

Braidwood's 'salubrious climate': a small town's experience of the 1919 flu epidemic

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With the headline "Fortunately we are blessed with a salubrious climate" the editor of the *Braidwood Review* on 8 April, 1919 heralded the arrival of Spanish influenza (also known as pneumonic influenza) in the town of Braidwood, in south eastern New South Wales. The editor sang the praises of the town's climate and lack of overcrowding by which the town hoped to escape the devastating effects of the pandemic as experienced in Sydney and other rural towns. Braidwood, however, did experience two waves of Spanish influenza, between April and July 1919, with some deaths, and is used as a microcosm of New South Wales society to examine the social and economic effects of the pandemic. Firstly, though, an overview of the general effects of the influenza pandemic is provided, together with discussion of the role of those with power and influence: the medical profession, the State and the Press. All these impinge on people's experiences, both direct and indirect, of Spanish influenza.

Influenza, an acute infectious disease, is probably one of the most ancient diseases known to man. It has been known for at least 820 years and derives its name from the Italian word for influence, as it was attributed to the influence of cold or fog or other atmospheric conditions, or the stars.¹ The

effects of influenza epidemics were generally greater in densely populated areas, and mortality limited to the elderly or very young. However, the Spanish influenza of 1918/19 had one epidemiological characteristic which differentiated it sharply from any other influenza outbreak: deaths were concentrated among young, healthy adults. So, this was a new influenza; from where did it originate?

The name 'Spanish flu' is something of a misnomer, as it did not originate in Spain. It became known as Spanish flu probably for the combination of a couple of reasons: Spain had no wartime censorship to prevent publication of the outbreak as other countries did,² and the King of Spain was an early sufferer.³ The crucial distinction between this strain of influenza and any other was its virulence, and for this reason it was likened to the bubonic plague, the Black Death.

In Sydney, rumours spread rapidly that the Government was concealing the true nature of this epidemic, and that it was actually bubonic plague. The memories of the plague epidemic of 1900 were still fresh in the minds of those who recalled the social and economic disruption caused by the plague. The similarities were apparent: the bubonic plague was introduced by infected rats aboard vessels at Darling Harbour and invaded the nearby dockside area; this new epidemic was also ship-borne and spread quickly though dockside slum suburbs - Pyrmont, Glebe, and others - via a different method: droplet

infection through human contact. As well, other symptoms could be mistaken for plague symptoms: cyanosis, for instance, which turned the skin of the patient a dark purple when death was near, and black after death. Cyanosis was the condition whereby the blood of the pneumonia patient was delivering insufficient oxygen to the skin.⁴ The lymph glands swelled too, another symptom of bubonic plague.⁵

Plague always comes from somewhere else, somewhere 'foreign': Spanish influenza. The English called syphilis the 'French pox', the French 'the German disease' and the Japanese 'the Chinese disease'.⁶ Illness is seen an invasion of one's body, so is defined in terms of 'the other', usually one's enemy. The word plague has been used metaphorically "as the highest standard of collective calamity",⁷ and victims of Spanish influenza were treated like pariahs. Notions of separation - them and us - were evident in Braidwood: victims of Spanish influenza were named in the local newspaper.

This medieval imagery of plague was fostered initially by the press in Sydney: a *Sydney Morning Herald* headline in December 1918 announced "Six Million Dead – Worst Scourge Since Black Death".⁸ Under the same headline, the link was drawn between this epidemic and diseases of the past: between Spanish influenza and the sweating sickness of Tudor times. However, these early sensational reports were much modified when Spanish influenza arrived in New South Wales, and the reporting become more factual. The two

Braidwood newspapers, *The Braidwood Review and District Advocate* and *The Braidwood Dispatch and Mining Journal*, however, were more factual in their reporting of the epidemic in Sydney. Both ran editorials from February 1919 warning of the dangers of the epidemic - "we are in daily communication by motor car with infected areas" - and encouraging preventative measures.⁹ When the first case of the flu was reported in April, the tone became sombre and the editor called for "hearty co-operation, there was no need for scare measures".¹⁰

The medical profession were in a predicament during the Spanish flu epidemic. There was a shortage of doctors to treat patients: about 5% of registered practitioners were still on overseas service.¹¹ Those at home were overworked and had to cope as well as they could. Dr. Traill, one of the two doctors in Braidwood, contracted influenza and his practice was conducted during his illness by his brother, a medical student. Frustration must have been paramount with the doctors, as the cause of the influenza was not known at that stage, and there was little they could do. Although isolation proved to be a successful measure, the wearing of masks, spraying and inoculation were doubtful in hindsight and doubtful at the time; but at least the medical profession were seen to be taking preventative measures. The opinion of the New South Wales Branch of the British Medical Association summed it up: "while the clinical manifestations and gross pathological changes have been accurately and minutely recorded, very little is known concerning the

aetiology and pathogenesis of the disease".¹²

Diagnosis was a problem for the medical profession too. There was a general belief that different organisms were responsible for 'ordinary' influenza and pneumonic influenza. In fact, the same strain of virus could produce both mild and virulent forms, but only serious cases were notified. During the outbreak of 1919, 6,387 persons died from influenza in New South Wales, a death rate of 3.25 per 1,000 persons.¹³ Of the 6,387 deaths, 672 were described by the medical practitioners as influenza, 4,894 as pneumonic influenza and 821 as influenza and pneumonia.¹⁴ The Deputy Director General of Public Health for New South Wales issued guidelines for diagnosis: epidemic pneumonia, septic pneumonia etc. were classified as pneumonic influenza.¹⁵ Influenza was also accepted as the cause of death when associated with other causes. The New South Wales Government did state that "practically the whole of the deaths caused by the epidemic were attributed to their proper cause",¹⁶ but this appears doubtful.

Likewise, the New South Wales Health Department was in the dark. Much had been made of the use of inhalatoria or spray rooms, in which people were subjected to the inhalation of a finely atomized spray of sulphate of zinc solution. An inhalation chamber was erected on the footpath outside the park in Braidwood, but was only used for two weeks, discontinued after advice that the spray could prove injurious to some persons.¹⁷ Dr. Armstrong, Deputy

Director-General of the Department of Public Health acknowledged that there was little value in the use of inhalatoria, but thought the psychological value should not be overlooked.¹⁸ The psychological value to Braidwood residents proved expensive, as they had to fund the entire cost of £25.¹⁹

In the evaluation by the New South Wales Government of the effectiveness of measures introduced by them, the following conclusions were drawn: the wearing of masks must have been of considerable value; compulsory notification of cases proved to have limited value; and isolation was important in the early stages, but later ceased to have much value. Restriction of assemblies was probably the most useful measure, as it was known that influenza was spread by droplet infection.²⁰ The government were as much in the dark as the medical profession, and issued instruction such as “Do not be depressed; keep in the fresh air and sunlight as much as possible; keep all children in the open air as much as possible; be temperate in eating, and avoid alcohol”.²¹

Some consequences of the flu epidemic were general to both city and country: interruption to children’s schooling, travel restrictions (not only between towns in New South Wales, but across State borders), quarantine restrictions and the level of personal sacrifice. In Sydney, Jean, daughter of Ethel Turner, author of *Seven Little Australians*, volunteered for nursing work and was sent to the Walker Hospital on Parramatta River. Over the next five months the toll

on Jean Turner's health was severe: she was run down and depressed.²² Similarly in Cooma, in southern New South Wales, Kathleen Woodgate had come from Sydney to nurse her sister's family. Her brother-in-law died and, when her sister was taken to hospital with a miscarriage, Kathleen was left alone with four very ill children. She has no recollection of how she nursed the children on her own, but remembered many sleepless nights.²³

How did the flu come to Braidwood, then: via a carrier or carriers from elsewhere, or was the weather a trigger? Perhaps it may have been a combination of both. Various people have pointed to a change in the season as a trigger for pneumonic influenza. Experiments in the 1930s in America demonstrated the reliance on changes in the weather: healthy pigs developed influenza when hosed with cold water long after exposure to the virus.²⁴ Dr. Makgill of the New Zealand Health Department in his report of 1919 guessed correctly, as later research would prove, that the virus was already present in New Zealand in symptomless carriers, but a trigger was needed for the epidemic of November 1918.²⁵ October 1918 in New Zealand was unusually wet and cold, with higher than average rainfall recorded, and the weather continued cold with storms and gales well into November.²⁶ Similarly, early March 1919 was particularly cold and wet in Braidwood, with over six inches of rain recorded.²⁷ In each case, there was an interval of about four weeks between the onset of cold, wet weather and the first case of Spanish influenza.

Despite its consequences, the rain of March 1919 was very welcome in Braidwood, as it was a time of drought and resultant financial difficulty for country people, with high interest rates and unemployment exacerbated by returned soldiers looking for work. Thus, Spanish influenza appeared in a community already suffering the effects of the drought and war, and it occurred in two waves in Braidwood in April and July, generally fitting the pattern for the whole of New South Wales. Influenza epidemics generally occur in three waves, and in some communities, those affected by the first or second wave proved immune from attack during the third wave, while in other communities, this was not the case.²⁸ Victoria had three waves, New South Wales two waves, New Zealand and other Australian States not already mentioned one wave.²⁹ As already mentioned, the death rate for the whole of New South Wales was 3.25 per 1,000 people with males having a higher death rate at 3.91 and females 2.59.³⁰ Braidwood's death rate was low in comparison with the rest of the State: 1.2 per 1,000 people.

In the first wave in Braidwood three people died, and in the second wave nine died. Some of these people were related: Mrs. Lane (46) and her daughter, Ivy (5); Margaret Louis (69) and her daughter Mary (50); George Stoyles (74), his son Sid Stoyles (33), and daughter in law Hilary (29). Thus, seven of the twelve deaths were concentrated in three families. Another victim, Katie Burke (71), nursed the members of the Stoyles family, but there is some doubt as to whether the cause of her death was Spanish flu or otherwise. Dr. McKechnie,

at a meeting of the Health Committee, stated that he had given a certificate that she died from this disease in order to satisfy public opinion and if he certified otherwise "*he would have been called mad*"; but, in his opinion, the cause of death was heart trouble with bronchitis.³¹

The deaths of three members of the Stoyles family illustrate well the devastation the influenza epidemic wrought in one community. Sid Stoyles (33) died first, followed by his father George (74), dying just as the funeral service was being read over his son.³² Sid Stoyles' wife, Hilary, died three days later, on her 29th birthday. She was the daughter of T.C. Musgrave, editor of the *Braidwood Review*, and in her obituary the bitterness of a father who has lost his only daughter can be seen: "the remains of the deceased were laid to rest beside those of her husband, in the nursing of whom she contracted pneumonic flu and died".³³ There were three other occupants of that ill-fated house: Jack Stoyles (3), only child of Sid and Hilary Stoyles, who survived a bout of influenza; Mrs. T.C. Musgrave, Hilary Stoyles' mother, and Nurse Higgins both of whom were nursing the Stoyles family and were fortunate to miss the disease.

Probably the most significant effect of the flu on the people of Braidwood was fear. Before it struck, it was the fear by residents of others bringing in flu. After it struck, it was the fear of contagion and fear felt by others towards Braidwood residents. During February 1919 the Mayor was authorised to

object to a forthcoming tour of the Gaiety Touring Theatre Co. as they were “possible perambulating bacteria-carrying agents”, but the editor rightly pointed out the stupidity of this act as residents of Braidwood were going to and fro from Sydney.³⁴ By April, when the first deaths had been reported, the fear had changed, the enemy was now within. Motorists passing through the town did not stop for meals or a drink, and country people refused to come into town. Braidwood residents were treated like pariahs elsewhere, and there were cases of hotels on the south coast refusing accommodation. Although children were permitted to return to school by the end of April, the *Braidwood Review* recommended that children from “erstwhile infected houses” be kept at home for another week or so.³⁵

Fear intruded on the social life of the community too. On Easter Monday at the Charleys Forest sports day, a car load of visitors arrived from Braidwood and were ostracised by the crowd. At a dance that same evening in the village of Mongarlowe, the local ladies refused to dance with the Braidwood visitors and created a predicament, which was only resolved when the Braidwood people promised they would not take part in the dancing.

This sort of informal entertainment had always been part of the life of Braidwood, but took on more significance with the closing of hotels, theatres and races by Government proclamation. The banning of race meetings, in particular, was not popular. Country shows were allowed to be held, and

what was the difference between a country show and a race meeting from an influenza disseminating point of view, asked the *Braidwood Review*.³⁶ A ban on race meetings was also perhaps a nod to the wowser element.

Most church services were held out of doors, and those indoors were not very well attended.³⁷ The funerals of flu victims were very poorly attended: the funeral of “Mrs. Lane who brought the disease from Sydney” was held on a Sunday afternoon and no-one walked behind the hearse to the cemetery.³⁸ This was a radical departure from the usual custom, sometimes still practised in Braidwood.

Soldiers returning home found not only that Welcome Home receptions were postponed because of Spanish influenza, but also that quarantine regulations and travel restrictions were in force. A soldier avoided the quarantine guard at Albury and, with his mother, crossed the Murray in a boat and took the train for Sydney. Both were seized at Wagga.³⁹ Similar instances were reported in the Braidwood newspapers, and these served as a general warning. Returning soldiers, and other intending travellers, were inconvenienced greatly after Goulburn was declared an infected area in early May. Lieut. R.T. Hassall, returning home to Braidwood from the war was fortunate enough to arrive a few weeks before this, although his father, mother and sister were not able to meet him in Sydney because of the epidemic, and met him in Goulburn instead. Had he arrived later, travel

permits and medical certificates would have been necessary for each member of the family. The regulations for travel from Goulburn provided that:

No Person shall leave the area by train, motor car, or other vehicle for any destination ten miles or more beyond the boundary of such area unless he produces to the proper authorities a declaration on the prescribed form he has not knowingly during the previous two days been in contact with any person infected with pneumonic flu; that he has been duly inoculated during the previous three months...and that he also produces to such authority a certificate from a duly qualified medical practitioner...that such practitioner has carefully examined him at the time of giving the certificate, and that he shows no sign of being infected with pneumonic flu. This certificate was to be issued not more than 24 hours before the date of its production.⁴⁰

There was a high degree of voluntary co-operation both before the onset of the epidemic, and during the event. One would expect in a small community like Braidwood - population 1,043 in 1921⁴¹ - a relatively high degree of co-operation simply because of the compactness of the town, and the fact that most people knew each other, or were related. A temporary isolation hospital containing twelve beds was opened during the first wave of the epidemic in a

private house lent by a local landholder, Mr. M. O'Brien. Dr. Traill based his plan of campaign on a system adopted in a town in New Zealand of about the same size as Braidwood.⁴² Volunteers were called for to staff the temporary hospital, and this call was speedily answered. Mr. W. Scott, who ran a motor car service, undertook to carry out the ambulance work with his motor car, and ferried patients from their homes to the temporary hospital.

Quarantine measures required many volunteers as well. Each house quarantined required three patrol men daily. The duty of patrols was (1) to send messages for contacts so that they might have everything they needed and (2) to prevent contacts from breaking quarantine and any outsider from mixing with them. The penalty for breaking quarantine was ten pounds or one month's imprisonment.⁴³ This system seems to have worked well, and there is no evidence of deprivation there were economic effects as well. The largest economic problem for Braidwood was the cost of the provision of emergency treatment. On 15 April the Government informed the Health Committee that it would bear "all reasonable expenses incurred by it in combating the outbreak in Braidwood",⁴⁴ but only three weeks later, the Administrative Board in Sydney called on the public of Braidwood to assist in paying the cost of combating the epidemic.⁴⁵ The only solution was to open a Subscription Fund for the total cost to that point, £100, and this was done on 6 May. It appears that Braidwood had to fund everything itself.

Loss of business was an obvious economic effect: loss of business for hotels, theatres and shops in town, especially as country people boycotted Braidwood because of the epidemic. Braidwood was (and is) a large cattle selling centre, with most buyers coming from Victoria, and that business was disrupted and disjointed with travel and quarantine restrictions. Coal was more expensive, as shipping became paralysed as a result of quarantine restrictions. One business, though, had a boost in income as a result of the epidemic: that of the undertaker.

The undertaker's records show that for the months of April, May, June and July 1919 there were a total of 36 funerals. During the same four months in 1918, there were eleven funerals, and in 1920 there were eighteen funerals.⁴⁶ Eleven was an extraordinarily large number of deaths for May 1919, but only one death was attributed to influenza. In comparison May 1918 had two funerals and May 1920 had six funerals. There is a correlation between the other months in 1919 with those in 1918 and 1920, but May is an anomaly. It is my guess that, in the early stages of the epidemic, there may have been uncertain diagnosis of some cases locally, and a check of official death registers may throw light on this, although government regulations relating to diagnosis need to be kept in mind.

It might seem obvious that the Good Samaritan Convent was in financial distress, as the only source of income had been cut off when the schools were

closed. But the problem was exacerbated as one Sister died from Spanish influenza and another Sister had been seriously ill. The newspaper drew attention to the plight of the nuns: "it is pointed out that for many years, the town has been under many and varied obligations to these good Sisters...and that now they have struck bad times it is up to the community to honour the obligation".⁴⁷ As well, the Sisters relied on country people to bring wood, meat, eggs, etc., and that lifeline would have been cut off too because country people were afraid of coming to Braidwood.

Braidwood's salubrious climate, and lack of overcrowding, may well have been a factor in lower mortality rates than the rest of New South Wales (1.25 per 1,000 people compared with 3.25 per 1,000). Mortality rates, though, do not tell the whole story. Lives were disrupted: three year old Jack Stoyles lost his mother, father and grandfather. And, while there was certainly a great deal of co-operation, fear, anxiety and tension were ever present between April and July 1919. To sum up, fewer people died and the impact was less severe than on other towns in New South Wales, but the social and economic effects were still very real.

¹Dr. E. Robertson, 'History of the Disease' in Public Health Department of Victoria, *Influenza*, Lecturettes delivered at the Melbourne Town Hall 2 May, 1919.

²A.W. Crosbie Jr., *Epidemic and Peace 1918*, Westport, U.S.A., 1976, p.26.

³G. Rice, *Black November: The 1918 Influenza Epidemic in New Zealand*, Wellington, 1988, p.8.

⁴Rice, *Black November*, p.16.

⁵Rice, *Black November*, p.17.

⁶S. Sontag, *AIDS and its Metaphors*, New York, 1989, p.48.

⁷Sontag, *AIDS*, p.44.

⁸R. Arrowsmith, 'The Spanish Influenza Epidemic 1918/19: Its Impact on Society in New South Wales', B.A. Hons. thesis, University of New South Wales, 1988, p.73.

⁹*Braidwood Review and District Advocate*, 18 February 1919.

¹⁰*Braidwood Review*, 8 April 1919.

¹¹H. McQueen, 'The Spanish Influenza Pandemic in Australia, 1918–19, in J. Roe (ed). *Social Policy in Australia*, Sydney, 1976, p.135.

¹²*Medical Journal of Australia*, 26 April, 1919, p.350 quoted in Arrowsmith, *Spanish Influenza*, p.46.

¹³New South Wales Government, *The Official Year Book of New South Wales 1920, 1921*, p.100.

¹⁴*Ibid*, p.100.

¹⁵*Ibid*, p.100.

¹⁶ *The Official Year Book of New South Wales 1920*, p.115.

¹⁷*Braidwood Dispatch and Mining Journal*, 18 April 1919.

¹⁸Arrowsmith, *Spanish Influenza*, p.43.

¹⁹*Braidwood Dispatch*, 18 April 1919.

New South Wales Department of Public Health, *Extract from the Report of the Director-General of Public Health, New South Wales, for the year ended 31 December, 1919*, Section V, Report of the Influenza Epidemic in New South Wales in 1919, p.162.

²¹*Braidwood Review* 8 April, 1919.

²²P. Poole (ed.), *The Diaries of Ethel Turner*, Sydney, 1979, p.255.

²³K. Woodgate, 'The Spanish flu epidemic' in *Voices from a Vanishing Australia: Recollections of the Way Things Used to Be*, Sydney, 1988, p.44.

²⁴Rice, *Black November*, p.128.

²⁵Rice, *Black November*, p.127.

²⁶Rice, *Black November*, p.128.

²⁷*Braidwood Dispatch*, 7 March 1919.

²⁸ W.I.B.Beveridge, *Influenza: the Last Great Plague*, London, 1977, p.21.

²⁹*The Official Year Book of New South Wales 1920*, p.115.

³⁰ *The Official Year Book of New South Wales 1920*, p.111.

³¹*Braidwood Dispatch*, 18 July 1919.

³²*Braidwood Review*, 8 July 1919.

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- ³³ *Braidwood Review*, 15 July 1919.
- ³⁴ *Braidwood Review*, 11 February 1919.
- ³⁵ *Braidwood Review*, 25 April 1919.
- ³⁶ *Braidwood Review*, 18 February 1919.
- ³⁷ *Braidwood Review*, 8 April 1919.
- ³⁸ *Braidwood Review*, 8 April 1919.
- ³⁹ *Braidwood Review*, 4 February 1919.
- ⁴⁰ *Braidwood Dispatch*, 2 May 1919.
- ⁴¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, quoted in N. Ellis *Braidwood, Dear Braidwood*, Canberra, 1989, p.196.
- ⁴² *Braidwood Review*, 8 April 1919.
- ⁴³ *Braidwood Review*, 8 April 1919.
- ⁴⁴ *Braidwood Review*, 25 April 1919.
- ⁴⁵ *Braidwood Review*, 6 May 1919.
- ⁴⁶ E.G. Morris, undertaker's records, 1918–34. Braidwood Museum.
- ⁴⁷ *Braidwood Review*, 1 July 1919.