

# Spanish Flu Epidemic in Kimberley

“Undoubtedly the most disastrous event to be recorded in the history of the Diamond Fields is the visitation of the Epidemic of Spanish Influenza, the full force of which was felt most severely between the 2nd October and 4th November 1918.” So wrote the Mayor of Kimberley, John Orr, in his report of the Mayor’s Minute 1916-1919.



October and November 1918 – there have never been two months quite like it in the short history of Kimberley, and hopefully, there never will be again. In that short period, 4483 citizens of Kimberley, or 8.85% of the entire population of 50 666 died from the Spanish Flu epidemic, which was sweeping the world. 3373 Blacks died, 567 Coloureds, and 543 Whites. Of the Blacks, 2564 died in the compounds, this out of a total of 11 454.

The total deaths in Kimberley from the epidemic however, finally reached 4861. Some 40 000 people in the Kimberley urban area would be stricken with the influenza, the greatest natural disaster the city has ever seen, and the majority of the people affected were blacks. The Diamond Fields Advertiser reported that the Flu 'had a firm grip of nearly half the population, the deaths among the native element being nothing short of appalling'.

The Flu had reached South Africa in September 1918, allegedly brought in by two ships, the “Jaroslav” and the “Veronej”, which had stopped at Sierra Leone. The first cases in Kimberley were detected in the mine compounds as early as 23 September 1918, and by the beginning of October the town was firmly in the grip of the dreaded disease. Kimberley was not the first inland town to be infected, that dubious honour going to Johannesburg. Surprisingly, or perhaps not so, the epidemic in Johannesburg took root in the mining compounds and spread outwards from there.

The first inkling of the epidemic in Kimberley was a small paragraph in the ‘Day by Day’ column on Page 8 of the daily Diamond Fields Advertiser, the column usually reserved for gossip and other interesting snippets of local happenings. It said, matter of factly, that there had been an outbreak of Spanish Flu in Kimberley, and that it had spread to the Dutoitspan Mining Compound where there were hundreds of cases. “Kimberley Gaol officials are suffering some inconvenience as a result of over 100 prisoners being laid up.” The brief chronicle ended by saying it was understood there were some cases in town. Within a week, the Spanish Flu would push the final days of World War I into a secondary story on the pages of the Diamond Fields Advertiser.

Men and women in the prime of the lives – between 25 and 45 years of age – were literally dropping in the streets and being carried off to either the hospital or home by

members of their family not afflicted. Work in the town soon came to a halt and most businesses closed their doors or operated with skeleton staff, including the mines.

All hospitals were full to overflowing and the Hotel Belgrave (105 beds), the Beaconsfield Central schools (50 beds) and the Teachers Training College (92 beds) were all utilised as improvised hospitals.

There were virtually no policemen on the streets, and public transport at one stage was reduced to a solitary tram running between Kimberley and Beaconsfield. Many trams had their seats removed and were turned into mobile soup kitchens, and carried food supplies and medical stores.

At the Kimberley Club, the famous Club founded in 1881 by Cecil Rhodes among others, there were no waiters and for the first time the members were forced to serve themselves.

Both the Kimberley High School and Christian Brother's College, on vacation when the epidemic hit, closed for the duration of the epidemic, and only re-opened on Armistice Day (11 November). They should have opened on 8 October. Benjamin Bennett, later a well-known author, was a pupil at the High School: "Many of the senior boys helped at the Kimberley Hospital. Others were themselves stricken or had to look after the sick in their own homes. Fortunately the plague passed by my home, and I remember vividly, as a little boy, cycling through Kimberley's streets of death to collect lemons at the City Hall – they were said to be good for one's health and somehow staved off influenza – then watching the unending funeral processions on their way to the cemeteries". The Irish Christian Brothers, those still on their feet, "rendered yeomen service in assisting the few doctors available by nursing the sick



in their own homes and in the Kimberley hospital". Quite surprisingly, no Brothers nor Boarders from CBC – all of whom contracted the flu – died from the disease.

### **Many well-known Kimberley families were affected.**

The great South African Solomon Plaatje and his family, living in the Malay Camp, were not immune to the disease, and Plaatje himself and his eldest daughter Olive were extremely ill. Indeed, Plaatje was laid up for weeks in bed as the influenza caused what he called an oppressive heart disease to take hold, a condition doctors announced to be incurable. It is likely this damaged heart contributed to Plaatje's death some 14 years later. Olive, who assisted other flu sufferers before catching the disease, contracted rheumatic fever in her weakened state while ill, and this brought about her early death a mere three years later in 1921.

The Champion golfer of the Diamond Fields from 1911 to 1914, and a South African Foursomes Champion of 1907, R.S. "Bob" Chatfield, did not have the chance to defend his title in 1919 – there were no championships because of the war – as he too died. A true gentleman and respected diamond expert, Bob had fought with the

Kimberley Light Horse during the siege of 1899-1900, and had been working as a volunteer nurse when he contracted the disease.

Miss Hughes, Principal of the Lanyon Terrace preparatory School, and Mr W Fraser, recently appointed as Inspector of Schools for the Kimberley region, were but two of the educationists who died.

There was a little good that came out of the disaster in that the City Council started cleaning up the unsanitary conditions that had been revealed in the poorer suburbs of the town, and in 1919 launched a municipal housing scheme to accommodate the people removed from the overcrowded areas.

From [Kimberley Calls and Recalls on Facebook](#) By Steve Lunderstedt

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