

Alabama's Struggles During Their Centennial

By Marjorie Reeves

Alabama has shared many experiences with the world including war, famine, financial crises and disease. The 1918 Spanish Influenza was devastating to Alabamians as well as populations all over the world. By 1919, people were not only afraid of strangers, but also their friends and neighbors, even family. Nine members in one family died. Who would be next to succumb to influenza? While celebrating the state centennial, our relatives were fighting for their lives here in Alabama. The war to end all wars was forgotten as the home folks were fighting to survive another year.

The Huntsville Commission wrote a letter to the state legislature requesting to organize the state centennial since the state government started in Huntsville. They requested \$50,000 from the state for the celebration. Marie Bankhead Owen wrote plays for schools to use on Alabama Day and programs for meetings and events. Montgomery organized a Centennial and Exposition Committee. Cities around the state planned an event to celebrate but as planning for a commemoration developed, the leaders also had to be concerned about people gathering and spreading the flu.

Madison County was the first to report the flu in Alabama. The first encounter was in Hazel Green where an Army soldier had just returned from the shipyards in Philadelphia where it was already killing. It spread like a sage fire in a week. As it spread, people died from "cytokine storm," an overreaction of the immune system. First the infected would have a

chill, then fever, their lungs would seem to liquify, they would turn blue, and die. Healthy people would have a stronger overreaction and die faster. To this day the medical community has not tracked down where it started. Some theories are it started in Kansas or France, yet the Spanish Flu is used as its nickname.

Alabama State Board of Health refused to talk about the epidemic thinking it was overrated and they could avoid a panic. Days after the State Board of Health said not to worry, they reported that the disease was in every county of the state and was spreading in epidemic proportions. The poor, black and white, were hardest hit due to living in unsanitary conditions.

Governor Charles Henderson was paying attention to all the activities, and “*issued a proclamation calling for all county and municipal authorities to ban public gatherings, and close schools, churches, theatres, picture shows, and other places as long as the disease exists.*” Birmingham closed events and businesses first, then Montgomery, with Mobile following but was already hit hard by the disease because of being a shipping lane and open to incoming illnesses.

Schools were closed in October for two weeks and when they reopened, the flu spiked again. The Board was afraid to close the schools again because they were concerned the students would go out and get a job not returning to the classroom. The doctors disagreed with the Board and sent out a statement advising parents to keep their children at home.

In the rural areas, it was up to the neighbors to help each other. They brought food to the ones that were bedridden, most of the time neighbors just left food and other items on the porch for the infected to come out to retrieve. And, neighbors often risked exposure to nurse a sick friend. The healthy ones would wear

gauze bandages around their faces while tending to the sick.

Druggist Young became ill and closed his pharmacy. Charlie Lane, who became sheriff later, opened the drug store and operated it so prescriptions could be filled.

People were begging for doctors. Dr. Grote Sr. was a young man just starting out in the medical field in Madison County during the influenza and managed to not become sick with it during the period it was running rapid. Local doctors England, Thomas, and Allen died taking care of the ones with the flu and as doctors and nurses became ill, cities would wire for help to other cities. A Red Cross nurse went to the Lincoln village to nurse the inflicted and died within the week. Six Army physicians from a Chattanooga post contributed their help to Madison County.

The neighbors buried the dead in their communities as the daily death toll climbed as high as 31 a day in October 1918. Dr. Grote stated caskets were set on porches to await the undertaker, every cemetery was busy every day. No funerals were held indoors because few would have attended. Garbage collectors were called off Huntsville streets to dig graves. In the Birmingham News, it was stated, "Undertakers seemed to be the only group to profit during the epidemic." Dr. Grote said it was the saddest situation because there was no treatment and he estimated "*that every woman who gave birth while she had the flu, died in delivery. We saved many babies, but the mothers always died.*"

The disease followed the railroad lines and shipping lanes where a larger populous were more transitory. The disease was first reported in the spring of 1918 being more of a bother than a killer. Then it returned

in September as deadly, decimating communities. In most cases, the disease developed into difficulty breathing within hours. If the flu did not kill, pneumonia which followed did. The third wave of the flu pandemic in 1919 killed 185,440 across the country. With the flu effecting the work force, people were moving to where the jobs could be had.

The war brought Federal money to Alabama bringing in thousands of new workers. There were two nitrate plants, the Wilson Dam was built, and the Mobile ship yards expanded. The war stimulated an increase in industries production, cotton prices and military bases helped to lift the economy.

Yet when the war was over, the women of Alabama still did not receive the right to vote from the state even though it had passed through Congress. Black leaders who lead the black involvement in the war found the usual segregation and inequality on the soldiers returning from the war. Strikes developed across the country for more wages, the largest strike with Seattle's ship builders. Race riots dotted the landscape, largest raged in Chicago.

Events in 1919 includes downtown Boston, MA., experiencing a clean up of a tank of molasses that burst, flooding the streets killing 21 and injuring 150; the beginning of Nazism by the German's Workers Party; the American government adopted German's Daylight Savings Time system; Communism, growing in Russia, attracted Americans to organize membership. Here in the states, Babe Ruth hit his 26th home run and the Chicago White Sox allowed the Cincinnati Reds to win the World Series that developed into a baseball scandal still not forgotten.

No time is purely bad, some of the good news of 1919 was Oscar Micheaux became the first Negro

producer and director of motion pictures. The Kiwanis Club organized. WWI provided 96 Alabama soldiers who received the Distinguished Service Cross and 19 others that received the Distinguished Service Medal. Enterprise became the only county that erected a monument to a pest, the Boll Weevil that had migrated from Mexico eating cotton crops making the farmers learn to alternate their crops. The Treaty of Versailles ending WWI established the League of Nations. President Woodrow Wilson won the Nobel Peace Prize. Act 459 passed by the 1919 Legislature approved daily Bible reading in schools and there were no shootings in educational institutes during that time.



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