

THE INFLUENZA PANDEMIC of 1918 — by Dr. Russ Gilliom

As I begin this article the scope and effect of this event is overwhelming. This worldwide plague of 1918-1920 was described as “the greatest medical holocaust.” Beginning in the Spring of 1918, reaching its peak in October 1918, with the last reports of influenza by early 1920, this pandemic caused 50-100 million deaths worldwide (5% of the world’s population). It cost 650,000 lives in the U.S. alone. This mortality dropped the average lifespan by 10 years, and also reduced the world population by 1/3 - 1/2, with over 500,000 infected globally. Mortality rates for various countries in deaths per 100,000: Australia 2.7, Germany 3.8, England 5.8, USA 6.5, Japan 7.0, France 7.3, Italy 10.7, Mexico 20.6, S.Africa 44.3, W. Samoa 236.1. The only areas left untouched by this pandemic were St Helena in the southern Atlantic and a few isolated islands in the southern Pacific. In the US 1 in 4 had the flu, in India 1 in 25 died.

Let us now study how the “Spanish Influenza” (as it was named by someone who did not like Spain; there was actually no correlation with the flu) got its start and how it affected the US, Indiana, and Whitley County. The origin of the influenza was likely brought to Europe by workers from China circa late 1917. It then rapidly spread to the military beginning March 1918, infecting a large number of troops by summer 1918, with the peak being in October 1918. The first flu case in the U.S. was recorded at Ft Riley, Kansas from troops returning from Europe, March 1918. Reports began coming in through the Summer and early Fall of increasing influenza infections and deaths. Dr. Blue, Surgeon General of the U.S., declared September 13, 1918, the beginning of the influenza epidemic in the US. All 48 states had reported increasing numbers of flu victims. September 19, 1918, Dr. Blue telegraphed all the States Health Officers that morning warning of the upcoming crisis. The Indiana Health Dept Secretary Dr. John Hurty telephoned each local Health Officer to produce a report of influenza cases in each county by the end of the day. At the time, most cases were limited to the military at Ft Benjamin Harrison (60) and other training centers (125) throughout the state. Plans were then established to help control the outbreak of flu. These plans would include closure of all public accommodations, churches, theaters, markets, schools, various meetings. All gathering places were to be fumigated and health inspectors would ride street cars to check sanitation, identify those with flu symptoms and control spitting in public areas. October 8, 1918, an official ban took place on public gatherings and recommendations were made to control this lethal outbreak of flu until October 20, 1918. Postal workers were required to wear masks (as many other people did also), quarantine placards were required as a precaution, affected persons were to stay home and not to go to hospitals or doctors’ offices - they were to be cared for at home. Several people were arrested for violation of the flu restrictions. Since October 7, 6,256 flu cases had been reported in Indiana, by November 18, 686 new cases of flu were reported and the state-wide restrictions were lifted by the State Health Department. Indianapolis had one of the lowest flu rates of any of the country’s largest cities: 290 per 100,000. This is an excellent example of cooperation with state officials, Health Department, local officials and other government agencies, thereby reducing the toll of the epidemic. Locally we had two heroes in Dr David Linvill and Dr Grisier Health Officer. Thanks to their rapid response in enforcing quarantine guide-

lines, Whitley County did not suffer as much as most of the country. A report in the Post and Mail listed all the reported patients with the flu October 12 which numbered 258. Of course, just like today, reported and actual numbers may vary by at least 50%. The newspaper reports doctors and nurses working day and night. By October 21, the infection rate began to decline, continuing to decline in November and December, with a few flu cases throughout 1919. The last reported case in Whitley County was January 1, 1920. October 1918, was the peak of infections in Whitley County. The total reported cases were 310 out of a population of 15,660 that would be 2% of the total population. Remember that was REPORTED cases. It's interesting looking at the census of 1910-1920: Whitley County showed a population loss of 7.3%. October 1918, was noted by 195,000 deaths in the US. I will have to research that figure for another article.

Let us now delve into the medical aspects of the flu. Typically a person would come down with the flu with fever chills, develop a cough, the lungs would start to fill with fluid, with death following soon. Most of the deaths occurred in those in the prime of life and health aged 18-35 years. The elderly and very young were not as affected. To quote a Dr Victor Vaughn, "the patients are placed on cots until every bed is full, and yet others crowd in. The faces soon wear a bluish cast; a distressing cough brings up blood stained sputum. In the morning the dead bodies are stacked about the morgue like cord wood." Another report from Camp Devens outside of Boston, Mass. from army surgeons: "on autopsy we found the lungs filled with masses like red currant jelly." Many of the flu cases then rapidly developed into pneumonia which was overwhelming for the victim. Dr. Ben Linvill of our county was instrumental in getting "flu vaccine" from the Mayo Clinic. He had this shipped for use by Dr Grisier the current health officer for our citizens. In addition, Eli Lilly and Company worked day and night on their "flu vaccine" utilizing over 100 workers. The virus was not even identified until the late 1920's, but they were trying to do something. Who knows but that "vaccine" may have saved a few people.

Dr Merritte Ireland became Surgeon General of the U.S. October, 1918. Look in this Bulletin for a detailed biography of this Columbia City native. From our newly published WWI books, a few soldiers comments: Clyde Ray Overdeer -several letters exchanged from Europe and home describing the flu; Marshal Kerns - died of pneumonia 1918, Ft. Douglas, Arizona; a large funeral was held in Columbia City. Many other interesting letters and stories are in these volumes.

In summary, it can be said that this pandemic was horrifying in its path of destruction. Whole families were killed by this virus. How strange the timing of October being the most lethal month (world-wide), the age group it affected, the inability to treat this plague, and the crippling death rate in addition to the Great War, Russian Revolution and other conflicts before 1920. How would we do today ? Would we comply with quarantine restrictions, follow Health Department guidelines such as vaccinations, health practices, limitations of individual freedoms? This may be the year you get your flu vaccinations !!! Check with your local health care provider.

Sources;
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University of Michigan - Public Health Archives
BBC History Magazine
Whitley County, Indiana Health Department- Official Record 1918-1920
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