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## Pandemic in the Flint Hills

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## *Pandemic in the Flint Hills*



EMERGENCY HOSPITAL DURING INFLUENZA EPIDEMIC,  
CAMP FUNSTON, KANSAS

*Courtesy of Otis Historical Archives, National Museum of Health and Medicine*

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In 1918 during the last months of the First World War, Spanish influenza progressed from a relatively mild flu into a deadly, worldwide epidemic - a pandemic.

Between late summer of 1918 and the following spring, the pandemic killed more than 500,000 Americans and at least twenty million worldwide. In those months more people died from this disease than were killed in the war in the previous four years. At Fort Riley, Kansas, in the fall of 1918, soldiers were dying so rapidly that the dead soon outnumbered available caskets. “Camp Center” initiated a global crisis that deeply affected communities throughout the Flint Hills, particularly the campus of nearby Kansas State Agricultural College in Manhattan.

In the fall of 1917, Kansas State Agricultural College was a small, primarily

agricultural school with an enrollment of 2,406 students. An atmosphere that embraced order, hard work, patriotism, and propriety prevailed on the campus. The faculty assumed far greater authority over the lives and activities of the students than today, and this accepted measure of control allowed the faculty the means to handle a crisis. Such a crisis would come in the fall of 1918, although the school had received a foretaste of it in late 1917 when the threat of a meningitis epidemic loomed. Beginning at Camp Funston, a newly built training camp on the far eastern edge of Fort Riley, the meningitis outbreak had attacked Manhattan in late November. Through cooperation, firm

leadership, and acceptance of authority, the college had avoided a potentially deadly epidemic. The meningitis scare had served as a practice run. The next time would be for real.

The day Congress declared war, a significant number of students and faculty left the college to enlist. Female students raised money, volunteered at the American Red Cross, or engaged in charitable activities for the soldiers stationed at nearby Funston. In March 1918 soldiers from Camp Funston began traveling daily to the campus for mechanical instruction from the Department of Engineering. In May this program was expanded. About two hundred fifty men at a time came to the college for extended training in several vocations, ranging from auto-mechanics to carpentry. This first group remained on campus for two months, and shortly after their departure in July, another detachment of more than five hundred soldiers arrived. Yet another group of five hundred came in September. At

the end of spring term in 1918, the government made plans for students to train as soldiers while still in college. The Student Army Training Corps allowed those waiting to be drafted to take college courses while immersed in army life.

Viruses had not yet been discovered in 1918, and scientists considered influenza the work of a bacterium, known as Pfeiffer's bacillus. At the time doubt initially existed among doctors as to whether the disease killing their patients was influenza at all, or rather something worse, such as a revitalized form of the medieval Black Death. Although victims showed typical flu symptoms, such as runny noses, sore throats, coughs, head and body aches, they also coughed up blood, turned blue, and regularly died within two days of first feeling sick. In an unusually high number of cases, pneumonia followed, killing weakened survivors.

Some people believed the flu was a side effect of the massive use of chemical warfare on the western front. Others accused the Germans of creating the

disease and unleashing it on their enemies. This belief gained such support that the US government felt obliged to analyze Bayer aspirin, originally a German product, to assure the public that aspirin would not give them the flu.

That spring, as plans for the soldiers' and Student Army Training Corps' vocational training moved forward at the college, and the fright of the meningitis affair passed into memory, Spanish flu made its first appearance in the United States. Unusually severe flu outbreaks occurred all across the country that spring - in Detroit, New York, among the inmates of San Quentin, and in Haskell County, Kansas. Whatever its place or places of origin, the first documented epidemic showing traits definitive of Spanish influenza followed shortly after the Haskell County episode at Camp Funston.

The soldiers who reported to sick call in early March 1918 showed several normal flu symptoms. But more reported sick than usual, and in some, symptoms appeared severe enough to be initially

misdiagnosed as meningitis. Despite Camp Funston's proximity to Manhattan, and the presumed extreme susceptibility of the college community to this new strain of flu, an epidemic did not occur at the college that spring. The war may not have caused the flu, but the massive movements of men it required - men from different parts of the country, with different germs, packed closely together on trains or ships - aided its spread.

During the summer, it infected other armies fighting in Europe and the civilian populations. European ships carried it to Africa and Asia, where it wrought havoc among the immunologically defenseless local populations. And in late August, as Kansas State Agricultural College students made ready to return to campus and final preparations continued to accommodate the coming Student Army Training Corps, Spanish flu returned to the United States by way of Boston.

The first report of the disease among the civilian population after Haskell County occurred in Paxico around

September 26, reportedly brought there by a sailor on furlough. Around the same time, back at Camp Funston, young men began dying from flu again. By October 1 when the camp declared quarantine, three hundred new cases of Spanish flu were being reported daily. Alarmed by these developments, the college in Manhattan sought to avert an epidemic on campus. *The Collegian* warned students against using public drinking fountains; the college authorities closed the swimming pools in Nichols gymnasium; and they discouraged students from travel. These measures, like the quarantine of Camp Funston, came too late. The first Manhattan cases appeared in late September.

On October 1, the day Camp Funston quarantined itself, the Student Army Training Corps became official. That day, in a great outdoor gathering, more than 1100 students took the oath of induction into the military. Due to a combination of midday heat and long-winded speeches, several of the new soldiers fainted. During

that protracted, patriotic ceremony, it is highly likely that the Spanish influenza virus spread, finding many new, susceptible hosts. A week later, seventy-two of the young men who had stood in that formation were ill. Spanish flu had arrived.

“The epidemic is here. There is no use trying to evade that. The only thing to do is to prevent its spread by preventing public gatherings.” So said Dr. S. J. Crumbine of the Kansas Health Department on October 9, amidst a flurry of reported cases and school closings in sixty Kansas counties. By that time, 135 men in the college, along with forty-three Manhattan citizens, were reported sick. When the first explosion of flu occurred on the campus, the student-soldiers were immediately quarantined. Those not on sick call continued to drill and to attend class but were confined to campus. Guards patrolled the campus at night, to ensure that students did not slip out of their barracks to visit Aggieville or their girlfriends in town. Two fraternity houses became hospitals, with the still-healthy

soldiers moving into Nichols gymnasium, and the sick being brought to the houses. On October 11 seeking to contain the ravaging epidemic, Governor Arthur Capper issued a proclamation banning all public meetings and classes for one week. The college closed the same day. The college president encouraged the students to remain in town and to avoid travel in an attempt to fight the spread of the disease.

As historian Julius Willard noted, “If one’s own young men were not at Fort Riley or Camp Funston, the chances were that they were at some other post where other parents, sisters, or sweethearts were ‘doing their bit’ to make the soldiers’ lot more comfortable.” The people of Manhattan and surrounding communities thought of the sick young soldiers as their own. And so, besides discouraging the *spread* of the flu, they had another goal: to save as many lives as possible.

Despite its own caseload, Camp Funston sent eleven doctors to the college campus. This influx aided the

local physicians, but the hospitals needed nurses even more than doctors. There was no remedy except blankets, fresh air, and warm food. The American Red Cross chapters in Wichita and St. Louis dispatched nurses to oversee caregiving in these hospitals. Under their direction volunteers strove tirelessly to care for the sick. Mary Van Zile, dean of women at Kansas State Agricultural College, led the contingent of faculty women. Many female students who had previously volunteered at the local American Red Cross now worked to provide the sick with respiratory masks and pajamas. Still healthy students also served capably in the hospitals. Other women volunteers came from Manhattan, but there was also at least one newcomer to the area. Mrs. P. B. Battey, twenty-eight years of age, came to Manhattan from her native Iowa when her husband, an army captain, was stationed at Camp Funston. She was a trained nurse and knew her skills would be useful in the hospitals. She volunteered soon after the flu appeared.

When the fraternity-hospitals requested one hundred pillows for the sick, the townspeople provided more than that number within four hours. Dean Van Zile organized efforts to collect other needed supplies, such as sheets, blankets, and cooking utensils, and the citizenry promptly delivered once again. Guy Varney, the proprietor of Varney's bookstore in Aggieville, sent his twelve-year-old son, Ted, to the edge of the campus with a red wagonload of candy bars to sell to the soldiers. Newly appointed President Jardine appealed to students' ingrained sense of patriotism and respect for authority to keep them in the town and bade them remain calm. *The Collegian*, edited by Milton Eisenhower, future president of the college, supported President Jardine's appeal suggesting the students make the most of their enforced "vacation" by staying in Manhattan and catching up on their homework.

The relief efforts attained heroic proportions. At the height of the epidemic in mid-October, 307 of the 1188 men in

the Student Army Training Corps were reported sick. Some of these cases were certainly serious, resulting in pneumonia. The sick men depended completely on their caregivers. A significant side effect of bad cases of Spanish flu was that it left its victims so exhausted they could not even eat on their own. Someone had to provide drinking water, cool their feverish heads with sponges, change linens, gather and burn the bloody discharge that came from their noses, help them relieve themselves, and keep both the patients and their quarters sanitary. Despite this mighty effort, some still died. The first recorded casualty of the epidemic affiliated with the college was not a member of the Student Army Training Corps, but a popular history professor, Raymond Taylor. Educated at Harvard and Yale, he died in his home of influenza-induced pneumonia on October 14. W.H. Ball, the college's carpentry instructor, died three days later. The first Student Army Training Corps casualties came on October 15. By the beginning of November, eleven

had perished: seven who had come to the college from Nebraska for the vocational training, and four former Kansas students. The virulence of the Spanish flu and the volunteers' constant proximity to it, as well as the exhaustion that resulted from the massive volume of their efforts, made cases among the caregivers inevitable. This phenomenon had occurred consistently since the spring outbreak at Camp Funston, where the camp's medical staff had suffered heavily from the flu. At least two of the volunteer nurses contracted it. Gladys McGill, the assistant nurse and former student, became ill while helping out at Fort Riley, but recovered. But Nurse Battey, the newcomer who had worked tirelessly among the worst of the flu victims from the start, also contracted the flu and died on October 19.

By the end of October, the epidemic began to decline. Doctors reported fewer new cases each day, and most of those that had been ill improved. The quarantines of Camp Funston and the Student Army Training Corps were lifted

on Saturday, October 26, and the soldiers who had been confined joyfully returned to Manhattan. On November 4 the Student Army Training Corps resumed its pre-flu coursework and training, in anticipation of deployment to the war in France. The rest of the students returned to class a week later on November 11. That same day Germany signed the Armistice, ending the war before any man from the Student Army Training Corps set foot in Europe.

The influenza pandemic of 1918 wrought great suffering throughout the world. For those who lived through it, Spanish influenza was a nightmare. But if in later years they paused to think of those days, one hopes they could acknowledge that it could have been far worse.

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