

# INTERPRETING AN IMAGE

## **‘Taking no risks’: Traralgon’s Response to the Influenza Epidemic**

*Cheryl Griffin*

### **The ‘Flu’**

*There’s been much agitation, likewise some sore vexation  
To prepare to meet the dread and wily flu.  
And the Shire Council has decreed that to meet the urgent need  
An isolation hospital is wanted too.*

*So the State School’s been fitted, paraphernalia all collected,  
Matron, nurses, wardsmen all are on the spot.  
The staff is all quite ready, just waiting for a steady  
Stream of “pnu-flu” from the township in to trot.*

*The kids with joy are singing while the Dr’s phone keeps ringing  
Replying to enquiries what to do till he can come;  
While the nurses and the staff (again the kiddies laugh)  
Look and long and yearn for patients—just for one*

*The scholars who’re away enjoy it more each day,  
Say the hospital is an excellent idea;  
But the mothers fume and fret, for there’s no respite in store as yet  
And the month’s vacation seems to them a year.*

*The wanted sense of jollity with the kiddies full of glee  
As they ramble round the old school day by day  
Is changed to one serene, only bunnies can be seen,  
Gambolling where the scholars have their play.*

*The hospital’s quite up to date, snow white bed in rows await  
An occupant whose symptoms leave no doubt  
That he’s well and truly caught the complaint that must be fought  
To a finish till its settled, down and out.*

*As the days go slowly by, the flu keeps drawing nigh.  
Morwell’s well infected, not a dozen miles away;*

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*And the townsfolk look and sigh as they pass each other by  
Half scared to say "How's Mr Dash today?"*

*It wasn't safe to even cough or to say you're feeling off  
Or the rumour's bound to fly around alright,  
That So-and-So's infected and to have his ills corrected  
He was taken to the hospital last night.*

*But the trouble looks like ending, soon the mothers will be sending  
The boys and girls along to school once more;  
And for nurses for the flu and all the doctors too  
A well-deserved and needed spell's in store.*

*Now the flu has spent its force and Traralgon in its course  
Has been spared and still remains quite free and "clean";  
A word of praise from me to those who helped to keep it free  
From the terrors of the flu that might have been.*

J. Ockwell, Traralgon South, 22 February 1919 (*Traralgon Record*, 4 March 1919, p. 3)



**Figure 1: Staff of the Emergency Hospital set up in the Traralgon State School during the influenza epidemic in 1919** (Courtesy Royal Historical Society of Victoria, MS 000883, image MSP4-0465)

When this photograph was taken, the small Gippsland town of Traralgon, 160 kilometres east of Melbourne, had been established for just 60 years. Traralgon is located on the land of the Braiakaulung people of the Gunaikurnai nation, who had lived there for many thousands of years before the first white settlers arrived in the 1840s and occupied land in

what is now known as the Latrobe Valley. By the 1860s Traralgon had been transformed from a pastoral run to a tiny settlement with little more than a store, an inn and a few bark huts housing a dozen or so families. Ten years on and new life came to the settlement after the discovery of gold in Gippsland and elsewhere. The arrival of the railway that connected the town to Melbourne in 1877 created even more economic opportunities. As land opened up for settlement, dairy farms and associated industries became the area's lifeblood. This was the core of Traralgon's economy until well into the 1930s.

Although it was a town of only about 2,000 residents, 252 Traralgon men served in World War I and 52 died in the conflict, so the town's residents were well aware of the traumas brought about by war and had rallied together during the war years to support those serving overseas and the families left at home. They were probably not prepared for an extra trauma, a deadly virus brought home by returning service personnel. However, as you can see from this photograph, the town responded quickly. The local council, health authorities, community groups like the Red Cross, and ordinary residents readied themselves for the 'terrors of the flu', first reported in the local newspaper, the *Traralgon Record*, in late January 1919.

Like its neighbour Morwell, a similarly sized town, Traralgon had no hospital, and so the state school in Grey Street with higher elementary school attached was commandeered and refitted as an emergency isolation hospital. Classrooms were converted into wards capable of holding twelve patients and other rooms were transformed into kitchen and laundry facilities. A group of volunteer staff, under the supervision of Matron Esther O'Mara, took up residence in the higher elementary school.

All was in readiness on the day the staff posed for this photograph (Figure 1) outside the school alongside a number of unidentified adults, some children, and a dog that sits in front of Matron O'Mara, looking at the photographer as if to say 'I'm part of the team, too'. Standing in the middle is Dr Andrew Hagen, who had changed his name from Hagenauer when he enlisted as a medic in 1915. Hagen, a Gippslander who was born to missionaries Friedrich and Louisa Hagenauer at Ramahyuck Mission in 1875, returned to practise in Traralgon in early 1919 and, along with Shire Health Officer Dr T.A. McLean, attended the influenza cases of the district.

The verses reproduced at the start of this piece tell the story of the early phase of the epidemic when Traralgon beat the odds and could boast of keeping free of the ‘terrors of the flu that might have been.’ There were cases all around—30 at the Sale Hospital by the end of January—and other Gippsland towns were taking similar precautions, Morwell also converting its state school to a temporary hospital.

Melbourne cases rose sharply and, as city residents flocked to the country by train, they were warned to isolate on arrival. People were also advised to wear masks and to wear them properly. Borders closed. In Melbourne, pubs closed within a radius of fifteen miles of the GPO, but churches remained open. Schools closed, many of them to take up duty as emergency hospitals.

In Traralgon, the community rallied, and the local Red Cross set about finding bedding and other much-needed supplies. And all the while, Traralgon remained influenza-free. Eventually, in the first week of March, the town’s temporary hospital was dismantled and the school re-opened. But two months later, when a new wave emerged and several cases were reported in Traralgon, there was no choice but to take over the school again. This time the pupils continued their schooling in the various Protestant Sunday Schools. The hospital staff moved back in and were soon dealing with fifteen cases (Yarram, about 60 kilometres south, had 40). Towards the end of May, the first influenza death was reported, and later Mrs Jones, one of the volunteer nurses and wife of local clergyman Reverend W.C. Jones, became ill but survived. The only other reported casualty was a 41-year-old woman who died of complications from an earlier bout of flu.

By the end of May the worst was over in Traralgon, even though the epidemic continued to ‘hold sway’ throughout Gippsland. The school was cleaned and fumigated, the wards turned back into classrooms and the nurses moved out of their quarters in the higher elementary school. Within two weeks school activities had resumed, despite the reservations of some parents who believed that their children were in danger from lingering germs. The minister of health glossed over these concerns, decreeing that all school buildings being used as hospitals should close for cleaning, then reopen for classes.

The 1919 influenza crisis triggered concerns in Traralgon about the lack of a local hospital, and the community turned its attention to ‘the hospital question.’ Dr Hagen and his second wife Sara built a private

hospital ‘Cumnock’ there in 1925, but it was not until 1950 that the foundation stone was laid for the Traralgon and District Hospital. It opened in June 1956 and was merged into the new La Trobe Regional Hospital in 1991.

By 1956 industry and modernity had come to Traralgon, and it was no longer a small rural community centred on its dairy industry. Electricity had arrived in 1923, and a paper mill opened in 1936. Other industries moved in. Coal mining transformed the Latrobe Valley landscape, bringing with it power generation plants. With increased employment opportunities came a huge growth in population, but the area suffered job losses and social dislocation when power plants were privatised in the 1990s. The City of Latrobe, incorporating Morwell, Moe and Traralgon, was created in 1994. Today, Traralgon’s economy is diversifying and it is a growing industrial city, home to 25,000 people, more than ten times the number who faced the influenza epidemic of 1919.

## Sources

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*Traralgon Record*, 28 January 1919 – 31 October 1919 (especially 28, 31 January; 7, 11, 14, 18 February; 4, 7 March; 4 April; 2, 9, 13, 16, 19, 20, 23, 17, 30 May; 6, 10, 17, 25 June; 8, 22 August; 19 September; 31 October 1919).