

# Pandemic Influenza of 1918

## An Interview with Gurtys Robinson

### **Ann Brantley**

Mrs. Robinson, first of all we'd like to thank you so much for talking with the Alabama Department of Public Health about the Pandemic Influenza that occurred in 1918.

I understand that you were actually living here in Chilton County. Could you tell us a little bit about your age, how it affected your family?

### **Gurtys Robinson**

Just everybody about had the flu at the same time. In my family, I didn't have it and my daddy was sick, but not dead sick. He was still able to help out. And my grandmother and granddaddy lived just about a half mile from us. They were all down with it 'cept one of the boys. That left me and Papa to do the cooking.

They got the wood in – course we had a wood stove back then. And they went and got the wood and fired up the stove. Me and Papa did the cooking. All they wanted was soup, we didn't try to cook a meal, just some kind of soup. The biggest fuss - I remember fixing rutabagas. Papa would peel the rutabagas for me and we had a great big iron pot that sat down in the eye of the stove. I'd fill that thing full of rutabagas and water and a big hunk of meat and make soup for both families. He'd come and get the soup and cornbread – I'd fix cornbread. We didn't have crackers then, I don't reckon, but I'd have that cornbread. Nobody ate much. Everybody was too sick to eat. I'd just force it on to get 'em to get them to eat anything.

Well, it was just awful. Everybody was sick. It was just terrible times. With everybody, not just one family, it was everybody.

### **Ann Brantley**

Did y'all have any physicians that could actually come see about the sick in their homes? Was that available to you?

### **Gurtys Robinson**

We didn't have all that back then. The nearest hospital was Birmingham and back then that was just too far for anything, you can imagine, unless it was something that had to be done to go that far to a hospital. We didn't have doctors then like we do now. We didn't even see a doctor until - my mother was pregnant at the same time. Gertrude was born during that, my sister was, and she had the flu. We just knew we was going to lose her. She'd get to coughing, we had to work and work to get her to breath. But she did make it.

### **Ann Brantley**

Do you recall how long this illness lasted and do you remember if it came back? If it lasted for a few weeks and did it reoccur?

### **Gurtys Robinson**

It was about almost two weeks that they wasn't – from the time they got sick until they could get up and get around.

### **Ann Brantley**

Do you recall some of the symptoms that your family members had?

### **Gurtys Robinson**

They just ached all over- the arms and everything. I know the baby, he'd say rub my arm, this arm does hurt.

**Ann Brantley**

Do you remember what medicines were used at that time? Was aspirin available or were there other medicines that were given to the sick?

**Gurtys Robinson**

Them that went to see the doctor, she'd just say go home and take aspirin and drink water – any kind of liquid.

**Ann Brantley**

Do you recall if businesses, schools and churches were affected by this?

**Gurtys Robinson**

We didn't have a church up here at that time, but the school was closed. There wasn't no school, they had to close it. There was nobody – teachers were even sick. Everybody stayed at home during this. Nobody - didn't have no getting out. Nobody was hardly able to get out and them that was had there hands full at home.

**Ann Brantley**

Were neighbors able to help each other out during this time? I understand you said the entire community was quite ill.

**Gurtys Robinson**

There was one man in the community and I can't think of his name. He'd come by and check, but he wouldn't come in. He'd just come to the door – is everything alright and then he'd go on checking others. There was several deaths but I don't remember but one of them and that was a baby. I know the daddy and his brother had to go bury the baby. There wasn't enough people -they didn't even have a funeral. They just went to the cemetery and buried the baby and I reckoned – I thought that was the awfulest thing at that age - that they couldn't even have a funeral, had to just go bury it. I remember the baby so well– the young ones just as sick as the old ones. Everybody was just sick. And I mean sick.

**Ann Brantley**

If this were to occur again what would be your suggestions to people? How do you think people would do in this day and time if something like this were to ever happen again?

**Gurtys Robinson**

Everybody would just go to Wal-Mart or all these other places. To be with something like that - now people don't stay at home when they're sick. Unless they get to where they can't go. They go spread whatever they got.

**Special Thanks to Gurtys Robinson**