



The Pandemic of 1917–20

The year 1917 saw the Americans enter the Great War, with mass training of American doughboys throughout the United States. Just as during the Civil War, disease was a major problem in military camps. Young men off the farms had not been exposed to the same environment as urban males. So, there was concern for the health of the men that were being trained. However, when one individual becomes sick in a crowded area, the sickness will spread. So, when troops were moved, the illness followed along.

The funny thing about critical diseases is that nobody wants to step up and take the blame for their origin. The pandemic of 1918 has been claimed to have started in Haskell, Kansas, by a pig farmer burning material by a military camp. It has also been said to have begun in a British Army camp in France and reported to have come to the United States by Chinese laborers. Regardless, the first major individual to die from the disease was the King of Spain, hence the name Spanish flu.

The disease infected some 500 million individuals and took the lives of around 50 million, with 675,000 deaths in the United States. The disease came in four waves, starting in 1917 with the first mild wave, and then the second wave hit with force in 1918. The fourth wave ended in 1920 and disappeared. This new influenza was different from past episodes of the type of disease. It took the lives of those between 15 and 40 years old instead of the very young and old, as in the past. The life expectancy in the United States fell 12 years. The life expectancy of males was now 36.6 years, and women fell to 42.2 years. No family was left unaffected.

Stemming the Spread

Communities had to react to the emergency and not cause panic. Some were faster than others in public hygiene education and ordinances: New York passed an ordinance that would fine people for not covering their mouths when they coughed. The closing of public schools, theaters and other public-seating places were closed. The isolation of individuals was done with quarantine ordinances. Children sang this song to the tune of a rope-jumping rhyme:

*I had a little bird
Its name was Enza
I opened the window
And in-flu-enza!*

Today, the Spanish influenza is identified as H1N1 virus, which is associated with swine virus and not the common bird virus of most influenza today. However, viruses mutate, and therefore, each year, we need to be vaccinated to prevent the next outbreak. One must remember that the only disease we have eliminated for the human population is smallpox. Medical science has made great progress since 1917.

D.H.Coop is a retired fire/paramedic and retired teacher having taught IB and AP World History 30 years. He continues to substitute, tutor and consult. www.HistoryDepot.com