Pandemic 1918

Much of this article comes from work by KCUR and Lynn Horsley, Topeka teacher Tom Fulbright and the Kansas State Historical Society.

It is almost like Déjà vu All Over Again. That quote from Yogi Berra seems to sum up the problems we are experiencing with the coronavirus and the fact that Kansas and the nation have gone through a similar period of history with the flu epidemic of 1918. The United States was involved in the World War I at that time and it was also dealing with the outbreak of the influenza epidemic.

Some researchers say the 1918 flu outbreak, the deadliest pandemic in history, may have started in Kansas (https://www.kansascity.com/latest-news/article194909839.html). Much of this article comes from work by KCUR and Lynn Horsley, Topeka teacher Tom Fulbright and the Kansas State Historical Society. A Haskell County doctor is believed to have first documented the deadly flu strain and it was believed that soldiers from Haskell County transported the disease to Fort Riley. Camp Funston at Fort Riley was particularly hard hit. And then the U.S. troops sent from Fort Riley to fight in World War I in Europe may have carried the virus with them and it spread it from there.

Eventually, the 1918 pandemic is said to have claimed between 50 million and 100 million lives worldwide, with as much as one-third of the world’s population infected.

On March 4, 1918, an outbreak appeared at Fort Riley, with as many as 500 soldiers hospitalized within a week. Within a month, however, the number of patients dwindled and it seemed that the flu had passed its course. Many of these soldiers were then sent to Europe to help fight in World War I and inadvertently spread the disease to Europe and other countries.

The outbreak of 1918 was named the Spanish influenza. Although inaccurate, historians believe this name came from the lack of media censure in Spain when the disease hit. The virus mutated again and deaths were being reported in Boston, Massachusetts, by August. In September outbreaks were reported in California and Texas. By October 1918, 24 countries had reported cases of influenza, and many had several deaths.

In Fall of 1918, the disease made its way back to Kansas and government officials were —cont., p. 2—
quick to take action against the spread of the disease. Dr. Samuel J. Crumbine (https://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/samuel-j-crumbine/12025) was the secretary of the state board of health and began a campaign to keep the public in Kansas well aware and educated about the flu and what people could do to prevent it. However, despite these measures there were still hundreds of deaths reported in Kansas, and eventually health officers were forced to close individual cities. By closing schools, public gatherings, theaters, church services, and limiting the number of people in a store at a time, the government officials in Kansas hoped to limit the outbreak and prevent more people from becoming sick. Here in Kansas the deaths attributed to the flu amounted to 2639.

A third and final wave of the epidemic hit in the spring of 1919, and many reported that it was so severe that people could wake up healthy and be dead by nightfall. By the end of spring the number of patients had dropped enough that officials lifted bans from their cities and states and people could resume school and church. Since the disease occurred at the same time as World War I, the epidemic was overshadowed. Although the epidemic only lasted a year, it left a large mark, both in America and worldwide.

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Historical Highlights

Society Events: May-December 2020:

August 6
Educators Night Out 5-7 PM
@ Kansas State Historical Society

August 7
Topeka Uncorked for Field Trips
@ Kansas State Historical Society

September 6
Lisa Larue on "Cherokees & the Civil War in the 1970s"
3 PM
@ 1118 SE Madison, Topeka

September 20
Lisa Larue on "Women's Suffrage"
3 PM
@ 1118 SE Madison, Topeka

September 27
Allen Stahl on "History of the Topeka Fire and the Topeka Cemetery"
3 PM
@ 1118 SE Madison, Topeka

September 27
Lisa Sandmeyer on "Topeka's Uncorked for Field Trips and "Women's Suffrage"
3 PM
@ Kansas State Historical Society

October 4
Doug Wright on "Baseball in Topeka"
3 PM
@ 1118 SE Madison, Topeka

October 11
George Vega on "The Topeka High Walkout in the 1970s"
3 PM
@ 1118 SE Madison, Topeka

October 25
Lisa Larue on "Cherokees & the Civil War"
3 PM
@ 1118 SE Madison, Topeka

December 6
Annual Membership Meeting
NOON
@ 1118 SE Madison, Topeka

Mark You Calendars

Historical Society

Lighting Freedom's Pathway;
Building Heritage Culture