



PANNEBAKKER FAMILY NEWS

NEWSLETTER OF THE PANNEBAKKER FAMILY ASSOCIATION

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1918-1919 Flu Epidemic

An unthinkable 50 to 100 million people worldwide died from the 1918-1919 flu pandemic commonly known as the “Spanish Flu.” It was the deadliest global pandemic since the [Black Death](#), and rare among flu viruses for striking down the young and healthy, often within days of exhibiting the first symptoms. In the United States, the 1918 flu pandemic lowered the average life expectancy by 12 years.

What’s even more remarkable about the 1918 flu, say infectious disease experts, is that it never really went away. After infecting an estimated 500 million people worldwide in 1918 and 1919 (a third of the global population), the H1N1 strain that caused the Spanish flu receded into the background and stuck around as the regular seasonal flu.

But every so often, direct descendants of the 1918 flu combined with bird flu or swine flu to create powerful new pandemic strains, which is exactly what happened in 1957, 1968 and 2009. Those later flu outbreaks, all created in part by the 1918 virus, claimed millions of additional lives, earning the 1918 flu the odious title of “the mother of all pandemics.”

Jeffrey Taubenberger was part of the pioneering scientific team that first isolated and sequenced the genome of the 1918 flu virus in the late 1990s. The painstaking process involved extracting viral RNA from autopsied lung samples taken from American soldiers who died from the 1918 flu, plus one diseased lung preserved in the Alaskan permafrost for nearly 100 years.

Now chief of the Viral Pathogenesis and Evolution Section at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Taubenberger explains that genetic analyses of the 1918 flu indicate that it started as an avian flu and represented a completely new viral strain when it made the leap to humans shortly before 1918. Lab tests of the reconstructed 1918 virus show that in its original form, the virus’s novel encoded proteins made it 100 times more lethal in mice than today’s seasonal flu.

The 1918 pandemic struck in three distinct waves over a 12-month period. It first appeared in the spring of 1918 in North America and Europe largely in the trenches of World War I, then reemerged in its deadliest form in the fall of 1918, killing tens of millions of people worldwide from September through November. The final wave swept across Australia, the United States and Europe in the late winter and spring of 1919.

But did the 1918 flu simply “go away” after that third wave? Absolutely not, says Taubenberger.

Virus Mutates Into Seasonal Flu

Since the whole world had been exposed to the virus, and had therefore developed natural immunity against it, the 1918 strain began to mutate and evolve in a process called “antigenic drift.” Slightly altered versions of the 1918 flu reemerged in the winters of 1919-1920 and 1920-1921, but they were far less deadly and nearly indistinguishable from the seasonal flu.

“The 1918 flu definitely lost its real virulence by the early 1920s,” says Taubenberger.

But what’s truly incredible, according to genetic analyses, is that the same novel strain of flu first introduced in 1918 appears to be the direct ancestor of every seasonal and pandemic flu we’ve had over the past century.

“You can still find the genetic traces of the 1918 virus in the seasonal flus that circulate today,” says Taubenberger. “Every single human infection with influenza A in the past 102 years is derived from that one introduction of the 1918 flu.”

Welcome to the Pandemic Era

The 1918 flu pandemic was by far the deadliest flu outbreak of the 20th and 21st centuries to date, but it wasn't the only one to qualify as a pandemic. Even with the advent of the first seasonal flu vaccines after World War II, the flu virus has proven capable of some unexpected and deadly genetic tricks.

In a normal flu season, vaccine scientists can track the most active viral strains and produce a vaccine that protects against changes in the human flu virus from year to year. But every so often, viral genes from the animal kingdom enter the mix.

"If one animal is infected with two different influenza viruses at the same time," says Taubenberger, "maybe one virus from a bird and another from a human, those genes can mix and match to create a brand-new virus that never existed before."

That's what happened in 1957 when the 1918 flu, which is an H1N1 virus, swapped genes with another bird flu giving us the H2N2 pandemic, which claimed a million lives worldwide. It happened again in 1968 with the creation of the so-called "Hong Kong Flu," an H3N2 virus that killed another million people.

The so-called "Swine Flu" pandemic of 2009 has an even deeper backstory. When humans became infected with the 1918 pandemic flu, which was originally a bird flu, we also passed it on to pigs.

"One branch of the 1918 flu permanently adapted to pigs and became swine influenza that was seen in pigs in the US every year after 1918 and spread around the world," says Taubenberger.

In 2009, a strain of swine flu swapped genes with both human influenza and avian influenza to create a new variety of H1N1 flu that was "more like 1918 than had been seen in a long time," says Taubenberger. Around 300,000 people died from the 2009 flu pandemic.

All told, if 50 to 100 million people died in the 1918 and 1919 pandemic, and tens of millions more have died in the ensuing century of seasonal flus and pandemic outbreaks, then all of those deaths can be attributed to the single and accidental emergence in humans of the very successful and stubborn 1918 virus.

"We're still living in what I would call the '1918 pandemic era' 102 years later" says Taubenberger, "and I don't know how long it will last."

How 'Hyphenated Americans' Won World War I

Nearly a quarter of the men sent to fight in Europe in 1918 were foreign-born.

A hundred years ago this week, on a bend of the Meuse River in northern France, Gen. John Pershing launched the final major Allied offensive against Germany, an assault that would bring an end to World War I two months later.

Without American intervention, the war would have probably ended in a German victory, or sputtered to a stalemate, leaving the Germans in possession of much of France, Belgium and Russia. The victory, though, came at significant cost: In the Meuse-Argonne offensive, as the operation came to be known, the Americans alone suffered some 122,000 casualties, including 29,000 dead.

That more than a million Americans were fighting in a European war was surprising enough. But even more surprising was the men themselves: Pershing's soldiers, known as the American Expeditionary Force, were in some units as likely to be foreign- as American-born.

Thanks to a wave of immigration, the United States had changed significantly at the turn of the 20th century, going from a nation whose white population was 60 percent British and 35 percent German at the start of the Civil War into a turbulent "melting pot" in time for the Great War: 11 percent British, 20 percent German, 30 percent Italian and Hispanic and 34 percent Slavic.

During the offensive, the Germans tried to use the army's multiethnic background as propaganda. The doughboys, as the American troops were known, were "half-Americans," the Germans sneered.

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Many Americans were as contemptuous of the “melting pot” as the Germans. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts, for example, tried in 1896 to extend the class of “excluded immigrants” from “paupers, convicts and diseased persons” to include all “Italians, Russians, Poles, Hungarians, Greeks and Asiatics” who arrived on our shores and failed a literacy test. Ideally, Lodge wanted citizenship confined to the “original race stocks of the 13 colonies.” The others, he averred, were chiefly “slum dwellers, criminals and juvenile delinquents.”

With one in three Americans in 1918 either born abroad or of foreign-born parents, resentment of immigrants became as American as apple pie. Terms like yid, mick, dago, greaser, bohunk, polack, and uke were tossed around as casually as baseballs well into the late 20th century. As great an American as Teddy Roosevelt popularized suspicion of “hyphenated Americans” so well that even his political opposite, Woodrow Wilson, took to saying that “any man who carries a hyphen about with him carries a dagger that he is ready to plunge into the vitals of the Republic.”

It took the press baron William Randolph Hearst to make the paradoxical argument that these hyphen-wielding “foreigners” belonged in the Army. Let *them* serve, Hearst thundered from his three dozen newspapers and magazines after Wilson’s declaration of war. If we send “All-American” boys to the Western Front, these “foreign slackers on American soil” — these “birds of passage” — will take American jobs and toil in profitable safety while “real Americans” die in France. Others saw service as a tool of assimilation: “The military tent,” Roosevelt said, “will rank next to the public school among the great agents of democratization.”

And so nearly a quarter of draftees in 1918 were foreigners, often recent arrivals. The Army’s 32nd Division, made up of National Guardsmen from Michigan and Wisconsin, was nicknamed the “Gemütlichkeit Division” — the German word means “coziness” — because it included so many German immigrants. Its rosters, one officer remarked, “sounded like Hindenburg’s staff.”

How did this “half-American” army do in World War I?

They were splendid. Even though the doughboys spoke 49 different languages, making training and command difficult, the immigrants fought as bravely and desperately as native-born Americans. Germans deployed against the United States 77th Division in the Argonne Forest, hearing the mix of voices from the other trench, assumed that they were fighting Italian troops who had been sent north to reinforce the French. They weren’t Italians; they were Americans, from Little Italy in Manhattan.

The Germans were fascinated by the Americans they captured on the battlefield. The Germans had assumed that with all its immigrant soldiers the United States Army would shatter into demoralized ethnic pieces when pressured. “The majority of them are the sons of foreign parents,” a German staff circular reminded interrogators. But German hopes of disintegration were dashed on the battlefield. “These half-Americans express without hesitation purely native sentiments. Their quality is remarkable. They brim with naïve confidence,” the Germans despaired.

“Naïve confidence” is as fine a description of what it means to be American as any — a superiority complex born of transformative, class-blind opportunity: the opportunity sought by the men and women who flooded into America at the turn of the last century, just like those who arrive today and continue to see the military as an avenue for gaining citizenship and respect.

Americans wandering in our nation’s World War I cemeteries in France today will be struck by how many of those “foreign slackers” and “half-Americans” reside there. The unassimilated names on the gravestones — Ottavio Fiscalini, Aleksandr Skazhkows, Olaf Knutson — confirm that, through what Senator Lodge called the “unguarded gates of American citizenship,” passed thousands of men ready to die for America.

By Geoffrey Wawro

5 Hard-Earned Lessons from Pandemics of the Past

Humankind is resilient. While global pandemics like the Bubonic Plague and 1918 pandemic wreaked havoc on populations through the centuries, societies honed critical survival strategies. Here are five ways people adapted to life amid disease outbreaks.

1. Quarantine

The first quarantine was passed into law in the port city of Ragusa (today's Dubrovnik) on July 27, 1377, during the Bubonic Plague, or Black Death. It stipulated: "Those who come from plague-infested areas shall not enter [Ragusa] or its district unless they spend a month on the islet of Mrkan or in the town of Cavtat, for the purpose of disinfection." Doctors at the time observed that the spread of the Black Death could be slowed by isolating individuals.

Quarantine played a large role in how 20th-century American cities responded to the outbreak of the 1918 influenza pandemic, or Spanish flu, following the return of soldiers from World War I. In San Francisco, naval arrivals were quarantined before entering the city. In San Francisco and St. Louis, social gatherings were banned and theaters and schools were closed. Philadelphia became a test case in what *not* to do when, 72 hours after holding the ill-fated Liberty Loan parade in September, the city's 31 hospitals were at capacity following the super-spreader event.

Did you know? The term "quarantine" is derived from the Italian quarantino, meaning "40-day period."

2. Socially Distant Food and Drink Pickup

COVID-19 was not the first pandemic to strike Italy. During the Italian Plague (1629-1631), the wealthy citizens of Tuscany devised an ingenious way to sell off the contents of their wine cellars without entering the presumably infected streets: Wine windows, or *buchette del vino*.

These narrow windows were cut into grand homes to allow wine sellers to pass their wares to waiting customers, much like the to-go cocktail windows that popped up cities like New York during the COVID-19 pandemic. Seventeenth-century wine sellers even used vinegar as a disinfectant when accepting payment. There are over 150 wine windows in the city of Florence, and 400 years after the plague, they were revived amid COVID-19 to serve customers everything from wine and coffee to gelato.

3. Mask-Wearing

Doctors treating patients during the plague wore masks with long, bird-like beaks. They had the right idea—the long beaks created social distance between patient and doctor and at least partially covered their mouth and nose—but the wrong science. Doctors at the time believed in Miasma theory, which held that diseases spread through bad smells in the air. The beaks were often packed with strongly scented herbs believed to ward off illness.

During the 1918 influenza pandemic, masks became the go-to means of stopping the spread of infection to the public. Masks became mandatory in San Francisco in September of 1918, and those who didn't comply faced fines, imprisonment and the threat of having their names printed in newspapers as "mask slackers."

But newspapers weren't just for shaming; they also printed instructions on how to make masks at home. People even got creative with masks, with the *Seattle Daily Times* running an article entitled "Influenza Veils Set New Fashion" in October of 1918.

4. Washing Hands and Surfaces

Washing your hands to reduce the spread of disease is an accepted part of hygiene now, but frequent hand washing was a bit of a novelty during the early 20th century. To encourage the practice, "powder rooms," or ground-floor bathrooms, were first installed as a way to protect families from germs brought in by guests and ubiquitous delivery people dropping off goods like coal, milk and ice.

Previously, these visitors would have traveled through the home to use the bathroom, tracking outside germs with them. (Typhoid Mary infamously spread the disease from which she earns her nickname by not properly washing her hands before handling food.)

Germ theory was a relatively new concept brought to light in the mid-1800s by Louis Pasteur, Joseph Lister, and Robert Koch that held that disease was caused by microorganisms invisible to the naked eye. Having a sink on the ground floor made it easier to wash your hands upon returning home.

Speaking of health and design, there's a reason why hospitals, subways and 1920s bathrooms were often tiled in pristine white: White tiles are easy to clean and make any dirt or grime highly visible.

5. Fresh Air and Adaptive Schooling

While the topic of whether or not to return to in-person schooling is a complex one in a pandemic, the 2019-20 coronavirus pandemic was not the first time that universities and schools were forced to grapple with the question.

In 1665, a young Isaac Newton was sent home from Cambridge University to his family's farm following an outbreak of bubonic plague. It was on that farm that he allegedly witnessed the falling apple that led to his law of universal gravitation.

While fresh air doesn't always lead to fresh ideas, it was used to help contain the Tuberculosis outbreak in the early 1900s that claimed 450 American lives a day—many of them children. Germany pioneered the concept of open-air schools, and by 1918, over 130 American cities had them. The movement toward fresh air also inspired city planners to create more green spaces to promote public health.

During the second wave of the Spanish flu outbreak in the fall of 1918, public schools in Chicago and New York stayed open. At the time, New York City's health commissioner told the *New York Times*: "[Children] leave their often-unsanitary homes for large, clean, airy school buildings, where there is always a system of inspection and examination enforced."

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Pannebakker Family Association



The Pannebakker Family Association is an outgrowth of the family reunion held at Pennypacker Mills, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania on July 2-4, 1999. The reunion celebrated the 300th year wedding anniversary of Hendrick Pannebecker and Eve Umstat, in Germantown, Pennsylvania in the year 1699. In the words of the Steering Committee of the reunion, "We hope that the 1999 Pfannebecker-Umstat Reunion will lead to the growth of a family association, which will provide a forum for conversation, collection and preservation of information, and a sense of lasting community among the heirs of this rich cultural heritage."