

MUSEUM MUSINGS
by Kaye Lister
SCHOOL IS CLOSED AGAIN and AGAIN

THE 1918 FLU PANDEMIC

During World War 1, 1914-1918, many children attended school each day while attempting to hide their worries about their Dads fighting in a war overseas. Numerous children on the home front had experienced the loss of male and some female family members to the war effort, and they struggled with the help of their teachers, classmates and special events to cope with everyday challenges imposed by the war. Often an afternoon was set aside for Red Cross activities. School rooms were festooned with maps, flags, and other patriotic symbols. The students stood at attention before the Canadian Ensign flag, sang 'God Save the King' and presented patriotic poems and plays. Teachers helped young girls make bandages for the medical corps, and knit or sewed articles of clothing for care packages. They encouraged their students to bring their nickels and dimes to go towards the Canadian Patriotic Fund, an initiative to raise money to support soldiers and their dependents.



Teachers even found themselves teaching about the war and its causes which began to appear in the school curricula as early as 1914. Students were taught that the British Empire was fighting for liberty against the evil and militaristic German "Hun" who had started the war by invading and occupying Belgium. By the halfway point of the war, in 1916, new texts began to emphasize the Canadian contribution to the Empire's war effort, and patriotic books like Lord Beaverbrook's 'Canada in Flanders' revealed the heroics of Canada's fighting forces. All the while, male teachers slowly disappeared from the classroom, enlisting for service.

However, life in the schools changed suddenly with the arrival of the 1918 Flu pandemic, commonly called the "Spanish Flu". It was brought to Canada by troops returning from the war and it made its way into even the remotest communities. Some entire villages in Canada were wiped out by the disease and many children were left without parents. Fredericton was paralyzed by almost 1000 cases. In an attempt to curb the spread of the flu, many communities ordered stores to close early each day and public places such as theatres and auction rooms had to close entirely. Schools were closed too.

A proclamation printed in the Daily Gleaner on October 9, 1918 was published as follows:

PROCLAMATION

It is ordered by the Department of Health of New Brunswick that all schools, theatres and churches in New Brunswick be closed on and after Friday, October 11th, until further notice, and that all public meetings be prohibited in view of the danger of an epidemic of severe (so-called) Spanish influenza.

(Signed) GEORGE G. MELVIN

Chief Medical Officer Province of New Brunswick

The schools were closed for five weeks. When they opened again, one can only begin to imagine the struggle that teachers experienced, reviewing with the students their forgotten studies, especially reading skills, spellings and their time tables.

THE POLIO EPIDEMIC

Poliomyelitis, an infectious disease caused by the polio virus, hit New Brunswick in 1937 just before the beginning of World War II. With cases occurring sporadically throughout the years, they flared sharply in 1941 and in 1952 with over 400 cases reported in our province in each of those years, and more than 9000 cases and 494 deaths reported across Canada. This disabling and sometimes life-threatening disease spread from person to person, mainly children, often infecting the spinal cord causing paralysis.

During the polio outbreaks, schools, swimming pools, playgrounds and theatres were closed in many parts of the country. Families of the infected were quarantined. Outbreaks typically happened in the summers, causing debates as to whether school openings should be delayed in the fall. Over time it became clear that such measures did not prevent polio's spread and it kept emerging throughout the next number of years. Salk vaccine in 1955 and the Sabin oral vaccine in 1962 eventually brought polio under control. Teachers in the mid 1960's remember the Sabin vaccine being administered to their students on sugar cubes.



THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Unlike polio which was predictable, invading the country summer after summer, COVID-19 came as a shocking surprise. Teachers and students learned of the COVID-19 arrival while they were enjoying their 2020 March Break. They returned to classes at the end of their break but Premier Higgs announced on March 13 that all schools would close for two weeks. A memo later in the month stated that New Brunswick schools would remain closed indefinitely to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development began working with the school districts on how to arrange for students to do school work at home. Many teachers amazed parents with the creative ways they had invented to teach the students during this home-based learning, thanks to computers and smart phones!



While New Brunswick students continued to remain at home, their teachers returned to school at the beginning of June to complete unfinished projects and to make plans for what could possibly be happening in September. In the meantime the grade 12 students were disappointed, knowing that because of the coronavirus school closures, there would be no graduation ceremony where they would receive that special diploma on stage before an audience of parents, teachers and friends. To help ease the disappointment, a number of school districts came up with clever alternatives. Observing the six-foot distance rule and the wearing of face masks if mandatory, graduates across the province were honoured with everything from graduate marches through their local town to outdoor graduation ceremonies, and even graduates' photos displayed on the town's street posts.

On June 12th, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development released parameters for the public-school system for the 2020-21 school year. The Department warned teachers and students that they must understand that the school and classroom environment will be quite different from what they left in March 2020.

There is much more to achieve as the future awaits.

