

Pandemic Influenza of 1918

An Interview with Annie Laurie Williams

Ann Brantley

Mrs. Williams we just appreciate you so much taking the time to talk with us today about the Pandemic Influenza that was in 1918. I understand that you were actually living here in Selma, Dallas County, and your immediate family was affected by it. Can you just tell us a little bit about how it did affect your family?

Annie Laurie Williams

Well, you know that I've reached my ninety-first birthday, but there's some remembrances that I do have, and that is one of the outstanding traumatic experiences that I've had in my lifetime. My father, who was a jeweler, was taken ill and was very ill and we didn't know whether he was going to live or not and it's a wonder that we all did not take it.

There were two girls, my sister and myself, and my mother, and she waited on him. I was three years old, but I can very readily remember and very clearly remember that he was so sick and we were afraid that we were going to lose him. I remember it snowed that year and he got out of the bed and went in the backyard to try to find a diamond ring that Mother had lost. We all were absolutely scared to death that it was going to kill him. But he must have been a very staunch, steady individual with a good health record because he never was in the hospital until when he died.

It was pretty representative on the town because there were so many people who were ill and out as well as I can remember. Now I can't say definitively, but as well as I remember, they had to close some of the places. My father worked at Baywig Jewelry Company, no it wasn't, it was Hobbs and McGill. When he first came he worked for an old firm called Hobbs & McGill. There were so many people out with the flu that they had to close up some of the stores and, as well as I remember, that was one of them.

The doctor's would come to the house and they would see their patients and some of them they took to the hospital. But do you realize that at that time they had no treatment that I can remember for flu at all? They had no pharmacy help, you know, pharmaceuticals. All they could do was just nurse them and try to feed them and bathe them and keep them clean and let them rest. And it was really a very, very sad situation. So many people died. I remember that they did but I don't remember the number. I have no way - that would have to be researched from some material that possibly you have and would be interesting.

Ann Brantley

You said the physician came and saw your father?

Annie Laurie Williams

Oh yes, they made house calls. Up until even my husband, after he had his heart attack in 1962 and went back to work 6 months later, he still made house calls. That's the last of them that I remember.

Ann Brantley

Your father was affected by the flu of 1918. Do you recall any of the symptoms that he had?

Annie Laurie Williams

Oh, yes. Fever, headaches, aching and that's about as much as I can remember because I was so small. But I remember he was really sick.

Ann Brantley

You said that your mother was the primary caregiver of your father. What all did she do for him during this illness?

Annie Laurie Williams

My mother took care of him and kept us away from him as much as she could and fed the family, as she did throughout her life.

Ann Brantley

Were your neighbors able to help each other out? Did they pull together during this time to try to care for the people who didn't have anyone to take care of them? Did they bring food and other items to you?

Annie Laurie Williams

Yes, some of the neighbors did and of course that's community. When someone is sick and in trouble the neighbors just came to our help and brought in food. They didn't come in. They would just come to the door and leave it. Or let Mother take it from them at the door.

Ann Brantley

Do you recall how long your father was ill, how long that illness actually lasted? And do you recall that it came back?

Annie Laurie Williams

No, Ann, I don't, but I remember that it was a long drawn out illness because there was no medication, there was nothing. He did recover and I do not recall it having returned. You know, at that time, I don't know, I might be wrong, you can look it up, but I don't think the word viral had been discovered. There was Pneumococcal and bacterial. Pneumococcal is a bacteria; Pneumonia.

Ann Brantley

The other thing that was mentioned, I've heard a little bit about is that some people were given aspirin. You don't recall?

Annie Laurie Williams

Well, I'm sure. That's all they had and I'm sure they gave him that to try to control the temperature.

Ann Brantley

Because he had a very high fever?

Annie Laurie Williams

Yes. The fevers ran high with that. They can't possible understand or even visualize the impact that it had on the entire society.

Ann Brantley

How were the businesses in the community affected? Do you recall that they were closed? Were people able to go to work?

Annie Laurie Williams

Well, as well as I recall, some of them had to close up because it didn't have the personnel to operate and people were afraid to go to town. I mean we were more or less confined to the house and should have been. I don't mean that it was a legal imposition but I think we just did it almost voluntarily because it was - you didn't want to get out. Mothers and fathers who were not ill, of course my father was, but they just did not turn us loose to roam the neighborhood.

Ann Brantley

What would you suggest for people today if this were to happen again? What would your advice be since you have actually experienced this? What would help us if this were to return?

Annie Laurie Williams

Well, number one, get to your doctor as soon as you can because they do have things today that they did not have in 1918. Go to your doctor, get your medicine, go home, be sure you've got plenty of food and stay there. And if you have to have a doctor then call your doctor and let him get you to the hospital.

Ann Brantley

Is there anything else you can think of or want to summarize or say about it Mrs. Williams?

Annie Laurie Williams

Nothing, except that it was about the most traumatic experience that I've had in my life, except for what I'm going through now.

Special Thanks to Annie Laurie Williams