7 Epidemic!

The Great Influenza Epidemic of 1918 and Its Legacy for Arkansas

THOMAS A. DEBLACK

In late January and early February 1918, a doctor in remote Haskell County, Kansas, began to see patients complaining of fever, body aches, headaches, and coughing. He had seen the symptoms before, and he correctly diagnosed the patients with influenza. But there was something different about this flu. It was "violent, rapid in its progress through the body, and sometimes lethal." Unlike most flus, this one did not conform to the traditional "U" curve, infecting the oldest and youngest most severely. Instead, it followed a "W" curve, attacking not only the extremes but those in the middle—healthy people of young and middle age.[1]

Soon the doctor was overwhelmed, and some of his patients began to die. Alarmed, he began to send reports to national public health officials about the outbreak. Schools in the county closed. Then in March, the disease disappeared as quickly as it had emerged. The schools reopened, and life returned to normal. The doctor remained concerned, but few outside the county paid any attention. Influenza was not then considered a "reportable" disease (one that the law required physicians to report).[2]

But in fact, what the Kansas doctor had diagnosed was the first strand of what would become a worldwide pandemic dubbed the "Spanish flu." The flu was not Spanish at all. In May 1918, the Spanish king, the prime

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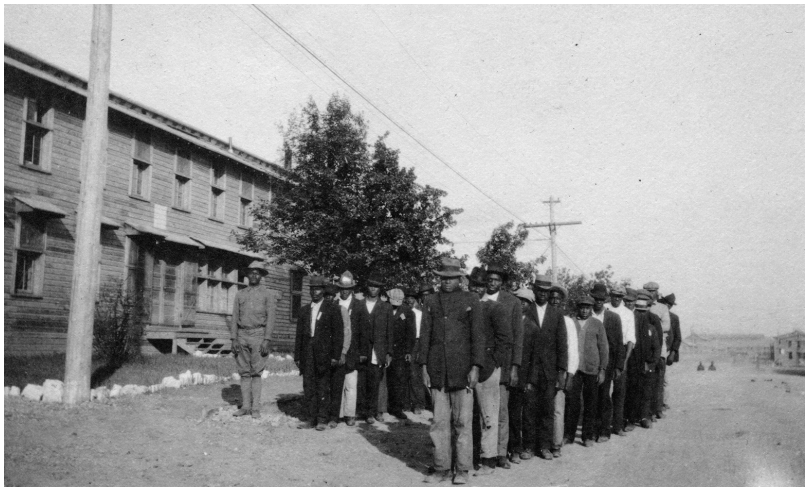
minister, and the prime minister's entire cabinet all came down with the disease, and the country's newspapers—not hindered by the censorship that hampered the press in the warring nations of Europe—freely reported on it.[3] Thus the name "Spanish flu" was born. It quickly became apparent that there was no inoculation (no "flu shot"), no remedy, no medicine, and no cure. One historian of the disease noted, "Your best chance of survival was to be utterly selfish. Assuming that you had a place that you could call home, the optimal strategy was to stay there . . . not answer the door (especially to doctors), jealously guard your hoard of food and water, and ignore all pleas for help."[4]

Historians still argue over just where and how this flu originated. Both historian Alfred Crosby in his 2003 book *America's Forgotten Pandemic: The Influenza of 1918* and John Barry in his 2004 book *The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Deadliest Plague in History* accept the hypothesis that the disease originated in rural Kansas, where rural people worked and lived close to animals and consumed the meat. The virus most likely originated in swine or poultry and spread to humans.[5]

And, yet, the outbreak might have ended right there, as well. As John Barry points out, "As sparsely populated and isolated as Haskell [County] was, the virus infecting the county might well have died there, might have failed to spread to the outside world. That would be so, except for one thing: this was wartime."[6] Some 300 miles to the east of Haskell County was Camp Funston, an army training camp located on the grounds of Fort Riley just southwest of Manhattan, Kansas. In 1918, it was the second-largest army base in the country, holding on average about 56,000 trainees. Soldiers inducted from Haskell County trained there.[7]

On March 4, 1918, a camp cook reported to sick call with influenza-like symptoms. Within three weeks, more than 1,100 soldiers were admitted to the hospital with similar symptoms, and thousands more were treated at makeshift infirmaries around the base. Thirty-eight men died of influenza or accompanying pneumonia at the camp, a number that, Barry notes, was higher than normal, but not sufficiently so to draw attention. Some soldiers went home on leave and returned. Others continued to transfer in and out of the camp. Many traveled to other bases on crowded trains. Others sailed for France in crowded ships.[8]

Some of them undoubtedly ended up at another large base in Arkansas—Camp Pike. Located just north of Little Rock, Camp Pike, like Camp Funston, had been hastily constructed in 1917. At its peak, it held just over 52,000 men, making it easily the second-largest city



African American recruits line up for sick call at Camp Pike. *Courtesy of the Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, Central Arkansas Library System, Little Rock.*

in Arkansas, trailing only Little Rock's population of 58,000. The first recorded incidence of a soldier reporting to the base hospital with the flu took place on September 23, 1918. The hospital administrator was highly concerned. By this time, the War Department had reported 20,000 cases of the flu at bases throughout the country. Just five days later, 754 men at Camp Pike were sick with the disease. Before the month of September was out, some 7,600 cases of the flu were reported at the camp.[9]

On October 3, the camp commander issued an order for a partial quarantine and quickly expanded it to a complete quarantine, with no one allowed to enter or leave the base. It was too late. By that time, a thousand soldiers a day were falling ill with the flu. The base infirmary was quickly filled to overflowing, and some of the sick were quartered in barracks, often with soldiers who were still healthy. As historian Kim Scott noted, "A more effective method of insuring the spread of the disease could hardly be imagined."[10] And, of course, new recruits continued to arrive daily, further negating the effects of the quarantine.

Notices of deaths at the camp began to fill the Little Rock papers, spreading fear throughout the city. On October 13, Col. Charles Miller, the camp commandant, told Owens and Company undertakers in North Little Rock to stop releasing such information to the newspapers.[11] Scott noted, "The mortician was in no position to refuse the order: his firm

held the contract for the post and had been assigned nine government embalmers just to keep up with the rush."[12]

Some twenty miles to the southeast of Camp Pike, near the small town of Lonoke, Eberts Field, an aviation training field, was also hard hit. Like Camp Pike, Eberts had been hastily built, with construction of seventy-two structures beginning in December 1917 and finishing in the spring of 1918. At its height, Eberts was home to approximately 2,500 men. When the flu outbreak struck the camp, the base hospital was quickly overrun. Hangars meant for aircraft were converted to hospitals and convalescent wards.[13]

Both the federal and state governments and the U.S. military responded slowly. Dr. Michael Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota, wrote, "The U.S. government didn't want our own vulnerability to be known around the world."[14] But those on the ground knew the real story. "You ought to see this hospital tonight," wrote Francis Blake, one of the four members of the army's pneumonia commission at Camp Pike. "Every corridor and there are miles of them with a double row of cots and every ward nearly with an extra row down the middle with influenza patients and lots of barracks about the camp turned into emergency infirmaries and the Camp closed. . . . There is only death and destruction."[15]

Historians disagree on the exact number of persons contracting and/or succumbing to the flu at Camp Pike and Eberts Field. Citing the Office of the Surgeon General's report, *The Medical Department of the United States Army in the World War* and the *Medical and Casualty Statistics*, as well as the November 1, 1918, edition of the *Arkansas Gazette*, Kim Scott wrote that a total of 7,642 soldiers contracted the flu at Camp Pike in September, and 105 of those died. In October, another 6,364 soldiers contracted the disease, and seventy-nine died, bringing the total for two months to 14,006 contracting the disease with 184 fatalities.[16] However, a researcher for the Arkansas National Guard Museum at Camp Robinson discovered a 1919 study, titled *Pneumonia Following Influenza (at Camp Pike, Ark.)*, which concluded that 13,892 men at Camp Pike fell victim to the flu or pneumonia resulting in 468 deaths at that camp alone.[17]

John Barry believes that Camp Pike played a huge role in the spread of the disease to Europe. Noting that nearly 40% of the two million American troops who arrived in France disembarked at Brest, France, Barry wrote, "The first outbreak of [the flu] with high mortality [in Brest] occurred in July, in a replacement detachment of American troops from Camp Pike, Arkansas."[18]

In retrospect, the early reaction to the disease seems puzzling. The Arkansas State Board of Health, created in 1913, not long before the outbreak, initially did little or nothing to respond to the outbreak. Scott noted, "Influenza was not among the twenty maladies listed by the board as being subject to reporting and quarantine by Arkansas doctors." By the time that problem was corrected, the epidemic was rapidly spreading through the state.[19]

On September 20 the *Arkansas Gazette* carried a story in which Dr. Jacob C. Geiger, the United States Public Health Service officer for Arkansas, said that the new influenza was "simple, plain old-fashioned la grippe." The pronouncement was strange given that the disease had claimed 265 lives in Boston in the two weeks since it first appeared in the city on September 7. As late as October 4, Geiger assured the *Arkansas Gazette*, "Situation still well in hand."[20]

By the time he made that statement, however, the cities of Little Rock and North Little Rock were reporting 506 cases of the flu. Located less than ten miles away from Camp Pike, those two cities received the full brunt of the epidemic. On October 5, the *Gazette* reported an additional 296 cases, but that same day Geiger told the paper, "The disease has reached its highest point here and the number of cases will begin to decline from now on." He concurred with the conclusion of the State Board of Health that a mandatory quarantine was not needed. "A general quarantine is both unwise and unnecessary," he told the *Gazette* on October 6. "Were such drastic measures necessary, the [United States] Public Health Service, which has the interests of the people always in mind, would have declared a quarantine before now." Two days later, with 1,800 cases being reported around the state, the Arkansas Board of Health did just that.[21]

The quarantine consisted of five points:

1) All children younger than eighteen were to be kept off the streets. Parents would be held accountable.
2) The "congregation" of people anywhere was forbidden. (This order closed schools, churches, and all public gatherings of people.)
3) It was strongly suggested that all people finish their business transactions and return to their homes immediately. Farmers were told to go home and not enter town for the immediate future.
4) Only immediate family, preacher, and necessary pallbearers should attend funerals.

5) All doctors were to report cases of Spanish flu daily to the county health office.[22]

Though accurate figures are impossible to determine, it is clear that by October the disease had struck Little Rock in epidemic proportions. Citing the records of the United States Surgeon General, Scott wrote, "Out of a population of approximately 58,000, Little Rock reported 9,813 cases of influenza during the month of October alone; 351 of the sufferers died." Scott puts the situation in central Arkansas in some perspective by pointing out that "one out of every four people reported sick during September and October . . . ; every man, woman, and child must have either had influenza themselves or at least knew someone who did."[23]

By the end of the month, the epidemic began to taper off in the capital city, and the quarantine rules began to be gradually lifted. On October 25, the State Board of Health announced that local boards would be permitted to authorize the resumption of church services, and colleges were granted permission to resume classes as conditions indicated. Public schools were to remain closed, and children under eighteen were restricted to their homes. The following day, it was announced that stores in the capital city were allowed again to remain open on Saturday evenings, and pool halls were permitted to reopen, albeit "for players only." On November 4, the quarantine for Pulaski County was fully ended.[24]

However, the end of the quarantine in Pulaski County did not signal the end of the epidemic in the state. In Fort Smith, the state's second-largest city with a 1918 population of more than 25,000, the epidemic was not declining in late October. A report from the city dated October 23 stated, "Eighty-four new cases of Spanish influenza were reported here today, a *marked increase* over the past several days, and 23 more than reported yesterday (emphasis added). From indications, the epidemic is not abating. There were two deaths today."[25]

The state's institutions of higher learning were also impacted by the outbreak. Classes at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, which generally started in mid-September, were delayed for about a month, beginning in late October. Many students were already on campus, including future Arkansas congressman Brooks Hays, who was returning to campus for his junior year. He found the campus, in Scott's words, "transformed into a military enclave." Scott continued:

> Surrounding the YMCA hut just west of the Arkansas Avenue-Dickson Street intersection in the southeast corner of the campus, a small city of frame barracks had sprung up to house the newly formed Student Army Training Corps (SATC). Uniformed guards positioned at the campus main gate barred anyone from entering unless they had a pass signed by Major George Martin, the university commandant who shared administrative power with [university] president John C. Futrall.[26]

The quarantine did not sit well with Hays's girlfriend (and future wife) Marion Prather, who was making plans to come to Fayetteville by train to visit him. "If you're in quarantine, can't you meet the train?," she wrote in a letter date October 3, 1918. "I don't want you to be in quarantine."[27]

Hays would soon get out of quarantine, but not in the way that he or his girlfriend had hoped. Within days, he and a significant number of his 600 fellow students were in the school infirmary with severe cases of the flu. Soon the infirmary was filled, and sick soldiers were forced to remain in the barracks. Eventually about half of the contingent of 600 soldiers at the university came down with the disease. An urgent appeal went out to the local community for pillows and bedsheets and later for fifty women "with or without medical training" to help nurse the sick. Hays made a speedy recovery, but six of his comrades died.[28]

Other colleges were also impacted. In early October, the Second District Agricultural School in Russellville (today's Arkansas Tech University) as well as the town's public schools were suspended indefinitely by order of the State Board of Health. The Russellville *Courier* reported on October 10, "The epidemic of Spanish flu which has been sweeping the country the past few weeks has reached Russellville. . . . There are hundreds of cases in Russellville, and there were 62 absentees from high school alone Monday."[29]

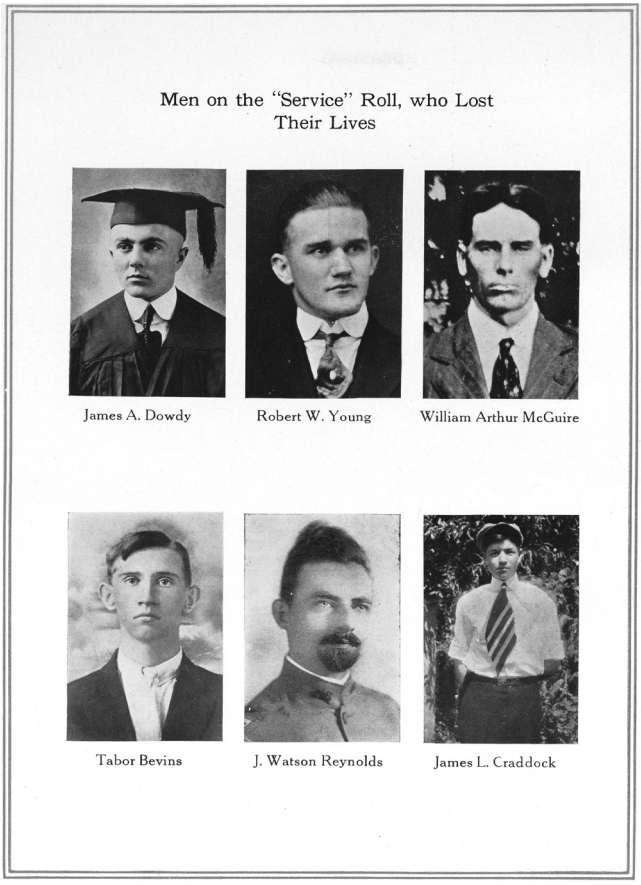
In Magnolia, the Third District Agricultural School (today's Southern Arkansas University) was also impacted. School president Elbert Austin canceled classes and some students went home, leaving only about forty-five on campus. Still, almost everyone remaining on campus—students, faculty, administrators, and staff—were stricken. With the adults ill, the few students who managed to avoid the illness were left to fend for themselves. Amazingly, given the widespread nature of the epidemic, there were no fatalities on campus.[30]

Galloway Women's College in Searcy shut down for two weeks in early October. It resumed classes on October 23, but the school remained under quarantine and local students were not allowed to attend. Approximately 100 students contracted the disease, but none were reported to be seriously ill. The *Gazette* reported, "Owing to the shortage of nurses, President J. M. Williams and Mrs. Williams, with members of the faculty, worked day and night." The paper reported, "While there has been a large number of cases in Searcy, the majority were in a very light form, and there have been only two deaths in town from the malady."[31]

In Arkadelphia, six deaths had been reported by the middle of October, but the *Arkansas Democrat* reported on October 21, "Work at Ouachita and Henderson-Brown colleges has not been retarded a single day by the flu although a large per cent of the students have had their case, most of which were light. One serious case has been reported at each college but these are on the road to recovery." Still, the colleges were under quarantine, with dormitory students restricted to campus. The Student Army Training Center (SATC) corps at both schools were also under quarantine, and those who became ill were taken to a special hospital.[32]

The experiences at Conway, another multi-college town, demonstrated the capricious nature of the epidemic. The establishment of an SATC unit on campus forced Hendrix College to postpone its opening until October 3. A record 415 students enrolled for classes, but the semester had barely gotten underway when the flu hit both the town and the Hendrix campus hard. On October 8 Conway was put under quarantine, closing all public schools and the town's three colleges. By that time, there were more than 200 cases of the flu at Hendrix. As the outbreak appeared to subside, Hendrix's president Dr. John Hugh Reynolds announced that the school would reopen on October 15. But on October 14, SATC member Tabor Bevins of Booneville died of complications of the flu. The following day, another SATC soldier, James L. Craddock of England, died. The deaths caused Reynolds to postpone the reopening to October 29.[33]

While the outbreak ravaged Hendrix, the campus of the Arkansas State Normal School (today's University of Central Arkansas) and Central College (today's Central Baptist College) remained largely free from the disease, though both closed their campuses during the quarantine that was in effect from October 8 to November 4. On October 19 both the State Normal School and Central College reported that they had no cases of the flu. By December a few cases had appeared at the Normal School, and



Men on the Hendrix College Service Roll who lost their lives in World War I. Tabor Bevins (bottom left) and James L. Craddock (bottom right) were both victims of the Spanish flu outbreak on the Hendrix campus in 1918. *From* The Troubadour, *Hendrix College, 1918, used with permission of the Hendrix College Archives.*

officials there gave permission to all students to withdraw until after the Christmas holiday. However, only about forty students took the school up on its offer, and classes continued without interruption.[34]

Fayetteville also had good news to report. The October 23 edition of the *Fayetteville Daily Democrat* ran a headline that read, "Flu Epidemic at U of A Nearly Eradicated." The accompanying article noted, "Of the three hundred and some odd men who have been ill at university barracks, base hospital, and infirmary, all have been discharged except 45,

and all but five of those are now on solid food and considered convalescent. None of the five is in a dangerous condition."[35]

While the state's larger cities and college towns provide interesting case studies, they were not typical of Arkansas as a whole. In 1918 the state remained almost 80 percent rural, defined not only as people living on a farm but also in small towns. At Nashville in southwestern Arkansas (population approximately 2,500), the public schools opened as normal in late September. A large Liberty Loan rally was planned for Saturday, October 12. On October 9, a headline in the *Nashville News* read, "Big Crowd Will Hear Sousa Band. City's Largest Crowd Expected Saturday." It urged people from all parts of Howard County to attend the concert, with proceeds to go to the war effort. But the concert never took place. A special from Nashville to the *Gazette* dated October 14, read, "On account of the statewide quarantine against the assembling of crowds, the Liberty Loan rally, which was to have been held here Saturday, was called off." It went on to note, "Up to date no cases of Spanish influenza have been reported here." A second article noted, "No quarantine has been made on the schools, churches and theaters here to date, as no cases of Spanish influenza have been reported in this community."[36]

That changed quickly. A headline in the October 16 issue of the *Nashville News* read, "Quarantine Placed on County." The accompanying article noted, "Dr. D.A. Hutchinson, the Howard County Health Officer, announces that all of Howard County is being placed under official quarantine to halt the spread of the Spanish flu." A subsequent edition on October 23 restated the quarantine rules and announced that Lt. R. B. Magee, scientific assistant of the United States Public Health Service, had arrived to aid Dr. Hutchinson in enforcing the quarantine. Magee warned all violators, including doctors, that failures to report cases of the flu were subject to punishment by federal authorities. The article concluded by noting that the disease was spreading rapidly and new cases were developing daily.[37]

The report from October 14 that there were no cases of Spanish flu in the county and the subsequent report from October 16 that the disease was spreading rapidly are hard to reconcile. Was the local paper or the state government suppressing news about the flu, or did it just break out incredibly suddenly? It is impossible to say with any certainty.

Anecdotal evidence makes it clear that the flu was present in Howard County and that it was deadly. Leo Puryear was just shy of his sixth birthday in October 1918 when his entire family—mother, father, five

brothers and a sister—were stricken by the disease. Young Leo remembered that a neighboring family would bring food to his family, place it outside the house near the family mailbox, and then holler to alert the family that food was there; they wanted to make sure that the Puryears did not come out until they had left. All the Puryears survived, but Leo's son, Frank Puryear, remembered that, later in his life, his father would point out a nearby house and relate the story of five children in one family who died of the disease.[38]

Forty miles to the south of Nashville, the city of Texarkana, with a population of about 8,000, was also hard hit, and the fatalities there indicated clearly that factors such as wealth, status, youth, or spiritual leadership were no protection against the disease. In its October 24 edition, the *Gazette* reported, "Several deaths from pneumonia, developing out of the Spanish influenza, have occurred in Texarkana within the last 24 hours. Among this number are J.D. Williams, former treasurer of Miller county, who died last night, aged forty. He was one of the well-known cotton planters of the county, owning a large Red River plantation near Index, 10 miles north of here. The Rev. E.D. Meredith, aged 66, a pioneer Baptist minister of this section, died yesterday afternoon at his home on Rose Hill." Three other victims listed in the article were in their twenties.[39]

A dispatch to the *Gazette* from Fordyce in south-central Arkansas dated October 14 read, "The schools are closed, no church services will be held, and no public gathering will be allowed until the influenza epidemic is checked. Dr. H.H. Atkinson has been sick for several days and the other doctors have all the work they can attend to. Thus far only one death has been reported." A dispatch from Crossett noted, "A total of 125 cases of influenza have been reported here. Some of the cases are very serious."[40]

A correspondent from Hardy in the northern part of the state wrote to the *Gazette* on October 24, "On account of the influenza the meeting of the Tri-County Teachers' Association, consisting of the teachers of Sharp, Lawrence, and Randolph Counties, which was scheduled to meet at Williford October 25 and 26, has been postponed."[41]

Reports from around the state indicated that much of Arkansas was suffering from the epidemic:

> Coal Hill—The influenza situation here is improving, only 500 cases remaining. The physicians are badly overtaxed. The school and theater have been closed.

Calico Rock—Because of the influenza situation the Calico Rock fair has been postponed.

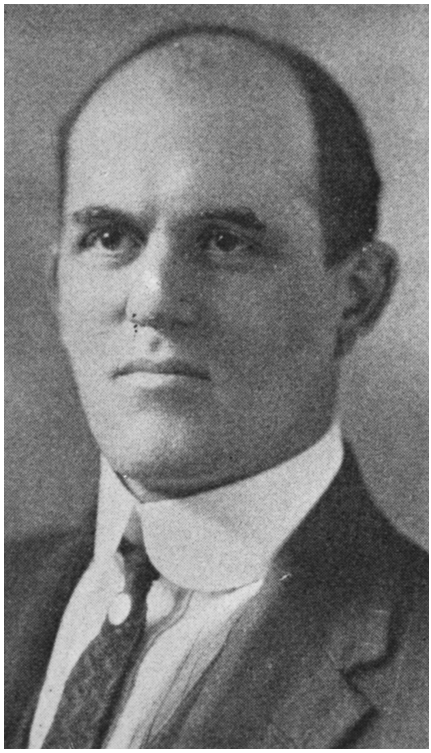
Piggott—On account of the influenza, Judge Dudly has notified the jurors not to appear Monday, the day for convening the civil division of the court.

Guion—The Spanish "flu" has a grip on this place, there being approximately 50 cases in the town.[42]

Some reports from around the country suggested that African Americans were less affected by the flu than whites. "As far as the 'Flu' is concerned the whites have the whole big show to themselves," J. Franklin Johnson wrote to the *Baltimore Afro-American.*[43] However, reports from around the state suggest that this may not have been the case in Arkansas. A dispatch from England, Arkansas, noted, "Up to Tuesday deaths from Spanish 'flu' have been 48, 13 white and 35 negroes. Local physicians say the epidemic among negroes is increasing."[44] A correspondent from McCaskill reported, "The flu is getting better around this place, but there have been several deaths among negroes." A white resident of Ozan wrote to the *Washington Telegraph*, "Our folks have not taken the 'flu' yet, although our colored man, Robert Muldrow, and all his folks have it."[45]

In much of the state, particularly the more populated areas, the epidemic had largely subsided by mid-November. But in the southern counties and in the more remote areas it was still raging. In Pine Bluff, November proved to be a particularly devastating month. In the week between November 20 and November 27, a "second wave" of the disease hit the city, with 440 new cases reported in a population of slightly less than 20,000, although these cases tended to be milder in nature than earlier incarnations.[46] On December 15, the *Pine Bluff Graphic* announced, "The usual [Elks] Christmas tree for poorer children of the city will not be had this year on account of the 'flu' situation." It also reported, "There will be no church services today, according to an announcement by Dr. F. C. Rowell. The 'flu' situation is decidedly improved, but the ban will not be lifted for several days."[47] Camden did not lift its quarantine until Christmas Day.[48]

By late November, the situation was so bad in parts of the state that Dr. Charles Willis Garrison, head of the Arkansas State Board of Health, warned that another statewide quarantine might be in the offing. Some have speculated that this November flare-up may have been a somewhat milder second (or maybe third) strain. A few unfortunate persons managed to be stricken twice, providing further evidence that the November



Dr. Charles Willis Garrison, head of the Arkansas Department of Health, contemplated a statewide quarantine as the Spanish flu spread in November 1918. *Courtesy of the Historical Research Center, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences.*

outbreak may have been a mutation of the initial virus. As Scott noted, "Just when this second wave of the epidemic ended depended on where in Arkansas you lived." A soldier returning home to Gentry in far northwestern Arkansas on December 20 found that the epidemic had passed, while a few miles away in Gravette, the situation was so bad that a new quarantine was ordered.[49]

By the beginning of 1919, the epidemic had largely run its course in the state. Officially, it had claimed over 7,000 lives, though that figure is almost certainly low, perhaps dramatically so. Like many disasters, the epidemic brought out the best in many people. All across the state, doctors and nurses worked themselves to exhaustion, and in so doing made themselves even more susceptible to the disease. Dr. Christopher Columbus Gray of Independence County had so many patients that his two eldest sons were made to be his chauffeurs. While making his lengthy rounds from house to house, the overworked physician caught what sleep he could in the back seat of his Maxwell while the boys piloted the vehicle. Five doctors died in Fayetteville and Fort Smith alone.[50]

Exhaustion may have contributed to the absence of bedside manner in a doctor from Center, Arkansas, who told a flu sufferer he was treating, "This is my 25th case and I've lost the first 24!" In an ironic twist, even Dr. Geiger, who had consistently downplayed the severity of the epidemic, contracted the disease on October 14. Eight days later his wife died of it. She was thirty-two years old.[51]

Heroism and sacrifice were not limited to members of the medical community. Scores of others with little or no medical training also stepped forward to help, often at great personal risk. In his centennial history of Southern Arkansas University, James Willis noted, "When the [campus] cook became sick, a student, Carl McCollum, who had been the 'stove wood boy,' assumed responsibility for preparing meals. There was then no campus nurse. A sophomore, Bess Lowe, worked day and night caring for those with the flu. Miraculously, she never became sick."[52]

All around Arkansas, people from various walks of life tended to those stricken with the disease. When the epidemic hit Everton, a small community of fewer than 200 located just south of Harrison in Boone County, a local doctor asked thirty-eight-year-old Nina Byrom Stephenson to look after a family that had contracted the flu and had no one to take care of them. Despite being warned to "be selfish" and not risk exposure to the disease, this mother of six children ranging in age from six to eighteen agreed. Due in no small part to her unselfish efforts, all members of the family recovered. But Nina Stephenson contracted the disease and was confined to bed at her home.[53]

Stephenson's granddaughter, Nan Snow, remembered, "As Christmas drew near, she became steadily worse. Realizing the dire nature of her situation, she called her two youngest daughters—Faye, age 8, and Rua, age 6—to her bedside on Christmas Eve, 1918. She gave each of them a gold locket and gold chain, told them she loved them, hoped they would always be good girls, and to mind their Daddy." Nina Stephenson died on December 30. She was buried at Crossroads Cemetery near Harrison. Snow recalled, "Her family would forever remember watching in disbelief as a black buggy bearing her body made its way to the cemetery carrying yet another casualty of this deadly epidemic in Arkansas."[54]

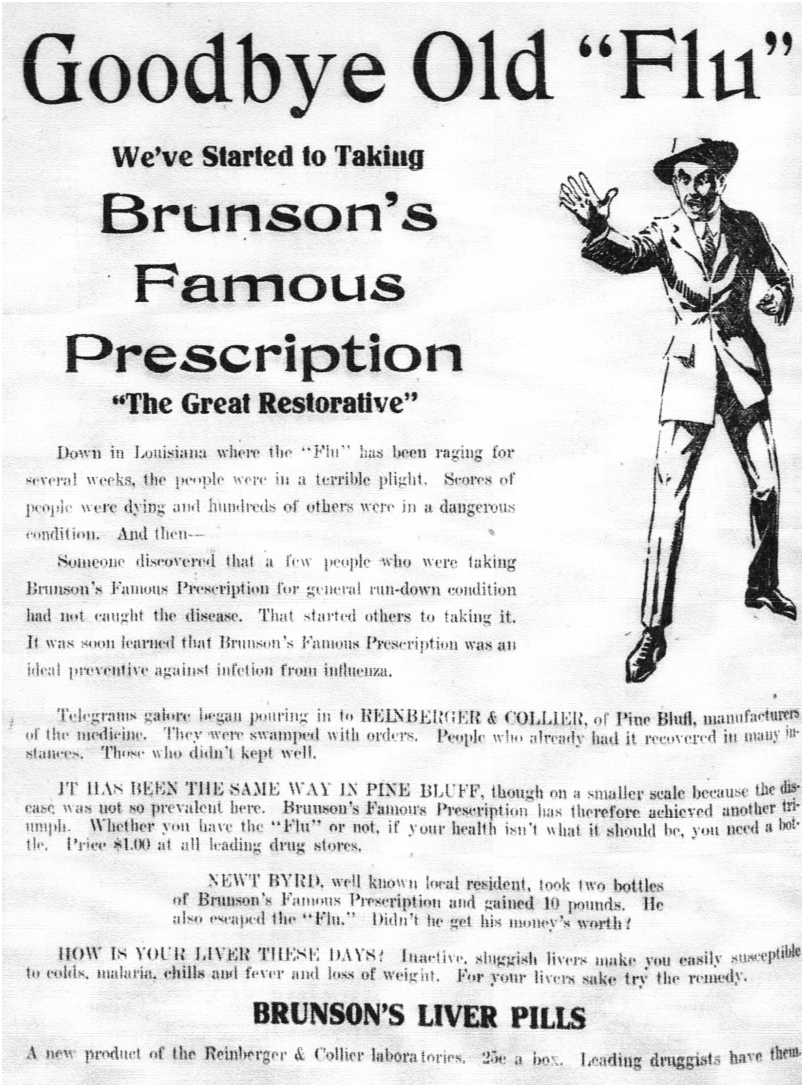
While people like Nina Stephenson represented the best in human nature, the epidemic brought out less-than-noble motives as well. As in any disaster, there were those who hoped to profit from the disease. An ad in the October 1 issue of the *Arkansas Gazette* informed readers that by using Dr. Jones Catarrhal Oil, they could prevent "Spanish Influenza

Nina Byrom Stephenson volunteered to care for a flu-stricken family. The family survived, but she died of the flu on December 30, 1918. *Courtesy of Nan Snow.*

and Other Dangerous Colds, Catarrh, Etc." It contained "campher [*sic*], menthol, eucalyptus, etc." and came in twenty-five-cent and fifty-cent bottles. On December 3, the *Pine Bluff Graphic* printed the testimonial of Mrs. Mary Kisby, 533 Princeton Avenue, Spokane, Washington, who wrote: "Our little boy found relief in wonderful Foley's Honey and Tar. It surely cured me. I am 75 years old; had very bad cough from la grippe." The wonderful curative was for sale at Mann's Pharmacy.[55]

A dispatch to the *Arkansas Democrat* from October 22, headlined "New Cure for Flu," read, "Dr. George S. Kimball, who discovered the lignite fields underlying 50 square miles of Ouachita County many years ago, and who has spent the last 30 years experimenting with the coal and its products, declares that vapor from lignite oil is a cure for influenza. Dr. Kimball has treated a number of cases with splendid results. The oil is vaporized by heating over a lamp or on a stove, and boils easily at ordinary heat."[56]

Another large ad in the *Pine Bluff Graphic* promoted the benefits of



Goodbye Old "Flu"

We've Started to Taking

Brunson's Famous Prescription

"The Great Restorative"

Down in Louisiana where the "Flu" has been raging for several weeks, the people were in a terrible plight. Scores of people were dying and hundreds of others were in a dangerous condition. And then--

Someone discovered that a few people who were taking Brunson's Famous Prescription for general run-down condition had not caught the disease. That started others to taking it. It was soon learned that Brunson's Famous Prescription was an ideal preventive against infection from influenza.

Telegrams galore began pouring in to REINBERGER & COLLIER, of Pine Bluff, manufacturers of the medicine. They were swamped with orders. People who already had it recovered in many instances. Those who didn't kept well.

IT HAS BEEN THE SAME WAY IN PINE BLUFF, though on a smaller scale because the disease was not so prevalent here. Brunson's Famous Prescription has therefore achieved another triumph. Whether you have the "Flu" or not, if your health isn't what it should be, you need a bottle. Price $1.00 at all leading drug stores.

NEWT BYRD, well known local resident, took two bottles of Brunson's Famous Prescription and gained 10 pounds. He also escaped the "Flu." Didn't he get his money's worth?

HOW IS YOUR LIVER THESE DAYS? Inactive, sluggish livers make you easily susceptible to colds, malaria, chills and fever and loss of weight. For your livers sake try the remedy.

BRUNSON'S LIVER PILLS

A new product of the Reinberger & Collier laboratories. 25c a box. Leading druggists have them.

An ad for Brunson's Famous Prescription, sold as a preventative/curative for the Spanish flu. Pine Bluff Daily Graphic, *November 12, 1918*.

an Arkansas-based product that had performed wonders in the state's southern neighbor.

> Down in Louisiana where the "Flu" has been raging for several weeks, the people were in a terrible plight. Scores of people were dying and scores of others were in a dangerous condition. And

> then—Someone discovered that a few people who were taking Brunson's Famous Prescription for general run-down condition had not caught the disease. That started others to taking it. It was soon learned that Brunson's Famous Prescription was an ideal preventive [*sic*] against infection from influenza.

The ad noted that telegrams had begun pouring in to Reinberger and Collier of Pine Bluff, manufacturers of the medicine. "People who already had it [the flu] recovered in many instances. Those who didn't kept well." It closed with the results obtained by "well-known local resident" Newt Byrd, who took two bottles of the miracle elixir and gained ten pounds while also escaping the flu. The ad asked, "Didn't he get his money's worth?" At $1 a bottle, it certainly must have seemed so.[57]

Not all the flu-related ads were for preventatives or curatives. One from E. B. and F. R. Bloom, "Hazard Experts," plaintively asked, "Has the 'flu' added increased burdens to your living expenses?" If so, the ad urged readers to "prepare for another emergency by letting us write you a Health and Accident Policy. The cost is low—the benefits great."[58]

Even real doctors were not immune to bad science. Dr. Albert J. Croft of Chicago wrote a paper read before the Chicago Medical Society, "Poison Gas in Air Cause of Flu Epidemic." In it, he "advanced the theory that the condition termed influenza is in reality a non-bacterial, non-contagious disease caused by inhalation of small amounts of depressing, highly irritating, high density gas present in the atmosphere, especially at night and when the air is surcharged with moisture, more particularly near the surface of the earth."[59] Those gases had been let loose during four years of war and could largely be attributed to the Germans, who were the first to make use of poison gas in the conflict."[60] While the theory fed into a widespread grievance against Germany as the major perpetrator of the war, an article in the *Dallas Morning News* dated December 8, 1918, concluded that Dr. Croft "does not seem to have affirmed the correctness of his theory" and noted that his explanation "will get a more tolerant reception from the nonscientific than the scientific mind."[61]

After the War

The wild inaccuracy of causal explanations and the almost total ineffectiveness of patent medicines notwithstanding, by 1919 the pandemic was largely over. Cases continued to be reported throughout that

year and in some rural areas even until 1920 but at nowhere near the death rates of the fall of 1918.

Few events in human history have had such a dramatic worldwide impact as the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918. In her 2017 book titled *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How It Changed the World*, Laura Spinney wrote, "The flu resculpted human populations more radically than anything since the Black Death. It influenced the course of the First World War and, arguably, contributed to the second. It pushed India closer to independence, South Africa closer to apartheid, and Switzerland to the brink of civil war. It ushered in universal healthcare and alternative medicine, our love of fresh air and our passion for sport, and it was probably responsible, at least in part, for the obsession of twentieth-century artists with all the myriad ways in which the human body can fail."[62]

In a review of Spinney's book, Scottish physician Gavin Francis noted, "It is estimated that five hundred million people contracted the Spanish flu—a third of the global population in 1918—and that between fifty and a hundred million of them died. Asians were thirty times more likely to die than Europeans. The pandemic had some influence on the lives of everyone alive today. Donald Trump's grandfather Friedrich died from it in New York City. He was 49. His early death meant that his fortune passed to his son Fred, who used it to start a New York property empire."[63] Around the world, most people who survived the flu returned to their normal lives, albeit with an increased fear that another new disease or even an old disease might appear without warning at any moment.

The impact in Arkansas went far beyond the lives cut short by the disease. In her essay in Michael Polston and Guy Lancaster's book *To Can the Kaiser: Arkansas and the Great War*, Nancy Hendricks cited a 2007 study by Thomas Garrett, an economist for the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, that gave evidence of the tremendous economic toll the flu inflicted. Quoting from an article in the October 19, 1918, issue of the *Arkansas Gazette*, the study noted:

> Merchants in Little Rock say their business has declined by 40 percent. Others estimate the decrease at 70 percent. The retail grocery business has been reduced by one-third. One department store, which has a business of $15,000 daily, is not doing more than half that. . . . Little Rock businesses are losing $10,000 a day on average. . . . The fact that males aged 18 to 40 were the

hardest hit by the influenza had serious economic consequences for the families that had lost their primary breadwinner.[64]

Hendricks also speculated that the flu may have impacted the election of November 1918 because "many voters were too sick or too afraid to vote." The resulting low voter turnout may have doomed to defeat the proposed new state constitution that included provisions for women's suffrage and prohibition. Other effects would take years to become apparent. Garrett's study found that babies born or in utero during the 1918 pandemic had "reduced educational attainment, higher rates of physical disability, and lower income" throughout the rest of their lives. Children of infected mothers were 15% less likely to graduate from high school.[65]

Arkansans would have to wait less than a decade for the next big disaster, the Great Flood of 1927, and then only two years more for the onset of the Great Depression. And, of course, new strains of the flu would reappear periodically. In 1957 it was the Asian flu, in 1968–1969 the Hong Kong flu, and in 2009 the swine flu. But none of those events and none of those flus would match the human toll wrought by the great epidemic of 1918.

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