

Roundabout Oxford Podcast Episode 12: Podcasts and Podcasting University Libraries, University of Mississippi

Name of interviewee(s): Blake Thompson, Abbie Norris-Davidson, Adam Clemons, and Alex Langhart

Name of interviewer(s): Harley Rogers and Brooke Gross, featuring Brian Corrigan and Gail Herrera

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Gail Herrera: Welcome to Roundabout Oxford, a podcast from the University of Mississippi Libraries.

Brian Corrigan: Today, Roundabout Oxford goes meta with a podcast episode about podcasting. This fall, members of the Roundabout team had the privilege of speaking to the Southeastern Library Association about how and why we make this podcast. In this episode, we share the spotlight with other podcasters, starting with Blake Thompson, host of the locally focused Beyond the Square and Oxford Charger Podcasts. Later UM librarians, Adam Clemons and Abbie Norris-Davidson discussed their recent experience being interviewed for the BBC's Breaking Mississippi podcast, and the digital humanities project that caught the attention of the show's producers. We then close out the show with the podcasting debut of University Health Services Director Alex Langhart and his new segment, What's Plaguing Us.

Harley Rogers: Hello, my name's Harley Rogers. And today I will be speaking with Blake Thompson, who's the creator of Beyond the Square: the Oxford Podcast, and the Oxford Charger Podcast. So to start, can you tell me a little bit about yourself and of your current podcasts? And really how you got started with podcasts?

Blake Thompson: Sure. My wife and I have been living here in Oxford for about 15 years. I am a realtor, and we've been raising our four kids. I have a daughter in college, a daughter that's a senior here at Oxford High School, and then an eighth grade son and a fifth grade son. So we've been enjoying Oxford for, like I said, right around 15 or so years. But in terms of podcasting, probably back in the mid-2000s, I started listening to some. And there was a small handful of them, because there weren't a ton of podcasts even out then. But one in particular was on the television show Lost that was on ABC. And if you've ever seen Lost, it's really intriguing, but there was a lot of questions about what's really going on there. And so there was a podcast that I listened to you that was, they would have an immediate, I guess, response episode right after the show was on, but then they would have another one where there's a lot of fan theories and speculation of what's going on and all. And I really enjoyed it. And there's another TV show that came out around that time called Friday Night Lights, which I thought then and still do that it was probably my favorite TV show ever. And I wanted to find a podcast that was the Lost podcast. So I would search in iTunes every so often and there wasn't one, and this was even back in the days when you had to download the iTunes on my desktop computer, and then drag and drop to an MP3 player before the iPhone was out. I'm dating myself, I guess. But I kept looking for one for Friday Night Lights. And so finally I thought, "How hard could it be?" I started Googling, and I actually emailed the guys that did that Lost podcast, and just got some tips. And then just kind of rolled up my sleeves

and jumped in without really knowing how it was going to go. I had set up a couple of podcasts for two churches I'd been a part of before, so I knew a little bit of the backend, but as far as the weekly production and trying to interview people and stuff like that, I was completely green. But I had reached out to a few of the not main actors, because they were not even on Twitter, and Twitter was kind of still young, I guess at the time, but some of the supporting actors and actresses on Twitter just saying, "Hey, I have a podcast. Here's what a podcast is. Would you want to be on it and talk about your experience with Friday Night Lights?" And they came on, and honestly, it was a blast. It was fun, but it was just me. And it was me by myself talking for whatever, 30, 40 minutes about the TV show, about what was going on. And a friend of mine who liked the Friday Night Lights TV show as well said, "You have a podcast. I don't know why you do about it, but then I sat and listened to you talk for 35 minutes about it, so if you do it for the next season, I'm in." And so when it renewed for season four and five, three other friends of mine and I, so there's me, there was Russ, Lyle, and Pat. I mean, we talked about it just as if, my wife made fun of us because she said, "Y'all talk about these people as if they're real life people, but they're just characters on a TV show." But we got to interview some of the actors and actresses, some of the main ones, reached out to by the director of photography that wanted to come on. And so that was just my introduction to podcasting and I fell in love with it. And then there was this big stretch of where I hadn't done one in a while, and living here in Oxford... I've always had, I guess, a handful of ideas about what a good podcast would be, and I still do. But I had started a magazine back in 2014 for the Wellsgate neighborhood here on the west side of town, and it was called Beyond the Gates, and it was a magazine for the residents about the residents. And it was attractive to local advertisers, because of the residents there and all. But each month there was a set of articles that were there. There was always a family of the month, a pet, a student, an athlete of the month, and a sponsor of the month, who was one of the advertisers. And so a lot of people in the company that I was working through, called In2 Publishing, would usually just email out a bullet list of questions, and the resident or the athlete or whoever would just email back the answers. And then they would just basically copy and paste it almost directly into the magazines. But my preferred method of doing it was to be able to go to someone's home and sit down in their living room or their kitchen table or meet somebody at the local coffee shop, put my phone on airplane mode, start the voice recorder, and just record a conversation. Because you get more of the dialogue, the back and forth, you get to follow up questions, you get to see how they respond, especially if it's a husband and wife both talking. That made for a much better story. It made a much more interesting way to tell that as well. And it got to point, like I said, I'm in real estate and I had to realize I'm either going to focus on real estate or the magazine, so I let the magazine go. But I always missed those conversations, whether it's somebody about what made them move to Oxford and why they love it, or a 12-year-old that made the volleyball team at the middle school and the joy of that that brought to them, or even just somebody's talking about their pet. Not having done the magazine in a while, I missed those stories and I started thinking that Oxford itself has a whole lot of stories. And so I started Beyond the Square, just because I know that if you were to try to make a brochure of Oxford and what it is that makes Oxford special and attractive to people, obviously, you're going to have the Square, you're going to have campus and the Grove, you'll have likely Rowan Oak and some of the restaurants and nightlife and whatnot. But I think it's really the people and the stories of the people here in Oxford that make Oxford special, make it what it is. And so I've had this idea knocking around in my head for, I mean, it's been four or five years easily, and my wife finally said, "Either just do it or quit talking about it, because you've been talking about it for way too long." So it's just a way to give back to the community,

I guess, a little bit. Plus, I just like hearing people's stories, and I think others would find it interesting as well.

Harley Rogers: Absolutely. So what is your process for coming up with episode ideas for your current podcast, specifically, and maybe how that's different from your previous ones?

Blake Thompson: With the Friday Night Lights podcast, I mean, it was pretty much straightforward. I mean, they would have a weekly episode, and then once it was out, the other co-hosts and I would just talk about what happened and what we enjoyed about it, what we thought was kind of goofy, or what we expected and thought might happen later on. And then if there was somebody, one of the cast members or whatnot, if they came on. But with this, it's somewhat more locally focused, and I think it's really just looking for people, I guess, that are interesting, people who, maybe, they've lived a number of years here in Oxford and experienced life throughout the decades and the change that Oxford has experienced. Or maybe somebody that's brand new and is kind of on the front end of starting a business. And they have this entrepreneurial spirit, and see that Oxford has opportunities here for them and for the business and to be able to impact the community. So it's really just people with a passion and a love for Oxford and want to see it thrive. People who are hoping to make a difference, make an impact for the good. And so my wife will sometimes give me some ideas of people who can maybe be on and all. And so it's really just for people who have a good background, who are able to speak openly and passionately about what it means to live here at Oxford. And then it goes from there. I'll reach out either through email or text. If it's somebody I know already, it's usually fairly direct. But sometimes I'm going to start trying to email out, do some cold emails, I guess to some people. So a lot of times it's even some crowdsourcing that goes on there with it.

Harley Rogers: So you've been doing this for a little while. Can you tell me about one of the most memorable moments?

Blake Thompson: I'd say memorable, looking back to the Friday Night Lights podcast, it was really surreal, I guess, to be able to watch the first three seasons and really get into a television program and you get to know the characters and the plot and all. But then going into those last two, it was five seasons total of the TV show, and we had the podcast for the middle of season three through the end of the entire series, and then to be able to reach out through either a publicist or an agent or whatnot, some of the A-list actors, I would say, or some of the top names that were a part of the series and be able to talk with them. It was almost always through Skype, but still being able to talk to Zach Gilford who played Matt Saracen or Brad Leland who played Buddy Garrity, and if anybody's watched the TV series before, they know who those characters are immediately. And that was kind of a surreal moment. Just to hear the people that love our community here within Oxford love the university as well, and just to hear the appreciation of our town, our small city in their voices is always good. But those are some of the highlights I think right there that I've been able to have so far, but hope to have many more as well.

Harley Rogers: So in your experience, have you found it more challenging or maybe easier to get in touch with people now compared to when you first began?

Blake Thompson: It's probably a mixed bag, because I would say back then, when I first started with the Friday Night Lights podcast, there weren't a lot of podcasts out there already. So sometimes people said, "What's a podcast?" "Well, it's kind of like a radio show, but it's on the internet and people could download it, and now it goes straight to their iPhones or whatnot." They're like, "Okay, yeah, sure,

whatever." Because there wasn't very much, I guess you would say, competition. Now there are more and more and more podcasts out there, and so it's a lot more common, but maybe there's a lot more asking, I guess, too. I think here on the local level, it's not been as... I'm not having to reach anybody's publicist to talk to somebody here in Oxford or at least there hasn't had to yet. So it's not been too difficult on the local level. I would say if I was trying to reach somebody that was like a major celebrity or somebody that was in New York or LA or someone just not here within North Mississippi, it may be a little bit more. But I find that most of the time if you let people know, "Here's what I'm doing. Here's how I think that you would benefit our audience, and then plus, give you some recognition and give you some publicity as well," most people, as long as you're respectful of their time, are willing to give their time and be a part and have a conversation.

Harley Rogers: What, if any, challenges have you encountered?

Blake Thompson: I think one of the challenges I had early on, and I think I briefly kind of touched on it, was that I kept waiting, trying to think through it, and my wife finally said, "Just go and do it." And I learned that done is better than perfect, go ahead and getting something done. Because I would get stuck into this paralysis by analysis, wanting to make sure the social media was just right or I had a webpage or the logo was just perfect or all this stuff. And I would sometimes get stuck in a rut. And so I think that was a challenge personally, just to get off the launchpad, because I was trying to make sure everything was just a 100%.

And I realized, yeah, even though I knew it, I finally realized that podcasting is just about anything else is that it's not going to be perfect. Sometimes you just got to go and have some course correction to make some adjustments on the fly as you continue to go through that. So for me, that was a challenge, was just kind of getting off the launchpad.

Harley Rogers: What tip would you give to someone who wants to start a podcast of their own?

Blake Thompson: I think the first tip is that you need to have a subject matter or a theme or whatever that you're wanting to podcast about, make sure there's something that you really do care about. I think as podcasting has grown in popularity, sometimes there are people that say, "Hey, my friends and I get together on, whatever, Friday afternoon or Saturday night, and we have really funny conversation. I know other people like it too." But make sure that whatever you're talking about it's kind of specific and narrowed down to where other people are going to have the same appreciation. But make sure it's on a subject matter that you actually like. I think that sometimes people think, "Hey, I'm going to start a podcast and grow a big audience and make a lot of money and get really famous." And unless you're a celebrity already, I think it's a lot more difficult to see that grow in fruition. So unless you really enjoy what it is that you're podcasting about, what your subject matter is, it's going to be more of a chore and not as much of an enjoyment. And you want it to be something you enjoy. So I think first tip is just make sure it's something that you love, that you're passionate about, that you could talk about, even if nobody else was listening, if it was something. And then two, just have a good mic, I think goes a long way. I think quality sound is key. I do think that the content, what it is you talk about, is primary, but if you have excellent content but you have a cruddy microphone and there's a lot of noise in the room you're recording, then nobody's going to listen. But on the flip side, you could have studio quality audio, but if it's boring, nobody wants to listen either. So make sure it's a subject matter that you care about and others can feel and understand you, you're passionate for it. And then have make sure you have a good microphone. I think what's unique about podcasting is, is that if you go listen on the radio and

you're driving across town or you're taking a road trip on the weekend and you just have the radio on, you don't really know what's going to come on next. And so you're just like, "I like this station," or I know that they play, whatever, '80s music from 4:00 to 6:00 today or whatnot," but you're really at the mercy of whatever they're going to play. For a podcast, if somebody's listening to one, almost 99% of the time they have clicked to download that or subscribe to it already, and then they've clicked on their iPhone or Android or whatnot, they said, "Play this specific episode for me."

So that's been very intentional. And so it's something that you have access to, and if people are using earbuds or AirPods or whatnot, you're literally talking into their head. And so take that as a responsibility that comes with it, some perks, but at the same time, there is a bit of a deep responsibility there I think. But I think it can be an intimate medium. And just enjoy it. And I think there are podcasts about all kinds of stuff you would never even think of would have a listenership, and so it's amazing what's out there. So if you do think about starting one, yeah, it's easy. I do encourage you to listen to Beyond the Square:: the Oxford Pod. You can find that quite easily. Just type that into any of your normal listening apps that you have, but it's easy to find. If you have any suggestions or feedback, you can DM me there on The Oxford Pod on Twitter.

Brooke Gross: This is Brooke Gross. I'm here with Abbie and Adam to talk about their experience as podcast interviewees. To get started, why don't you go tell us a little bit about who you are and what you do here at the university?

Abbie Norris-Davidson: I am Abbie Norris-Davidson. I am the digital initiatives librarian and assistant professor. And my primary role at the university and libraries is to work as an administrator on the university repository, eGrove.

Adam Clemons: And this is Adam Clemens. I'm a digital humanities and data visualization librarian and assistant professor at the University of Mississippi Libraries. My primary role is to support the research that utilizes digital humanities, or more broadly digital scholarship tools and methodologies.

Brooke Gross: Thank y'all so much for meeting with us. You all were recently interviewed on another podcast not affiliated with the university, for a project that you worked on related to the University of Mississippi's 60th anniversary of integration. Can you talk a little bit about what that project was?

Abbie Norris-Davidson: Yes. So Adam and I have over the past few years been building a geospatial humanities project. The library archives has a collection of letters that were sent to James Meredith during his attempts to integrate the university. And as we were looking over these letters, we noticed that a lot of them had return addresses and we were curious about where the letters had been sent from and also the sentiment of the letters. The archivists who processed the collection has split the letters into either pro-integration or anti-integration. And we were curious to see where in the US and where in the world the pro letters were coming from, where anti letters were coming from, and if it would push against expectations about where these letters were coming from. So we created this project to coincide with the 60th anniversary celebrations of the integration of the university. We knew that there would be a lot of events planned, and so we thought that this was a great collection to draw attention to the archives and the institutional repository, but then also to <inaudible> the climate of the university and what was going on. We have been building a map in ArcGIS. And we have now completed our pilot phase of our project, and are planning on continuing the project. And we hope to add all of the letters that have return addresses in the collection in the near future.

Brooke Gross: Prior to the interview that y'all recently did for this project, did either of you have any podcasting experience, creating a podcast, being interviewed on a podcast, listening to podcasts, anything like that? What was your podcasting background before that interview?

Adam Clemons: No, I had not been interviewed for a podcast. I delved a little bit I think years ago in creating podcasts, I think largely unsuccessfully. But I am a large consumer of podcasts as sort of a median during my sort of daily exercise routine. For instance, I listen to a number of different podcasts. I'm a really big fan of long form, I guess, and deep dives in particular topics. And so I really appreciate the way the podcast allowed that sort of to happen, and it's convenient for me as strictly audio that I can just put on my earbuds and go. So I'm a big consumer of podcasts, I guess, would be one way to describe that.

Abbie Norris-Davidson: I was definitely introduced to podcasts as a consumer. I am an avid podcast listener. I spend a lot of hours in the car, and for some reason I seem to prefer listening to podcasts, over listening to music or audiobooks these days. I do have some experience in the podcast production world. I was one of the founding members of the Roundabout Podcast, which we are now interviewing for. Went through the whole process of figuring out what we wanted it to look like, what we wanted the name to be, all of these things, and then producing episodes, interviewing individuals, and I was interviewed for the podcast once myself.

Brooke Gross: Now, y'all have seen one way that we do podcasting through the UM Library Podcast Committee. We're on Zoom right now. We are doing a recording of this meeting, which will be edited down into an interview, which will go into an episode that is put up on YouTube. We primarily use Zoom, Audacity, and OpenShot, which are all open source tools. Now, that you've been involved in this podcast and you've also been involved in a totally separate podcast, can you talk a little bit about what your experience was like being interviewed for your other podcast for this project? How it compares to this and things that you enjoyed about it, and things that maybe surprised you or intrigued you? When you describe your project, it seems like there's a big visual component, so describing that and talking about that in an audio form, if y'all could touch on just a little bit about what that was like and your experience as a whole as interviewees.

Adam Clemons: To begin with, as Abbie described our project, one of the sort of principal purposes of a digital humanities project is to raise awareness of particular project, or collection in this case. And so that was one of the thoughts that we had in mind with the letters themselves that Mr. Meredith received, this project would help raise awareness of that collection in a unique way. It might help reveal interesting things about the letters as we mapped them out, like where they came from. But raising awareness, making them more accessible kind of thing was really important to us. And so naturally, when we were asked to interview about the collection itself or the project itself, we were happy to do that. There is a very large visual component, like you said, but again, just getting an opportunity to talk about our project that's always great, I think. And so we're happy to do that. One of the things, and I'll take responsibility for this that I noticed differently from that experience to this experience is that, Brooke, you shared with us the questions in advance and sort of laid out all of the details of what we could expect. At the time of communication with the previous experience or the other podcast interview, Abbie was away, so I was basically communicating with the producer of this podcast. And I never asked for any questions upfront, and the producer never volunteered those questions. And so when we showed up for the interview, we didn't know what to expect, I guess. We knew we'd talk about

or answer questions related to our project, but we didn't know anything beyond that. So that was certainly one thing. If we had done it over or if we were to do that over, I would probably at least ask for those questions. I don't know, I mean, everybody's different. This person may just not provide questions in advance. May not those questions in advance, I don't know. But that was certainly a distinct difference.

Abbie Norris-Davidson: It was funny, our experience with the podcast, I think the word that comes to mind is whirlwind. It was a one man show, and he was visiting from out of the country, for I think less than a week, and had a jam-packed schedule, because they were producing a podcast about the integration, and so had a lot of people on campus and in Mississippi that they wanted to talk to. And I think even in states other than Mississippi. He was really traveling all over the country to interview people for this podcast. And so we had one hour time slot that ended up turning into 30 minutes, because the library can be hard and confusing to navigate, and we kept on having just conversations with him. And then he explained to us that the podcast was going to total, I believe 120 or 140 minutes for everyone that he was talking to. So it was one of those, "Tell me about your project, but it might only be a sound bite or one quote that gets into the final project."

So I think if memory serves, we didn't even talk about the visualization aspect of our project so much, because he did not anticipate there would be enough time to delve into that. It was more a very blanket explanation of what our project was, and then talking more about what the project had uncovered and made us think about.

Adam Clemons: Yeah, I mean, basically the emphasis was on the letters themselves, I think. That's what the bulk of our time we spent, essentially, selecting a few letters to read, once we had described what our project was about and what we're trying to do. You're right, Abbie, that was basically the extent of that aspect. And then it just became sort of a chance for us to highlight some of the distinct differences between the kinds of letters that Mr. Meredith received. Not just in the sense that some were in support or sympathetic, and then others were not, but also to try to highlight some of the sort of nuance of hatred, I guess that came through in some of those unsympathetic letters, that some were much more sort of extreme than others. And some of that came out in our, I guess, reading of those letters might be one way to describe it. Which I was not prepared to do, but we were able to find letters that captured sort of the sentiment of what he was looking for. We did that, and he would give us feedback based on our takes.

Abbie Norris-Davidson: He would try not to guide what we were saying, but then also very clearly had kind of a narrative idea in his mind that he wanted to fit our story into. So it was interesting to see how our experience, which it's just been the two of us working on this project for two years, and so it can be very, not siloed, but very focused, I guess, very focused on our project to see how it fit into this broader narrative that was surrounding the 60th anniversary celebrations.

Adam Clemons: There was very much a director sort of element of, at least from my perspective, like Abbie said, he was very clear that we were free to say whatever we wanted, but there was, I want to say coaching, but encouragement or guidance or something. I'm not sure what word may be most appropriate. But yeah, we were given free rein, but we were kind of given an idea of what was trying to be achieved. And again, thinking that we only had, I think, believe there was going to be 10 total episodes at 14 minutes a piece, and our interview alone ended up being 30 plus minutes. And knowing, as Abbie said, that he had visited multiple places on a whirlwind trip. We had to be very sort of careful in

choosing what we did say and what we did elaborate on. So we interviewed in the STUDIOone in the JD Williams Library here on campus. That space is set up for, I think, it has still has screen capabilities, and it's effectively a one-touch studio, but he had his own equipment. It was all sort of portable, but he had this enormous microphone, everything that he needed to make the audio recording. And so Abbie and I, we had each had a nice comfortable sort of lounge chair. We moved, I think, there was a small crescent table that he had moved towards kind of in front of our chairs, so that we were almost sitting at a desk, if that makes sense. Where both the chairs are pulled up to the table, and then he is behind the table and behind him is the wall. And so it's a very tight space, I'm just trying to create the image in an already small room. I don't know, Abbie, we were at least maybe a five feet in diameter between the three of us. And he has this, it must have been two feet long, microphone that was positioned within, effectively, several inches of our faces. And that microphone would then rotate, and he was managing it. It would rotate left to right depending on who was speaking. And so when you're trying to be careful with what you're saying and articulate, that's can be a challenge in and of itself, but it sort of magnified when you have this microphone in your face. And so I just want to say that did create... there was a level of intensity I guess that kind of came along with that setup. And I think that was just done because it helped eliminate any potential background noise and would make his job easier as he went to edit, produce. But it certainly created an environment where we were very close together. And at least in my experience, I had not ever done anything like that. So it was interesting.

Brooke Gross: Based on your experiences with that podcast, with this one, being a consumer, having worked with podcasts before, things like that, I'd love to know y'all's overall thoughts about podcasting as a format or a medium. And if you think that podcasting is something that y'all are wanting to get more into after having kind of seen both sides of it.

Adam Clemons: I mean, it certainly gives me a greater appreciation of what goes into it. As a consumer of podcasts, I had up to that point not really considered everything that goes in into a podcast, the production. I mean, I certainly think of things differently now in terms of being involved with podcasts. Yeah, I mean, I think it's a great medium to spread awareness, to talk about things that you're interested in, all that sort of stuff. And so I think that's something I'd certainly be interested in being a part of. And I'd certainly be happy to do further podcast interviews in the future about just about anything. Again, because I appreciate what podcasts are able to offer, and I think that plenty of people, clearly, utilize that podcast format.

Abbie Norris-Davidson: Yeah, I agree. I think that podcasting is a wonderful medium, and it has been exciting to see how it's evolved over the last 10 or 15 years. I feel like. At least for me, it blends the best of both worlds, between visual content, YouTube, movies, and music. I love that podcasts can run the gamut from being two friends talking and making you crack up on the other side of the screen to getting people who were wrongly convicted, cleared of all charges. And I think it'll be really interesting to see what happens to the podcasting world in the next 10 or 15 years. And it's definitely something that I enjoy participating in, and would love to take part in more in the future.

Brian Corrigan: Alex Langhart was similarly inspired by the experience of being a podcast interviewee. The director of University Health Services joined us in episode 10 to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on the campus community. And today he returns to Roundabout Oxford as host of a brand new segment, What's Plaguing Us.

Alex Langhart: Hey, it's Alex Langhart, director of University Health Services at the University of Mississippi. I'm obsessed with public health and its history. And I'm excited for this opportunity the Roundabout Oxford Podcast has given me to share my passion with you in a series called What's Plaguing us. This first segment will be all about the flu. Flu season in the Southern Hemisphere typically runs April through September and has been used as a predictor for flu season in the Northern Hemisphere. Our friends Down Under had a bad flu season, and unfortunately, so far, we seem to be following suit. What do we do? Well, we do like we've done every year since the invention of a little shot in the 1940s, get the flu vaccine. Or we find an excuse not to get the vaccine, erroneous ones like, "It gave me the flu," or, "It never works," or, "Flu isn't that bad."

Why do we have such a complicated relationship with the influenza virus? Let's first look at what it is. There are two main types of human flu viruses, types A and B. For brevity, let's focus on A, as that is the real troublemaker. Influenza A has the ability to cause flu pandemics, due to its propensity for virus reassortment. Now, this is the process by which there's a swapping of gene segments. Influenza A is divided into subtypes based on two surface level proteins, hemagglutinin and neuraminidase. You may have heard of a virus subtype being named like H1N1 or H3N2, this is referring to those antigens. More than 130 influenza A subtype combinations have been identified in nature. That's extremely alarming to think about. Why? Well, let's take a trip back in time and discuss the forgotten pandemic of 1918 and see what the implications are for influenza type A's ability for reassortment. Arthur Duery Davis was a logger who relocated from North Carolina to Tennessee when his logging camp closed. When the pandemic hit, he found work in digging graves. This seemed to be a pretty popular occupation at the time, because his direct quote was, "There was no time to build coffins, since the bodies were put in the ground as soon as possible." Arthur tells a story where one morning at 6:00 AM he was set to work digging three graves for a family of six that lived down the road from him. Around 9:00 AM, the doctor sent word to dig yet another grave. Then at lunchtime, he got word to dig another. And by 4:00 PM, he was instructed to dig the final grave for that entire family. The 1918 flu is thought to have evolved from a strain that typically infected birds. It acquired mutations that allowed it to infect the upper respiratory system, and it was really good at it. I mean, it would replicate extremely quickly, and then could be transmitted to the air via coughing and sneezing. Combine that with our immune systems not being previously exposed to a novel virus, and you have the perfect conditions for a catastrophic pandemic. Even worse, secondary bacterial infections contributed to the high death counts, because they were able to infiltrate an extremely weakened body and develop pneumonia. Now, I think what struck fear the most in the population was of how many young adults were succumbing to severe illness. Some research estimates close to 50% of deaths were adults aged 20 to 40. Many scientists think that this is due to that age group not being exposed to a strain similar to the 1918 flu. Whereas older adults, may have had some exposure to something similar, since they were born before 1889. Also, our immune systems could have played a harmful role due to an intense immune response called a cytokine storm. This is a rapid release of immune cells and inflammatory molecules that overwhelms the body leading to severe inflammation and fluid buildup in the lungs, increasing the chance for those secondary infections. A few scientists present the theory that younger immune systems would produce a stronger cytokine storm, thus being more destructive. I'm reminded of the quote that luck is when opportunity meets preparation, and how in this scenario, worked perfectly for the virus. It came at a time when physicians were only just discovering the existence of viruses. In fact, they thought this pandemic was caused by bacterium. They were a long way away from antiviral meds and the vaccines we know today. It wasn't until 1997 that we discovered the genetic sequence of the 1918 virus. The passing of a century since this

dark mark on history contributed to this being labeled the Forgotten Pandemic. This was a gut check for public health response and medical advancement. We luckily survived and learned a lot along the way. It will never truly be forgotten. In fact, all influenza A pandemics since 1918, and almost all cases of influenza A worldwide have been caused by descendants of the 1918 virus. It is truly the mother of all pandemics for the modern era. So are we learning from our history? I posed the question earlier of why our relationship with influenza is so complicated. It's because we haven't seen the devastation on a global scale that a flu virus can cause. There have been flareups, sure, but most people associate the flu with mild symptoms: chills, cough, fever, and body aches. It's a much harder truth to swallow that we are one reassortment away from another tragedy. This current flu season has hit us a little harder because our immune systems have been shielded the past couple of years. Masks and social distancing have kept it at bay. Now that the world has opened up again, our immune systems are getting back used to all the crud that's out there. So let's be smart each flu season, make sure to get your vaccine. Keep practicing good hand hygiene. Wear a mask if you are vulnerable or feel that you may be becoming sick. It takes everyone to win their part in looking out for each other. Thanks for listening to this segment of What's Plaguing Us.

Brian Corrigan: Roundabout Oxford was created by Brian Corrigan, Taylor Fields, Alan Munshower, Abigail Norris-Davidson, Christina Streeter, and Alex Watson. Today's episode was produced by Elizabeth Batte, Brian Corrigan, Sarah Katherine Glass, Brooke Gross, Harley Rogers, and Alex Watson. With guest contributor Alex Langhart, and musical contributions from Brian Corrigan and Gail Herrera. Thank you for listening to Roundabout Oxford.