

Recalling the fear, heavy toll of the 1918 flu outbreak

May 10 2009, By David Casstevens

Given his age, H. Byran Poff figures he has seen just about everything that can happen to mankind.

Fire. Famine. Floods. Flu.

The last of those is nothing new.

When Poff was 8, a [global pandemic](#) hit Fort Worth. The child and his parents and five siblings weren't infected, but Poff hasn't forgotten the magnitude of the human toll it took and the rising fear that gripped the city of 106,000.

"Sure, it was scary. The talk of the town," the 98-year-old Fort Worth oilman recalled.

His memory of that fall and winter of 1918 is vivid, real, part of the widower's life -- a blessed life he now quietly shares with an aging border collie, Katy, dozing at his feet.

"All those boys ... "

In Poff's mind, he sees the tent rows at Camp Bowie.

"That winter they died out there in droves."

In 1918 the nation had plenty of physicians, some of whom touted

medicinal remedies in newspaper advertisements. Dr. Caldwell and his Syrup Pepsic. Dr. Tutt's Liver Pills. Dr. Edwards' Olive Tablets. The bottled products promised to relieve a wide range of maladies, from rheumatism to irregularity.

But no pill or potion could fend off or stop the spread of Spanish influenza.

Between 20 million and 50 million worldwide died from the disease, including about 675,000 Americans.

A mild flu wave first appeared in the U.S. in the spring and returned with a vengeance months later, with the highest mortality rate among those ages 20 to 40, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) Web site.

Locally the flu arrived surreptitiously, as if on a sparrow's wing.

Camp Bowie, named after Alamo hero Jim Bowie, was about three miles west of downtown. The 36th Infantry Division trained there in 1917-18. As a boy, Byran Poff joined the cheering as he watched those columns of stalwart soldiers parade in lockstep through downtown before they shipped out to France in World War I.

"I could take you to Main Street," he said, "and show you where I was standing."

The infantry replacement and training center reported no cases of flu in early September 1918.

On Sept. 27, this front-page headline appeared:

"81 [Spanish Influenza](#) Cases At Camp Bowie Base Hospital."

By Oct. 4, the camp hospital had treated a record 1,900 patients.

The camp was quarantined and flu patients segregated. Not even a chaplain was allowed to visit the wards. Soldiers were prevented from entering picture shows, dance halls and pool rooms.

"Tents must be furled when not in use," one newspaper story read.

"Bedding and cots must be aired two hours or more daily. All men must sleep with heads five feet apart. The floors of the tents must be treated with oil and gasoline three times weekly."

Influenza found its way to area airfields. The Royal Flying Corps trained Canadian and British pilots at Taliaferro Field, later named Hicks Field, in what is now Saginaw, and at fields in Benbrook and Everman. Some airmen were U.S. citizens who enlisted in the Canadian military before the U.S. entered the war.

One cadet reported seeing a trainload of casket-laden flat cars leaving Fort Worth.

"Fully one-third of people at Barron Field (Everman) caught the flu," said J'Nell Pate, a former history professor at Tarrant County College who researched that era for a yet unpublished book titled "Military Fort Worth." Pate said that while the disease was rampant, more fliers (106) died of air-related training accidents than of flu.

Two Royal Flying Corps flu victims are buried at Greenwood Cemetery. Another lies in Granbury.

During the first week of October the U.S. government postponed the military induction of 111 men from Tarrant County draft boards because of the pandemic. Congress approved a \$1 million budget for the U.S. Public Health Service to recruit 1,000 medical doctors and more than

700 registered nurses.

Graduate nurses needed at military camps were paid \$75 monthly, plus lodging and laundry.

Women with the local Red Cross chapter worked on weekends, making gauze masks. Yet despite preventive measures, the disease spread like gossip to the civilian population, reaching its peak in October.

That month 217 died locally of flu and pneumonia -- 13 in 24 hours.

The illness did not discriminate. On one day it claimed 17-year-old newlywed Mattie Marshall and Louis Miller, vice president and general manager of the Fort Worth Record.

Police began enforcing the anti-spitting ordinance, especially in movie theaters and streetcars, with violators subject to fines or imprisonment.

Meacham's department store at 12th and Main streets saw the flu outbreak as an opportunity to advertise its men's and women's underwear, flannel pajamas and germ-fighting mouthwashes, namely Lavoris and Listerine, priced at 23 cents a bottle.

The Texas State Board of Health made suggestions on how to prevent flu outbreaks in schools. All woodwork, the board advised, should be disinfected. Every pupil should carry a clean handkerchief.

"Spitting on the floor, sneezing or coughing, except behind a handkerchief, should be sufficient grounds for suspension of a pupil," the board advised.

Later Fort Worth shut down its public school for 10 days. Theaters closed. Church services were canceled.

The Dallas Morning News said surviving the flu required "medical attention, good nursing, fresh air, nutritious food and cheerful surroundings."

The Fort Worth Relief Association visited those whose situations were anything but cheery.

One was a family of six living in a tent, with one bed.

"They are all seriously ill with influenza and repeatedly refused to be taken to the hospital," the Star-Telegram reported. The association furnished a stove, a bed and shoes for the children.

A Fort Worth health department report confirmed 210 deaths in December, mostly flu or pneumonia victims. More females died than males, which raised the question: Why?

"They (females) don't wear enough warm clothes," an unnamed Fort Worth doctor told the newspaper. "Low shoes and web-weaved stockings ... with temperatures below freezing are not non-conductors of cold to say nothing of other flimsy garments."

The same physician suggested male smokers were less likely to get the flu.

By the summer of 1919, the disease had begun to disappear in the state.

Ten years later, Poff, then a senior at Central High School, went to work part time in the oil fields. The business became his passion and calling. A founding member of the Fort Worth Petroleum Club, he drilled his first well at age 23, and he's still drilling, with numerous wells in Eastland County.

Poff said he has never had the flu.

"Very few times I've seen a doctor in my life," Poff said. "I've outlived most of 'em."

Is he worried about swine flu?

"I'm not worried about anything," Poff said matter-of-factly.

The businessman, who operates his company from home, heeds Benjamin Franklin's advice, "Early to bed, early to rise ..."

Poff is asleep by 5 p.m. He wakes up at 3 a.m.

Before breakfast, he spends an hour "talking to the Lord," the one, he said, quoting from Proverbs, who directs his life and has comforted and protected him, through 10 decades, in rare sickness and in health.

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