

The Spanish Flu – 1918

A young wife and mother with two children ages 2 & 10 months, has been fighting the flu for days. She starts to feel better as she struggles to take care of her family and home. Caring for her own sick children makes the simplest task a major undertaking. After a few days she has a relapse, her lungs fill up with fluids and she dies.

A young soldier has just completed training camp and set sail for Europe to assist in the campaign against Germany. He takes ill on the trip over and dies before he reaches foreign shores. His body is shipped back to his parents.

A recent graduate of the University of Michigan signs up to assist in the war effort. His knowledge of radios helps him to assist in the effort of testing new radio types used on aircraft. He catches the flu and appears to have a mild case. A short time later he has a relapse that severely weakens him. He leaves for the family cottage with his twin sister to recuperate. He never came home alive.

A 12-year-old girl and her 10-year-old sister look through a frosty window and sing a song all the kids are singing.

*I had a little bird
Its name was Enza
I opened the window,
And in-flu-enza*

They wonder when school will start again, as it has been several weeks since they were last able to attend.

In December 1918 the Wisconsin State Board of health declared that the Spanish Flu would “forever be remembered as the most disastrous calamity that had ever been visited upon the people of Wisconsin or any other states.” The damage done by the flu was staggering. Between September and the end of the year, 8,459 Wisconsin residents died of the flu. Another 103,000 flu related disabilities were reported. More Wisconsin residences died in four months of the flu than were killed in World War 1, the Korean Conflict and the Vietnam Conflict combined.

The epidemic was not limited to Wisconsin. Globally over 20 million people died from the pandemic. That’s more than the total number of soldiers killed in the 4 years of the World War 1. It is estimated that as many as 800,000 Americans died. Some experts believe that the total death rate may even be as high as 60 million. Many of the deaths were never reported in third world countries.

Strangely the epidemic never received much notoriety. No great disaster such as the Titanic sinking or armies clashing on a French beach. The flu was a silent and deadly killer. It was spread by means of coughs, sneezes and human contact. The fact that the flu struck at the close of World War 1 made it take back

seat in the headlines of the newspapers. The majority of the flu reporting was in the obituaries. It is believed that the flu was named "The Spanish Flu" because Spain, being neutral during the war; first started reporting about its deadly spread.

What made the Spanish Flu different and deadly was the rapid onset and the dire complications. In a matter of mere hours, a perfectly healthy person would become so weak they could not walk. They complained of severe aches in their muscles, joints and head. Fevers reached 105 degrees. Victims laid bedridden and exhausted. For many the symptoms passed in 4 or 5 days, although the cough persisted for several weeks. The disease was highly contagious. It was spread by contact with sick individuals. It was unique in that it was an airborne virus and could live for several hours if not exposed to sunlight.

While most flu takes their toll on the very young and the very old, the Spanish Flu did it biggest damage on the men and women in their prime – between the ages of 25 and 40. There was no cure. The only effective treatment was 2 weeks of bed rest. That is why so many of the young people died from the flu. After several days they would feel better and try to resume their normal daily lives of working or caring for family. This was what was expected of them. In many homes, exhausted mothers struggled to care for sick children; while in others, not one adult was well enough to cook, clean or tend to sick & dying. Not fully recuperated, they would develop pneumonia and cyanosis. A condition where the lungs fill up with a thick blackish liquid and would usually kill within 48 hours.

Wisconsin tried to be proactive in preventing the spread of the deadly disease. On October 10, the State Health Officer ordered all boards of health to close all schools, theaters, and any other places where people gathered. Many schools were closed for 6 to 8 weeks. Even Catholic churches were closed. A rare event to not be able to attend church, even on Sunday.

The flu took it toll on the economy as well. Stores, saloons, theaters, and even some factories were forced to close. For months profits did not exist. Churches suffered from the lack of 7 weeks without collections.

It is strange that even today very little is known about the flu. In the last couple of years through DNA improvements, much more is being found out about the deadly flu.

I believe the Spanish Flu had a great impact on our family. The young mother of two and wife to my grandfather Peter Bartelme was Julia Neumann Bartelme. She died at the age of 24 on October 30, 1918. She left behind my father Claude, age 2 years. The young soldier that died on his way to serving our country was George Simonis, Grandma Becker's brother. He was 24 years old when he died on October 22, 1918. The young engineer that died by his twin sister's side was Eugene Alfred Bartelme, one of our many cousins. He was 24 years old. The

young girls captive in their own house are Evelyn and Dolores Becker. Neither of them came down with the flu.

References: Wisconsin and the Great Spanish Flu Epidemic of 1918; Steven Burg
Various Internet Sites



Julia Neumann Bartelme

Photo courtesy of Kate Neumann