

Pandemic Influenza of 1918

An Interview with Garfield Johnson

Ann Brantley

We're here today in Coffee County. We're discussing the Pandemic Influenza that occurred in 1918 with Mr. Garfield Johnson, who actually was a resident here, in Coffee County during that time.

Mr. Johnson, we appreciate so much you taking out the time to talk with us today about the influenza that occurred in 1918. I understand that you were actually living here in Coffee County at that time. Can you tell us a little bit about how old you were and who was affected in your family and what you remember about it?

Garfield Johnson

My age was going on five years old. My dad had influenza. He lost consciousness three days and nights and then lived. Then a brother of mine, a younger brother, a baby, got it and lived, but affected his brain.

Ann Brantley

Do you recall the symptoms that your father – you said your father had this influenza. Do you recall some of the symptoms that he had?

Garfield Johnson

High fever. Yes, Ma'am.

Ann Brantley

And he was just very, very ill in general?

Garfield Johnson

Well, he was more or less not able to move or, you know, get around, or rove around, even on the bed. He had a very serious one – a case of it. But there were no doctors then. There was a doctor in Brantley, and there was a doctor out at Bullock, and they went to the house, the doctor. I remember, but I can't remember which one it was come for my dad, but he gave him something and he came out of it on the fourth day. It was awful out here the way it was. Everybody was scared of it and they were scared to go help the folks that did have it. Afraid they'd get it and it was very contagious.

My mother had myself and older girl and a brother and she was there - back then what we had was very crude, what we had to live. We had to burn wood and go to the gristmill and one thing and another, the groceries got down to a very low place, and nobody could come in to make new arrangements for nothing. Finally, there was a first cousin of mine, a nephew of my dad, come by and stayed with us about two weeks. He got out and did some of this and we made and we made in that way.

Ann Brantley

So your mother tried to see about everybody and take care of everybody, but they sort of ran of supplies to do that with.

Garfield Johnson

That's right, and nobody to go replenish nothing. You know, the groceries were getting down very low in the house. Nothing. Nobody to get out, but her being a woman and when you ain't got somebody with you when you been having, you miss them. You know they can't and a woman – Momma was a kind, weren't too good to get out and do that.

Ann Brantley

Were neighbors able to help each other out during this time or was the entire community too ill to even try to help each other?

Garfield Johnson

Now, I was told of whole, complete families that died with it and nobody to bury them, nobody to hire to bury them. It was an awful thing.

Ann Brantley

That's very interesting. I've read that - where they really couldn't hold funerals. What do you recall?

Garfield Johnson

No. Well, more or less some of the bodies get out there and back then there was plenty of old lumber around and they'd build a box, and build a casket and cover it with cloth if you had that much and put it in there. I remember. I helped build a lot of graves. They put them six feet under, six feet under.

Ann Brantley

You said that the doctors did come some, but you were telling me that they couldn't because...

Garfield Johnson

They had so many places to go to. What they had back then was very crude to what people have got today. He clean them like everything else. The doctor did, he clean them like everything else.

I had a little flu one time and I didn't exactly go slam out of my head, and I remember we were using aspirin. One of us was up able to go and my sister was giving me aspirin tablets. Well, old Dr Watkins come in. Somebody got him to come there, and I told him, I said, "Doctor, I want you to give me something for my head. It hurts awful bad." He said, "I'll give you something," and I said, "What was it?" He said, "Aspirin." He went over and got in his car and before he got that car cranked I had my sister bring me a glass of water and one of them aspirins. It eased me all. Next morning I jumped right up and ready to go. See, that fever hadn't got me down, but that fever would carry you away.

I don't see how today, how my daddy, lived to go three days and nights in a coma, you know, but he did. He come back out of it.

Ann Brantley

It's my understanding that it did affect younger, healthy individuals. Were people able to get supplies that they needed?

Garfield Johnson

Well, I knew people who didn't have it, didn't want to get any contact with it. That's where my daddy got it, I think. The vets down by the railway. At the close of WWI at 1918 he went to Elba, a lot of them they went on down. I was reading a little bit something pertaining to this in The Advertiser. He went to a train - they called it the war train - and he said there was a guy down sick. He stopped and talked with him a little and that's where he said he got his. That man had that influenza, lying there.

Ann Brantley

He thinks he caught it?

Garfield Johnson

That man was very contagious. He was just as contagious as red measles used to be. You know you could walk through a house just about it and get those things. And mumps, mumps was very contagious too.

Ann Brantley

Do you remember church services?

Garfield Johnson

Oh yeah! We went to church.

Ann Brantley

They didn't ever stop that?

Garfield Johnson

Yes, Ma'am. They stopped it for a period of time, 'til it settled down, and then went back. Even the schools shut down, what schools there were, because schools were very crude, you know. You could learn some if you took an interest to go.

Ann Brantley

People just sort of... you think they just figured out on their own that they needed to not gather together?

Garfield Johnson

Yes, Ma'am. They knew it well. There were some that, and he'd put out the word, you know, that it was dangerous to being around people with that high fever. Now you'da been very easy caught when he was at his highest temperature. See it was a virus, it's like a pollen. If it's in there now, it'll settle on you somewhere, and that's the roughest stuff I ever jumped against. It'll get me down.

Big part about it doctors don't know what to do for it. Well, I don't think they've got out anything to do for it, now. I think this shot, this shot that they're given now, you know I think that's to avoid it, if you get exposed. I think that's what it is. I have missed some of those shots, but I've taken quite a bit of them too. You know how it is. They go to places and give them shots, the health department and the private doctors that give them. That's the only time that a thing like that has come through. Now we'd miss school a lot of times. Our whole family had never had measles until me and my brother got it out of school. Out of Brantley and we - everyone had that at one time.

Ann Brantley

If this were to happen now, in this day and time, how do you think people would do?

Garfield Johnson

Well, they'd pull together and help one another and the doctors are more advanced today than they was then. They got more to do with. We go through it a lot better then what went through in 1918. That was awful.

Ann Brantley

You know, talking about the doctors... if there were a severe flu pandemic like that, you know the doctors might not be available to come see about anybody. That's one thing we're trying to let people know about being prepared at home. Ya'll were talking about how ya'll nearly ran out of food. So, you think that would be an area where people could maybe...

Garfield Johnson

Oh, yeah. That's just an easy a ride, something like that to what it was. There was no transportation. Maybe a mule or a wagon, very slow, take you a day, day and half, a night to go to Troy and back that way, and things like that and of course the person could be dead and ready to bury.

I wondered about how these forefathers come in here and put down here with nothing and just lived. Course, I reckon they might have had a milk cow or a might have had a mule or a wagon, something like that - is what I think it'd be.

Ann Brantley

I think one of the ideas is to just have some things at your house. To keep some supplies there if you can.

Garfield Johnson

Well, you know, most folks don't try to have a garden. I say it's better to have it and not need it than it is to need it and not have it. Me and Harriet got three deep freezers and we've got them partly full. We give to the young ones – share it one thing and another.

But it was awful times back then, awful times back then.

Ann Brantley

You've given us some really great information and I know that this will be beneficial.

Garfield Johnson

If there's anything I like to do, it's to help somebody. If there was nobody to help, then no nothing them that could. If they was ignorant or no, just didn't know, we'll say that. Done the best they could.

Ann Brantley

Well, you certainly have helped, because people, unless they've lived something they don't have really a grasp on the seriousness of it, how bad that was, what y'all went through. So, it's extremely important information.

Garfield Johnson

It'd be hard to find somebody that was grown up, grown now, that went through that. I'm lucky to remember as young of an age as I was, close to four and a half years old, but I can remember real good. But some folks can remember, but now I'm getting where I can go tomorrow and I don't know where I went nor want to get there.

Ann Brantley

Do you remember being scared at that age? I'm sure at 4 and a half years old you were probably very frightened.

Garfield Johnson

Well, you know, at times, at times I was. But I could hold it down, you know. I can handle it pretty good, I'll say.

Ann Brantley

Do you remember if people actually did stay at home or did they try to get out and about? What were their feelings about this? Were they afraid to be out and around other people?

Garfield Johnson

Folks just stayed at home. They didn't want to get it, you see. They stayed put, because if they didn't have it, they didn't want it, and you can't blame them. They were doing the best they could. My dad's sister and his brother was living a right out a mile, a half a mile. They'd come to the edge of the porch, maybe you know, and ask about it, but they were scared to come in.

Well, in a way, they were saving their hide, I guess. Doing the best they know. But there was whole families, large families that died with that.

Ann Brantley

The entire family?

Garfield Johnson

Entire family. Knock them all out. But I reckon some folks had more fighting ability about them, you know. To fight it off with or just was to be, I guess. I don't believe that kind of thing will come back here no more. It'll be something else that somebody's going to figure out. Something like that bombing in New York and one thing and another, to get to people. This come from Europe. That flu epidemic come from Europe. They brought it back with them and scattered it over here and it went wild when it got here and it'll be something that'll come back. But there's a lot of smart people around now, before they was dumb. They just didn't hardly know what to do. Just look to the Lord, I guess.

Special Thanks to Garfield Johnson