

## The War Within

*In 1918, a flu pandemic ripped through the global population with such speed and virulence that by the end of the following year an estimated 40 million people would be dead -- four times the number of victims eventually claimed by the First World War. The flu's impact was simultaneously felt in nearly every corner of the earth, from the battlefields of Europe and Northern Africa to remote Inuit villages in Alaska and the grasslands of New Zealand. The international medical community, lacking the expertise to deal with the virus (which it mistakenly believed to be a bacterium), found itself powerless to stop the contagion from spreading. Hospitals ran out of beds for their sick. Morgues spilled out onto the streets, the corpses stacked on the sidewalks like cordwood. And the war ensured that the cycle would continue. Troops from both sides of the conflict, dispatched back and forth across the globe, were serving as the unwitting carriers of a lethal disease. The carousel of death kept turning (Secrets of the Dead, 2004).*

This vividly horrific quote is from the advertisement sleeve of a film published by PBS. It gives just a glimpse into the destruction that ravaged the world's population in 1918. The Spanish Flu, as the Pandemic of 1918 would be coined, was beyond anything ever experienced before by Americans in that generation. The Spanish Influenza spread via military activity, having devastating effects which brought the American people to the brink of despair.

The Pandemic affected one third of the world's population, about 500 million people. The flu spread worldwide in three consecutive waves during 1918 – 1919. The first wave occurred in the spring-summer, the second in summer-fall and the third in winter. Dr. Jeffery Taubenberger (2006) is the chair of the Department of Molecular Pathology at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology and specializes in the study of the evolution of influenza viruses. He verified that the second wave proved to be “highly fatal.” The cumulative global death toll from all three waves is estimated from between 40 to 100 million.

The first wave of the influenza broke out near the end of World War I; the war served to facilitate its spread. In the book entitled *The Great Influenza*, John M. Barry (2004), states that the most common theory on the pandemic's place of origin is Fort Riley, Kansas. Camp Funston, the second-largest military base in the United States and the second of two military bases in Fort Riley, housed about fifty-six thousand troops (p.95). It was at Camp Funston on March 11, 1918 that a private reported in the hospital before breakfast with flu-like symptoms. By noon, the hospital was swarmed with over one hundred men with the same symptoms, and within a week the number rose to 500. This event would be referred to in history as the beginning of the first wave of the Spanish Influenza, the least fatal of the three waves but still claiming the lives of forty-eight soldiers at Camp Funston. The film recorded by PBS entitled *Influenza 1918*, reported that pneumonia was the recorded cause of death for the soldiers (The American Experience). The close quarters of the military base and mass deployment of troops throughout the world hastened its spread: “Funston fed a constant stream of men to other American bases and to Europe, men whose business was killing. They would be more proficient at it than they could imagine” (Barry, 2004, p.97).

During the summer and fall of 1918, there were over one and a half million Americans dispatched to the European campaign; among them were soldiers from Camp Funston who “brought with them a tiny, silent

companion" (The American Experience). The flu had seemed to disappear only to almost instantly re-emerge in Europe. "For the virus had not disappeared. It had only gone underground, like a forest fire left burning in the roots, swarming and mutating, adapting, honing itself, watching and waiting, waiting to burst into flame" (Barry, 2004, p.175). By May, the flu had made its presence known on two continents. Ensuring the influenza's spread, battle front interactions between warring factions lead to the establishment of the second wave.

As the result, "the second wave caused simultaneous outbreaks in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres from September to November" (Taubenberger, 2006) and included the most fatalities of the pandemic. Seventy-thousand American military stationed in Europe were ill. In some companies, eighty percent of the fatalities were a result of the influenza that like a consuming blaze ravaged everything in its path (The American Experience). Simultaneously, in the United States the three months of the second wave would test the very fabric of the American society.

Accordingly, the beginning of the second wave landed on the American east coast with its distressing effects: "By the time the silent traveler came back to America, it had become a relentless killer" (The American Experience). In September Dr. Victor Vaughan, the Surgeon General of the Army, was called to Camp Deven military base near Boston, Massachusetts. There he saw a nightmare he would never forget. The wards of the military base's hospital were packed past their one hundred bed capacity, with uniformed men continuing to pour through the doors. Their appearance was marked with a "bluish cast" on their faces, along with symptoms of a cough that was producing bloody sputum, saliva mixed with mucus, puss and blood coming from the lungs (Barry, 2004, p. 189). Blood was often seen coming from several other orifices of the head, such as the nose, eyes, and ears. On that day, 63 men died at Camp Deven's hospital (The American Experience). Autopsies would show that the lungs had swollen, filled with bloody bodily fluids, and turned blue because of oxygen deprivation. Many people that were infected showed no signs of illness in the morning and by nightfall would already be dead. "It was so quick, so sudden and so terrifying..." (The American Experience). The destruction seemed to be confined to the military population on the bases, sparing the general American public.

Although the initial death toll was predominately military, the families of the deceased soldiers were beset with loss. With the increasing number of troops returning from Europe, various military hospitals were dealing with the same symptoms found at Camp Devens. Notices of the severe illness or death of these enlisted family members flooded the communication lines bringing multitudes of civilians onto the military bases. Therefore, it was just a matter of time before the Pandemic of 1918 was introduced to the civilian population (Barry, 2004, p. 215).

On September 11, as the Boston Red Sox were winning the World Series lead by the famous Babe Ruth, three civilians died in Quincy, Massachusetts to the dreaded Spanish Influenza (The American Experience). The fortress of protection had been breached by an invisible invasion force. America itself was under attack. In September about 12,000 people died from the flu; in October, "the deadliest month in the nation's history" 195,000 Americans died (The American Experience).

During these devastating months, "47 percent of all deaths in the United States, nearly half of all those who died from all causes combined [...] resulted from the influenza and its complications [...] it killed enough to depress the average life expectancy in the United States by more than ten years" (Barry, 2004, p.238). Almost every American family experienced loss (The American Experience).

To illustrate this point, personal testimonies of family after family could verify the hovering fear of waiting for the vector to cross the front door. They had witnessed the intruder entering uninvited into the homes of friends and family. Christine A. Featherstone relays the story, in the *Toronto Star*, of her grandfather who was a family doctor during the pandemic.

*He was seeing patients day and night in their homes. He often spoke of how terrible it was to answer those house calls only to find that his patients had died. He described one particular tragic incident when he arrived at a patient's home late in the evening, his last call of the day. No one answered the front door, but it was open, so he went in. He found two children dead in the living room, then went upstairs and found the mother dead in the bedroom with her baby dead in the bassinette beside her (Everything Changed Drastically, 2005).*

Indeed, the pandemic had become a national crisis even though measures were being taken to try to stop its spread. Schools were closed, public gatherings were forbidden, and even churches shut their doors. In Washington D.C., Commissioner Louis Brownlow closed the bars and theaters (American Experience). In many cities, officials required that anyone in public must wear a mask. "But masks didn't help. They were thin and porous—no serious restraint to tiny microbes. It was like trying to keep out dust with chicken wire"(American Experience). Signs were posted about sputum causing death. People avoided talking to one another, not knowing who would be the next to fall prey to the deadly disease.

Following right along with these anxiety-filled precautions, one of the "most terrifying aspects of the epidemic was the piling up of bodies. Undertakers, themselves sick, were overwhelmed. They had no place to put bodies. Gravediggers were either sick or refused to bury influenza victims [...] with no grave diggers bodies could not be buried" (Barry, 2004, p.223). This coupled along with a shortage of caskets caused the massive burying of bodies in trenches dug by steam shovels. This added demoralizing elements to an already traumatic event. Louise Apurchase can "vividly" recall this stripping away of dignity that accompanied the plague.

*A neighbor boy about seven or eight died and they used to just pick you up and wrap you up in a sheet and put you in a patrol wagon. So the mother and father screaming, 'Let me get a macaroni box' [for a coffin] – macaroni, any kind of pasta, used to come in this box, about 20 pounds of macaroni fit in it – 'please please let me put him in the macaroni box, don't take him away like that...'(Barry, 2004, p. 223).*

Coupled with this demoralization and fear, there was such a sense of despair produced by the absence of any answers to the cause and therefore the solution of this disease that was ravaging the nation. Many different theories were circulated. One such theory was originated by the head of the Health and Sanitation Section of the Emergency Fleet Corporation, Lt. Col. Philip Doane. While speaking in Washington, D.C., he speculated about the cause by pointing at the Germans.

*It would be quite easy for one of these German agents to turn loose Spanish influenza germs in a theater or some other place where large numbers of persons are assembled. The Germans have started epidemics in Europe, and there is no reason why they should be particularly gentle with America (1918 Influenza Timeline).*

At the same time, scientists themselves were baffled, believing it to be a bacterial pathogen, yet being unable to create a vaccine to counteract it (Barry, 2004, p.357). Many years later, research would discover the pathogen to be viral, a microbe that could not be seen until the discovery of the electron microscope.

Not only did politicians and scientists have their theories, but the uneducated commonwealth did as well. Because of the bluish cast that settled in on the face of the victims, a cast that at times became so dark blue that it appeared to be black, some people mistook it for the “Black Plague”. The Black Plague was a fatal disease that swept through Europe in 1347 A.D. During an interview with Veronica Pauze, a resident of Fond Du Lac, Wisconsin who was born three years after the pandemic subsided, she shared the fear that remained in the voices of the adult population for years whenever the topic of the “Black Plague” was mentioned. Conversations about this past event were usually spoken in hushed voices between adults, ruminating with anxiety about the possible return of such a flu. The mental picture of the dead with their blue-black faces always caused Veronica to shiver with fright (V. Pauze, personal communication, July 5, 2006).

Truly, the very strength of America was being tested, not by an outside enemy like one would assume during the time of war, but by an internal predator that was attacking the very souls of the American people. “An epidemic erodes social cohesiveness because the source of your danger is your fellow human beings, the source of your danger is your wife, children, parents and so on [...] then morality does start to break down”(The American Experience).

Mercifully, when America was at the end of her ability to endure, the disease began to dissipate. By the end of its devastating whirlwind through the United States, the pandemic claimed about 675,000 American lives. There was no returning to life as usual. Every city and town would bear wounds of the Spanish Influenza, wounds that would take years to heal, if healing were really possible at all. In his recollection of the weeks that followed when the schools finally reopened, John De Lano shares his memories of his first day back to school.

*When we got out again and went back to school, I was shocked to see that my friends were not around, they were home. I would knock on their door and they would open the door just a little bit and say, ‘No, Jimmy’s not here’ or ‘Frankie’s not here’ [...] ‘Where is he?’ ‘Let your mother tell you.’ They wouldn’t tell me, [...] I was a pretty lonely kid at the time because these were my friends that I played with all those years, and went to school with and when I lost them, why, my whole world changed (American Experience).*

Finally, on November 11, 1918 the Armistice ended World War I; the troops returned home. But the home that they returned to was very different than the one they left. In San Francisco, 30,000 people flooded into the streets to celebrate not only the end of The Great War, but the survival of America from a far more deadly enemy that had attacked from within. There in the crowded streets, singing with mouths covered by protective masks, the survivors danced together. Yet deep within each man, woman and child, there was awareness that life would never again be the same.

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