

THE 1918 INFLUENZA - THE LAST GREAT PANDEMIC

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PANDEMIC
By Colleen Adair Fliedner

On April 6, 1917, Woodrow Wilson declared war on Germany and its allies, collectively called the "Central Powers." The president had flipped his anti-war promise on its proverbial head, facing the challenges of preparing the country for war like a bull charging a matador's cape. Going to war had been a difficult decision, but Wilson was left no choice when Germany had become more aggressive towards the United States. Kaiser Wilhelm II had announced that

all ships, including American passenger liners, would be sunk on sight. In addition, the British had intercepted a coded telegram sent by Germany's Foreign Secretary to the German Ambassador in Mexico. The message proposed that Mexican troops invade the United States to start a war to reclaim New Mexico, Texas and Arizona. The Central Powers would supply weapons and money to support Mexican troops. That way, the U.S. military would be too busy fighting against Mexico to send troops overseas to join the Allied forces.

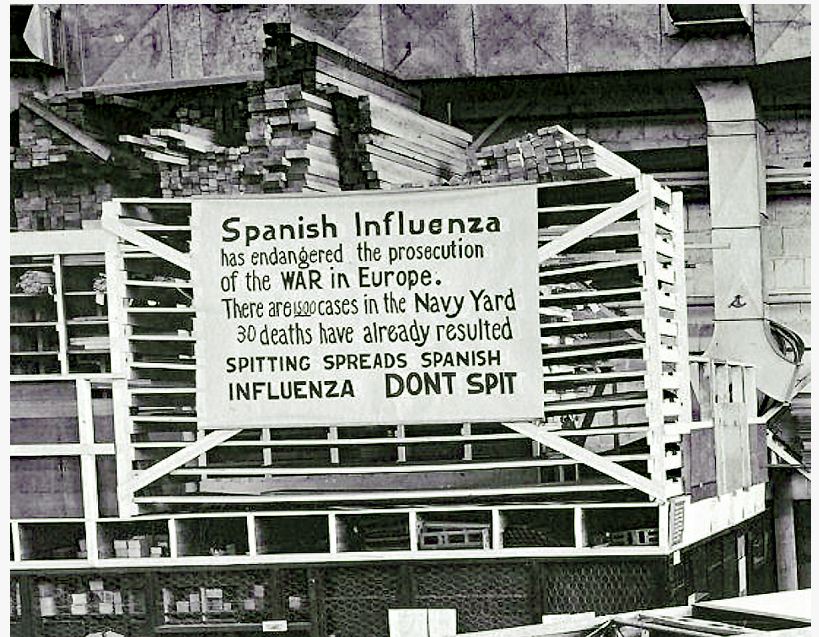
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censored so that nothing negative about the war was printed. People who spoke against the war were often brought to trial; some were even imprisoned.

In the military encampments, new recruits were squeezed into barracks and tents, their cots so close together that there was barely room to move between them. At Camp Funston on the massive grounds of Fort Riley, Kansas, an estimated 56,000 young men were being trained. Little did anyone know that a battle almost as terrible as the one they would face in the trenches abroad would soon come to call on the home front.



Sign during the Spanish flu

To this day, scientists battle about where or how the “Great Influenza Pandemic” began. One theory is that the virus infected pigs on a farm near Camp Funston. It all started, they said, two days after the farmer burned piles of hog manure. The wind carried a storm of smoke laden with the virus into the camp. Men began to sicken by the scores. Within three weeks, 1,100 had died. Other researchers stated that it was impossible for this kind of virus to survive burning, let alone to be infectious after being swept along for miles before finding a human host.

A more popular theory was that the killer influenza had been created by German scientists and brought to America on a submarine. The newspapers picked up on this idea and people believed the story. After all, the Germans had created deadly gases which killed thousands of soldiers in the trenches.

Yet another hypothesis was that the influenza outbreak during the winter of 1916-17 at a British encampment in France had symptoms eerily similar to the strange new strain of the killer flu. Some researchers believed that because of the weakened condition of the soldiers and the filth in the rat-infested trenches, the germs had mutated into an even stronger strain that was easily transmitted. The killer flu spread from stricken French

soldiers in concentric circles to soldiers on both sides and into the cities. It hitched rides on unknowing hosts boarding ships bound for ports all over the world, eventually making its way to America...and possibly to the overcrowded military base in Kansas.

Ironically, the new flu was nicknamed “the Spanish influenza” even though it didn’t begin in Spain. Most likely, it reared its ugly head in France and Britain first and was likely carried to Spain by infected people spending time in Spain’s warm coastal resort towns. Because the war’s propaganda machine in the Allied countries had forbidden their newspapers from printing information about the outbreak of the flu and the toll it was taking on the troops, Spain, a neutral country with newspapers that included stories about the influenza outbreak in its country, was blamed for its beginnings.

The reality is that we may never know the influenza’s origin. The fact is that it moved through military bases in America and overseas like locusts ravaging a wheat field. Soldiers who had been exposed – and even those who were already showing symptoms – were deployed overseas. Shiploads of sick men arrived and spread the disease by the thousands. The strange virus preyed most often on the young and healthy. Symptoms began with headaches, violent coughing, body aches, sore throats and high fevers. Although some recovered, others weren’t so lucky. After a



Beds crowded into a barracks at Fort Funston, Kansas.



A victim of the 1918 Spanish flu is loaded into an ambulance.

few days, their lips and even their faces turned blue when their lungs became congested with blood and fluids. Scientists worked madly to come up with a cure or, at least an inoculation. But in 1918 their microscopes weren't advanced enough to view, let alone understand how to destroy, the viruses that were wreaking havoc on the world.

It's ironic that the pandemic struck during a time when the world was at war. Military ships with soldiers carrying the flu stopped for fuel and supplies in ports all over the world. There are stories about sailors disembarking their ships in a port and infecting entire communities, such as in Western Samoa, where 8,000 people died after a vessel from Auckland docked there for refueling.

Meanwhile in America the flu continued to sweep across the country. People wore flimsy gauze masks hoping to protect themselves from the invisible enemy. Restaurants, churches and theaters closed, and people were advised to avoid crowds and stay home as much as possible. Mingling closely with other people was banned in many areas. For most Americans, however, that wasn't an option. They had to work. Without them, who would build the much-needed military trucks and guns and cannons to ship to the troops? And of course, they caught and passed on the flu to their fellow workers.

One of the worst massive public exposures, a mistake that cost thousands of lives, occurred in Philadelphia when a Liberty Bond parade wasn't canceled by the city's leaders. An estimated three-hundred thousand residents lined the parade route and within three days, an estimated hundred thousand men, women and children became infected. Thousands of men, women and children – often entire families – died.

Overseas, the influenza sickened and killed thousands of soldiers on both sides. By fall, battle-weary Bulgaria, Austria, Hungary and Turkey had asked the Allies for peace. Germany would soon do the same, signing an armistice on November 11. The war was over, and the flu had more than a little credit for its somewhat quick end.

Although the flu continued its killing spree in second and third waves for months, the epidemic seemed to be over by the early winter of 1919. The public was ecstatic, patronizing their favorite eateries, partying, attending social functions, and shopping. Slowly, things returned to normal.

The total number of people who died from the 1918 influenza is believed to have been more than the those who died in World War 1. Because many of the countries affected by the virus didn't keep accurate records, the numbers of dead are only estimates and range somewhere between 40 million and 100 million worldwide. Added to the 20-plus million soldiers and civilians who were killed in World War 1, the loss of life during this time is staggering.

For the scientists who couldn't find a cure or what had caused this new variety of killer flu, their work continued. No one doubted that the day would come when another mutated disease would disrupt the world. It took over 100 years, but during the current outbreak of COVID 19, lessons learned from the 1918 flu were put into practice. Avoiding crowds, closing businesses, and asking people to stay home, helped then as it has helped now.

And the good news is that our ancestors' lives did, indeed, return to normal. Strangely, the 1918 influenza hasn't been included in history classes, and few books have been written on the topic. Until the recent pandemic, the "Spanish" flu had been forgotten by most people...with the exception of the generations of scientists who have worked to understand exactly what caused the deadly flu of 1918. Their hope has always been to prevent another similar outbreak.

And the battle to find a vaccine goes on....

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