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The Flu Epidemic of 1918



The third of a series of articles in which Scribner's is reconstructing memorable fragments of our neglected past in the light of their contemporary meaning

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EVERY newspaperman, publicity man, and politician knows that a big news event is sometimes thrust out of public notice by a still bigger—or more exciting—event which happens simultaneously. If he wants his story to land on the front page, he prays that there will be no grave threat of war, no great disaster, no juicy murder to compete with it for public attention. There is relativity in news. When, for example, a *Hindenburg* disaster takes place, even a struggle between the President and Congressmen over the Supreme Court sinks for the time being into comparative insignificance in newspaper readers' minds.

Now and then the same sort of thing happens in the larger field of history. An event of great historical importance is crowded off the front pages and out of people's memories by other simultaneous happenings. Could one find a better example of this truth than the fact that the most terrific epidemic which ever visited the United States—an epidemic which brought death to half a million Americans—never became the big news event of its day, was only sparingly written about, and was soon half-forgotten?

It would be interesting to know how many readers are aware of the huge proportions of this epidemic. It would be still more interesting to know how many readers under the age of twenty-five *have ever heard* of the great influenza epidemic of 1918.

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2

F L U



The influenza epidemic struck hard in the Army camps Every fourth man came down with the flu, every twenty fourth man caught pneumonia, every sixty-seventh man died

Readers who were grown up in 1918 will recall it, more or less vaguely, as a sudden scourge of a particularly virulent form of grippe (known at the time as "Spanish influenza") which swept through the country during the last two months of the World War—those months of late September, October, and early November, 1918, when the Allied troops were victoriously thrusting the Germans back across the ruined countryside of France and Belgium, when the Central European empires were crumbling, when Woodrow Wilson was laying down the inexorable terms of armistice to a frantic German Chancellor, when the Fourth Liberty Loan campaign was arousing a new frenzy of war enthusiasm, and when the American public were wondering if the fighting would be over soon.

These readers will remember how friends and members of their families and fellow office workers were taken ill, how the influenza often turned into pneumonia, how doctors and nurses were overworked (if indeed obtainable at all), how people went about with white cotton masks over their faces. Some readers will remember going home with a high fever and aching bones and a cough, and being warned to stay in bed lest pneumonia develop—as it often did. Ex-soldiers may recall that their regiments at the training camp or at Brest or in the trenches were depleted by sudden illness. But even these older readers will perhaps be surprised when they are reminded how widespread and destructive was the plague.

The epidemic took at least half a million American lives—ten times as many as the Germans took during the War. In other words, it killed almost as many people in this country as are now living in the City of Washington. In the Army camps in the United States, every fourth man came down with influenza, every twenty-fourth man got pneumonia, and every sixty-seventh man died from the combined effects of the two diseases.



In April, the disease broke out among American troops abroad, apparently carried there from American Army camps

Nor was this an American epidemic only. It was world-wide. In India it killed some five million people. It spread almost simultaneously to the remotest regions—Africa, upper Labrador, the Philippines, the South Seas. In Alaska whole villages of Eskimos lost their entire adult population; in Western Samoa the epidemic took, directly or indirectly, seven thousand lives out of a population of thirty thousand; in Fiji some 85 or 90 per cent of the population of Suva fell ill. Although the total loss of life the world over cannot possibly be computed, certainly it was much larger, in a few months, than the total loss of life in all the many years of fighting in the World War.

If that is not enough, listen to this further statement. According to no less sober and cautious an authority than the British Ministry of Health, the epidemic ranks "not lower than third, and perhaps second, upon the roll of

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3

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By the middle of October, the epidemic had reached its climax in New York City. Theaters and public meeting places were closed. Outdoor church services were held in the streets

great pestilences" of all recorded history. "No epidemic of smallpox or cholera," says a report issued by this Ministry in 1920, "not even the typhus periods of the earlier years of the nineteenth century, can vie with the influenza of 1918–19 as agents of destruction." The only two rivals in history, it seems, are the plague of Justinian's reign and the fourteenth-century Black Death.

Yet so completely did the end of the War displace this great plague in popular attention and destroy the memory of it that you will find only the most fleeting mention of it—if any at all—in the history books. That is one reason why I venture to guess that few members of the generation which is now growing up have ever heard of the influenza epidemic of 1918.

II

SINCE there was a war going on at the time and hysteria ran high, it was natural that many credulous Americans should have imagined that influenza germs had been brought to America by German agents. One gentleman, Lieutenant Colonel Philip S. Doane of the Shipping Board, suggested an even more definite possibility. "We know," he was quoted as saying, "that men have been ashore from German submarine boats, for they have been seen in New York and other places. It would be quite easy for one of these German agents to turn loose Spanish influenza germs in a theater or some other place where large numbers of persons are assembled. The Germans have started epidemics in Europe, and there is no reason why they should be particularly gentle with America." Unfortunately for this delightful theory, careful postwar research shows that one of the places where the epidemic was first reported in the whole world was Camp Funston, in Kansas.

Did the epidemic actually start in Kansas? To ask that question is to find oneself confronting one of the obscurest riddles of medicine. As everybody knows, there are periodic waves of diseases or groups of diseases variously known as influenza or grippe. Sometimes these waves are big, and the disease is frighteningly severe; it was very widespread and very bad, for example, in 1889–90, and pretty bad in 1928. Sometimes it is comparatively mild. The epidemic of 1918 began in a rather mild form in the spring of the year. It was recorded at Camp Funston on March 5, spread quickly through the camp, passed off. On March 18 it hit the Oglethorpe camps. In the same month the same disease—or what looked like it—appeared in such widely separated places as China, the Japanese Navy, and the French village of Chaumont.

That is a strange set of facts to build a theory upon. They suggest that possibly the influenza broke out in no one place, but in several places simultaneously. What followed was even stranger.

By April the disease had reached American troops at Brest, apparently having been carried there from American Army camps. It had broken out also among the British troops, and among the German troops on the Western Front. In May it was reported not only from France but from Spain, Scotland, Greece, Macedonia, Egypt, and

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Influenza ran wildly through Europe, for soldiers had to be shifted, and as they marched, the flu marched with them

the Italian Navy. By June it had taken hold in Germany, Austria, Norway, and India. It was running wildly through Europe, and no wonder, for most of Europe was fighting, and troop trains and ships were constantly transporting men hither and yon in quantity. Spain had a hard time with it toward the end of May; hence the name "Spanish influenza" which became attached to it. And as it spread it increased in virulence. During those summer weeks of 1918, when Ludendorff's final thrusts into French territory were being turned back at Château Thierry and Compiègne and Hazebrouck, and Foch was beginning the counterattack which never stopped for long until the War was over, few Americans heard much about the influenza epidemic, but it was moving fast and taking an increasing toll abroad.

Then it moved *westward* again—back across the Atlantic. And all at once it was no longer a mild disease, either in the United States or in the other countries, all over the world, to which it had been brought. Now it was terrifying.

Toward the end of August, some fifty cases suddenly appeared among the men at the Naval Station at Commonwealth Pier, Boston. Within a week there were 2000 men down with influenza in the Naval Forces of the First Naval District, centering in Boston. Sailors often mingle with soldiers: on September 7 or 8 influenza had broken out at Camp Devens near Boston. The scourge was beginning its real American onslaught.

In each place the first few cases appeared to be mild, but presently one case in six or seven turned into pneumonia; and this took so severe a form that a pneumonia patient had only about two chances in three of pulling through. The disease spread from the military through the civilian population, doing its greatest damage among young men and women. It leaped from one end of the country to the other. By the first of October the epidemic had reached its peak in Boston (and simultaneously, believe it or not, in Bombay, India); by the middle of October it had reached its peak in Philadelphia and Baltimore (and also, for variety, in Liverpool and Vienna); during the next week, from the nineteenth to the twenty-sixth of October, it came to its climax in New York (as well as in Berlin, Paris, and Stockholm). Another week, and Cleveland was seeing the worst of it (along with London); still another, and Pittsburgh, Spokane, Edinburgh, and Amsterdam were having their crises. Meanwhile, influenza and pneumonia were running through all the other American cities, through the Army camps in America, and through the troops in half a dozen theaters of war.

III

To MEET the crisis, Congress made a special appropriation of a million dollars for the Public Health Service, and the Red Cross appropriated $575,000. Though nobody knew just how the disease was communicated, the coming together of people seemed to have something to do with it, and therefore football games and boxing matches were canceled, and the Kentucky races were called off, and theaters and other places of amusement were closed, stranding thousands of actors on the road. All releases of motion pictures were canceled until the epidemic should abate.

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5
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Early in November, the Allied troops were routing a demoralized enemy. America forgot illness, forgot masks, for the War was ending and the influenza epidemic was ending too

In Boston and Washington the public schools were closed. The New York Public Library discontinued the circulation of books. The New York Telephone Company, with no less than 1600 of its operators ill, asked its subscribers not to use the telephone except for the most urgent calls. Dr. Royal S. Copeland, now Senator from New York but then Health Commissioner of New York City, asked business houses to stagger their hours of opening and closing so as to relieve the congestion in the subways and other transit lines. A political campaign was under way, but political meetings were few. In Seattle and many other cities, every place of public assembly was closed. Even war plans were delayed: the Provost Marshal General canceled orders for the entrainment of 142,000 draft registrants because conditions in the training camps were already so appalling.

Meanwhile the health authorities lectured their frightened communities on hygiene—and thus occasionally provided a little comic relief from the stress of illness and worry, as when Dr. Copeland warned New Yorkers not to kiss except through a handkerchief and, taking his cue from the custom of observing heatless days and motorless Sundays to save fuel for war purposes, called for "spitless Sundays." Five hundred New Yorkers were arrested for spitting. The New York Medical Society warned against handshaking.

In Washington and elsewhere one saw people wearing strange-looking white cotton masks in offices and shops; they looked ridiculous, to be sure, but was it not one's patriotic duty to wear them to defeat this new enemy of a nation at war? Barbers generally put on masks, but even so they were regarded with such suspicion that the sale of safety razors boomed. Nor was ingenuity asleep: in the *Popular Science Monthly,* Edward T. Duncan suggested that you could smoke cigarettes through a mask if you put two cornplasters on the mask, one inside and one outside, and cut a hole through the mask to fit the holes in the plasters. The holes would be corked when not in use.

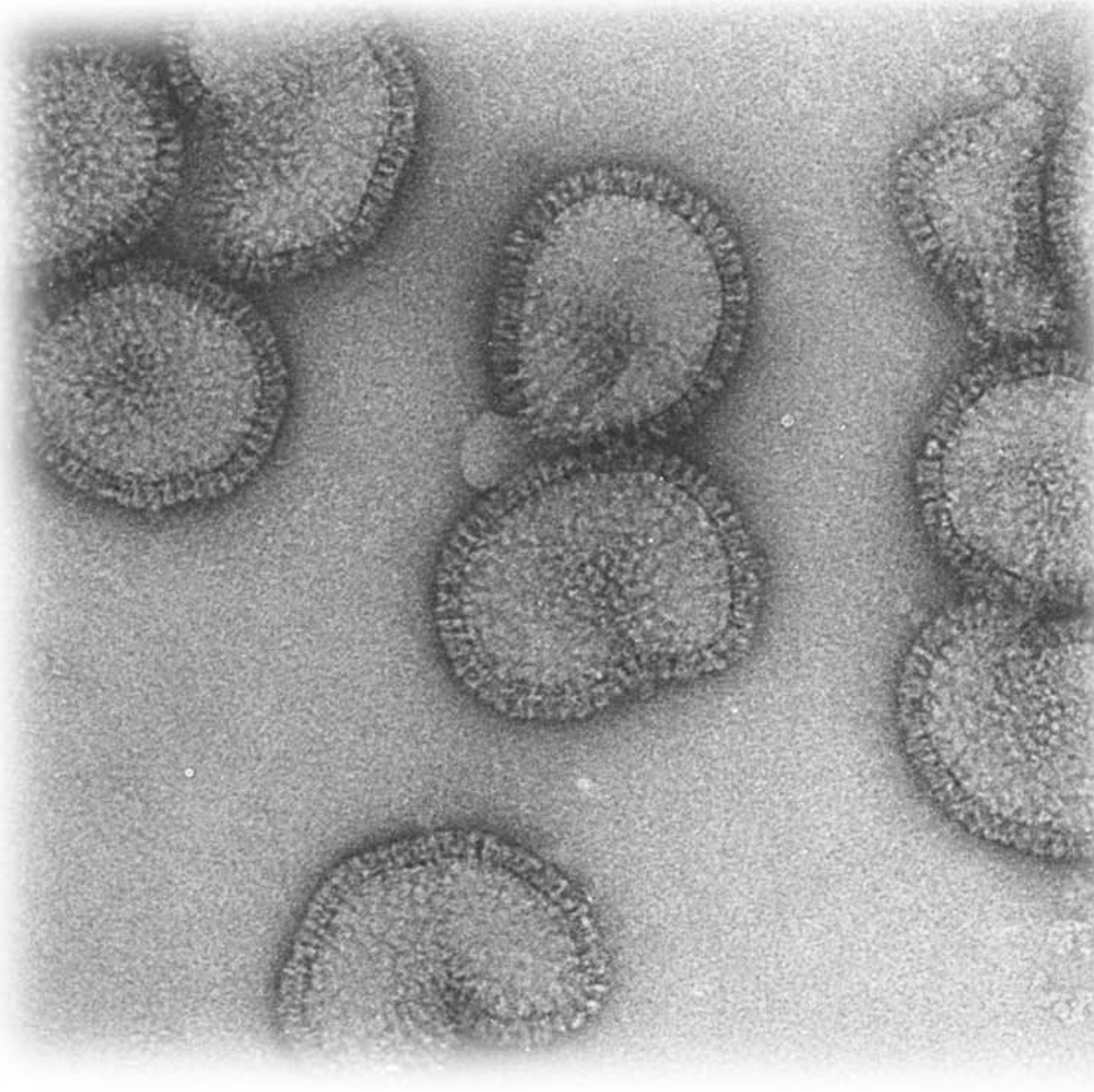
Yet all precautions seemed useless. So savage was the attack of the epidemic that mines and factories and shipyards were crippled by sick leaves. Over half the population of San Antonio, Texas, fell ill. In other cities one person in three or four was laid up. The death rate in Camp Sherman approached those of the plague in London in 1665 and of yellow fever in Philadelphia in 1793.

Doctors and nurses everywhere were overwhelmed. A physician would answer a call and instead of treating one patient would have to treat ten or fifteen—members of the family and neighbors who had been unable to get a doctor or nurse—before he could leave. Hospital conditions were a nightmare: wards designed for thirty people would be jammed with seventy, half of them dying; when the day nurses came on duty they would find many new faces in the beds—patients put in the places of those who had died in the night. Doctors and nurses were falling ill themselves, some to die in three days. Panic was everywhere. A nurse who had then had only two months of training tells me she was offered $100 by telephone to come and look after a man and his wife who were both ill. Dr. Copeland appealed to every woman in New York with any knowledge of nursing to volunteer for immediate service; and in Philadelphia, which was harder hit than any other big city in the country, the Council of Defense advertised for help from "any person with two

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false news that an armistice had been signed, and America poured out of its shops and offices and homes, singing and shouting and blowing tin horns, while ticker tape showered down out of the windows. On the eleventh came the real news, and there was mad celebration all over again. Influenza? Masks? Keeping away from crowds? All that seemed a remote and unimportant nightmare now to the cheering multitudes in the streets.

Only one thing mattered. The War was over.



Spanish Flu under an electron microscope

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