

THE 1918 FLU PANDEMIC

A US perspective on how a nation responded By Todd Van Beck

There are people who claim to know how and when it started, but it is very probable that no-one will ever truly know. What is known is that, between January of 1918 and December 1920, it affected 500 million people worldwide. The death toll is estimated to have been anywhere from 17 million to possibly as high as 100 million people.

I am referring to the 1918 flu pandemic, sometimes mistakenly called “The Spanish Flu.” The Allies of World War I came to call it the Spanish flu, primarily because the pandemic received greater press attention after it moved from France to Spain in November 1918.

In 1918, the West was embroiled fighting in the First World War, and this alone would have dire consequences in enhancing the spread

of this deadly virus - due to close quarters and massive troop movement. When just one infected person would sneeze or cough, more than 500,000 virus particles could spread to those nearby. The War may also have increased the lethality of the virus. There is speculation that the soldiers’ immune systems were weakened by malnourishment, as well as the stresses of combat and chemical attacks, increasing their susceptibility.

Denial

In the United States, there were countless denials that the health risk was not significant, that the health risk was exaggerated and that even if there was actually a health risk it would pass within days. Failure to take preventive measures in March and April of 1918 was later highly criticised. To this very day there are posts on American social media that claim the pandemic of 1918 never happened. As this October 1918 headline in a Tennessee newspaper shows, one physician publicly denied the reality and severity of the deadly virus, the same month when 200,000 Americans died.

The power of the psychology of the denial of death was just as powerful in 1918 as it is in 2020.

Someone to blame

Just as today, in 1918 conspiracy theorists were up to their usual exaggerations and embellishments but, in 1918, there was one person who was singled out as planting the flu bug across the globe. This one person was an easy target because we were at war with the country he led. This person was the German Kaiser Wilhelm, and many people globally were only too willing to blame the Kaiser for this health disaster. Of course, when thousands of people started dying in



Germany and in the German Army this conspiracy theory collapsed.

Some religious leaders began preaching about the end of the world. Sermons abounded in the country, pointing to Old Testament and New Testament scriptures as signs predicting the end of the world.

People involved in the (then) new world of psychology offered their own ideas as to the real reason for the flu epidemic, blaming it on negative thinking. However, positive thinking proved ineffective in dealing with the deadly situation that was being experienced across the face of the globe.

A deadly outcome

The flu pandemic of 1918 killed more people in 24 weeks than HIV/AIDS killed in 24 years.

In 1918, the United States had a population of 105 million and 28% became infected - and it is estimated that between 500,000 to 675,000 Americans died.

October 1918 was the deadliest month of the whole pandemic, with 200,000 American's dead. This was known as "The Second Wave" and was utterly lethal. The second wave hit the country with a vengeance and, after this, suddenly new cases dropped abruptly. By November, in Philadelphia for example, a hard hit city, the influenza flu had almost disappeared.

How the funeral profession responded

When the flu epidemic of 1918 began, it was underestimated. The country was in the midst of fighting in World War I and, at the beginning, the deaths were manageable.

In 1918 cremation was largely unheard of. Earth burial, with the accompanying funeral rituals, was the common social and religious practice of the United States. Decedents were also still embalmed and laid out in the parlour or individual residences.

Then life in America began to change, death rates increased with great speed - and all hell broke loose.

The Harrisburg Courier on 20 October 1918 wrote: "The pall of death hung low over the city, and the end is not yet." In Harrisburg, the places that illustrated the massive loss of life which was to become a daily part of American life were the undertaking companies and morgues. In short order, many funeral home and morgues ran out of space and, because of sheer numbers, had no way to quickly bury the dead.

The funeral and cemetery professions, like the entire country, were unprepared for the outbreak, partly because of advances in bacteriology which led Americans to believe that they could control infectious diseases.

“The flu pandemic of 1918 killed more people in 24 weeks than HIV/AIDS killed in 24 years.”



Coffins Scarce; Diggers Few; Bodies Accumulate; Man Digs Wife's Grave

Cremation might have worked, but in 1918 there were so few crematories in the country and, even if available, the amount of time that it took to generate enough heat to thoroughly burn a dead human body also contributed to the conclusion that cremation would not help.

Back in Harrisburg, Boyd Brothers Undertakers were overwhelmed by the outbreak's incredible power to kill, and kill quickly. They were summoned to the home of a Mr Herman R Sourbeer. This is what the undertakers found upon arriving: "One home, that of Herman R Sourbeer, 323 Crescent, was made particularly sad by the visitation. On Thursday morning at 3 the father died. An hour later, two children, newly-born, followed in death. Other homes have been sorely stricken. Mrs. Sourbeer died Friday evening."

In large metropolitan areas across America, officials declared jurisdiction and limited the size of funeral attendance.

Funeral directors were inundated with flu deaths. Many funeral directors, such as William H Sardo in Washington DC, were required to stack caskets in their living quarters at the mortuary and on the street. In New Haven, Connecticut, six-year-old John Delano and his friends played outside a neighbourhood mortuary, scaling a mountain of caskets piled on the sidewalks. The boys thought this great

fun playing the common child's game "King of the Mountain".

By October 1918, a genuine crisis began in the task of caring for the dead. Undertakers across the country were being compelled to bury influenza victims in rough boxes because of the demand for caskets. The companies that manufactured caskets simply could not keep up with the demand.

George Olinger was the President of the National Selected Morticians in 1918, and this is what he said: "The shortage of burial cases is acute. Undertakers are compelled to hold bodies for six, seven, and eight days; some have their buildings filled with bodies, and coupled with the difficulty to get coffins the funeral directors have found that the cemeteries are having trouble to get graves opened in time for funerals."

One undertaker in Missouri absolutely could not get a casket and, due to this scarcity, went to the local lumber establishment and ordered twelve coffins. This undertaker at the time had nine bodies of flu victims in his facility awaiting burial.

At the same time, suicides began to spike. One father killed his entire family and then took his own life - and this was not an isolated incident.

Cemeteries struggled to handle the soaring death toll. With gravediggers absent from work - either because they had contracted the flu or were afraid that they would - local officials had to revert to extreme measures. In New Jersey, 15 workhouse inmates were handed spades and picks to dig graves under the watchful eyes of guards. In Baltimore, city employees were called into emergency duty as gravediggers, while soldiers from Fort Meade in Maryland were pressed into service to bury a three-week backlog of 175 bodies at Mount Auburn Cemetery, in Baltimore.

Casket companies were working at, and over, capacity. American casket companies had already been busy supplying caskets for the thousands of American soldier's killed in World War I, and the war was not yet over. As the supply fell and the demand rose, the price of caskets skyrocketed. This was called by the press "The Coffin Trust." Most casket companies and most undertakers in this health crisis were generous and professional, but there were a few villains.

Local officials facing desperate shortages of caskets resorted to extreme measures. District of Columbia Commissioner, Louis Brownlow, hijacked two train cars filled

***Col. Charles B. Hagadorn a Suicide
Elmira Officer Shoots Himself in Bed
Due to Worry Over Influenza Epidemic***

“In large metropolitan areas across America, officials declared jurisdiction and limited the size of funeral attendance.”

with 270 caskets bound for Pittsburgh and rerouted them to Washington DC under armed guards.

As the health crisis worsened, the War Industries Board ordered all casket makers to manufacture only plain caskets and immediately cease production of "all fancy trimmed couch and split panel varieties". Also, the rule limited casket sizes for adults to 5' 9" and 6' 3".

The worst horrors for undertakers, possibly, were seen in Philadelphia where the number of deaths approached 1,000 a day at the pandemic's peak. Entire neighbourhoods were draped in black crepe that was mounted on front doors to mark deaths inside. The well-known Philadelphia funeral director, Oliver H Bair, recruited the J G Brill Company - a streetcar manufacturer - to construct thousands of rudimentary boxes in which to bury the dead. City officials in Philadelphia also began hijacking train cars full of caskets and escorting the supply into the city under armed guard.

The City Morgue of Philadelphia was built to hold 36 bodies. In October of 1918, over 500 bodies were in the facility. The city scrambled to open six supplementary morgues and even placed bodies in cold storage plants.

Philadelphia was also the first city to turn to trench burial without benefit of any ceremony or ritual.

It was a common daily sight in Philadelphia to see, throughout day and night, horse-drawn undertakers' wagons in a constant parade through the streets of Philadelphia, as relatives placed their dead on porches and sidewalks to be removed. In most undertakers' wagons rode three people - a priest, a policeman and the undertaker.

In Iowa, the President of the State Board of Embalmers, John B Turner, prohibited public funerals and even the opening of caskets. In Iowa, exceptions were made only for parents or wives identifying soldiers before burial and, even then, they could only open the caskets if the family members covered their mouths and noses with masks and refrained from touching the body.

Much later one Iowa funeral director, Norbert L Blust, who worked under this particular state rule shared this thought: "In many Iowa communities, processing the loss of loved ones entails a series of rituals and rites and laying a person to rest in a respectful way. In many Iowa towns, the restrictions on public funerals meant that families and communities had those valuable rites interrupted, so grieving didn't take place in public but became an individual process, which had long-term consequences. Without an opportunity to share it with those around them, that grief was carried around for decades."

Burial of a victim

This went on and on for about 18 months. Then, almost out of the blue, the influenza epidemic was over. Churches opened, funeral services resumed and people and undertakers stopped having trouble finding caskets. The horror of World War I was about to end also.

During a wicked and intense 10-month period, life was turned upside down. As the influenza spread, so did fear. At the beginning the doubters were in abundance but, by the time 200,000 people lay dead in one month, they had long since been silenced and had mostly disappeared.

In 1918, people isolated themselves, not speaking to anyone, avoiding crowds, not having anywhere to go but stay at home. The rapid rate of death, and the fact there were so many dying, meant that most of the undertakers and cemeteries in America could not keep up. Refrigeration for deceased people was yet to be invented, so chemical embalming was of great importance, but even this was curtailed significantly - simply because of the overwhelming number of dead people.

Interestingly, despite the high morbidity and mortality rates that resulted from the flu epidemic of 1918, this experience began to fade from public awareness over the decades, until the arrival of news about Bird Flu, Ebola and other pandemics in the 1990s and 2000s - and the coronavirus pandemic of today. This has led some to label the 1918 epidemic as a "forgotten pandemic", and there are even conspiracy theorists alive and well on social media that claim the epidemic of 1918 never happened.



There are various theories of why the epidemic of 1918 has been forgotten. The rapid pace of the pandemic which, for examples, killed most of its victims within less than nine months, resulted in limited media coverage. The general population in 1918 was familiar with the patterns of pandemic disease in general during the 19th and early 20th centuries - typhoid, yellow fever, diphtheria and cholera outbreaks happened routinely and so might have lessened the significance of the influenza pandemic for the public, in the beginning!

Additionally, the outbreak coincided with the deaths and media focus on the First World War. In 1918, when people read obituaries they saw the war and post-war death as well as the death from the influenza side by side.

Conclusions

Crisis always reveals heroes and villains. For most funeral directors and cemeteries, the situation simply

overwhelmed their standard method of operation. There just was not enough of anything. People shared, people hoarded. People gave, people took. People confronted the crisis, people ran away. As with all life, crisis reveals the hard lesson that, whether we like it or not, a mirror is being held up to the human race. And looking hard into a mirror can be a very difficult experience.

The story of how the funeral profession responded to the epidemic of 1918 is a jumbled-up, untidy and messy account of how human beings deal with the harsh realities of life and death - which are totally out of their personal control. Human beings usually find this intolerable, but then when all is said and done they find they have to move forward and learn from the crisis. This seems to be going on right now in America again.

In the end, the dead were taken care of, not the way we wanted, but the dead were taken care of and time and history, as they always do, marched on.

About the author:

A regular contributor to *Funeral Director Monthly*, Todd Van Beck lives in Decatur, Georgia in the United States with his wife, Georgia. He formerly owned the T W Van Beck Funeral Home & Ambulance Service, and served as General Manager of John B Turner & Son Mortuary, Cedar Rapids, IA.

Todd was an educator at Cincinnati College of Mortuary College of Mortuary Science, Hudson Valley College, New England Institute and Commonwealth Institute. He was the Dean of the College of Funeral Management and the College of Embalming and Restorative Art at the University of Memphis.

Todd is a Certified Funeral Service Practitioner and a member of the Academy of Professional Funeral Service Practice. He is a Certified Embalmer and is on the Board of Trustees of the British Institute of Embalmers and a member of the President Calvin Coolidge Memorial Foundation. He is also the author of 4 books, 400 professional articles and a member of the Dr Albert Schweitzer Memorial Fellowship, and the American Guild of Organists.



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