

# EARLY HISTORY

## THE 1918 SPANISH FLU

### AND IT'S IMPACT IN THE FAR NORTH

Curated From The Te Ahu Museum Collections



*Funeral procession through the town in Kaitiaki, 1918. Northwood Brothers Photographic Collection, Te Ahu Museum.*

In the last two months of 1918, New Zealand lost half as many people as had died as a result of World War I. The killer: a lethal flu pandemic that probably arrived in the country with soldiers returning from the war in Europe.

Although a Royal Mail boat Niagara was initially identified as the origin of the virus, this was later ruled out. Passenger research indicated that no-one on board was in fact infected with the influenza.

Whatever the point of entry to New Zealand, the flu spread quickly across the country. Few restrictions were placed upon travel or contact, and as the virus spread, thousands across the country became ill, with over 9000 people eventually being claimed.

An armistice celebration in Auckland on November 11 was identified as a super-spreader. Thousands of New Zealanders gathered to celebrate peace. As they returned to all corners of the country, they took the virus with them.



Staff, doctor, nurses and volunteers Mangonui Hospital during 1918 - 1919. Northwood Brothers Photographic Collection, Te Ahu Museum

Symptoms were similar to the Covid-19 pandemic which impacted the world in the 2020's. They included sore throats, fever, runny noses and headaches and body pain. Often, it wasn't the flu itself that killed people, but the pneumonia that followed.

Te Ara, the online encyclopaedia of New Zealand describes the illness graphically: *The skin of some people who caught pneumonia darkened because of burst blood vessels. If the whole body became virtually black this often meant death was imminent. Later in life, sufferer Grace Stewart described her experience: 'I was in bed for six weeks. My fingers and fingernails went black. My tongue was covered with some sort of fungus half an inch thick ... The pain in the whole of my body was terrible.*

The Far North was hard-hit by the epidemic. Rawene hospital was overwhelmed. At least 167 people died in the Hokianga, 158 of them being Māori. By the end of the first month of the epidemic, 35 people had died in Kaitaia.

The community did band together to attempt to stamp out the spread, and to provide medical aid. Kitchens and medical clinics were set up across the far North. Keith Parker's book *Portraits from the Past* captures a comprehensive list of the leaders of this support effort. They include Colonel Bell and R.A. Northwood, Dr. Lunn and Nurse Ferguson, Alf Long, the Rev. Drake and many others who put the community need in this time of crisis ahead of the risk to themselves.



*Mangonui Hospital being the only Far North Hospital during the epidemic 1918 - 1919. Northwood Brothers Photographic Collection, Te Ahu Museum*

Eventually, restrictions were placed on community gatherings in the North, including a temporary ban on gathering for tangi and travelling across districts. Seeing the growing loss of life in their communities, hapu leaders supported these measures, to help protect their people.

In all, the death rate for Māori across the country was eight times higher than that for Pakeha. The impact on regions with high Māori populations, including the Far North, was catastrophic.

World War I had taken a heavy toll on the Far North, with many locals never returning home from the battlefields in distant lands. The epidemic which followed the conclusion of the war was equally devastating for local residents. With high rates of death, a disproportionate impact on Māori, and by completely overwhelming the health system of the time, the Spanish Flu was an unwanted coda to an already dark time in the history of the district.

### **References:**

<https://teara.govt.nz/en/epidemics/page-4>

<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/culture/influenza-pandemic-1918>

*Kaitaia: Portraits from the Past.* Parker, Keith. Bridgewater Publications, Kamo, New Zealand. 1999.