

# **INFLUENZA: THE TWENTIETH CENTURY'S DEADLIEST PANDEMIC**

## **INTRODUCTION:**

In 1918 with the war raging in Europe a silent deadly killer travels with the soldiers from the United States over to the war zones in France. Considered America's deadliest epidemic that killed more people here than the soldiers that lost their lives fighting. Genealogy records document those persons who survived and for families who lost their relatives.

## **ORIGINS OF THE FLU:**

Haskell County, Kansas west of Dodge City is where the stage is set for events to unfold. In late February, 1918 in rural Haskell, KS a mysterious and unknown illness begins to run unchecked. In a few short weeks healthy citizens in the county became violently ill. Doctors in Haskell County don't know what is killing area residents.

As quickly as the unknown disease begins it vanishes. Young men of military age who live in Haskell Co. are inducted into the service and report to duty at Camp Funston between February 28<sup>th</sup> and March 2<sup>nd</sup>. Public Health Officers report the cases of the flu, but it is too late, this is the first strain of the flu.

## **DISEASE COMES TO CAMP FUNSTON:**

Recruits from all over Kansas for WWI come to Camp Funston (located in present day Fort Riley), where the men would come into close contact with each other through training for the military before deployment to Europe.

Between March 11<sup>th</sup> and March 18<sup>th</sup> more than 500 soldiers become ill. Within 3 weeks more than 1,100 men were sick. By the end of Spring 1918 there are 48 soldiers dead. Their causes of death are listed as Spinal Meningitis and Pneumonia on death certificates.

## **DISEASE TRAVELS TO EUROPE:**

In the next couple of months-men are transferred to other Camps and Bases and eventually to the war zone in Europe. Once the virus reaches Europe it quickly spreads among the Armies fighting affecting Germany, France, Russia, Italy, England, and the United States in a short time. The flu runs unchecked throughout the Army where 30-40% of our fighting forces become infected.

## **TRAVEL BACK TO UNITED STATES:**

Starting in August 1918 a second strain begins to appear with striking regularity. On August 17, 1918 a Liner arrived in New York harbor with 21 cases reported of Influenza killing five passengers onboard. The Influenza strain that first appeared in Kansas in February and March was mild; with this second strain now much stronger and deadly. The disease once back in the United States spreads very quickly and remains unchecked.

## **FLU TRAVELS TO CAMP DEVENS:**

One of the first military camps in the United States that witnesses multiple cases is located outside of Boston, MA. Camp Devens is one of the first to report the disease with the flu mortality rate quickly jumping to 2.5% for the month more than 25 times the normal rate of mortality in the country.

Dr. Victor C. Vaughn who serves in the post of the Surgeon General of the U.S. Army is then summoned to solve why so many soldiers are dying. On the day he arrived in September to Camp Devens sixty-three soldiers die from influenza. With the spread of the flu the local and government leaders seek to try to contain the spread by closing down all public places and assemblies of persons.

### **OCTOBER HARDEST HIT MONTH:**

Major cities in the United States; New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Boston all suffered at the hands of Influenza. October of 1918 many cities reported the greatest number of deaths attributed to the flu and within weeks most of these cities reported peaks in their death tolls. Slowly afterwards the number of reported deaths and new cases start to gradually lessen.

### **VIRUS WEAKENS AND DISSAPEARS:**

December 1918 the third and final strain of the flu begin to appear, and by January 1919 the illness had mostly run its course. This does include persons who didn't succumb from the virus or died of complications caused by bacteria or who died from pneumonia.

World War I claimed an estimated 16 million lives. The influenza epidemic that swept the globe in 1918-1919 would continue to go on to kill an estimated 50 million people. In some numbers we understand nearly one fifth of the population of the world was infected. Within ten months the flu killed more people than any other illness in recorded history.

### **BEGINNING YOUR RESEARCH:**

The following list of record groups used by family historian are sub divided into civilian and military related resources.

### **DEATH CERTIFICATES:**

One excellent source for locating someone who may have died from the pandemic can include sources on death certificates. Each state recorded their own vital records and can be accessed online for requests by state at: [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/w2w/index.htm?CDC\\_AA\\_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fnchs%2Fw2w.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/w2w/index.htm?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fnchs%2Fw2w.htm), search for state. The cause of death might be listed directly as influenza, although it could be masked in another cause including pneumonia, or spinal

meningitis as a contributing cause of the death. Note that additional documentation could be forthcoming as Death Certificates may list an M.E. (Medical Examiner) case or file numbers.

### **CORONER REPORTS:**

When someone dies from unknown causes or where the person dies without a physician in attendance at the time of death very often a Coroner or Medical Examiner case file is opened for the deceased. Consult your local jurisdiction to determine the statutes relating to these case files to determine the years of availability and with whom the records are in custody.

### **CITY DIRECTORIES:**

This often-overlooked resource can offer genealogists details on death dates and give explanation of family circumstances. Not all City Directories list death dates, but many list regularly. One of the largest online sites for resources for directories is found in *Ancestry*: <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2469/> and browsable and indexed by city.

### **NEWSPAPER RECORDS:**

Another excellent resource used by genealogists comes in the form of newspapers. Whether printed daily, weekly, or semi-weekly. They can record details about those who died; or can include persons admitted to the hospitals who suffered, but survived the flu.

### **COURT RECORDS:**

One of the best avenues to approach finding genealogy connections of families is found in court records. From probate, deeds, tax lists, and even bankruptcy records all can have some impact on those affected who lost family members from the flu. Searching in these local and Federal records can reveal details not otherwise found in any other location. Be diligent in your search.

## **OFFICIAL PERSONNEL FILES:**

The National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, MO is the repository of millions of military files for veterans in the military during the 20th century. On July 12, 1973 a disastrous fire destroyed between 16-18 million Official Military Personnel Files. <https://www.archives.gov/personnel-records-center/ompf-background> ordering details.

Army Personnel discharged November 1, 1912, to January 1, 1960 80% destroyed.

Air Force Personnel discharged, September 25, 1947, to January 1, 1964 75%-destroyed beginning with the name James E. Hubbard.

The records of Navy, Marines, and the Coast Guard were unaffected by the fire.

National Personnel Records Center (NPRC)  
Military Personnel Records  
1 Archive Drive  
St. Louis, MO 63138

## **MORTUARY OR CASUALTY FILES:**

Another set of records found at the NPRC. These files are a collection of records for individuals who were killed in action or who deaths as a POW, and persons who died of disease. Abbreviated at IDPF or Individual Deceased Personnel Files.

This is the name given to these files during World War II. During WWI they were often called “*Mortuary Files*” or “*Casualty Files*” or even “*Burial Case Files*” which often do contain detailed information of the soldier’s family and other relatives.

- Name of Veteran
- Military Unit/Organization and Rank
- Date, Location, and Cause of Death
- Location of Temporary Burial
- Information on the Permanent Burial
- Medical Records of Veteran
- Topographic Charts of the Burial Site

More information is available on the status and for making requests from the NPRC online at: <https://www.archives.gov/st-louis/frequently-requested> with links to frequent record sets.

## **MORNING REPORTS:**

Morning reports were created by the military as part of their personnel and payroll functions. These records are especially important when trying to reconstruct service information-from the fire if 1973. Only available at the National Archives; these reports are an “*Exception Based*” style, only containing individuals who are not “*Present or Accounted For*” Some reasons to be included:

- Promotion or Demotion
- Killed, Wounded, or Missing In Action
- Assigned/Leaving Another Unit
- Going to Hospital
- Another Activity or Training.

The records are available onsite at the National Personnel Record Center in St. Louis, MO and are not digitized. Request records remotely.

## **TROOPSHIP MANIFESTS:**

Troopship manifests provide a complete listing of the Army personnel that went overseas to France and returned back to the United States are scanned and digitized online on *Ancestry* at: <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/61174/> searchable by name of service member on both outgoing and incoming ship manifests. The manifests contain a wealth of genealogy.

- Name of Soldier
- Rank
- Service Number
- Company/Regiment/Unit
- Next of Kin/Emergency Contact  
Address/Relationship

For soldiers that died as a result of the disease in Europe they were often repatriated and then brought back to the United States. Manifest also recorded who were killed or died of disease.

## **HEADSTONE APPLICATIONS:**

Applications indexes for headstones of any veterans of the military issued from 1925-1963 are available online on *Ancestry* at: <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2375/> where the original records are located at the National Archives in RG92 of the office of the Quartermaster General. .

## **GOLD STAR MOTHER'S:**

The Term “*Gold Star Mother*” was applied to those women who had lost sons in World War I. Later this was extended to include widows. The original files are held at the National Archives, but an online index exists on *Ancestry* and can include those who died from the influenza disease. An online register of the mothers and widows that applied for the “Gold Star” on *Ancestry* at: <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/4224/> named are indexed by location.

## **VETERAN CLAIM FILES:**

In 1921 United States Congress created the Veterans Bureau for veterans to file for benefits. Later in 1930 President Hoover combined Veterans Bureau, with the Bureau of Pensions along with Homes for Disabled Veterans into a single office called the Veterans Administration called the Veterans Affairs. Records at the National Archives are part of RG15 and at the NPRC contain claim files covering 1917-1970 and are called claim files and not pensions. The index from 1917-1940 is online at *FamilySearch* at: <https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/2968245> indexed by veteran and listed with their claim information.

The files have two numbering designations. If the veteran file number is preceded by “C” this indicates the person is alive requesting benefits. Once Deceased that numbering Changes as the file number it now preceded by an “XC” and are onsite at the National Personnel Record Center in St. Louis, MO.

## **LEGACY OF INFLUENZA:**

The Influenza pandemic didn’t discriminate. It hit rural and urban areas worldwide, attacked both the rich and the poor with equal fury. In most cases healthy young adults were hardest hit group from the illness. Overall, in the United States nearly 25% of the population struggled with this disease, and would lower the average life expectancy here by 12 years. The country would take years to recover.

## **REFERENCE SOURCES:**

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