

# Compulsory mask-wearing in Pacific Northwest caused spirited debate -- and a jury trial -- during 1918-19 flu pandemic

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The "Umbrella Man" statue in downtown Portland's Pioneer Square wears a face mask on April 21, 2020. The debate today over public-health measures such as mask-wearing mirrors the one during the 1918-19 flu pandemic. (Dave Killen/The Oregonian) Dave Killen

**By Douglas Perry | The Oregonian/OregonLive**

The defendants, two Walla Walla attorneys, had good reason to be nervous.

They were facing the charge of failure to wear “flu masks” in public, which the Washington state board of health had ordered. And one juror showed just how seriously he took the mask requirement: He had a large towel wrapped around his head, with two slits cut out for the eyes.

The debate in Walla Walla -- and throughout the U.S. in the early days of 1919 as the second wave of the deadly flu pandemic rolled through the population -- was about the tradeoff between individual freedoms and the exercise of official power for the “public good.” The same debate, that is, that’s playing out today as communities and states study how to safely reopen with the coronavirus continuing to roam the land.

As the Walla Walla jury weighed their case 100 years ago, the argument over mandated face coverings was also taking place across the border in Oregon.

In January 1919, the Portland City Council considered an emergency ordinance requiring the wearing of face masks in public places -- stores, theaters, churches and so on. The outbreak had just reached a new high point in the city, with 422 reported new cases in 24 hours. The flu pandemic ultimately would kill more than 600,000 Americans.

“The debate became exceedingly fiery,” The Oregonian reported from the council meeting about the proposed mask-wearing ordinance.

Local attorney W.T. Vaughn declared that he could not be forced to “wear a rag” over his face, insisting the ordinance was autocratic and unconstitutional. “I am a law-abiding citizen,” he said, but he objected to the city “attempting to muzzle us like a pack of [rabies-afflicted] dogs.”

# Wear a Mask



We appeal to your civic patriotism to co-operate with us in our effort to

## STAMP OUT THE Spanish Influenza or “Flu” Plague in Portland By Wearing a Mask

You should willingly co-operate in doing this and not necessitate the passage of an ordinance which will make the wearing of a mask compulsory.

### OBSERVE THE FOLLOWING RULES

Masks should be worn when you enter crowds, streets, stores, theaters, moving-picture houses, churches, schools, and even at home.

After you have worn the mask sterilize it by boiling for at least five minutes before you wear it again. Never wear a mask the second time, after having removed it to go from one place to another.

Realize that the outside of the mask is contaminated after use—you can very readily infect your fingers, and in this manner transmit the infection.

The mask should consist of four layers of butter cloth. Patterns of it will be shown in the big stores.

Never visit people who suffer from a cold without wearing a mask, because they may have influenza, if only in a mild form.

During the 1918-19 flu pandemic, Portland officials encouraged the public to wear masks. (The Oregonian)

Back in October of 1918, Mayor George Baker had closed theaters and schools for six weeks to blunt the initial wave of the flu pandemic. Ever since then, Dr. R.C. Coffey now told the

council, wearing masks had been compulsory at Portland Surgical Hospital. As a result, he said, there had been no disease transmission there, “whereas the other hospitals are full of it.”

Others at the council meeting argued that the strict quarantining of people with influenza, rather than universal mask-wearing, was the way to go, pointing to the success of such isolation in Corvallis, Grants Pass and other Oregon communities.

This debate came just days after the influenza death of one of Portland’s most prominent citizens, Oregonian publisher Henry L. Pittock. The 83-year-old Pittock was not quarantined during his illness. In fact, his newspaper reported he had “received numbers of old friends and members of his staff” as his condition worsened.

Though Portland Commissioner John Mann blocked the mask-wearing ordinance’s immediate implementation, plans moved ahead for it. The basement of downtown’s Hotel Portland was established as the headquarters of a massive mask-distribution operation. The face coverings, made by Red Cross volunteers, would be sold for 10 cents each. City officials said the poor could receive them for free.

As the council debate ran aground (the emergency mask-wearing order never would be put into effect), the discussion inevitably spilled out into the public, spreading faster than the flu.

One anonymous newspaper reader wrote that the ordinance called on all retail staff in the city “to wear masks continuously for eight hours each day, which does not seem reasonable, seeing as they are not a menace like the crowds of patrons that jostle each other in the aisles and would seem to be the chief carriers of the disease.”

But Dr. E.A. Sommer, who headed up Portland’s official response to the epidemic, said all citizens should carry the load.

“If everyone will knuckle down and help us, forget the little things and remember that the health of the community and lives are at stake, the battle is won,” he said.

That might have been the case, but this being America, the clarion call of liberty proved potent.

Up in Walla Walla, during the trial of the two lawyers who refused to cover their faces in public, the county health officer took the stand wearing a mask. The defense objected, insisting the defendants had the right to face their accuser. The judge agreed. He ordered the health officer to remove his mask.

The prosecutor, however, kept his face covered throughout the trial. “I hate this mask as much as anybody,” he said.

The jury, including the man wearing a towel on his face, quickly acquitted the men.

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