



Pens Recording a Raging Pandemic:

Two Luther College Students' Accounts of How the 1918 Flu Pandemic Touched Their Lives



Sigvart (left) and Gerhard Rugland at Luther College, Decorah, Iowa; circa 1918-19

The following are excerpts from letters written by Gerhard and Sigvart Rugland to their siblings and to their parents, Reverend Jacob and Johanna [Rosholt] Rugland in Carpio, North Dakota. The brothers had just started studying at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, in the fall of 1918. Below, their direct references to the pandemic at that time appear in **bold** for easier finding.



October 1st, 1918

Dear sister,

received your dear letter today. **There are five boys sick with Spanish Influenza and about a dozen more sick in bed with colds, headaches etcetera. Gerhard has been in bed all day with a headache. Everybody is taking steps to check the spread of Spanish Influenza.** I will write again as soon as his condition changes. Will again and often.

Your brother, Sigvart

Decorah Iowa

October 1, 1918

I went to bed Sunday with a headache and sore throat and Monday morning I was not better but got up anyway at 6:15 and went out to breakfast. But then I had something [amiss] right away and I couldn't do anything and I had to lie down. Monday afternoon I had to go up to the 4th floor where many others were lying in bed sick. Thursday I wasn't much better and the doctor had not found my room. But today I felt quite a bit better and about 12 the Army doctor came and took my temperature and said that I could go around a little. So I am now quite good. [Luther College religion professor] Preus was in to see me and said Doctor Stabo said that I have the Spanish influenza and Preus thinks I have it so I am now on my own legs again instead of lying in bed. I must study right now and study hard with my lessons. I don't have permission to go out of the house, and I couldn't even if I wanted to, I am so sick.

Your son, Gerhard

Decorah, Iowa

October 6th, 1918

Dear [younger brother] Walter,

it is now two weeks since you saw me, maybe it does not seem any longer to you but it seems like 2 months to me. I have learned seen and heard more than I did in Carpio in 2 months. Today is a fine day and all the days have been fine but some of the mornings have been cold and damp so **many of the boys are on the sick list — 14, I think. Two have got Spanish Influenza, and several cases are reported downtown. I have a sore throat and headache today but the Army doctor gave me a dose of medicine and now I'm feeling better.**

Well that is all I have time for now, Gerhard

October 15th, 1918

Dear Mother,

now it is 10 minutes to 9 and we are studying but I got orders from Preus to write home. Now don't get excited. Last time I wrote I was just out of bed being over with the Spanish Flu. **On Monday evening I was sitting on the first floor studying, we have supervised study hours from 7:30 to 9:30, Preus came into the room and asked for a volunteer to go up and take care of Professor Spearati's family who were all sick in bed. Preus was asked to do this by Dr. Stabo. It had to be a boy who had had Spanish influenza and was strong. Well I was just a little weak but spoke up and said I would go. Then Preus and I got Lieutenant Grundy's permission for me to go. Preus followed me up to Sperati's home and I had the following to take care of: Professor Sperati in bed, Vitteor Sperati 17 years old in bed, Camilla Sperati 15 years old in bed, Sigvald Sperati 10 years old in bed. Mrs. Holmes their nurse in bed. I came there about 9 in the evening. Gave them water and many other things. I took off my shoes and lay**

down on a couch, in a room directly under the professor's. He used a heavy stick to tap on the floor with to wake me. I had to get up three times after 11 before 7 in the morning and I didn't sleep much. At 7 I got up and done a nurses work, went to Luther College dining hall for breakfast at 8. Then Preus [came] and he said your brother is sick in bed. Well I went up and found Sig in bed with some fever under the college nurse's care. I went back to Sperati and was on the jump all day. Just before 12 Miss Celia Holmes, daughter of the woman, came but she had been ordered not to go up to the sick people before she was inoculated in the arm. Well the doctor didn't get to Speratis so I was sole doctor and nurse with help downstairs. Last night I slept on the same place and got up two or three times and slept very little. At 9 the Doctor Stabo came and inoculated Mrs. Holmes and saw my report on fever of the patients. He stayed about 10 minutes, he is awful busy. Well I worked like a good fellow all day. Miss H could go upstairs after dinner. I asked Sperati if they needed me more and he said "My yes, we want you three days." I had to ask Lieutenant. So I left Speratis' at 8 tonight and I'm feeling awful tired but pretty well otherwise. Mrs S is coming home Saturday from Tacoma Washington where she saw a soldier son. Sig was feeling pretty good but was still in bed. I hope and think that he will be sitting up tomorrow. I promise to come up to Sigvart sometime tomorrow. Yes Preus had asked if I had had time to write home and I said no. "You had better take time" he said. I'm a little behind in my studies but will work hard. [Luther College professors] **Dr. Dahl and Dr. Emmanuel are dead from Spanish influenza and two other men and a lady out in the country in Decorah.** Well it is getting awful late and I am so tired. **Two college nurses are sick in bed and Preus drove to Spillville and got a third yesterday. About 25 boys at College are in bed now, none very serious. When I was sick there was between 70 and 80 sick.** Well good night.

Your son, Gerhard

Thursday morning. **I rested good last night. Went over to the Larson Hall held to see Sigvart. His fever is gone the temperature was 98 degrees this morning .006 below normal but that is the way they all have it just before they get well. He said he felt good.**

Your son, Gerhard

October 20th, 1918

Dear folks,

yesterday was my first day up. I'm feeling fine with the exception of being a little weak. They have 5 nurses here now. Preus comes around to the sick ones about twice every day. He certainly is an energetic old man. There is talk of quarantine so we won't be able to go to class more than 6 at the time. Nothing definite as yet. Going downtown has been Forbidden for 10 days past and will probably last 10 days more. Quite a number of deaths have occurred in the city.

Your son and brother, Sigvart

October 23rd, 1918

Dear Father,

This morning the first death of a student [Selmer Knutson] left the college. How many more will follow as a result of the influenza is the question. There are still several dangerous cases besides a large number of light cases. The Carpio boys are all well now. [...] We have no Chapel now and no church on Sunday as public gatherings are forbidden for the present. The Prep department is suspended in such a way that no class with more than six members can meet. Hoping the influenza does not come into our home.

I am, your son, Sigvart



According to the 12th spotlight in the series "Luther College Moment in History" (accessed on 28 July 2020 at https://www.luther.edu/archives/spotlightarchives/?story_id=470736) "The October 1918 issue of Luther College Chips reported that 112 out of the 241 students at Luther College were sick with the Spanish Flu. Six students additionally developed pneumonia and one, a first-year student named Selmer Knutson, died. This photo shows three members of the Students' Army Training Corps being tended in their beds by one of the six college nurses." At least two Luther professors also died, as did about a hundred (source of total: Midge Kjome) individuals of the wider community of Decorah and surrounding Winneshiek County.

October 23rd, 1918

Dear Mother:

This afternoon, Wednesday, is devoted athletics but as I am not allowed to do any hard exercise until I have fully recovered I spend the time studying and otherwise. There are five nurses here now.

Your son, Sigvart

PS: Gerhard is down playing football.

10/27/1918

Dear father, mother, sisters and brother,

The influenza is on the decline now. We will be allowed to leave the campus by next Saturday.

Will write more tomorrow if I can, your son and brother, Gerhard

Decorah Iowa

October 30th

Walter Livingstone Rugland

Carpio North Dakota

Dear brother,

The quarantine in town has been lifted but the S.A.T.C. men have not been given passes yet to go to town.

Your brother, Gerhard

For additional information about the 1918-19 global flu pandemic as well as to view a PowerPoint presentation featuring the Rugland brothers' experiences at Luther College during that period, see:

www.TRACES.org

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