Flu hardly noted in PHS yearbook

It’s been five months since schools closed and the impact of the 2020 pandemic has affected virtually all aspects of life in Pottstown. It’s anyone’s guess when things will go back to normal.

Many area school districts, including the Pottstown School District, will hold only virtual sessions this fall. Many districts have canceled fall athletics, as well.

As bad as it is, the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020, which so far has killed 160,000 Americans, has reached only a fraction of the Americans who died in the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918-1919.

From the spring of 1918 through the spring of 1919, about 675,000 Americans died. Unlike the current pandemic, which mostly kills the elderly, the Spanish flu mostly killed people in their prime of life.

There are three times as many Americans today as there were in 1919, so an equivalent number of deaths today would be more than 2 million.

Philadelphia was one of the country’s hotspots. A Liberty Loan Drive parade on Sept. 28, 1918, drew 200,000 onlookers to Broad Street, which turned out to be one of the greatest super-spreader events of the century.

About 47,000 people in Philadelphia were infected and 12,000 died, most in October 1918 alone.

My late friend Jimmy Fichtol served in the Army in World War I. He returned from France to Pottstown in 1919 without a scratch, but in the meantime his business partner had died of the flu here at home.

But in the Pottstown High School yearbooks of 1918 and 1919, the pandemic is barely mentioned.

Classes, athletics, the school play, the senior trip to Washington, D.C., and commencement proceeded normally.

The only reference to closing school is in the class history: “All went smoothly until the ‘flu’ epidemic visited Pottstown and disturbed the progress of our school life. After this vacation we studied harder than ever, endeavoring to make up for lost time.” No mention is made of how long the “vacation” lasted, although it was likely in October.

A “Day by Day” account of the 1918-1919 school year through June has one entry, in October, referring to the flu and the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm:

“The Kaiser: catches a cold from the American “Draft”.

“The rest of the month comprises a period of great changes during which In-flu-enza and Out-flu-Bill (The Kaiser).”

Only one death is mentioned in the yearbook, of a freshman in March 1919. No cause was given.

What accounts for the difference between then and now? One can only guess. In an age when life expectancy was only 52, and before the discovery of antibiotics, death at a young age was far more common than it is now.

Science did not know what caused the flu until a virus was isolated in 1933.

There may have been more fatalism about life than there is today.

Commentary by Tom Hylton