Epidemics at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University

In 2020, CSB/SJU have had to respond to a COVID-19 pandemic. It’s not the first time deadly diseases affected the campuses. A smallpox scare came to SJU in 1902, and decades later had a resurgence in Minnesota. At Saint Benedict’s (then just a high school) over a hundred students and sisters were stricken in a diphtheria epidemic in 1906. The Sisters had built an infirmary in 1903. Because of its segregation from other buildings, it was ideal for isolating patients with contagious diseases like diphtheria, and hence dubbed the "pest house." Archival records also show many young sisters stricken with tuberculosis between 1900 and 1915.

Beginning in 1918, an influenza pandemic swept the world, reaching Minnesota in September 1918. By the time it subsided in spring 1919, over 10,000 Minnesotans died. At Saint John’s, 100 priests, brothers and students were afflicted with influenza. Monks Fabian Ethen (28) and Godfrey Gans (29) died from flu late in 1918. Students were quarantined on campus over Thanksgiving because of outbreaks in nearby towns. The November 1, 1918 student newspaper reported “The Record has perhaps never before recorded as many deaths in one issue as this month. The dreaded Spanish influenza has taken its toll of alumni also.” Subsequent issues noted the deaths of students’ family members as well.

The College of Saint Benedict was just a few years old at the beginning of the 1918 influenza epidemic. There are few specific records about students or faculty experiencing flu at this time. However, the Sisters’ annual health report for July 1, 1918-July 1, 1919 (which included all community members) records:

- Number contracting influenza during the epidemic: 256
- Number in delicate health in consequence of influenza: 85
- Number of follow-up cases for suspicious incipient and quiescent pulmonary tb: 13
- Number of deaths: 7
- Number receiving treatment in hospitals: 92

Sister Incarnata Girgen, who had just joined the Convent in 1917, recalled in her 1983 oral history, “I think this attack of illness that I had was what they called the flu, the 1918 flu. And I think I was the first one here at St Benedict’s to have it. But by the next May the whole...
Novitiate had it and before long all the students had it, so that all the dormitories were really sick rooms.”

While Saint John’s appears to have weathered the first wave without student fatalities, a subsequent flu epidemic claimed the lives of six Johnnies in 1920. Early in the year, the Record optimistically observed “While practically all the colleges of the Northwest were quarantined with the ‘flu,’ the dread malady seemed to have missed Collegeville almost entirely.” But by April 1, 1920, it was reporting the loss of Leo Altmann, Erby Lafontaine, Thomas Egan, James Gogin, Henry Thuente and Albert Meyer, all of whom died as a consequence of influenza.

Saint John’s and Saint Benedict’s have emphasized special care for the sick during epidemics. The 1918 flu epidemic demonstrated to the Sisters that they needed to establish Saint Cloud Hospital. In 1987, at the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, Brother Louis Blenkner took a leave of absence from Saint John’s to establish a home for adults with AIDS in Minneapolis. And now, in 2020, that care continues as CSB and SJU bring a message of gratitude and hope to troubled times.

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