The War that Came Home

The Individuals that personalized the 1918 influenza epidemic in Middletown, Connecticut.

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History 171

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Fall 2004

Prologue
The following essay will discuss the 1918 influenza epidemic that first struck China and Spain in February and swept throughout Europe, reaching the shores of North America in the early spring. The epidemic was extremely massive, killing an estimated 50-100 million people worldwide. By examining its destruction on a small city one can get a sense of its impact. The paper will focus on Middletown, Connecticut, where 1400 people were struck and 400 died. Also highlighted will be three individuals- Wesley Rich- a Wesleyan University professor, Cushman Sears- a retired physician, and Frances Sheehan- a student nurse. These individuals personalized the national crisis in Middletown. Their life stories offer unique viewpoints of the epidemic and bring to life the events and emotions that the rest of the country was experiencing.

A Year like No Other

"The 1918 has gone: a year momentous as the termination of the cruellest war in the annals of the human race; a year which marked the end at least for a time, of man’s destruction of man; unfortunately a year in which developed a most fatal infectious disease causing the death of hundreds of thousands of human beings. Medical science for four and one-half years devoted itself to putting men on the firing line and keeping them there. Now it must turn with its whole might to combating the greatest enemy of all---infectious disease:"-The American Medical Journal. ¹ A plague that terrorized the earth, bringing to its knees both major cities and small rural areas alike, infecting one-fifth of

¹ Journal of the American Medical Association-1918
the world’s population. And unfortunately for those living in Middletown, Connecticut, the influenza would show no more mercy on the inhabitants of the town or the rest of the world. This is its story...

_Influenza: Beast of the Earth_

Also known as the flu or grippe, influenza is a disease that originates in ducks and other aquatic birds. These species have been infected with influenza for millions of years. The human population is extremely prone to the influenza gene and can relatively easily contract its infection. It is a contagious disease caused by a virus transmitted from one person to another aerially. Influenza has a rapid onset and several distinct symptoms, although it can take up to three days for them to show. The virus is characterized by headaches, fevers, sore throats, coughs, aching body parts, and nausea. Infants and the elderly who have cardiopulmonary diseases are most prone to the illness. Normally, influenza is short in its duration, averaging a lifespan of one to three days. However, in some cases, rapid spread can lead to deadly epidemics. Largely crowded areas are usually the places where new influenza strains form and spread rapidly, including schools, campgrounds, and seaports. Prescriptions solely useful for curing bacterial infection and not preventing the virus itself were the only remedies available during the 1918 outbreak. Beginning in 1989, flu shots and other vaccinations become available in most medical facilities, yet these only are effective up to a year and are not entirely protective since the virus is constantly mutating. Moreover, vaccines are merely seventy percent effective even concerning the mildest form of influenza. A specific cure has still not been
developed for the cure of influenza. The best treatment for influenza is to stay in bed and avoid any human contact. For years in the beginning of the 20th century, medical researchers attempted to produce a stronger vaccine production for fear of a devastating pandemic strain. To control an epidemic, the appropriate vaccine must be available in quantities sufficient for population inoculation at least two to three weeks ahead of the outbreak. When a new strain emerges, there is seldom enough time to develop and administer a vaccine. For the most part, vaccines are useless and there is no specific cure for influenza. After the early 1900s, there was a lack of interest in this field, for the virus disappeared for almost two decades. At time when the flu did emerge, symptoms were quite weak and were easily combated. It was not until 1918, when the deadliest epidemic known to the world appeared, did the frantic search for a cure rejuvenate.  

A Gentle Beginning-The First 1918 Outbreak

It is still a mystery as to where the 1918 influenza originated. There are several hypotheses, but no single convincing theory. The most concrete hypothesis that researchers have developed is that the influenza originated in Spain in February of 1918. The first wave of the influenza brought special prominence to Spain. Because it was the only country that reported the outbreaks of the epidemic, Spain was thought to be the site of the earliest manifestations of the pandemic. One-third of the country was infected and in Madrid alone, eight million residents perished. The authorities tried to cover up the

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2 Mark and Beatty  
3 Snodgrass, Barry, Kolata
influenza from reaching tourists and the media. However, news of the pandemic leaked out and shortly after the disease became known worldwide as the Spanish influenza. Other researchers believe that the influenza first appeared in China. The 1918 pandemic began as a mild spring wave. Because the initial stage of the flu was not powerful and was contained to a few areas, most authorities did not believe it was influenza at all, simply a transitory sickness with minor symptoms. They proved to be terribly mistaken, as influenza began to sweep the globe. From Madrid it was carried north to London, crept south across the African continent, infected the Caribbean and Central and South America, until it finally reached the shores of the United States on March 4, 1918. The first target was Fort Riley in Kansas, where after the second day of its emergence, 414 soldiers were infected and 48 died. This day will be remembered in history for the launch of the demoralizing clash between science and nature. The only explanation as to why the virus did not spread throughout the United States in this first wave of influenza is perhaps all those who were infected at Fort Riley were shipped to Europe where the virus exploded. Because it affected only one state in the United States, the federal government paid little attention to the influenza at first. It was simply diagnosed as symptoms of pneumonia. The army continued to train troops and send them overseas, crowding them together in vessels and planes across the globe. The American soldiers were unintentionally infecting the trenches of Europe, as countries including France, Ethiopia, Denmark, and Ireland all reported influenza spreading among its populations. Still, “by no stretch of the imagination, except on the part of those morbidly apprehensive, could the March infection at the camps be interpreted as the forerunner of a plague”.

4 Barry, Snodgrass
5 Barry, Fuller
Middletown, Connecticut - Pre-Epidemic

After much turmoil, Middletown's residents were living peacefully by 1918. The labor union strikes were presently silenced, the immigration issue had been settled for the most part in establishing separate neighborhoods, and life was exceptionally comfortable. The early 20th century was characterized by one of hopefulness; the economy was bustling and the foreigners had finally established their presence in the town. Highlights included the opening of Middlesex Hospital in 1904, which could treat up to one hundred patients at a time, and the invention of the automobile. Health services and the economy of Middletown were at their peaks. This period in time was known as "the Gay Nineties", for residents were constantly blissful with the present conditions. Because demands were abnormally high for automobiles, the businesses in the town flourished. Week after week, new companies would emerge on Main Street, particularly gas stations, car dealerships, and rubber companies. Economic conditions improved, as those living in the lower class moved to the middle class, and those in the middle class became more affluent. Because the town had never experienced such a golden age, Middletown was glorified in the Evening Press. An idealized picture of the town was painted, characterized by an increase in factories, commercial economy, and transportation. The first custom house was built on Main Street as well as the formation of the first depot line for the Connecticut Valley Train line. Middletown was now easily accessible to major cities as Boston and New York, and neighboring ones including Hartford and New Haven. The years of glory were
unfortunately short lived for Middletown. The tide began to turn beginning in 1918, when 1500 residents either volunteered their services or were drafted for the war effort. Over a three year period, Middletown lost 37 men to War World I from combat. The ecstasy of the “Gay Nineties” came to an abrupt halt as the town was horrified at the tragedy of losing numerous respectable civilians at once to war. Never before had there been a funeral for more than one person in a single day- until the plague struck. The influenza epidemic came in two waves- the first was more of the international killer, affecting those in the United States solely at Fort Riley, Kansas. The first relatively mild outbreak of influenza would have gone unnoticed had it now been followed by a lethal second wave. The second surge was destructive, as two thirds of the deaths occurred from mid-September to December 1918.

The Intensity of the 1918 Epidemic

What was so different about the 1918 infection? Vast numbers of people around the world develop influenza each year, on average killing 2 million people annually due to complications. Influenza usually affects extremely young children or people age sixty and older that usually have chronic illnesses or poor health. Most people that contract influenza recover quickly, in a period of one to two weeks; others develop complications that last a lifetime. Yet, never before 1918 were there an overwhelming number of deaths. The United States Center for Disease Control reports that in most years less than one percent of those infected by influenza die. Since influenza is extremely contagious

6 Warner
and easily spread, many people are usually infected. Epidemics usually involve hundreds of people, but was not the case in 1918. A pandemic of influenza spread around the world, infecting millions of people. The virus was fatal because it was wiping out the entire middle generation of the world. Influenza usually kills the weak; as the elderly accounted for 90 percent of influenza deaths in the United States. However, the 1918 flu hit the young, strong adults. Most of the deaths were among adults between the ages of 20 and 40, a group that is usually always resilient to influenza. The virus killed eight to ten percent of all young adults in the world. Also, the symptoms of this outbreak were not typical of influenza. A doctor situated at Camp Devens in Boston described:

These men start with what appears to be an attack of la grippe or influenza, and when brought to the hospital they very rapidly develop the most viscous type of pneumonia that has ever been seen. Two hours after admission they have the mahogany spots over the cheek bones, and a few hours later you can begin to see the cyanosis extending from their ears and spreading all over the face, until it is hard to distinguish the coloured men from the white. It is only a matter of a few hours then until death comes, and it is simply a struggle for air until they suffocate. It is horrible.”

For most people, influenza usually begins to disappear after a week or so. Now, not only were the symptoms more severe, millions of lives were being taken at the hands of the virus. Author John Barry declared, “Victims of this influenza pandemic were doubly dead that they died so young- it took the strong and spared the weak”.

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7 Britannica Encyclopedia  
8 Encarta Encyclopedia  
9 A Letter From Camp Devens  
10 Barry 2004
Wesley Everett Rich -

The Beginning of the Second Wave & the Journey to Camp Devens

The end of World War I marked the return of the virus for a second round of infection. American soldiers who returned home from the war in Europe were spreading the virus through the exchange of supplies and troops at various seaports. News of the influenza crisis was broadcasted throughout the United States. Authorities were in desperate need of hale and hearty young men to enroll into the army. One who volunteered was Wesley Rich, a 1911 graduate of Wesleyan University, a native of Newton, Massachusetts. During his years at Wesleyan, Rich played on the class football team, varsity hockey team, and served as the business manager and supervisor of the DKE Housing association. Three years later he earned a masters degree in economics at New York University, and decided to take some time off and stay at home with his family. In January of 1918, Wesley returned to Wesleyan University as an associate professor in economics and social science. Wesley wavered back and forth for awhile and finally, in June of 1918, he enlisted into the army and become one of the first men from Middletown, Connecticut to volunteer to attend the first officers training camp at Camp Devens located in Boston, Massachusetts during World War I. No one from Middletown had ever entered the war previous to Rich. After seeing one of their beloved professors

11 Barry
12 1911 Wesleyan University Yearbook
valiantly risking his life, Wesleyan University immediately initiated a program in August of 1918 called “Wesleyan in War Time-Preparing for the Nation’s Service”. Any young man who entered Wesleyan as a student could now carry out college work and military training at the same time. The actions of Wesley Rich reached out to the youth population who desired to serve in the war. Youngsters in the town began to mobilize and join the military cause. The War Department and the University joint forces to send over 140 students over the next three months to Camp Devens. Camp Devens also served as the base hospital for the Division of the Northeast Camp. Devens was one of the first targets of influenza once it reached the shores of New England. On August 28, 1918, the pandemic entered Boston and began to infect New England like a forest fire through both the civilian and military population. A week following the first outbreak of the disease, 520 people had lost their lives.  

The hospitals in Boston and the surrounding cities became quickly overcrowded. However, nothing was as devastating as the conditions at Camp Devens. There were 50,000 men serving at the military base when the epidemic broke loose. On average there were one hundred deaths per day as the merciless disease spread throughout the region. The following is an excerpt from an original letter that was found in Detroit in late 1959 from a surgical ward of Camp Devens in September 1918. It was written from a doctor stationed at the camp, describing the conditions an individual such as Wesley Rich endured when the influenza pandemic broke loose:

It has developed so rapidly that the camp is demoralized and all ordinary work is held up till is has passed. All assemblages of soldiers taboo. One can stand it to see one, two or twenty men die, but to see these poor devils dropping like flies

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13 A Letter from Camp Devens, Barry
14 Barry, Hall
sort of gets on your nerves. We have been averaging about 100 deaths per day, and still keeping it up. There is no doubt in my mind that there is a new mixed infection here, but what I don't know.

The doctor continued:

We have lost an outrageous number of nurses and doctors. For several days there were no coffins and the bodies piled up something fierce, we used to go down to the morgue (which is just back of my ward) and look at the boys laid out in long rows. It beats any sight they ever had in France after a battle. An extra long barracks has been vacated for the use of the morgue, and it would make any man sit up and take notice to walk down the long lines of dead soldiers all dressed up and laid out in double rows. We have no relief here; you get up in the morning at 5:30 and work steady till about 9:30 p.m., sleep, then go at it again. Some of the men of course have been here all the time, and they are tired."

Because few vaccines were available to contain the disease, Camp Devens soon transformed from a military base into a morgue. The influential virus began as simply a possible “mutant swarm” with the potential to kill, and now that potential was a reality. Unfortunately for the Wesleyan community, Wesley’s was one of the coffins that overflowed the city of Boston as a result of the plague. Rich’s death had one last cruel and tragic twist. World War I officially came to an end on November 11, 1918 when the Allied Powers signed a cease-fire agreement with Germany in France. It was a cessation of hostilities as a prelude to peace negotiations. This unconditional surrender of Germany

15 Letter From Camp Devens
was celebrated throughout the United States. As soon as news traveled to Middletown, Connecticut, authorities began planning a victory parade to celebrate the end of the war. The local War Bureau planned a monstrous celebration for the town and was one that will be remembered for several generations. The Evening Press reported that there was much dancing and singing; however, every one in the streets wore gauze masks. As Middletown was preparing for these festivities, Wesley Rich’s mother received his death notice. Thus, Wesleyan University added a special commemoration speech during the parade along Main Street to acknowledge his heroic actions during the war. While serving overseas in France, he became fatally infected with the flu. His death had a tremendous impact on the residents of Middletown. As one of his students reported to the Alumni magazine, “He was dear to the hearts of every Wesleyan man”. Wesley’s contributions were priceless to the University. His teachings inspired his students and a formal memorial service was held on June 6, 1919 to recognize his life. He was one of the 140 Wesleyan alumni to give their lives to the nation during the war.

Cushman Sears :

A Doctor's Role in the Catastrophe

The problem of caring for the sick, both military and civilian, was magnified by a lack of facilities and of medical and nursing personnel. More than one third of the nation’s 140,000 doctors were in the military service, as well as a significant number of

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16 Middletown Evening Press
nurses. 17 Hospital reports reveal that there were a shortage of doctors and nurses, and those who were available for services were quickly overworked. Cushman Sears was one of the Middletown physicians who volunteered during the war. Born and raised there, he was a veteran doctor who had practiced medicine for fifty-four years. Those who knew him said “his pleasant disposition made him loved by all those around him”. 18 Sears had retired from his practice in 1914, four years before the influenza outbreak commenced. Once news of the epidemic reached Connecticut, civilians were frightened. Panic unfolded throughout Middletown, as attempts to find remedies for influenza failed. People tried everything for prevention, including antiseptic and prophylactic solutions, sliced cucumbers, charms, and other homemade remedies. However, none of these vaccines were effective. 19 Time was running out. On October 4, 1918, Congress approved a special $1 million fund to enable the U.S. Public Health Service to recruit physicians and nurses to deal with the growing epidemic. US Surgeon General Rupert Blue set out to hire over 1000 doctors and 700 nurses with the new funds. The war effort, however, made Blue’s task difficult. With many medical professionals already engaged in lending care to fighting soldiers, Blue was forced to look for some recruits in places like old-age homes and rehabilitation centers. 20

That very evening, the cover of the Evening Press read: Influenza -Sweeping the State. Additionally, the American Red Cross opened to the public in the hope of volunteer physicians coming forth and aiding during this time of national crisis. For a

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17 Barry
18 Middletown Evening Press
19 Middletown Evening Press
20 American Red Journal
week straight, the headlines of the paper remained the same “Volunteers Needed for Red Cross and Middlesex Hospital.” 21 It was quite evident that no one was willing to volunteer in fear of contracting influenza. Normally, people only came to Middlesex Hospital if they needed surgery or were deathly ill. The facility lacked the tools and space to treat more than 100 patients at once. However, now patients falling ill were everywhere, especially since it was the general hospital of more than 50 towns in Connecticut.

Middlesex Hospital had influenza victims flooding its parking lot, surgical wards, and narrow hallways. Because there was limited space and manpower, hundreds of residents were turned away. Children and middle-aged civilians were given first priority, and so the majority of those patients over the age of sixty were refused admission. ¹They were told that nurses or family physicians would come to their homes. Conversely, it was becoming impossible to send only nurses house to house for the demands were exceeding the medical personal available. Call after call for local volunteers with any medical experience or training failed. Cushman Sears must have seen enough. The now eighty-two year old doctor emerged from retirement to serve the Middletown Community. For three weeks straight, he traveled from home to home, comforting and aiding those who were unable to leave their residences. There was not much he could do except to advise his patients, prescribe insignificant remedies, and treat those who had minor bacterial infections; nonetheless, it took heroism on the part of Sears to answer the call for assistance. Sears’ schedule paralleled to those of the doctors working at Middlesex Hospital. His routine consisted of working tedious hours from 5:30 in the morning until 9:30 in the evening. Doctors were exhausted, yet there was no time to rest for the healthy.

A family friend of Cushman described him as “determined, compassionate, and genuine,”

21 Middletown Evening Press
and that was exactly what he was. Over a three week period, he visited a total of thirty-four homes faithfully. Though Sears made a deep impact on the Middletown population, he was still merely one man battling a city of infection. The epidemic, which up until this point had been a myth to small urban towns, unleashed its wrath in Connecticut without showing any mercy. By October 3, 1918, the Evening Press had reported 27 dead from influenza. Influenza was sweeping the state with vengeance. Schools, libraries, and other public facilities were closed down as 8,000 people were affected in Hartford and 200 more in Middletown within a week of its onset.

Frances Sheehan:
The invaluable role of nurses

It can be argued that nurses were the most significant figures during the influenza epidemic. They were indeed more important than doctors, for patients could make a special connection with these women that entered their homes to provide care. While doctors simply diagnosed patients, nurses boosted their morale’s by calming them down, easing their strains, preparing food, and being a companion in times of desperation. Like doctors, nurses were saving lives. Unfortunately, before the epidemic broke loose, there were only a small amount of nurses compared to the number of doctors in the United States. Women did not have many opportunities to excel in the labor force, and so when the influenza struck, it was almost impossible to get a nurse to come to one’s home. They were so hard to find since women at the time were not permitted to be professionally

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22 Linda Fournay interview
23 Barry, Kolata
trained in the health care field and male nurses did not exist at this point. Nonetheless, news stations around the country in October of 1918 were estimating that there were at present, 12,000 nurses in the Red Cross nursing services and that a total of 50,000 nurses were needed by the next month. Middlesex Hospital was filled to capacity and could not accept any more patients. There was one final option left to attempt. In 1908, a new surgical wing had been added to the hospital which was transformed into the Wilcox School of Nursing. It was opened in hopes of attracting women volunteers who could be trained as professional nurses. At the beginning of the war, the School of Nursing merged with the American Red Cross in an attempt to treat as many victims of World War I as possible. This plan was executed successfully for a few months; however, the onset of the disease brought havoc to Middletown. The Red Cross was soon overcome with influenza victims in the civilian population and was desperately in need of more nurses. Miss Frances Sheehan of Middletown was twenty-one years old at the time. She had entered the Wilcox School of Nursing in attempt to receive a degree in nursing to pursue her dream of becoming the first female doctor in Middletown. Once the influenza began sweeping through Connecticut and reached Middletown however, Sheehan decided to abandon her studies and directly aid with the crisis. She entered Middlesex Hospital on October 1, 1918 as a volunteer student nurse. The situation was getting out of control. The entire town was soon infected, and soon enough all schools, stores, and other institutions had to be closed down in fear of spreading the virus. Miss Frances Sheehan, along with eleven other volunteer nurses, prepared soups and home remedies for hours at

\[24\] American Red Cross
\[25\] Warner
\[26\] Wilcox School of Nursing
a time and delivered them to homes throughout Middletown. Once the civilian population saw Sheehan and the rest of these daring women risking their lives for Middletown, the entire community soon began to unify in the midst of the national disaster. Every parish and available home in Middletown became a supplementary ward of Middlesex Hospital, despite the possibility of becoming prone to the flu themselves. These makeshift emergency hospitals, volunteers, and visiting nurses somewhat reduced the load of the overburdened hospitals. As a report from one New York hospital read: “All the beds had been filled. Every corridor, every spare room, every porch was filled, crammed with cots occupied by the sick and dying. There was nothing antiseptic about the sight... and there were no nurses.” One can assume the situation was identical in hospitals throughout the United States. A reported 70 out of 200 nurses in Connecticut were sick in bed themselves. Those who were not killed were sometimes kidnapped by the patients they visited in their homes. This did not frighten Frances Sheehan. She continued to serve the Red Cross loyally, helping to furnish beds and pay visits to patients who were not able to leave their homes. Frances Sheehan died at Middlesex Hospital following a short infection. Her death came as a shock to her friends and family. The funeral held in her name was one of the largest ever held in Portland, Connecticut. Over two hundred in the Middletown area came to pay their respects to a woman who gave her life to help those in suffering. Anna Brazos, the superintendent of the Middlesex Hospital and the Wilcox School of Nursing, concluded in her annual report: “The public can never appreciate the heroism of doctors and nurses shown at this time for conditions that were appalling even to trained minds. Although surrounded by the most distressing

27 History of the Middlesex County Chapter-American National Red Cross
28 Wilcox School of Nursing, American Red Cross
and discouraging evidence of the malignant nature of the disease, they went about the work with the same cheerful spirit and indifference to danger which has been exhibited by a soldier in battle."\(^{29}\)

**Resilient Middletown**

Similarly to every other city and town in the United States, the city of Middletown was demoralized by the pandemic. An estimated total of 1,400 people were infected and 400 passed away from the influenza, including societal figures Wesley Rich, Cushman Sears, and Frances Sheehan. The death tolls of neighboring towns far surpassed Middletown’s. Meriden lost 800 people, Cromwell 1,100 and Haddam 950 to the influenza. Despite these turbulent times, Middletown was able to respond more effectively than most other Connecticut locations. When they were lacking medical personnel, civilians volunteered their services. Residents opened their homes to those who needed care when Middlesex Hospital could no longer accommodate patients. What was most impressive about the situation was the town’s unification. Nurses, doctors, policemen, health officials, residents- all worked together to serve their town.\(^{30}\) At one point in early November, corpses littered the streets and sidewalks because there was no place left to put them. Residents showed a spirit of cooperation and willingness, and drove around the town, loading bodies into their cars in order to cleanse the streets. The superintendent’s report accurately affirmed: “Every single resident of Middletown has

\(^{29}\) Brazos’ Superintendent Report  
\(^{30}\) Warner, Hall
performed acts of service not only in a spirit of sacrifice but in a one of devotion.” In her book “The Pictorial History of Middletown, Liz Warner concluded: Middletown today, as it has been for the past 300 years, is poised to meet the challenges of the future. Just as the city has successfully met challenges of the past, it will continue to meet those of the 21st century.”31 However, during an interview with a current Middlesex Hospital employee, the question arose of whether Middletown would be ready if another virus filled its streets. In response, she refuted Warner’s argument by stating, “Unfortunately, it is my belief that Middletown or any other place in the United States is not prepared for such a disaster. The problem with the world is that we only focus on the situation currently at hand and forget about past problems until they arise and it’s too late to react. If anything such as the 1918 influenza ever occurred again, the United States would be sent to its knees”. Luckily for the small Connecticut town, it was able to overcome rout and responded boldly to the catastrophe of the plague. Connecticut’s population of 1,450, 300 people in 1917 dropped to 1,380,631 by the beginning of 1920, as a direct result of the catastrophic impact of the ‘Spanish Lady’.

The Aftermath of the Influenza

The Spanish influenza epidemic was responsible for more than 500,000 deaths in the United States and an estimated 50-100 million worldwide. It is a plague that killed more people than World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and all the victims of

31 Warner
AIDS combined. An outbreak as lethal as influenza should not have gone unnoticed. So the question remains as to why the authorities downplayed the epidemic and why wasn’t the situation handled the moment it arose? For one thing, the United States was at war in 1918. Attention was directed primarily to troop shipments, draft call-ups, trench warfare, and peace negotiations. This left no time to investigate the potentially killer virus. Because the tragedies of World War I were concluding, the government frantically attempted to maintain a positive morale in all facets of American society. Thus, health officials were ordered to minimize anxiety and keep society serene. The civilian population was becoming frustrated with the government for not publicizing genuine information about what was happening. To keep the chaos at a minimum, authorities downplayed the epidemic by stating that “Fear Kills More than Disease”. Unfortunately in this case, the exact opposite was true. A mild wave of the flu quickly transformed into the worst infectious disease outbreak in human history. What was most perplexing about the influenza was its immediate disappearance after making its subsequent mark on the globe. By the end of November 1918, the number of deaths resulting from the epidemic had significantly dropped for no apparent reason. Public health officials believed that the influenza simply ran out of fuel, for the majority of the world had already been exposed. The epidemic killed millions and then vanished.

Could it Happen Again?

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32 Barry, Kolata, Snodgrass, Torrey, Britannica
33 A Letter from Camp Devens
34 Barry
35 Interview with Dr. Shirley Fannin, Los Angeles County public health official
The lingering question on everyone’s mind is: Should we be concerned with the threat of another pandemic influenza, and if so, are we ready to handle its repercussions? Unfortunately for researchers and health officials, there is not much time left to ponder such possibilities. Based on historical patterns, influenza cannot be averted and is expected to occur on average four times a century when new virus subtypes emerge and are transmitted from person to person. Even so, in reality, influenza pandemics are unpredictable and inevitable. No supplementary pandemics have occurred during the 20th century or so far in the 21st century; however, public health officials believe that there will be more outbreaks of pandemics in upcoming years. Recently, events have arisen that have led to the frightening possibility of yet another devastating infectious disease. Scientists have now found that the avian flu that is materializing in the Far East has similar genetic components as the influenza that caused the 1918 pandemic. Avian influenza is an infectious disease of birds caused by type A strains of the influenza virus. Type A influenza is extremely treacherous because it is a constantly mutating virus that replicate rapidly in human beings and animals. Thus, every species in the world is susceptible to such an infection. H5N1 is the bird flu strain that scientists believe can cause serious infection, based on their findings that it has some of the same mutations as the 1918 strain. The virus is still currently avian-adapted and cannot be transmitted from person to person, even though there have been some reports that it infected and killed a small number of humans. Scientists are hoping that they can determine the genetic basis as to why the 1918 virus was so powerful in order to conquer the Avian influenza before it causes any severe damage. If human beings are infected with the avian influenza, a
pandemic will be almost unavoidable since little resistance exists to this genetically new virus. Because new strains of virus are constantly arising, it is vital that vaccines are produced annually to match the current strain.\textsuperscript{36} Thus, using new information that scientists have pieced together regarding the genetic coding of the 1918 virus, Dr. Jeffrey Taubenberger, Chief of the Department of Molecular Pathology at the United States Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, hopes to understand the entire composition of the Spanish flu in order to bypass worldwide tragedy. He has faith that his scientists will succeed in developing new antiviral drugs and vaccine targets before the avian bird flu transforms into a pandemic.\textsuperscript{37} Consequently, in response to the question of whether or not another influenza pandemic is possible, author John Barry declares: “It is inevitable. However, there is a solution. Governments must immediately start making a major investment in the world’s vaccine-producing infrastructure. It will be a race...a race to the death”.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{36} Knobler, Barry, Kolata, Snodgrass
\textsuperscript{37} Taubenberger interview
\textsuperscript{38} Barry
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*Special Thanks to:*

Professor Ron Schatz

Dionne Longley-Middlesex Historical Society

Special Archives Administration

Bruce Sparks