

DALLAS COUNTY
HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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Dallas and Pandemics: We've Been There Before



Soldiers lining up at Love Field to have their throats sprayed during the 1918 Spanish Influenza outbreak.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: *As this issue of the Chronicle is being prepared, the nation is taking what appears to be unprecedented steps to combat a disease.*

It all seems very familiar—people saying that it's “a hoax,” science scrambling to find an answer, businesses closing, shortages of certain peculiar items, restrictions on public gatherings, canceled sporting events, and people offering all kinds of cures—some genuinely sincere and some only genuinely concerned about making money. One could think that we're talking about today and the COVID-19 virus, but we're actually talking about the 1918 outbreak of Spanish Influenza.

That disease affected the world like no other since the Black Plague of the Dark Ages. It is estimated that as many as 50 million people died worldwide. One in three Americans contracted the disease, and the mortality rate was devastatingly high—20% of those who fell ill died. Overall, about 600,000 Americans died because of the disease—a number that exceeded the combined total of those who died in all of America's wars during the 20th century.

Nor did Dallas escape the pandemic. In fact, how it spread and how the community and local officials reacted to it is again very similar to what is now occurring. Although the national press had begun in September 1918 to report the spread of disease, locally, the city's health officer down-played its threat, saying it wasn't much worse than the common flu. However, local hospitals were seeing something quite

(See **Dallas and Pandemics** on Page 3)

The Hernandez Grocery Store

Amazing. That is all that can be said about a family-owned grocery store that has been in existence for 102 years. The odds of any business lasting more than a handful of years are exceedingly difficult—more than 80% of all new businesses close by their fifth birthday. To be a “mom and pop” neighborhood grocery that has had to withstand the Great Depression, the arrival of grocery store chains and Walmart, population shifts, the construction of a toll road that literally destroyed the neighborhood it served, speculative real estate pressures, and the challenges of being a minority-owned business, the story of the Hernandez Grocery is truly amazing.



The sign at 2118 Alamo Street.

Established by Pedro Hernandez in 1918 when he was just twenty-one, the grocery was originally located on McKinney Avenue and served the Little Mexico community where much of Dallas’ Hispanic population lived. At the time, it was one of the first and one of the few grocers to provide food items that people from Mexico were accustomed to using in their cooking.

As might be expected, the grocery, not unlike most businesses, experienced difficult times during the 1930s. Socorro Navarro Hernandez, Mr. Hernandez’s wife, recalled in 2007 that the store survived on barter. Customers, she said, would often “bring some cheese or chicken to pay. It was hard, and one year, we almost had to close.”

But they didn’t, and in the mid-1940s, the store moved a few blocks to Alamo Street. It was there for the next sixty years that the store operated even though the construction of the North Dallas Tollway during 1966-1968 irreparably changed Little Mexico. Still, the grocery continued, selling meats, meals, and other food.

It was only until 2009 when real estate in the area had become so expensive that the store finally left for a new location on Garland Road. However, just because it is no longer in Little Mexico doesn’t mean that the store isn’t continuing to serve its traditional customers.

Today’s Dallas now has 560,000 Latinos—90 times the number that lived in Dallas in 1940—and while the store’s current location is ten miles away from Little Mexico, the population of its new neighborhood is 52% Hispanic.

It is not often that a family-owned grocery store can become one of the oldest, continuously operated businesses in a city like Dallas. But what else would you expect from a store that has been so amazing?

The photos of Pedro Hernandez and Socorro Navarro Hernandez were graciously provided courtesy of their grandson, Macario Hernandez, PhD.

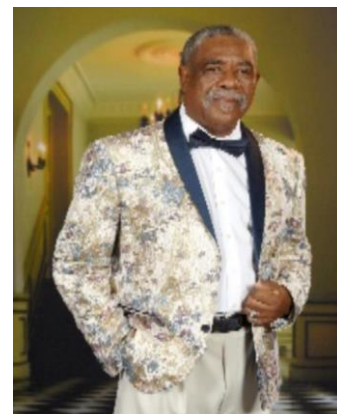


Grocery store founder Pedro Hernandez and his wife Socorro Navarro Hernandez who is standing outside of their Alamo Street store.

Meet Roosevelt Nichols

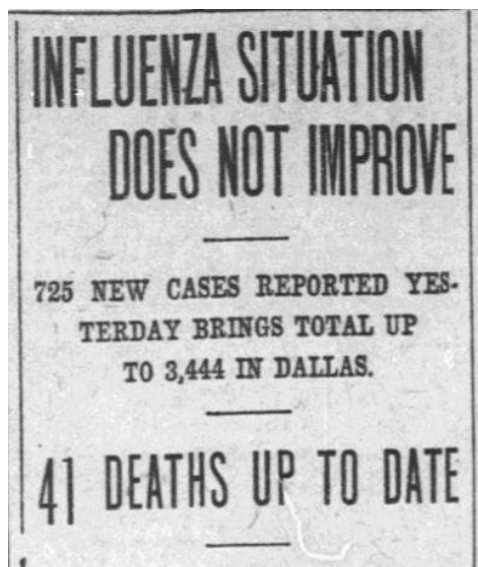
Roosevelt Nichols is one of the Dallas County Historical Commission’s newest members, having been appointed last year by County Commissioner John Wiley Price.

A resident of Lancaster for over thirty years, Mr. Nichols brings a strong mix of experience and community involvement to the Commission. He has chaired the Lancaster Human Relations Commission, been a member of the city’s planning and zoning commission, and been an election judge. He is a Mason and a member of the Lancaster Lions Club. (See **Nichols** on Page 4)



Dallas and Pandemics *(continued from page 1)*

different and were soon at capacity. For two weeks, the city's health officer and its board of health deliberated over what to do. Once it appeared that the health officer was prepared to ask the city to pass an ordinance declaring a quarantine, but he changed his mind, and all that he and the health board could agree upon was to require that influenza cases be a reportable illness.



October 12, 1918 Dallas Morning News article on the local incidence of Spanish Influenza.

Four days later, with patients now being treated in hospital hallways, city health officials finally decided that stronger action was needed, and the mayor issued a public gathering ban and closed all Dallas theaters, playhouses, and other places of public amusement. Streetcar operators were asked to disinfect their cars each day, to permit only as many passengers on a car as there were seats, and to add extra cars during rush hour.

Immediately, affected businesses complained that they were being singled-out and wondered why they had to close while schools were allowed to remain open. Although the city's health officer had doubts about the effectiveness of closure methods, the mayor did not. Three days after the city's initial theater-closing order, the mayor—against the advice of his health board—unilaterally closed all public and private schools, churches, and other remaining forms of public gatherings. Such action came none too soon—659 new cases were reported on that same day.

The mayor's action remained in effect for about three weeks. By then, over 9000 cases had been reported, and about 500 people had died—particularly startling numbers when one recalls how quickly this all occurred and that Dallas then was only about one-tenth the size that it is now. It is also thought that many cases went unreported.

In the end, Dallas was relatively far more fortunate than other cities like Philadelphia that had 12,000 deaths or Birmingham and New Orleans that had mortality rates that were two-to-three times higher than Dallas'. That, of course, was of little consolation to those Dallasites who had been ill or who had lost friends and family members.

No one knows how today's encounter with COVID-19 will end, but one thing is clear—that the skepticism, inaction, and mixed signals that we are presently sometimes seeing with this disease is unfortunately not new.

Untold History Marker Funding Available

With the State having announced that it has resumed taking applications for Texas Historical Markers, the Dallas County Historical Commission (DCHC) will once again provide funding for markers that acknowledge important cultural aspects of the County's history that have largely gone under-recognized.

Under its Untold History Marker Program, the County may provide up to \$587.50 (i.e., 50% of the cost of a small state historical marker) for a qualified marker. DCHC funding is contingent upon the Texas Historical Commission first approving the request for the marker and then having the applicant provide the rest of the cost of the marker by January 1, 2021.

Funding applications, which are available on the DCHC's website (www.dallascounty.org/dchc) under "Projects," must be submitted electronically to Rick Loessberg, the County's Director of Planning & Development, at rloessberg@dallascounty.org by June 1, 2020. Mr. Loessberg is also available at 214.653.7601 to answer any questions about the program and the funding application.



"The Crossroads" was the first marker to receive DCHC untold history funding.

The Sears Catalog: Quietly Combatting Jim Crow

By Roosevelt Nichols

Probably almost every American over a certain age has warm memories of Sears and its catalog. For most, it is probably its Christmas catalog that seemed to contain every amazing toy ever made. For people in Dallas, Sears and its catalog represented a good job—its one-

million-square-foot catalog-order facility south of downtown was the first Sears warehouse outside of Chicago, and at its peak, this complex employed 1000 people—some of whom wore roller skates so that they could quickly move through the enormous facility. Not so well known, though, but actually much more important is what the catalog meant to blacks in the Jim Crow South.



Very simply, this catalog was a beacon to African Americans who lived in small southern towns like I did in the 1950s. At that time, blacks were always last in line to be waited on—if we were ever waited on at all—and we were always subject to stares and disapproving looks. We weren't allowed to try clothes on, the choices we had in these stores were limited, and the prices always seemed to be too high.

But Sears was different. Its mail order catalog was *revolutionary* to African Americans who were not able to shop in stores of their choice. You see, people could read the catalog at home and decide what they wanted to order and avoid the local ridicule. They now had the opportunity to freely buy and shop for whatever they wanted as long as they could afford it—*just like their white counterparts*.

Not surprisingly, white Southerners sometimes pushed back. If you were black and wanted to shop in some other way, you were not only threatening sales at the local white-owned store, but you were also threatening Jim Crow itself. In some situations, white storeowners went so far as to publicly burn Sears catalogs, but the Sears strategy was even more far-reaching than Jim Crow.

Instructions were given in each catalog about how to place orders. People could either mail their orders—and they didn't have to be made on an order form (they could be scribbled on a piece of scrap paper)—or place them by phone (Sears had also keenly hired people who could speak other languages so that the nation's newly-arrived immigrants could easily place orders, too). And there were always people like my grandmother, Ruth Davis, who had access to a Sears catalog (she was the maid for the owner of the local general store!) who would either place orders for others or help them do so.

Sears may now not be what it once was, but for many of us, it helped provide us with the foundation that we now have today. As historian Louis Hyman notes, Sears helped fuel and sustain the belief that African Americans could use the same buses and restaurants and restrooms and theaters as whites. That's a valuable belief that could not be purchased in any store.

Nichols *(continued from page 2)*

His appreciation and commitment to history is equally deep. He has created a mobile museum on African American history, developed an approved social studies curriculum, and organized an annual Martin Luther King celebration and parade in Lancaster since 2002.

The *Dallas County Chronicle* is the quarterly newsletter of the Dallas County Historical Commission. People can subscribe to the *Chronicle* by sending an email to: rlouessberg@dallascounty.org.

The Historical Commission serves as the primary advisory body on historic preservation matters for the County.

Its meetings are open to the public and are typically held on the second Thursday of every month at 11:30 a.m. For more information, please call 214.653.7601.