

ARTICLE

“IT SEEMED AS THOUGH THE WHOLE COUNTRY WAS DOOMED”: EBENEZER EVANS’S ACCOUNT OF THE 1918–1919 INFLUENZA PANDEMIC ON SEWARD PENINSULA, ALASKA

Kenneth L. Pratt

Bureau of Indian Affairs, ANCSA Program, 3601 C Street, Suite 1200, Anchorage, Alaska 99503-5947; kenneth.pratt@bia.gov

ABSTRACT

The importance of context cannot be overstated when evaluating a major historical event like the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic, which had devastating impacts on people and countries around the world. In cultural terms, however, the true scope of that devastation can only be understood when the pandemic is evaluated in the context of local experiences. The Seward Peninsula region of western Alaska provides an ideal forum for such an evaluation. The region’s largest community, Nome, had an established newspaper that published regular updates about the pandemic’s impacts; those updates are supplemented by information in government records concerning activities of the United States Bureau of Education in the region. When Alaska Native oral history accounts about the pandemic and land claims research data documenting settlement histories on Seward Peninsula are added to the mix, a finer-grained evaluation of the pandemic’s local-level impacts is possible. By illuminating traumas experienced by Seward Peninsula’s Native peoples during the 1918–1919 pandemic, this article provides critical context for understanding Alaska Native responses to the COVID-19 pandemic a century later.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is unlike anything most people alive today have previously experienced; however, historical precedents exist, and there is much to be learned from them. The 1918–1919 influenza pandemic is a perfect example. In Alaska, it was associated with many of the same problems and difficulties encountered in the state (and the United States as a whole) during the current pandemic (2020–2022). These include a shortage of health-care workers and medical supplies, high rates of infection and large losses of life, quarantines, the necessity of providing food and other assistance to people who lacked the means (or physical ability) to take care of themselves, and objections to local and national governmental decisions made and mandates put in place to combat the

pandemic. In 1918, Alaska Territorial Governor Thomas Riggs Jr.¹ issued a “Notice to Natives” that makes certain parallels between the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic and the COVID-19 pandemic obvious (*Alaska Daily Empire* 1918; Fig. 1). Although some of the rules listed therein were impractical given the remoteness of many Alaska Native villages, the objectives were consistent with similar such notices being issued around the country at that same time.

Ebenezer Dyfed Evans² (1880–?) (Fig. 2), a teacher with the U.S. Bureau of Education (BOE) in Alaska, became a central figure in efforts to fight the 1918–1919 influenza in the Seward Peninsula region of western Alaska (Fig. 3). Comparatively little is known of his personal

Notice to Natives
Juneau, November 7, 1918

To all Alaska Natives:

On account of the prevalence of influenza, all Natives (Indians) are warned as follows:

- (1) **Do not visit at another Native's house.**
- (2) **Keep your house well aired.**
- (3) **Wear influenza masks.**
- (4) **Avoid any gathering.**
- (5) **If you have a cold or fever go to bed and stay there until well.**
- (6) **A potlatch is absolutely forbidden, and any Native attempting to get up a potlatch will be prosecuted.**
- (7) **Stay in your own village. Do not attempt to visit any neighboring village and do not allow a native from another village to visit you.**
- (8) **Report any infraction of these rules to Mr. Hawkesworth who will see that punishment is imposed.**

THOMAS RIGGS, Jr.
Governor, Commissioner of Health

Figure 1. "Notice to Natives" issued by Alaska Territorial Governor Thomas Riggs Jr. in November 1918.

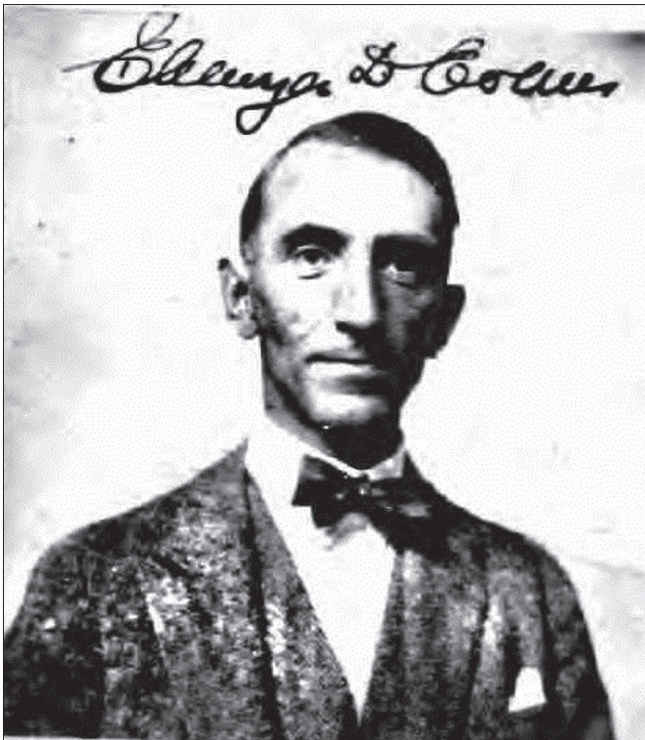


Figure 2. Ebenezer D. Evans passport photograph, 1924. Source: "U.S. Passport Applications, 1795–1925." National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington DC; Roll #2448—Certificates: 381350–381849, 20 Mar 1924–21 Mar 1924.

history, but while in Alaska he taught in the communities of Kenai (1909–1910), Selawik (1915–1916), and Marys Igloo ("Igloo" [1916–1918]) (US BOE 1911:1348, 1917:10, 1918:10, 1919:6).

In September 1916, Evans and Walter C. Shields (superintendent of the Northwestern District, BOE) started a specialized newspaper called *The Eskimo* (US BOE 1918:18). Evans, who was then teaching at Marys Igloo, was put in charge of its production. Their objective was to make the paper something that appealed to the Native people and might thereby increase their interest in learning to read. As Shields explained:

From the first we have endeavored to make the Eskimos write articles for the magazine. This has mostly been along the reindeer lines, following up the plan at the basis of all the work at the reindeer fairs—the development of a strong, united Eskimo sentiment on matters that vitally concern the Eskimos. This development of Eskimo leaders and Eskimo public opinion is, in my estimation, the most far-reaching work that we can do. (US BOE 1918:18)

But fate did not allow Shields to fully realize the paper's objective. In late October 1918, when the influenza reached Nome, Evans was apparently working as an assistant to Shields (U.S. Congress 1919). Shortly thereafter, Shields was infected by the virus, which claimed his life in November 1918. The men's close working relationship

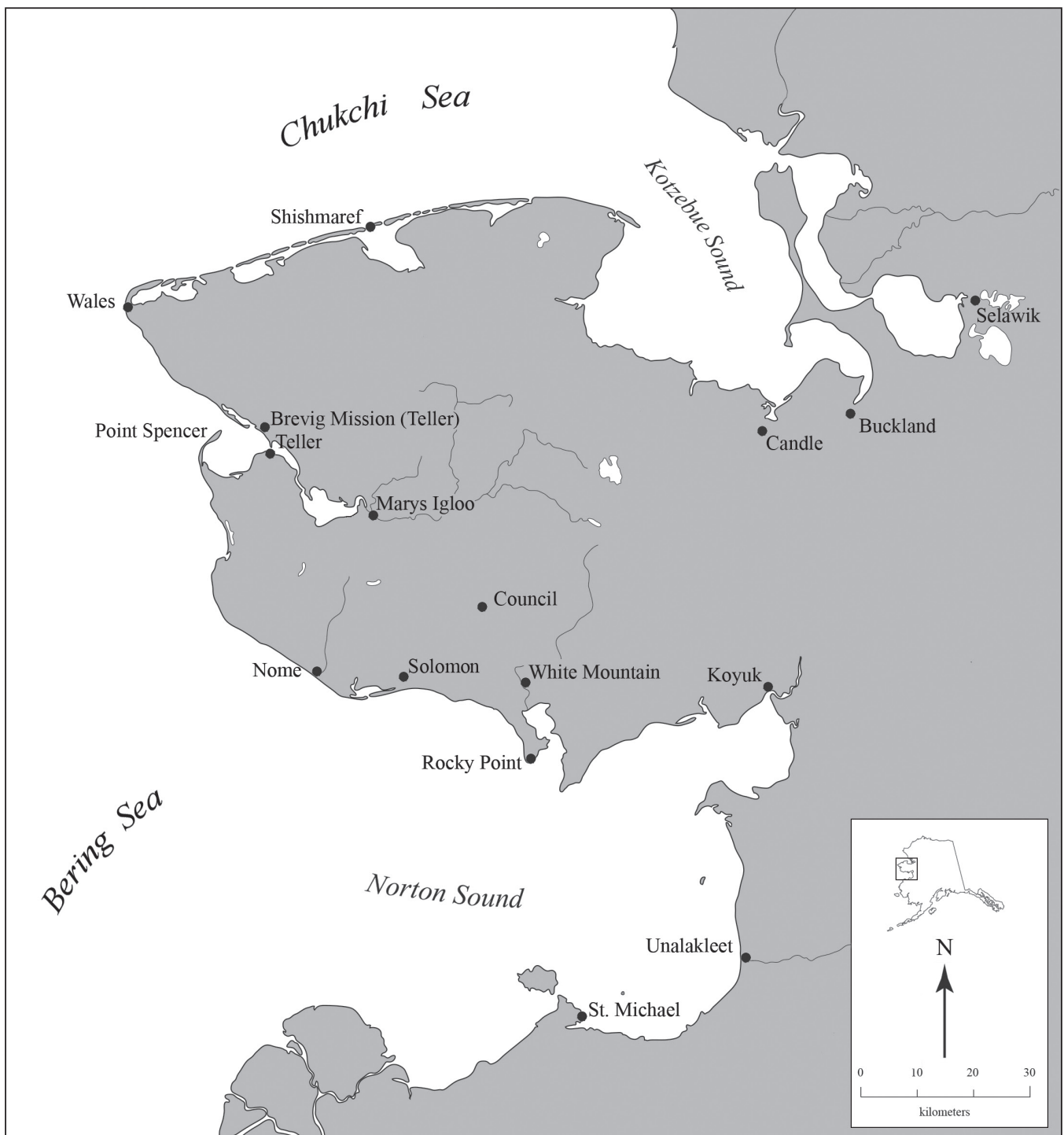


Figure 3. Seward Peninsula region of Alaska. Map by Dale C. Slaughter.

probably explains why Evans was named acting superintendent of the Northwestern District after Shields's death. Evans, who had just turned 38 years old, suddenly found himself thrust into an unbelievably stressful and demanding role.

An important paper by Matt Ganley (1998) describes the timing and ethnohistory of the 1918–1919 influenza's

spread across the Seward Peninsula. The paper is particularly valuable because it demonstrates how Indigenous oral history accounts can help “humanize” such disasters and clarify, correct, and supplement other reports about them. In contrast, a June 1919 letter from Ebenezer Evans to Governor Riggs reveals the administrative and practical challenges faced by BOE staff and other Nome officials

and organizations in their efforts to effectively respond to the rapidly unfolding, horrific event.³ Additionally, it highlights the selfless contributions of everyday citizens who volunteered to perform tasks—many of which were physically exhausting and risky, and some outright gruesome—to help stricken people and villages on Seward Peninsula. Evans’s account also provides a compelling example of how vital it was for regional hub communities in Alaska, and certain prominent organizations based in them, to lead responses to the pandemic (e.g., Troll and French 2021; see also DeValpine and Keeler 2022).

PREFACE TO EVANS’S LETTER

The text that follows is the letter sent by Ebenezer Evans to Territorial Governor Thomas Riggs Jr. In the letter, Evans justified decisions made and expenditures authorized on behalf of the BOE during the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic on the Seward Peninsula of western Alaska. I have added figures, tables, and endnotes to supplement Evans’s account, which is otherwise quoted directly. In it, Evans described the human conditions at the height of the influenza, including details of death and suffering that some readers are likely to find disturbing. But the account is part of Alaska’s history, as well as a useful reminder that every great tragedy includes stories of remarkable human courage, self-sacrifice, compassion, and resiliency.

EVANS’S LETTER

June 21, 1919

To The Hon. Gov. [Thomas] Riggs [Jr.]

Juneau, Alaska.

Sir:

I have the honor to submit to you a brief report of the Epidemic in the Northwestern District, with explanatory details regarding the expenditures made, and the necessity for same.

There seems to be no doubt in the minds of those who are familiar with the facts that the disease was brought into this section by the Steamship *Victoria* on its last sailing to this port.⁴ It is true that the passengers were quarantined and detained at the Holy Cross Hospital for a number of days, but owing to our isolation and the lateness of the season it was absolutely impossible to maintain a rigid quarantine (Fig. 4).⁵ To prohibit the landing of freight and supplies on which Nome and the north depended entirely for the fast-approaching winter would be to bring about

a famine and probably precipitate a riot, or at least a very strong protest from the citizens of this section; therefore, in the landing of freight and supplies we were brought into close contact with those who had become carriers of the pestilence. I believe that everything that was possible to be done under the existing circumstances was done as far as lay in the power of the Health Officer. Unfortunately for all concerned Dr. Neuman, Territorial Health Officer, was among the first to be attacked by the disease, which, in his case, developed so rapidly that little hopes were entertained for his recovery.⁶ In a few days several more were taken sick, among them being myself, this occurring even before the *Victoria* had left for the last trip to the outside. At this time of the year there is usually a slight epidemic of grip [influenza] prevalent in this part of the country and consequently the significance of the fast-spreading epidemic failed to arouse much concern until things were in such shape that there was no mistake regarding the nature of the dread malady that had overtaken us. The late Walter C. Shields was among the first to be laid low, and his death occurred during the first days of November [1918] (Fig. 5).⁷ I cannot help but think and remark here, that I believe that the disaster had much to do with his death; the news continually brought to his bedside by his friends regarding the wholesale deaths of his beloved Eskimos, among whom he had labored for so many years as Superintendent of the Bureau of Education, to see the labor of years apparently ruthlessly destroyed at one blow, he must have felt that his labor had been in vain.

Although Walter Shields had died, and I of not much practical use at that time, yet there were many hands willing to help, and through the agency of these, soup kitchens were established at the native villages at Nome (Fig. 6),⁸ coal was distributed and grub supplied; but as the disease spread, many of our indefatigable workers were laid low and upon others were many insistent calls from relatives and friends for aid. As the toll of deaths grew a silent horror fell on the people for it seemed as though the whole country was doomed: as one walked [through] the streets of Nome it seemed a city of the dead. A panic had struck the natives and their feverish conditions suggested the need of colder air and in spite of all efforts to stay them they would leave their beds of sickness and go into the cold air, which, inducing pneumonia, carried them away rapidly. We were in sore [straits]; ninety percent of our population laid low, and to make matters worse very little medical aid. Dr. Burson of the U.S. Army did everything he could to aid the sufferers as did Dr. Kittleson, a retired



Figure 4. View of Nome, Alaska, ca. 1915, with Holy Cross Hospital prominently featured. University of Alaska Anchorage—Archives; Hans J. Christensen family photograph album, 1908–1925; image no. uaa-hmc-0664-p51-b.

physician of Nome, but our medical facilities were painfully inadequate.⁹

To aid in caring for the sufferers the Holy Cross Hospital, which had closed its doors the previous fall, presumably for all time, was opened and, owing to the absence of trained nurses, volunteer nurses took charge of the work. The hospital was immediately filled with sufferers, and subsequently a building belonging to the fraternal order of the “Sons of the North”¹⁰ was taken over for the use of the Eskimos.

At my request the management of the native hospital was undertaken by the Keeper and Members of the Local Life Saving Station, and to their credit be it said that there was no let-up in their work of humanity. No one can imagine the scenes that took place in the native hospital, and it required a strong man to stand the severe strain that work at this place entailed.

So many were the calls for aid and so rapid the spread of the disease that there was no time for organization and few to organize had there been time, but every man that was able to do something did it, and everybody was trying

to help someone else. From ten to twenty natives were dying each day on an average in Nome and the dead wagon was in use constantly, going round to hunt for them and remove them.¹¹ Many were frozen to death during the night, their fires having gone out and not having sufficient strength to get up and replenish them. It was utterly impossible for myself, and others in charge, to [oversee] everything during the height of the epidemic, and so medicines were brought, food distributed to the natives and ordered at the stores when necessary by the relief workers. It was at the height of the epidemic at Nome that we got word that it had attacked other places, and I set to work to procure relief for them. This was no easy matter as the demand for workers in Nome had taken practically all available help. The prospect of going forty or fifty miles by dog team in exceptionally cold weather after lately recovering from an attack of influenza was enough to make the strongest man hesitate, for men were constantly being brought to town from outlying camps and many men so brought in had died. That they went speaks well for the quality of men that dwell in the northland, for there were few who went



Figure 5. Walter C. Shields and a Native boy preparing to eat dinner in a deserted cabin. Alaska State Library, Dr. Daniel S. Neuman Photographs, 1911–1920; Daniel S. Neuman photographer, ASL-P307-0061.

but felt they might succumb on the trail and fall a victim to the severe weather.

What places could be reached by telephone were speedily informed of the appearance of the epidemic and a very strict quarantine was inaugurated.¹² [Telephone] tolls were heavy in this country owing to the cost of upkeep but never was money better spent. Knowing that mail that had been landed from the *Victoria* had been sent north, I became alarmed for the safety of the inhabitants at Teller, a settlement about 75 miles north of Nome, but at that time of the year about a three days trip was required by dog team, and consequently sent two men north for information.¹³ On arriving at that place they found that the epidemic had struck that place at about the same time as at Nome. There had been but one white death, but at the native village a few miles beyond it had taken practically all of the natives, a few adults and children being saved.¹⁴ They had arrived too late; but fears being entertained for the safety of the several

villages north of Teller, they were instructed to proceed, one man returning for more help. I sent several more men to Wales and the relief parties arrived there in time to save the children and a few of the adult natives. The scenes at Wales were appalling and beyond description. On entering the native igloos, in some cases bodies were found in an advanced state of decomposition, where the adults had died and the children or women had attempted to keep the fires going. In many cases were found living children between their dead parents, huddling close to the bodies for warmth; and it was found at Wales that live dogs, taken into the house for comfort, had managed to reach the bodies of the natives and had eaten them, only a mass of bones and blood evidence of there having been people in the igloo. The men who handled these bodies and removed them from the cabins were paid ten dollars a day; they took their lives in their hands and I believe they earned every cent of the money due them.



Figure 6. "Eskimo camp at Sandspit, Nome, Alaska." The drying fish are probably tomcod. Alaska State Library, Dr. Daniel S. Neuman Photographs, 1911–1920; Daniel S. Neuman photographer, ASL-P307-0106.

The scenes that occurred in Nome and Wales were typical of other places with very little variations. Had I the gift of description I could write a record that could never be forgotten, but as it is, I am writing this to justify the expenditures I made to save the lives of these lovable people whom we are proud to call wards of the government, an industrious, self-supporting race, inoffensive and hardworking, who have always looked to the Bureau of Education as children look to their fathers in times of danger for succor.¹⁵ Had I not incurred these expenditures I am convinced that the Eskimo nation from the Kuskokwim to Point Barrow [*Utqiagvik*] would have been practically wiped out. I admit that had we had ample time for preparation, and had the thing to do over again, that much of the expense might have been saved; but in the hour of extremity when human life is at stake, I could not bring myself to haggle over expenses; it seemed too much like placing a money limit on a human life. For instance, I heard that a family had died at Rocky Point and that the children were living, but badly frozen; I hired a special

team to bring these children to Nome. Two men brought them here, a distance of seventy miles, starting early in the morning, and after resting a short while by the way, they arrived at five o'clock the next morning. I had stayed up all night to wait for them and on their arrival I sent for the doctor, who came immediately and examined them. Two were badly frozen, one of them dying a few days later, but the other surviving with one leg amputated. These hardy men came [through] a snow storm, terribly cold, with six children and delivered them to me at the hospital; one died, the rest were saved. There are some things that one cannot place an adequate value on, but the hire of the team and the services of the driver are well worth the sum they ask.

Take another case of a little girl at Teller who was cared for by her sister, everybody else in the house having died. When relief came it was found that both her feet were badly frozen and so she was brought to Nome for treatment; one foot had almost dropped off, hanging by a small piece of tissue; the doctor, on her arrival at the

hospital, removed this foot by cutting the tissue with the scissors. She survived but both legs have been removed to the hips.¹⁶

My action in sending a nurse to Shishmaref has been criticized. How much more would I have been criticized if I had neglected preventative measures, in the face of the experience I had had, and the epidemic reaching Shishmaref should have taken, let us say, ninety percent of the population. I know that if the disease had spread along the coast, that the scenes that had been familiar in other places would be repeated, and probably worse, owing to its greater isolation and the fact that there was but one white soul living there at the time, a Bureau [of Education] representative. The fact that it did not reach that place I believe is due to my sending a nurse there to take the necessary preventative steps; so I do not think that the attitude taken regarding my sending a nurse to that place when there was no epidemic there is just, when she herself is probably responsible for that very gratifying condition of things. It was the quarantine measures that were put into effect that stopped the flu and I personally do not regret anything that was done.¹⁷

On your telegraphic advice I incurred all necessary expenditures for the relief of the sufferers and those persons who are familiar with conditions as they were at that time maintain that, taking into account the extreme difficulties under which we worked, and the covering of so much territory during a time when workers were at a premium, that the total cost of relief, and what is more, the victory we achieved in stopping [the influenza's] progress, was remarkably small.

The malicious criticism that has been directed against the efforts of those who did the work, and the efforts to create an impression that moneys were expended needlessly and extravagantly can only come from those who were far removed from the zone of danger and saw to it that they stayed removed. The best answer to such as these is to ask them "What they did" in the hour of extremity.

In sending in these vouchers for payment two men who were active during the epidemic have assisted me passing upon the claims, Mr. Lomen, the District Attorney for this Division and Mr. Miller of the Marshall's Office, who is a capable accountant.¹⁸ As a Committee we have gone over the items and have eliminated everything that we believe to be unjust or extortionate, signing and forwarding only such claims where we have every reason to believe that they are legitimate and fair and in conformity with prevailing rates. There are of course several classes of

work where there never has been an established rate, such as burying the diseased bodies and collecting them. The men who did this class of work were paid at a higher rate than was paid for other classes of work, but they earned the money. Where there has been an established rate we have paid that only.

The following is a list of the villages attacked and the number of deaths known [see Table 1; Fig. 7].¹⁹ The body of one child was carried away by a lynx, and several are missing; a number have been partly eaten by dogs and cannot be identified so I give only the number of bodies found:

Wales and vicinity, including the villages of York, Ikpik, Metlatavuk and others... 175²⁰

| | |
|----------------|-------------------|
| Nome | 190 ²¹ |
| Penny River | 27 |
| Sinnuk | 38 |
| Woolley | 15 |
| Cape Nome | 13 |
| Solomon | 38 ²² |
| Spruce Creek | 7 ²³ |
| American River | 8 |
| Agiapuk | 23 |
| Teller | 72 ²⁴ |
| Golovin | 20 |
| Eldorado | 17 |
| Igloo | 60 ²⁵ |
| Safety | 7 |

Total Native Deaths this District... [710]

This figure will probably reach 725.

I have not included in these figures the deaths that occurred in St. Michael and vicinity, owing to the fact that I have not accurate data except from the villages below St. Michael extending to the Yukon Delta.²⁶

A number of the people who were engaged in relief work and who have presented claims are away in the creeks working and therefore have been unable to sign the vouchers necessary, so I must hold them over until they return in order to present them in proper form, duly signed.

I can assure you, Sir, that the people of this District appreciate the efficient manner in which you responded to our call for aid and the natives especially extend their heartfelt thanks through me for your promptness in offering them aid. I regret that there have been difficulties which seem to have delayed the payment of the vouchers, for I cannot help but appreciate the action of the Nome merchants who gave out their goods in this emergency without question or hesitancy. That they should thus have

Table 1. Correlation of village names reported by Evans (1919)

| Village or Area Name | Native Name | Variant Name(s) | ANCSA Site Number |
|----------------------|-------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------|
| Wales | Kingigin | Kingegan; Kiñugumut | |
| York | Anakuvatuug | | |
| Ikpik | Ikpik | | F-21966 |
| Metlatavuk | Millitaġvik | | F-22006 |
| Nome | Sitŋasuak | Chitnashuak | |
| Penny River | Sitŋasuakak | | |
| Sinnuk | Singak | Sinrock; Siniogamut | |
| Woolley (village) | Sinuk | Singiyak | |
| Cape Nome (village) | Ayasayaq | Ayacheruk | |
| Solomon | Anġutaq | Angutak | |
| Spruce Creek | Ukpiktulik | Opiktulick; Opictulik; Okpiktolik | F-21889 |
| American River | Kunguvik | Iglu, Igloo | F-21954 |
| Agiapuk | Mikuqtut | Metoktu, Aġiapak(?) | F-21978 |
| Teller | | Brevig Mission, Teller Mission | |
| Golovin | Cingik | Chinik | |
| Eldorado | | Eldorado River Site | F-21946 |
| Igloo | Akvugunak | Mary's Igloo, Iglu, Aviunak | |
| Safety | Sinuk(?) | Chingyak | |

Sources: Brown and Oksotkaruk (1975); Jacobson (2012); Koutsy (1981); Nelson (1899:PL. II); Oquilluk (1973); Orth (1967); Ray (1971); U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs (n.d.); U.S. Census Office (1900).



Figure 7. Locations of the villages for which Ebenezer Evans provided mortality figures. Village names are as reported by Evans. Map by Dale C. Slaughter.

suffered the pecuniary loss that comes with delay in settlement is unfortunate, as it is impossible to foresee but what the same contingency may occur at some future date. I ordered the goods when necessary and they gave them in good faith; I asked men to work when we needed them sorely, and they who could respond did so, and looked to me for their just reward, and I feel personally responsible to these men who helped to avert a serious calamity; for it was only by the united efforts of all who did their bit that the epidemic was stayed before it took practically every native from here to Point Barrow. I, in turn, therefore look to you, Sir, to see that these people who did what they could to aid the sufferers are treated in a becoming manner and that they receive what is legitimately due them as soon as funds are available.

Thanking you again for your timely aid, I remain.

Respectfully yours.

[Ebenezer D. Evans]

Acting Superintendent, Bureau of Education

Northwestern Division, [Nome, Alaska Territory].

DISCUSSION

The influenza virus was brought to Nome by the SS *Victoria*, which arrived in port there on October 20, 1918, with passengers from Seattle and mail aboard; the ship was quarantined thereafter, but that measure and fumigation of the mail it held did not prevent the virus from being released in Nome (Ganley 1998:248).²⁷ Ganley concluded the virus was initially spread across Seward Peninsula by the movement of mail carriers and others from Nome to outlying villages. Based on a map in his study, Fig. 8 shows three reconstructed routes by which the virus was dispersed (see Ganley 1998 for details about each of these routes of dispersal).

When the 1918–1919 influenza was in full swing, it was not possible to accurately tally the associated mortalities on Seward Peninsula, for the reasons listed below.

- Too many remote sites were scattered across the region that could not reasonably be checked on by travelers from Nome—particularly in the heart of a very cold winter and with so many possible Good Samaritans ill with the flu.
- The myriad variant (and often redundant, highly generalized, or conflicting) names for the region’s villages and mining camps make it impossible to be certain which sites are being discussed in some accounts. For example, there were at least four different sites known

as “Igloo” and three others that could be identified as “Teller.”

- The corpses of influenza victims at hard-hit villages frequently could not be buried, the result being that many were consumed by starving dogs, which left virtually no physical evidence behind.

There is nevertheless some value in comparing the mortalities reported by Evans (1919) and Ganley (1998). Listing those figures side-by-side (Table 2) hints that such a comparison presents a “moving target” challenge. Although not evident on the surface, mortality figures provided by Ganley were temporally focused on 1918 but those presented by Evans included deaths from 1918 and 1919. Those cases in which their respective mortality figures match (or very nearly so) usually indicate that the subject Native villages were totally wiped out early in the pandemic and no longer existed by 1919 (i.e., Agiapuk River, Sinnuk/Sinrock, Penny River, American River, and Cape Nome/Safety). The one village Evans reported on that Ganley did not (Eldorado [Fig. 9]) was also totally

Table 2. Comparison of Village Mortalities Reported by Evans (1919) and Ganley (1998)

| Village (Evans) | Mortalities | Village (Ganley) | Mortalities |
|------------------------------|-------------|---|-------------|
| Wales, York, | 175 | Peluruk | 200 |
| Ikpik, Metlatavuk and others | | (Peluzuk), Wales, Mitletaavik | |
| Nome | 190 | Nome | 175 |
| Penny River | 27 | Penny River, Cripple River | 28 |
| Sinnuk | 38 | Sinrock | 38 |
| Woolley | 15 | Cape Woolley | 8 |
| Cape Nome, Safety | 20 | Cape Nome, Safety | 21 |
| Solomon, Spruce Creek | 45 | Solomon, Spruce Creek | 75 |
| American River | 8 | American River (Igloo) | 7 |
| Agiapuk | 23 | Agiapuk River (Metoktu) | 23 |
| Teller | 72 | Teller (Brevig Mission), Point Jackson, Point Spencer | 72 |
| Golovin | 20 | Golovin, Chinik | 17 |
| Igloo | 60 | Mary’s Igloo | 68 |
| Eldorado | 17 | | |
| | | Rocky Point | 5 |
| Total Mortalities: | 710 | | 737 |

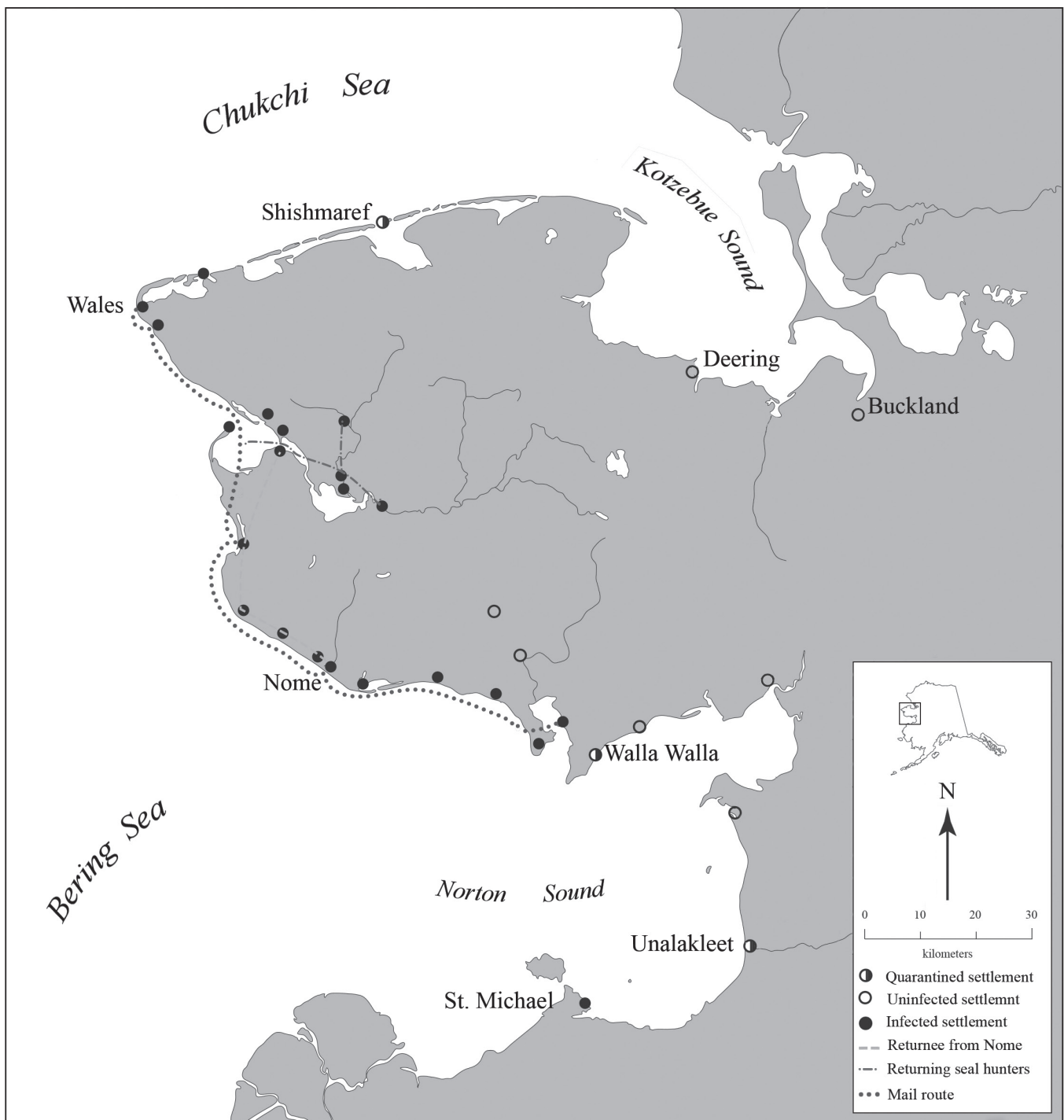


Figure 8. Routes of influenza virus dispersal on Seward Peninsula as reconstructed by Matt Ganley (1998). Map redrawn by Dale C. Slaughter.

wiped out. Ganley's emphasis on oral history accounts renders his mortality figures more reliable in some cases, the most notable of which may be the village at Cape Wooley. Those mortalities are based on an interview with Jerry Kaloke, a Native from the Nome–Brevig Mission area who was at Wooley when the flu hit and who named

or mentioned everyone who died there (Ganley 1998:247; Matt Ganley, pers. comm., 7 February 2022).

A related observation about Ebenezer Evans is appropriate here. In addition to the challenges Evans faced while dealing with the daily horrors and bad news during the pandemic, the death of his close colleague Walter



Figure 9. "Eldorado Village, Alaska." The man in foreground wearing the dark parka appears to be Walter C. Shields, which suggests the visit to this village may have been part of a Bureau of Education "reindeer inspection." Alaska State Library, Dr. Daniel S. Neuman Photographs, 1911–1920; Daniel S. Neuman photographer, ASL-P307-675.

Shields was probably never far from his mind. Worse yet, having been a teacher at "Igloo" (Marys Igloo) for two years prior to the influenza's onset, the death of most of its residents—people he personally knew—must have been very traumatic. It says much about Evans's character that he was able to so effectively carry out the demanding and stressful duties of his position in the midst of a raging pandemic.

Finally, it should be noted that the 1918–1919 influenza had a comparatively short duration on the Seward Peninsula: about three months. There are three main reasons for that: the region's dispersed and "remote" nature of human settlement prior to 1920; the influenza's extreme virulence (which did not spare many Natives who contracted it, and thereby also impeded its spread); and the high effectiveness of village quarantines. The residents of Nome, specifically, must also be credited. They adhered to rules imposed to stem the spread of the virus (wearing masks, avoiding large gatherings) and consistently put the community's wellness above themselves. Evans described the attitude of Nome residents during the pandemic with the statement that "everybody was trying to help someone else."

The attitude and responses of Nome residents during the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic are a stark contrast to

what has transpired in many parts of the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic—where public sentiments and related political divisiveness have sometimes seemed more toxic than the virus itself. Denial of the pandemic's reality has often been characterized as "fake news" or explained with bizarre conspiracy theories, both of which willfully ignore epidemiological history. Local and national mandates imposed to stem its expansion (masking, social distancing, vaccinations) have generated disrespect for medical caregivers and "science" in general; angry physical confrontations between groups and individuals with opposing views; and protests centered on claims that such mandates infringe on rights of personal freedom. From the author's perspective, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed America's decline when it comes to doctrines of unity, compassion, civic discourse, and critical thinking, as well as public interest in and knowledge of history.

In Alaska, specifically, it is no surprise that when COVID-19 appeared, Native villages around the state quickly enacted measures (essentially quarantines) to severely restrict travel into and out of the villages. Alaska Natives are very aware of the devastating impacts the 1918–1919 influenza, and numerous other epidemics, have had on their populations and cultures and were determined not to see history repeat itself. Unfortunately, no

such historical context existed among or was recognized by many Alaskans living in urban centers and closely adjacent communities. Thus, many of the latter people were critical and contemptuous of the preventative actions taken by rural Native villages.

ENDNOTES

1. Thomas W. Riggs Jr. (1873–1945) served from 1916 to 1921 as the ninth territorial governor of Alaska.
2. The June 1919 Ebenezer Evans letter was found in the Lomen Family Papers Collection, box 43, folder 629 (“Nome-Influenza Epidemic 1919”), Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, University of Alaska Fairbanks. Note that some minor corrections to that letter (e.g., “north” instead of “North,” “through” instead of “thru,” “St. Michael” instead of “St. Michaels”) are not indicated herein. More significant corrections or clarifications appear in brackets. Evans’s use of the term “epidemic” has been retained in the letter. In the text proper, Native place names spelled in accordance with accepted Native language orthographies are presented in italics.
3. Evans wrote the letter after the pandemic had passed, so he was summarizing its impacts in the region. From the influenza’s first appearance in Nome, Evans regularly reported details about it to Governor Riggs, who had relied heavily on that information in his efforts to secure more funding from Congress to help the BOE fight the pandemic.
4. Ganley (1998) discusses the role of the *Victoria* in bringing the influenza virus to Nome and explains factors in its dispersal across the Seward Peninsula. An excellent example of the latter is provided by Oquilluk (1973:205–208).
5. The Holy Cross Hospital in Nome was founded in 1902 by the Sisters of Providence (Catholic missionaries) and closed in September 1918 (Renner 2005:465–466). But, as Evans later notes, after the influenza reached Nome in late October 1918, local officials decided the hospital should be reopened. Father Frederick Ruppert was put in charge; he lived at the hospital (which was staffed with volunteer nurses) and oversaw its operation for the next few months (Renner 2005:552–553). With the pandemic in retreat, the hospital was closed for good on January 19, 1919 (Schienle 2018). During the pandemic, the hospital not only administered to people infected by the virus but also provided care for 80 orphaned children under a contract with the BOE, which paid the Catholic Church ten dollars per orphan (U.S. Congress 1919). The orphans were steadily moved to the church’s mission at Pilgrim Hot Springs—the establishment of which had begun in April 1918 (Renner 2005:507)—resulting in the addition of an orphanage to the mission.
6. Daniel S. Neuman (1869–1935), a physician employed by the U.S. Department of Health and Education, served in Nome from 1910 to 1920 (see Wallen 2000). He was also a dedicated photographer, and three of his photographs are included in this article.
7. Walter C. Shields (1884–1918) was named the superintendent of schools for the Northwestern District of the BOE in 1910 and served in that capacity until his death from influenza in November 1918.
8. Here, Evans is probably referring to the following Native camps and settlements in the Nome vicinity: the Nome “Sandspit,” Fort Davis (at the mouth of Nome River), and Cape Nome.
9. Apart from knowing that Dr. Henry Burson worked for the U.S. Army at Fort Davis, no further information has been found about him. Dr. Albert N. Kittleson (1870–?), a physician with the U.S. Department of Health and Education, “arrived at Port Clarence, Alaska, in 1896 as the government’s doctor for the reindeer herders” (Carlson 1946:261n11). Shortly after the 1898 discovery of gold at Nome, Dr. Kittleson retired from government service and became involved with mining, helping to organize three gold mining districts: the Discovery District and Council City District (Carlson 1946:261) and the Cape Nome District—for which he served in the then-dangerous position of recorder (Carlson 1947:165) until August 1900.
10. This may be an informal name for (or an affiliate of) the fraternal organization “Pioneers of Alaska, Igloo No. 1,” established at Nome in 1907.
11. This was apparently a horse-drawn wagon.
12. At the time, the communities of Candle, Council, and Marys Igloo all had telephone service with Nome (Ganley 1998:250). After being notified of the influenza by Nome officials, Marys Igloo established a quarantine, but it was broken soon thereafter when two local men who had been seal hunting on the ice west of

Teller returned home. The quarantine zone was then modified to protect the part of the village that had not been visited by the seal hunters (Ganley 1998:250).

13. Here, Evans is referring to the modern village of Teller—formerly also known as “Libbyville” or “Libby Station.”
14. The “native village” referred to here is Brevig Mission, about five to six miles northwest of Teller. Brevig Mission is located where the former Teller Reindeer Station operated from 1892 to 1900; this explains why historical accounts sometimes identify it as Teller, Teller Station, or Teller Mission.
15. This should be recognized as an idealistic, slice-of-time statement by a firm believer in the BOE’s work and objectives. The obviously high regard Evans had for Walter Shields, who was evidently well-liked by the Native community, may also have influenced his wording.
16. Inaccuracies exist in the information Evans presented about this unfortunate little girl, whose name was Elizabeth Bernhardt (later, Elizabeth Pinson [1912–2006]). Not only did the six-year-old survive her ordeal, she later published a memoir that includes a detailed account of her experience (Pinson 2004:32–51). That account states that both her family and her grandparents (“Ootenna” and “Kinaviak”) were at a fish camp named “Nook” (on the north spit at the entrance to Grantley Harbor) during the summer of 1918. When fishing ended, she went with her grandparents to their home at “Teller Mission” (Brevig Mission). Her family’s home was several miles away, at Teller (modern Teller [Salinuk or Nuk according to Ray 1971:6, 26]). Influenza struck when she was with her grandparents, both of whom fell ill and died. Their deaths coincided with a severe winter storm and extremely cold temperatures, leaving her alone in their house for several days without heat or anyone to care for her. The virus was also killing people in Teller at that time. When Elizabeth’s father (Albert Bernhardt) felt weather conditions were good enough to do so, he sent his 18-year-old son (Tommy Bernhardt) to check on his sister and grandparents. Tommy found the frozen bodies of his grandparents and Elizabeth barely alive on the house floor—with badly frostbitten legs. He loaded her on the dogsled and took her home to Teller, where she remained for several days due to bad weather, while her mother (“Ouiyaghasik”) and father did their best to care for her. As the condition of her

legs increasingly worsened, her parents decided that (despite the continuing bad weather) they could wait no longer to get her to Nome for medical treatment. Traveling by dogsled, it took her father and brother two long days to transport Elizabeth to Nome (about 100 miles away over the winter trail), where doctors at the Holy Cross Hospital immediately operated on her. They amputated one leg in the area of the thigh and the other below the knee.

17. The quarantine at Shishmaref was indeed critical to limiting the spread of the influenza, as were those established at Walla Walla and Unalakleet (see Ganley 1998). Quarantine points were typically manned with armed guards. Quarantines were also established at other villages in the region, such as Candle, Council, White Mountain, and Marys Igloo, and another quarantine point was put in place about 18 miles east of Golovin (Ganley 1998:250).

The nurse Evans sent to Shishmaref is believed to have been Mrs. E. W. Tashner (see Mielke 2020). The “one white soul” he said lived in the village at that time was a BOE teacher named John P. Jones, and a woman named Mollie F. Jones was there with him (US BOE 1919:6).

18. Gudbrand J. Lomen (1850–1934) was the U.S. district attorney in Nome from 1918 to 1919. Patriarch of the Lomen family of Nome, he also served as mayor of Nome (1917–1919) and U.S. district judge (1921–1929).

Chief Deputy A. B. Miller of the U.S. Marshal’s Office is said to have “worked continuously for relief of [the] stricken since [the] outbreak of influenza” in Nome (*Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget* 1918a).

19. Table 1 correlates sites listed by Evans with their Native names and/or variant names. Some of these correlations are problematic. A number of these sites were the subject of historical place and cemetery site applications filed by Bering Straits Native Corporation pursuant to Section 14(h)(1) of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) (see Pratt 2009). When an “ANCSA Site Number” is shown in the table, it means a report about the given site is part of the Bureau of Indian Affairs “ANCSA Collection” (in Anchorage).
20. The large number of mortalities at Wales, together with widespread infections among other community members, was so overwhelming that the living were not capable of burying the dead. Men who had been sent from Nome to check on the village ultimately

buried the deceased in a mass grave that is believed to contain about 170 people.

21. Influenza caused very high (Native) mortalities in Nome, and in a very short span of time: in this respect, the situation was similar to that experienced in Wales. But in Nome it was possible to collect the victims' bodies soon after their deaths, and many of their names were known and recorded. The number of victims, however, precluded the possibility of individual burials, so Nome officials arranged for the Pioneer Mining Company to dig a trench in the frozen ground in which the bodies could be interred. After a crew of the company's miners completed the task, the resulting trench—"200 feet long, 12 feet wide, and 8 feet deep"—became a mass grave for 175 individuals (*Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget* 1918b). Since it was the regional hub, at any given time Natives from numerous outlying villages were present in Nome. Thus, the mass grave undoubtedly included people from multiple Native communities.
22. The large number of Native people killed by influenza at Solomon (Angutak)—probably between 45 and 75—also led to a mass grave, the exact location of which has not yet been determined. According to an account by influenza survivor Herb James (1975), a resident of that village when the virus struck, the ground was frozen so hard that the victims' bodies were taken "down to the beach" where there was soft sand. Then "one big trench" was dug and all the bodies were placed inside it. He also noted that the people who performed the burial "put two big stakes on the end": presumably meaning that a stake was planted at each end of the trench.
23. The village Evans identified as "Spruce Creek" was *Ukpiktulik* (Brown and Oksoktaruk 1975). The site is bounded on one side by a tributary of Cache Creek, a variant name of which was Spruce Creek (Orth 1967:173). In its November 18, 1918, edition, the *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget* (1918b) reported 16 people dead from influenza at Spruce Creek: every resident of the village according to one elder from the area (James 1975). Oral history accounts suggest the victims were subsequently buried in a sort of mass grave, in which "the bodies were placed on the ground and then covered with wood" (U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs 1990:6).
24. The influenza's impact on the village of Teller (Brevig Mission) was devastating: 72 of its 80 residents died between November 15 and 20, 1918 (e.g., Pratt et al. 2013:46). The victims' frozen bodies "remained in the homes where they died until January 1919" (Stern and Ryder 2009:22), and then were buried in a mass grave.
25. Here, "Igloo" refers to Marys Igloo. This was another village hard hit by the influenza, which struck during extreme cold weather conditions and quickly killed many residents (e.g., see Pinson 2004:32–43). As in other villages in the region, the scale of infections and mortalities was such that there were not enough able-bodied people in the community to bury the dead. In this instance, the 60+ residents killed by influenza had died in November 1918, but their frozen bodies remained in houses until January 1919, when they were buried in a mass grave at Pilgrim Hot Springs (Oquilluk 1973:205–208). William Oquilluk's first-person account describes the many difficult tasks he performed at Marys Igloo in the influenza's aftermath, including having to kill hundreds of village dogs that—due to their owners' deaths—were starving and becoming dangerous. The account also explains that he and mail carrier Peter Jaeger transported the human bodies by dogsled to Pilgrim Hot Springs (about four miles away), using Jaeger's 30-foot sled and a team of 16 to 20 dogs. The bodies were taken to Pilgrim Hot Springs because it was the only place near Marys Igloo that contained unfrozen ground, thanks to the hot springs. Oquilluk and Jaeger personally dug the trench and buried the victims. The Marys Igloo case is unique not only due to Oquilluk's first-person account but also because those who died at the village were buried in a mass grave at an entirely different location.
26. Evans did not discuss these data.
27. The *Victoria* departed Nome on October 28, 1918 (Renner 2005:552), headed south to the village of St. Michael.

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