

# The Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918

*Written by the staff of the Hayward Area Historical Society:*

In late 1918 and early 1919, a major influenza epidemic swept around the world. It was a highly contagious flu often called “Spanish Influenza.” The virus did not necessarily start in Spain but that country was the hardest hit by the epidemic and somehow became attached to the most severe pandemic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some estimates put the death toll from this flu, which started with the usual flu-like symptoms and then spread to the lungs causing pneumonia, to be over one-third of the world’s population at the time. In the US alone, the death toll was just under three-quarters of a million people. Some cities closed schools and businesses and required residents to wear face masks in the hopes of reducing the spread of the disease. The story of the spread of the disease and the measures implemented to prevent it are eerily similar to what we are experiencing today with COVID-19.

There are a few historic photos showing cots lined up in the large Oakland Municipal Auditorium filled with influenza patients in a makeshift hospital. We have no photos of such locations in the Hayward area but that does not mean Hayward was left untouched by the pandemic. However, it is difficult to give precise accounts because the local Hayward newspapers for that time are missing. That said, a few sources give us some insight into what was happening in our community at that time.

For example, on October 18, 1918, when the epidemic was at its height, the *San Francisco Examiner* noted that Hayward High School was postponing their athletic events out of precaution during “the epidemic of Spanish influenza”. On the same day Hayward High cancelled its athletic events, Oakland Mayor John Davies ordered the closure of movie theaters, churches, and schools. Sounds familiar doesn’t it. We do not know for sure if eventually schools and businesses were closed in Hayward but since the area was just as connected to the greater metropolitan region as we are today, it seems likely the epidemic had an economic and social impact. Now, as then, the understanding of the interconnectedness of the Bay Area called for a coordinated cross-county response.



A view of the corner of B and Main Street c.1918. This is what the downtown area looked like at the time of the Spanish Influenza pandemic. The City Council often met on the second floor of the building to the far right.

[The California State Board of Health's January 1919 Bulletin](#) in large part, could have been released January 2020. Among its recommendations is closing places where people gather and the wearing of gauze masks. It also provided readers with lists of symptoms and what to do if they thought they had the dreaded flu.

The state board's bulletin also provided a list of city and county health officers. Hayward's health officer at the time of the 1918 pandemic was Dr. Fredrick W. Browning. Browning served as Hayward's health officer between 1906 and 1930. Perhaps caught off guard, Dr. Browning

wasn't even in Hayward when the pandemic reached its climax in mid-October 1918, having gone on vacation with his wife. It's unclear how long it took Dr. Browning to return to Hayward.

By January 1919, the Spanish Influenza pandemic was in the middle of a second wave. New cases were on the rise in nearby Oakland and San Francisco. This time however, Dr. Browning was in Hayward. A January 19, 1919 *Oakland Tribune* article titled "Hayward to Fight Influenza Epidemic" reported a briefing Dr. Browning had with Hayward's City Council. The article reported:

"While suggesting that flu masks be worn as a preventative measure, Dr. F.W. Browning, local health officer, did not insist on such a step at the meeting of the town trustees as the members of that body expressed the belief that the situation was well in hand. Dr. Browning is urging the people to take every precaution to stay further spread of the malady. As a step in this direction, the health officer has outlined a campaign of education that he thinks will be of great advantage to the community. Pamphlets bearing on this subject will be distributed."



View of inside the council chambers, 1912. Hayward's Health Officer, Dr. Browning, is the man standing furthest to the right.

Advice on how to protect yourself from the Spanish Influenza did come too late for at least one person living in the Hayward area. On January 10, 1919 it was reported that Mrs. Mabel Byars had died of influenza. Mrs. Byars was buried in the Mt. Eden Cemetery a few days earlier on Wednesday, January 8. Her husband M.S. Byars was too ill to attend his wife's funeral. No doubt there are many other area residents who perished in the epidemic.

Just over one-hundred years later the Hayward area is faced with a similar pandemic. This time our population is much larger and our access to information is far beyond what would have been imagined in 1918. We may not have a cure or a vaccine against this influenza at the moment, but we are far more aware of what to do to slow the spread of the disease. The loss of life was great in 1918. If we all work together to follow the guidelines our health officials are giving us now, we can prevent the same thing from repeating now. This is an instance when we do not want history to repeat itself.

*(Note: an epidemic has one epicenter or point of spread. A virus becomes pandemic - pan-means "all" - when it has spread across many countries and affects a large number of people. "We assume with a pandemic that everyone can be potentially exposed," says Dr. Andres Romero, an infectious disease specialist at Providence Saint John's Health Center in Santa Monica, California.)*