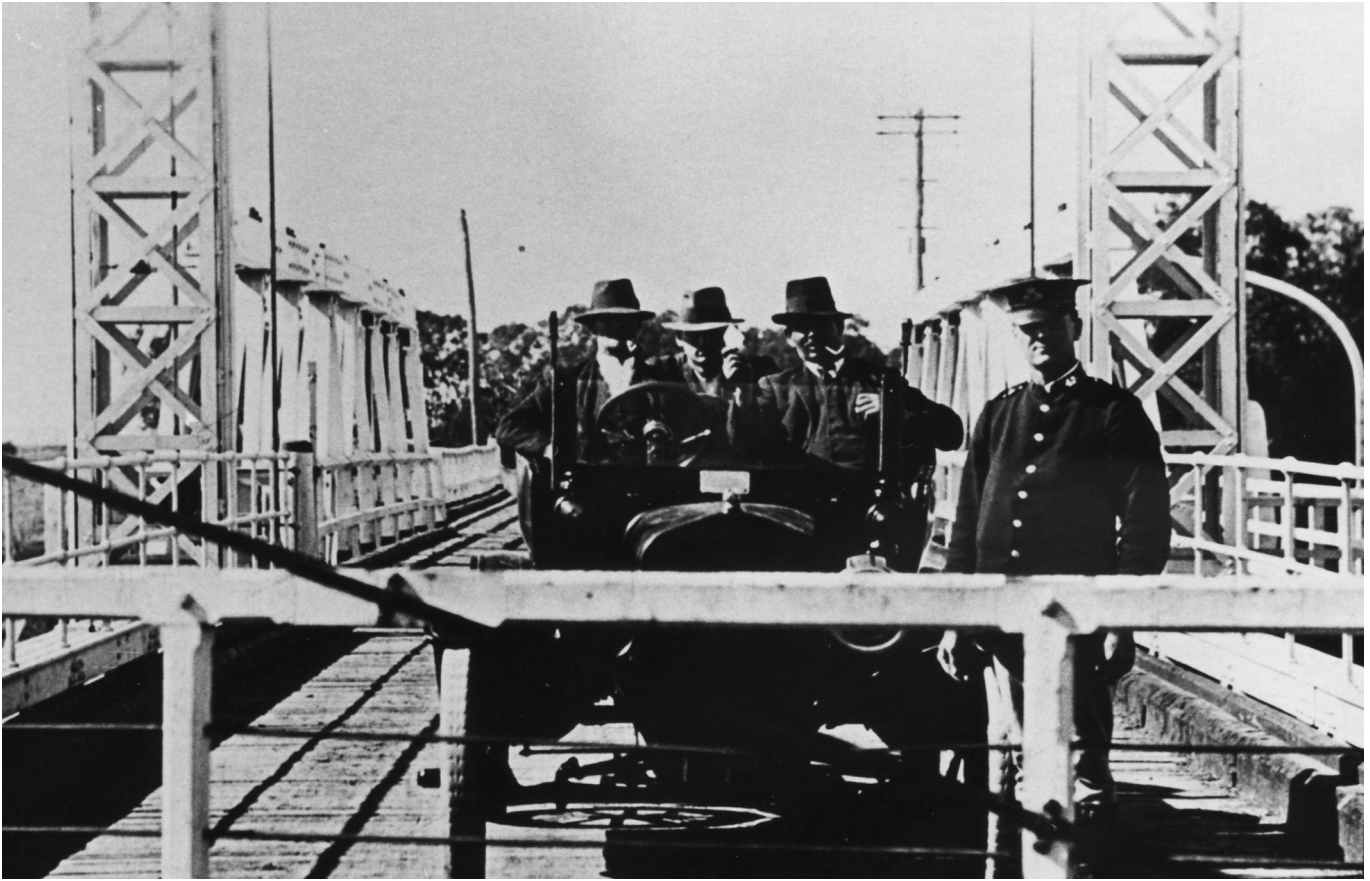
Car detained at NSW border near Swan Hill, Victoria, during Spanish influenza quarantine 1919 [Swan Hill Regional Library collection, image SH-33585001657148]

metropolis'.[13] However, unlike larger population centres such as Albury, where a quarantine camp was established, people returning to border towns further west had to fend for themselves while under quarantine. Balranald residents, for example, had to either camp in the bush at Windomal, outside of town, or pay for hotel accommodation at Narrung on the Victorian side of the border.[14] In the light of cases that could be traced from locals returning from Melbourne to Deniliquin, the fear remained that returning holidaymakers might introduce the virus by evading border quarantine.[15]

Interestingly, the enforced quarantine was not universally applauded by NSW residents. The editor of Wentworth's local newspaper, the *Western Advertiser*, was forced to wait out his quarantine period in Mildura, before being allowed to cross the border. Having been in Melbourne, he concurred with 'general opinion' there that 'the danger was being magnified out of all proportion by the N.S.W. authorities for political reasons'. He saw Sydney as whipping up 'hysteria, bordering on panic', and he contrasted the calm populace, mask-free in Melbourne, with the 'comic opera' of 'Cal Lal [a small border settlement eighty-five kilometres west of Wentworth] going about the bush in

masks'. Further, he criticised the border quarantine requirements as ineffectual, pointing out that, although complying with quarantine requirements in Mildura, he was still free to interact with locals and travellers.[16]

Notwithstanding the threats from across state borders, Wentworth and Balranald remained free of influenza during the initial outbreaks. Border quarantine, ridiculed as it was, appeared effective and had prevented the spread of the pandemic to the far western towns. This was not to last, and when NSW relaxed border restrictions on 17 April 1919, it paved the way for the virus to cross the border into these towns and beyond.[17]

Arrival of shearing season

The advent of the shearing season, which took place in the Western Darling region throughout July and August, led to a comparative explosion in influenza cases and enabled the virus to complete its invasion of the far west.[18] In an interview with the *Barrier Miner* newspaper in Broken Hill in late July, J. Murphy, organiser for the South Australian arm of the Australian Workers' Union, stated that shearing brought in around 1,500 workers to cope with the demand. He added that approximately 250 of those

Barber George Kimm attended NSW residents on Murray River Bridge at Swan Hill, Victoria, during Spanish influenza quarantine 1919 [Swan Hill Regional Library collection, image SH-33585001548024]

had travelled to the area via Broken Hill, with the balance arriving via Wentworth and Mildura.[19]

The Spanish flu was notorious for targeting the young and healthy, and spread most quickly in crowded environments.[20] The shearing industry matched this profile and, while Murphy did not specify the shearers' home towns, they were registered in South Australia, travelling from the south, and likely coming from South Australia and Victoria. In his work on the industry, Timothy O'Malley suggests that many shearers came from amongst 'the jumble of selector families sprinkled around NSW and Victoria'. Because shearing was seasonal, shearers needed to find other employment out of season, and O'Malley asserts that there was strong evidence to suggest that, up until World War II, around a quarter of shearers gravitated to Melbourne or Sydney to find additional work on the docks.[21]

In July 1919, the virus, which was resurgent in Melbourne and still present in Adelaide, was probably given a push along by Peace Day celebrations. This brought people out in large numbers in celebration of the official end of World War I, and was a known cause of spikes in influenza infections.[22] Importantly, they also occurred just before the shearing season in far west NSW was due to begin.

Influenza crosses the border

As the shearers crossed into NSW, influenza cases began to appear. The previously uninfected Balranald district reported its first cases at the end of July.[23] This widespread outbreak was 'anticipated, owing to the virulence of the epidemic in the Southern State [Victoria], and to the great increase in … population through the large influx of men from Victoria engaged in shearing operations'.[24] In fact, many cases were discovered in shearing sheds, with a mild outbreak at Cannily, sixteen men affected at Yanga, and another dozen at Manfred Station.[25]

At Wentworth, where the first cases appeared in early July, the town experienced a 'recrudescence' of the virus whilst processing shearers travelling to nearby stations. These stations were, in turn, feeling the effects of the virus on their operations.[26] One death was recorded at Para Station, and two more at Ned's Corner, shutting down shearing in both locations.[27]

At Cal Lal, it was reported that 'Influenza is rife in the district and is materially interfering with the shearing'; at Lake Station, only eighteen out of thirty contracted shearers turned up to shear 73,000 sheep—eleven of them had influenza.[28]

By mid-August, cases were appearing on West Darling stations further upstream, with the most serious being taken to Broken Hill for treatment.[29] Poolmacca station, for instance, experienced eleven infections and one death, and most stations in the area were affected by influenza in some way.[30] As shearing finished in NSW, cases started to manifest in South Australia, as shearers completed work and moved to sites such as Calperam near Renmark.[31]

The economic imperative to complete the shearing had opened the door for the pandemic to wreak havoc in the most isolated rural environments in much the same way as it had done in larger cities, its move through the rural and remote population was complete.

About the author

Alison Moir recently completed a Master of History at the University of New England. She has long been interested in the effects of the Spanish influenza pandemic on the Australian population, particularly on rural communities away from capital cities.

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6 *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record*, 21 February 1919, p.5.

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8 *Government Gazette of the State of New South Wales*, No. 14 (Extraordinary), 30 January 1919, Sydney, p.593.

9 *Government Gazette of the State of New South Wales*, No. 24 (Supplement), 5 February 1919, p.781. NSW also instituted maritime quarantine between itself and Victoria and South Australia the same day. See *Government Gazette of the State of New South Wales*, Issue No. 25 (Supplement), 5 February 1919, p.783.

10 *Mildura Cultivator*, 1 February 1919, p.7.

11 *Express and Telegraph* (Adelaide), 11 February 1919, p.2.

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Riverina Recorder*, 5 February 1919, p.2.

14 *Ibid.*, 19 February 1919, p.2.

15 *Sun* (Sydney), 6 February 1919, p.8; *Riverine Grazier*, 4 February 1919, p.2. It wasn't officially notified until 8 February; NSW Report, p.166.

16 *Murray Pioneer* and *Australian River Record*, 7 March 1919, p.7.

17 *Mildura Cultivator*, 23 April 1919, p.8.

18 John Merritt, 'Shearers, Mountain Stockmen and the Australian Legend', in *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2008, p.59, suggests that inland sheds conducted shearing in June/July, although Murphy's interview in the *Barrier Miner* clearly states that for the Western Darling and South Australian regions in 1919, it took place from late July.

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