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Historical Writing

The Spanish Flu at the University of California, Berkeley
A Case Study

Amid the height of a world at war and the abandonment of any global order, in 1918 a influenza pandemic swept the world. Beginning in Kansas, the influenza soon found its way overseas and anyone from the King of Spain to the lowest of classes was fair game. In the U.S., densely populated cities on the East Coast were hit the hardest due to the contagious nature of the flu. Although it was nowhere near as destructive and deadly, the presence of the influenza loomed heavily over the West Coast as well. This led to a mobilization of state officials and civil society aware of the stakes. Officials and students from UC Berkeley offer insights into how this mobilization materialized. Their reports and diaries bring to life the two flu waves that swept through the campus, the effects they had on social and academic life, the role women played in the effort, and the lessons the epidemic left for everyone to learn. Though young men and women were typically stronger and of better health, the greatest casualties of the flu were these young adults, many of whom were mobilizing to support the war effort. As a result, this ground the University of California at Berkeley to a halt and instilled panic among young adults and faculty.

To understand the experience of California's young adults and students during the Influenza pandemic of 1918, two questions must be answered. First, how did the flu develop amongst young adults? A case study of the University of California, Berkeley, a bastion of education, trade, state politics and home to California's oldest university, provides a prime example of the state's experience during the influenza pandemic. Second, what were the

firsthand experiences of students and young adults during the pandemic of 1918? Excerpts from the diaries of Berkeley student Agnes Edwards highlight the daily lives of students. The importance of this topic is highlighted by the horrid flu season California and the nation are currently experiencing, 100 years after the Spanish flu pandemic. With California considered one of the states that fared best during the pandemic, the answer to future flu seasons that have shown no hint of slowing down may perhaps be found in a study of the past.

A general search of California's experience during the influenza pandemic reveals various works on the web. The Influenza Encyclopedia, compiled by the University of Michigan, provides a vibrant take on the developments that occurred in San Francisco between 1918 and 1919. Agnes Edwards and her diaries as a student at the University of California at Berkeley during the height of the war provide a firsthand account of daily life for many younger men and women mobilizing behind the war effort. Most importantly, the passages she writes home to her parents explaining what life during the Spanish Flu was like at Berkeley are essential to understanding the public's response to the pandemic. This is especially important considering that young adults like Edwards were the likeliest casualties of the flu. To understand the response by authorities, the easily accessible HathiTrust digital repository has compiled several public bulletins, private memos and other government works from universities and libraries across the country [which can be accessed by those able to travel]. Most notably among these are the reports to the Governor of California from UC Berkeley's President. They show the development of the influenza from the perspective of officials scrambling to contain the pandemic and the methods they employed to do so. On the other hand, scholarly work is lacking when it comes to California during the pandemic. Several works that cover the Spanish Flu are available, but none with a specialization on California and much less on Berkeley.

The story of the flu in the Bay Area began on September 23, 1918, when a man returning from a trip to Chicago came down with flu like symptoms. Despite the quick response by San Francisco's health officials to quarantine patient zero, "by October 9th the city had at least 169 cases of Influenza. Only a week later that number had jumped to over 2,000."¹ Scrambling to contain the epidemic that had already ravaged major cities on the East Coast, "the Board of Health voted to close all places of public amusement, ban all lodge meetings, close all public and private schools, and to prohibit all dances and other social gatherings effective at 1:00 am on Friday, October 18."² Backed by a strong enforcement of face mask ordinances that included fines and jail time, the Influenza effectively closed down the city and brought with it 20,000 cases of the flu and over 1,000 deaths by the end of October.³ Across the bay from San Francisco, UC Berkeley and its experience with the flu provides a valuable microhistory to better understand the lives of students and the general impact of the 1918 epidemic on the West Coast.

Home to a military academy that had contact with the warfront, UC Berkeley's first contact with the influenza came when two cases were reported on the 6th of October 1917.⁴ According to the *Annual Report of the President, 1917-1918*, "On the 8th there were three undoubted cases, and on the 9th seventeen.... On the 18th of October the disease reached its maximum with seventy-four new cases admitted to the hospital."⁵ The next day, sophomore Agnes Edwards penned a letter to her mother back home in the Imperial Valley, revealing the immediate impact on students:

¹ "San Francisco, California and the 1918-1919 Influenza Epidemic," Influenza Encyclopedia: The American Influenza Epidemic of 1918-1919, University of Michigan Center for the History of Medicine and Michigan Publishing, accessed April 9, 2018. <https://www.influenzaarchive.org/cities/city-sanfrancisco.html#>, 1.

² Ibid., 2.

³ Ibid., 3.

⁴ "Annual Report of the President of the University on Behalf of the Regents to His Excellency the Governor of the State of California, 1917-1918," HathiTrust, University of California Press Berkeley, Accessed April, 2018, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015042856586;view=1up;seq=1>, 22.

⁵ Ibid., 22.

Three of the girls here had it, but none of them very badly... then four or five of the girls who live around here have had it too. We didn't have any meeting last Monday night because so many girls were sick... all the boys are either sick or in quarantine anyway, so there's absolutely nothing happening.⁶

Social life came to a halt. Edwards writes, "Certainly was a good thing we had our dance just when we did, because they're forbidden now. Can't go to church tomorrow after all."⁷ The disparity between men and women is notable. According to the *Annual Report of the President*, in 1917-1918 there were approximately 1400 military and civilian cases of Influenza at UC Berkeley⁸. It is worth noting that only 351 cases affected women.⁹ This could be due to the proximity that life in military barracks and fraternity houses brings. Regardless, women seized the opportunity to help.

According to UC Berkeley President Benjamin Wheeler, "The Student Volunteer Home Service Committee of the Women Students between October 22 and December 18 made 1799 visits of investigation in aiding those affected by the influenza epidemic."¹⁰ The Berkeley chapter of the American Red Cross, which had 648 women in its ranks, made 23,991 gauze masks. Among those helping was Agnes Edwards, who wrote in her October 19th letter, "we're going to the Red Cross rooms & help make the gauze masks. Everyone is going to have to wear them tomorrow... The campus will surely be a funny looking place."¹¹ In San Francisco, "every resident and visitor would be required to wear a mask in public," and this mandate was strictly enforced.¹² The gauze masks, though effective to a certain extent, proved futile for the seventy-

⁶ Agnes Edwards Partin, *Student Life at the University of California, Berkeley, during and after World War I: the Letters of Agnes Edwards Partin, 1917-1921*. ed. Grace E. Moremen (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), 148.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 148-149.

⁸ Berkeley, *Annual Report 1917-1918*, 23.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹¹ Partin, *Student Life at the University of California, Berkeley*, 149.

¹² University of Michigan, *San Francisco, California and the 1918-1919 Influenza*, 2.

five students, four nurses and one faculty who perished at the hands of the flu. The faculty member who passed was Marjorie G. Foster, a member of UC Berkeley's medical research department, the Hooper Foundation. In her quest for a cure, Ms. Foster attended a medical conference on the East Coast and contracted the flu, dying of it after a short-lived fight. Guy Mulberry, dean of the Hooper Foundation, writes of her loss: "Her death was a severe blow to this department and her place will be hard to fill. Her friends hope that a fund will be accumulated to establish a fellowship in her name to carry on the work which she was so greatly interested."¹³ The four female nurses who succumbed to the flu, according to University physician Robert T. Legge, "died as patriots... the memory of these four women should shine as an inspiration to all of what American women did for humanity when the call was sounded."¹⁴ The work of Ms. Foster and her fellow nurses is the epitome of the overall role women had in helping during the epidemic at Berkeley, which President Wheeler sums up by stating, "the young women who labored under their direction [Red Cross] must be counted to have served in the cause as faithfully as any."¹⁵

In the *Annual Report of the President of the University, 1918-1919*, the effects of the epidemic were more accurately analyzed, as some time had passed to process the school's bout with the influenza. Regarding the flu virus itself, the Hooper Foundation was still unable to find how it was spread or ways to prevent it. In his section of the report, Hooper Foundation director George H. Wipple states that "In spite of all this work and careful study of this influenza epidemic in all parts of the world, it is generally admitted that the causative agent or virus is as yet unknown."¹⁶ Despite seeing no fruition in their labor, the foundation was diligent in its work,

¹³ Berkeley, *Annual Report of the President 1918-1919*, 89.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁵ Berkeley, *Annual Report of the President 1917-1918*, 25.

¹⁶ Berkeley, *Annual Report of the President 1918-1919*, 88.

as “a large amount (50,000 doses) of polyvalent influenza vaccine was manufactured in this laboratory and distributed free of charge... (however) there is no definite evidence that this vaccine conveys any protection to a susceptible person.”¹⁷ This lack of protection was important, as Robert T. Legge, the University physician, states on behalf of the Infirmary: “The deaths from influenza were double the deaths from all causes which have occurred in the Infirmary since its inception, twelve years ago.”¹⁸ Despite there being no medically proven remedy for the flu, Agnes Edwards wrote to her mother on October 27th, 1918:

It’s only when the germs go in thro’ your nose & into your lungs that they’re dangerous, so the best thing to do is to spray your nose or use Nazeptic wool in it. That’s what Mary & I use, & then Listerine as a mouth wash. Don’t worry about us. We’re the healthiest ones in the house.¹⁹

Agnes exemplifies the rumors that spread around campus concerning the ways with which to avoid the flu and, most importantly, she shows the optimistic nature of the student body.

Surrounded by death and away from home, students attempted to forge a guise of regularity.

Despite the threat that it brought to UC Berkeley, which left the entire student body and faculty vulnerable, the flu regressed in early November, and a semblance of normalcy returned to Berkeley, if only for a moment.

Living with the anxiety of the flu looming over them like overcast skies, the students and staff at Berkeley appear to have finally received a pause from it all in the beginning of November, just in time for winter break. Riding the wave of good news that came with the Armistice of November 11 and what appeared to be the end of the flu, school officials attempted to restore morale. On November 17, 1918, Agnes wrote to her mother, “The epidemic seems to be almost over, guess we’ll have to wear our masks this week (only). Theatres opened yesterday

¹⁷ Ibid., 88.

¹⁸ Ibid., 99.

¹⁹ Partin, *Student Life at the University of California, Berkeley*, 151.

& the churches today.”²⁰ In San Francisco, “Hotels and restaurants could resume their musical entertainment but no dancing was allowed.”²¹ A semblance of optimism was shown by school officials, such as Guy Mulberry, director of the dentistry college: “the epidemic of influenza demoralized the work of the first quarter but a normal readjustment proceeded rapidly.”²² Agnes Edwards wrote to her mother on November 18th, 1918, of the rallies and other events she’s attended by stating, “My, I never had a more thrilling time in my life... All week everything began getting more & exciting.”²³ The optimistic nature of the school started to gain the upper-hand amid the chaos that had ensued before, but not all was won yet. Despite these efforts, the Influenza made a return to Berkeley, and the joyride Agnes and her fellow students were on came to an abrupt stop.

As December came and the winter break began, so too did the flu again. As stated by University physician Robert T. Legge, “University authorities delayed the spring reopening for two weeks; and in the meantime the second wave of the epidemic passed with only one death.”²⁴ One of those affected by the second wave of the flu was Agnes Edwards, who spoke of feeling symptoms in a December 15, 1918, letter: “Have a sort of cold which is disagreeable--caught it in time that it isn’t a bad one, just a sniffly. Wouldn’t like to get the flu at such a late date as this... pray for me during these last days--I surely need it.”²⁵ As previously mentioned, the urgency brought on by the resurgence of the flu forced school officials to delay the spring semester, a fact Edwards relays back home on January 11, 1919, stating, “There seems to be a great many cases [of flu] here & in the cities & college is not to open till the 20th, as they’re

²⁰ Partin, *Student Life at the University of California, Berkeley*, 159.

²¹ University of Michigan, *San Francisco, California and the 1918-1919 Influenza Epidemic*, 4.

²² Berkeley, *Annual Report of the President 1918-1919*, 56.

²³ Partin, *Student Life at the University of California, Berkeley*, 165.

²⁴ Berkeley, *Annual Report of the President of the University 1918-1919*, 99.

²⁵ Partin, *Student Life at the University of California, Berkeley*, 169-170.

waiting for mask ordinances to be enforced.”²⁶ The mandatory use of face masks is worth noting as well as the return of curfews, showing how quickly and decisively authorities were to respond to curtail another wave, regardless of the impact it had on the student morale they had all worked so hard to rebuild. Furthermore, Edwards mentions on January 19, “There won’t be anything doing this week after all. Won’t be able to have any parties because of the Flu.”²⁷ Students in San Francisco were also dealt a blow, as elementary classes were extended by twenty minutes and high school by forty-five.²⁸ The impact the second wave of the flu had on UC Berkeley students is best summed up by Agnes when she states that “because of the Flu we haven’t been able to do anything exciting... Since we were 2 weeks late in starting, we won’t have any spring vacation at all.”²⁹ Regardless, students were able to receive full instruction and, most importantly, stay alive.

The second wave of the flu shocked Berkeley and impacted daily life for thousands, yet to the benefit of all it came with fewer deaths compared to the first. School was in back in session on January 20, and by February 2, Edwards wrote to her mother that “we took our masks off Tuesday, & it surely seems dandy not to have to wear them.”³⁰ Soon, the flu was considered under control, and social life returned to normal, albeit with a sense of urgency to make up for the ground lost to the flu, as Edwards states on February 9: “Now that the Flu has gone & went, we have to begin rushing, & [it] takes up all our ‘spare’ time.”³¹ Regardless, students were grateful to have no spring vacation instead of no life and to not be able to socialize due to the urgency of school work rather than a mandatory quarantine, though this urgency was not to be taken lightly.

²⁶ Partin, *Student Life at the University of California, Berkeley*, 181.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 184.

²⁸ University of Michigan, *San Francisco, California and the 1918-1919 Influenza Epidemic*, 4.

²⁹ Partin, *Student Life at the University of California, Berkeley*, 187.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 188.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 189.

The Spanish Flu came and went from UC Berkeley, but not without first leaving an adverse impact on academic work. In the *1819-1919 Annual Report of the President*, University Physician Robert T. Legge writes that “The Influenza situation interfered seriously with the clinical material at the service of the department.”³² Medical students saw their education impacted directly: “medical instruction had been abandoned during the epidemic in the University Hospital... Aside from this no teaching was done at either hospital by this department during the year.”³³ Strain was still placed upon the school staff even after the flu was considered over, as noted by Dr. Legge:

Our staff has, at the expense of considerable labor and time, kept a close observation on all our students who have had respiratory infections or influenza this past year... Many examinations and periodical visits were insisted upon from students who possessed any slight post-influenzal conditions.³⁴

This hard work shows the extent to which school officials went to ensure the flu was gone for good. Furthermore, Dr. Legge also stated that “During the past year, the laboratory routine was seriously disturbed by the influenza epidemic which placed a heavy burden on all medical schools and hospitals.”³⁵ The College of Dentistry also had gripes with the flu, its dean Guy Mulberry stating, “The college experienced the usual difficulties arising out of the war... This, with the epidemic of Influenza, demoralized the work of the first quarter but a normal readjustment proceeded rapidly.”³⁶ Even future Berkeley students had their lives affected, for better or for worse, as Chairman of the Committee for Schools Clarence Paschall disclosed: “Scholarship requirements were almost universally relaxed during the war and after it. The

³² Berkeley, *Annual Report of the President of the University*, 135.

³³ *Ibid.*, 138.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

repeated epidemics of Influenza added to the demoralization.”³⁷ The troubles brought upon the staff at UC Berkeley by the flu did not go unanswered, their quick responses and hard work playing a large part in keeping the student death toll lower than universities in the East. From this arduous process came a time for reflection to learn important lessons and prepare for another epidemic.

The *Annual Report of the President of the University, 1919-1920* reveals several thoughts and actions taken by school administration viewing the influenza pandemic in retrospect along with a sense of gratitude that life was back to normal. Dr. Legge discussed the adjustments made by the University Infirmary:

The University Physician purchased fifty extra beds with complete bedding to be utilized in case of grave emergency. By the use of preventive measures such as vaccination, education, and eternal vigilance, communicable diseases are constantly kept under control. The possession of a well-equipped Infirmary and Department of Hygiene constitutes a very real economic asset to the University.³⁸

With this renewed sense of confidence and comfort in knowing the school was prepared when matters got out of hand, student morale rebounded. This morale boost was also aided by the events planned in 1920 and 1921 by school officials, including live concerts, drama performances, and rallies, among others.³⁹ The results of this renewed enthusiasm are raised by UC Berkeley President David Prescott Barrows when he writes, “The last year has shown remarkable progress in the restoration of educational work to a normal status. The percentage of students enrolling in advanced work... has steadily increased.”⁴⁰ Dr. Paschall best sums up this breath of fresh air that happened not just at UC Berkeley but all schools: “In the high schools, as

³⁷ Berkeley, *Annual Report of the President of the University 1919-1920*, 88.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

in the universities and colleges, there is gratifying evidence of a return to more normal conditions.”⁴¹

The Spanish Influenza of 1918 ground California’s higher education system and its only UC at the time, Berkeley, to a screeching halt that left behind dark memories and a renewed value on life. Believing the November Armistice would end the ‘War to End All Wars’ and peace would soon ensue, students and faculty at UC Berkeley were blindsided by the epidemic and the chaos it brought. Their experiences during the ordeal shed light on what life was like for thousands of others on the West Coast battling this silent killer. In retrospect, those on the West Coast of the U.S. fared much better compared to their counterparts in the East, where hundreds of thousands died. Regardless, their comparatively lower death toll do not make their trauma any less valid and worthy of study, providing a prime example of how effective mobilization on all fronts and unity can tap into the resilient nature needed in the face of adversity.

⁴¹ Berkeley, *Annual Report of the President of the University 1919-1920*, 89.

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