

2020

K-State Keepsakes: Influenza and K-State

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1918

INFLUENZA & K-STATE

As K-Staters endure the COVID-19 pandemic, an experience from our past may serve as a touchstone of courage. Between 1918 and 1920, there were multiple waves of influenza that ravaged people throughout the world. Infection estimates are as high as 500 million people—about a quarter of global population at the time. Death estimates vary widely from 17 million to 50 million. People connected to K-State were not immune to the disease. Throughout 1918 and 1919, the Kansas State Collegian and the Kansas Industrialist newspapers had numerous articles about students, alumni, faculty, staff and community

members who were affected by influenza. It even resulted in the first campus closure due to disease.

The country's involvement in World War I also brought changes to campus in 1918. Military leaders created a Students' Army Training Corps (SATC) at over 500 educational institutions across the U.S., including K-State. Over 1,100 soldier-students lived in barracks on campus or in fraternity houses that were turned over to the military as part of the war effort. These men participated in an induction ceremony on October 1, and by then influenza had a foothold in the area. In fact, in order to

Above: When the pandemic began in 1918, soldiers ill with Spanish influenza were treated at a hospital ward at Camp Funston, a U.S. Army training camp located in Fort Riley, Kansas. Photo from National Museum of Health and Medicine, Otis Historical Archives.

reduce the spread of contagions, it was reported on that same day all students needed approval from K-State to leave school or Manhattan. A week later, the SATC was quarantined to the properties where they lived.

The State Board of Health closed all colleges in Kansas on October 12 to stem the spread. K-State

remained shuttered for four weeks, reopening on November 10. Yet, it became only a one-month reprieve. Another outbreak of influenza prompted the local board of health to close schools, and K-State ceased normal operations a second time on December 9, which continued until reopening on December 29.

How did influenza affect students? There are no reliable statistics for the infection rate or fatalities, but at one point there were more than 400 cases in Manhattan and many were students. With a total enrollment of nearly 3,000 that term, it is possible that 10% or more of students were infected during the epidemic.

More than one in three members of the SATC had influenza, resulting in 11 deaths. Fatalities would have been much higher if the home economics department had not transitioned quickly into a temporary health care unit. With help from community members, these courageous women played an essential role in nursing nearly all the infected back to health.

Other contributions to the sick included linens, sleepwear and pillows from fraternities, Red Cross and K-State. Such service came at a cost since some who provided



Above: Delta Sigma Phi house, former YMCA building used as a hospital during the pandemic.



Left: Almost lost amidst the pandemic was the inauguration of William M. Jardine as K-State's seventh president. While he had served in the capacity since March 1, 1918, the formal ceremony was postponed until February 4, 1919.

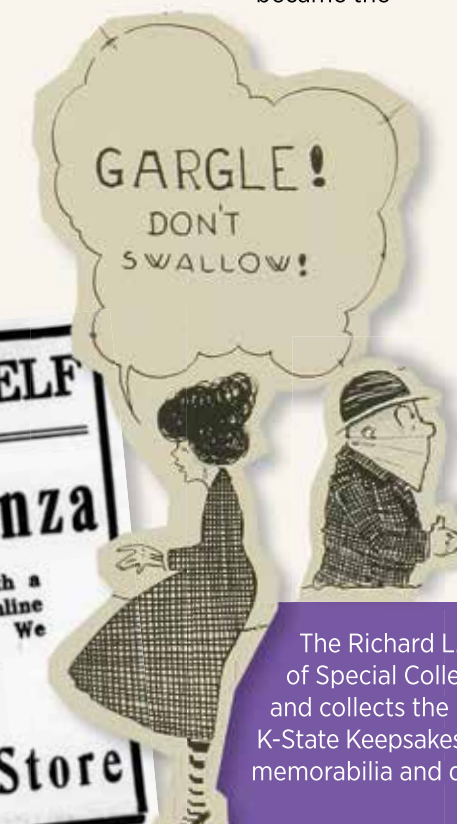
care—regardless of their status as faculty, staff, alumni or community members—became infected and a few of them died.

Those five weeks of closure in 1918 became the

university's inaugural experience with handling a pandemic. While fatalities occurred, they were not the result of negligence. Instead, K-Staters and Manhattanites exhibited great diligence as they cooperated to help those afflicted on their path to recovery. As we cope with challenges during our present crisis, may we reflect on how K-Staters faced an earlier plague with strength and courage.

To view historical issues of the Collegian, Kansas Industrialist and Royal Purple online, visit lib.k-state.edu/digital-collections.

Left: Kansas native Oscar R. Lindstrom did these cartoons in the 1919 Royal Purple as a humorous attempt to cope with the influenza pandemic.



The Richard L. D. and Marjorie J. Morse Department of Special Collections at K-State Libraries preserves and collects the history of Kansas State University. K-State Keepsakes are compiled from photos, diaries, memorabilia and documents in University Archives.