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# A monument to ‘Spanish flu’ courage in Braidwood

**Peter Smith, President, Braidwood & District Historical Society**

There was no avoiding the terrible inevitable, in spite of all the preparations. The impending arrival of ‘Spanish flu’ led Braidwood, like many other towns across NSW, to put emergency measures into place.

In February 1919 an inoculation depot was established at the Braidwood Council Chambers. In March an inhalation chamber was erected on the footpath fronting Ryrie Park; all passengers arriving by car would be asked to use it. The request to stop all traffic between Goulburn and Braidwood was reconsidered as it would paralyse the local economy. However there was a prohibition of public meetings and the picture theatre was closed.

Nevertheless, by the end of the month the first case was reported, 41-year-old Mrs Emily Lane. She died on 1 April. Several other cases were soon identified and a number of residences were placed in quarantine.

In May the hospital was vacated of ordinary cases and the isolation ward was prepared to receive more infected patients. Plans were made to secure the Church of England Sunday School for hospital purposes as fatalities began to rise.

In July the death toll peaked. Sister Emerentia of the local Convent died on the same night as Wilma Hollands, 26. Mary Lois, 50, succumbed next followed by her mother, Margaret, 73. The death of John Stoyles was followed by his son and daughter-in-law, George and Hilary, although their 3-year-old son, John, survived.



*Kate Burke plaque, Braidwood [Photograph by Peter Smith]*

The tragedy of the Stoyles household also claimed the life of 71-year-old Kate Burke, a foremost member of the Red Cross. She had come face to face with the pneumonic influenza in its most virulent form but nevertheless volunteered her services to nurse the Stoyles in their plight. Hilary Stoyles had asked Kate not to wear a protective mask, in order not to frighten the seriously ill George. Kate agreed, but in doing so likely sealed her own fate.

Her courage and service is remembered by the plaque in the Braidwood Uniting Church, a poignant reminder of the indiscriminate death toll and tragedy of the Spanish flu.

As the epidemic passed and the population came to terms with the sadness and loss, the indomitable laconic Australian humour survived. The *Braidwood Review* reported the following conversation: “I don’t mind the influenza itself so much; it’s the after effects I’m most afraid of”. Reply: “the after effects is what ails me, I am still dodging the doctor because I owe him 20 [shillings]”.

## About Braidwood & District Historical Society

The Braidwood and District Historical Society was founded in 1970. Its members encourage the study of the history of Braidwood and promote and undertake the preservation, storage and display of artefacts and records of historical interest. The society own and run the Braidwood Museum which holds a rich collection of objects and archives.

## References

- The Braidwood Review and District Advocate*, March–July 1919.
- Braidwood & District Historical Society Newsletter* No.9, June 2018.
- Notification of Prevention of Infectious Diseases*, held in Braidwood Museum.