

Pandemic Influenza of 1918

An Interview with Edna Register Boone

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My name is Edna Register Boone. I was born in 1907 in rural Houston County Alabama.

We moved away from the farm when I was three years old and moved into the little town of Madrid, still Houston County.

Times were troubled – a war going on, flu epidemic that followed the boll weevil. Three catastrophes, right there. A new disease, just like another epidemic would be perhaps maybe not the flu but something else and it would be a new disease. We would have to learn to deal with it.

I was 10 years old and my family was the only family in the little town that did not contract the flu. Therefore, my parents became automatic nurses. They nursed every family in town. One family in particular was outside the town limits. My father and Uncle Eli, who we called his manservant, dug a common grave and buried three people in it - a mother, a father and a young daughter. Unfortunately, we had no sanitary conditions in the area at that time, so the people were buried in the clothes they died in and wrapped in the sheets, because there was no one to wash the bed linens for them. So they were buried in a common grave. I do not remember a single church burial caused by the Asian flu.

It was prevalent. The greatest problem, of course, was getting medication. There was only one doctor, Dr. Andrews, a wonderful man. He did the best he could. We had no penicillin, no sulfur, nothing to treat that dreadful disease. Of course, there were wagon loads of sick people lined up at his front door all the time. If you loaded a sick person whom you could no longer help and put him in a wagon, which was what most transportation was, put him in that vehicle and take him to Dothan to a hospital, chances are that patient would be dead when they got there. Ok, if he wasn't, there would be no room, the rooms would be filled. The doctors would be worked to capacity. That's why most families just buried their own dead.

The flu itself, the so called, I think they called it the Asian flu, affected the throat and the windpipe and chest. Lack of medication, we had a little drug store and he had a pharmacist, a hired pharmacist but he could only supply a paregoric, maybe a mentholatum. I don't know what kind of ointments they put on their chests, but that's about all there was.

My mother would take a half a teaspoon full of soda and put it in a glass of water for each of us – my twin brothers and for me and we would drink that before breakfast. I've often thought that that's what saved us. She said that that soda would neutralize the system and we would be less subject to pick up the germ. It must have worked because we were the only family, entire family, that escaped having that dreadful flu.

It was my job as a 10 year old to take food to people, to families, all of them stricken. Mama would put a gauze bandage around my face and she kept sterilized fruit jars on the stove at all times. She would fill the jars with soup or whatever there was, and I would take those jars to the home of an afflicted family, knock on the door and leave the food at the door for someone to come pick it up. It was not a pretty picture. It was my job to see that the, you know the old fashioned ranges that we cooked with had a reservoir, a hot water reservoir attached to the side of the stove. It was my job to see that that reservoir was full all of the time. Of course, I had to haul water up out of a well but that wasn't hard for a 10 year old. But anyway that, and it was my job and my twin brothers' job to see that there was plenty of wood cut for the fireplaces and the stove.

One thing that I remember that my father did - there was an open space on one side of our house, I would say the west side, that Papa ploughed up, totally. I don't know what the measurement was, I'd say fourth of an acre, and planted sweet potatoes. I would say that half of the community lived off of that potato patch. No one was able to go shopping. No one was able to cook. They could bake a few potatoes, even if it was in the fireplace. I knew I had to participate. I knew that my family was being protected. I was raised in a Christian family and we had our evening prayers. I was just - I knew I had to do my part.

I came home one day, I don't know where I had been, but I came home and Mama was stretched out on a pallet in front of the fireplace. Oh, I panicked, "Mama, Mama, are you sick?" She said, "No, Child. I'm just so tired. I wanted to get as close to the fire as I could." She said, "I knew that if I got into that bed I might not ever get up."

We were like a great big family, you might say. I doubt if we had 200 residents. It brought families closer together. It brought our little town closer together because we all suffered losses, one way or the other, if not through war, then through the epidemic.

Oh my goodness, what if it happened suddenly, say in three or four days or some sort of epidemic swept through. I think the only thing I could suggest about that is to be aware that it could happen again. Children need to learn about what could happen. Of course, I'm sure hospitals are aware. The shock wave that sets in when something like this happens kind of stuns people, you know. They go beyond thinking correctly.

Lots of times I would come in and I would cry because of all the sickness around me and I knew that the sickness was deadly. It was depressing to me.

Be aware. Be aware.

Special Thanks to Edna Register Boone