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MUSEUM NOTES: APRIL 14, 2020

The 1918 INFLUENZA PANDEMIC

From Spring 1918 until Spring 1919, the “Spanish Flu” circled the globe. It is estimated that 500 million worldwide were infected, which was about a third of the world’s population. An estimated 50 million worldwide died from the virus or from complications of it. The 1918 pandemic killed approximately 3% of the world’s population, including a staggering 675,000 in the United States.

It is historically erroneously referred to as the “Spanish Flu.” Many believed that the virus originated in the Iberian Peninsula, comprising of Spain and Portugal, thus the nickname “Spanish Flu.” The reason they believed that the flu came from Spain is due to the Spanish media. During World War I, Allied and Central Powers censored their news about the widespread influenza infecting and killing military members to avoid affecting Frontline and Homefront morale. Spain remained neutral during the war and their media was free to comment about it. The Spanish media first reported about the virus in late May 1918, after their King Alfonso XIII became ill. In Spain alone, 8 million died from the influenza. Nations with blackout media could only read about the flu epidemic from the Spanish media, thus assuming that country was ground zero. However, Spain believed the virus came from France, so they called it the “French Flu.”

It is actually unknown exactly where the 1918 Influenza originated. It has been suggested that it could have come from France, China, or Britain. However, from historic records and scientific data, it probably came from the United States. In January 1918, an influenza outbreak struck Haskell County, Kansas. It was so severe that a local physician named Dr. Loring Miner alerted the U.S. Public Health Service about it. Several young men from Haskell County who had been exposed to the flu soon left to report to Camp Funston, a training camp located on Fort Riley. On the morning of March 4th, after breakfast, Private Albert Gitchell went to sick call complaining of cold-like symptoms of a sore throat, fever, and headache. By noon, over 100 more Fort Riley soldiers reported similar symptoms. Soon after the initial report, similar outbreaks occurred in Army camps and prisons throughout the United States. The virus then traveled to Europe among the American soldiers deployed to help the Allies in France. The virus spread rapidly in Europe, Russia, North Africa, India, China, Japan, the Philippines, and even New Zealand.

As American soldiers returned home from Europe, starting around September 1918, they brought the virus back with them. This was the second wave of the flu to hit America. It spread

quickly throughout the nation crippling employment and economic sources as well as hospitals and medical staff. Then, it seemed to have burned itself out by December. Unfortunately, in January 1919, the third wave started and lasted until Spring of that year.

Influenza was not a new disease. There had been previous documented cases. In 1889-1890, there was the "Asiatic" or "Russian" flu, which killed approximately 1 million people worldwide. Unlike that strain, the 1918 virus was particularly deadly in healthy people, including the 15-34 year age group. There were no vaccines to halt the virus and no antibiotics to treat secondary bacterial infections. The only way to stop it was to isolate, quarantine, maintain good personal hygiene, use disinfectants, and limit public gatherings (sound familiar?). Yet, that still could not keep it from spreading to a remote tiny outpost in Alaska called Brevig Mission. The small village had approximately 80 adults, mostly Inuit Natives. Between November 15-20, 1918, 72 adults died from influenza. The perished were buried in a mass grave and preserved in permafrost.

In 1951, a Swedish microbiologist and PdD student at the University of Iowa, Johan Hultin received permission to excavate the mass grave to obtain lung tissue to research the 1918 virus. Although he was able to obtain a sample, he was not successful in retrieving the virus. Forty six years later, in 1997 Dr. Hultin and Dr. Jeffery Taubenberger, a molecular pathologist, returned to Brevig Mission to collect more lung tissue samples. This time was successful. From these samples, Doctors Hultin and Taubenberger were able to sequence the full length of the hemagglutinin gene of the 1918 virus. They believe the virus was likely from avian sources, but may have been altering in a mammalian host before emerging in its pandemic form. In 1918, Haskell County, Kansas, sat on a major migratory flyway for 17 bird species and ranchers raised cattle, horses, sheep, hogs, chickens and turkeys. So, it sounds like a perfect breeding ground for the particularly deadly 1918 virus.

Next week I will delve into how the 1918 pandemic affected Texas and Canadian residents.

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