

## **A forgotten Macon tragedy: 1918 influenza pandemic**

*By Rick Maier*

The fall of 1918 was the deadliest period in American history, but somehow we have tucked it away in a dark corner of our collective memory.

We remember 1918 as the end of the First World War in which 56,000 Americans sacrificed their lives to defeat the Germans. But in the closing months of the war, 550,000 Americans died of influenza – more US deaths than from all the wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century combined.

Here in Macon during October and November of 1918, the front pages of the Daily Telegraph were filled with stories of America's efforts to win the "Great War". Accounts of the flu epidemic were found in the back pages, usually shrouded with assurances such as: "the situation is progressing satisfactorily", the "flu has run its course", "the quarantine is working splendidly", and "cases in Macon are of a mild type". By late November the editor of the Telegraph admitted that the "city is in something of a state of panic".

Influenza has been plaguing man since the beginning of our existence, but every few years the virus mutates into a particularly dangerous strain. The 1918 flu pandemic was the worst ever recorded, leaving an estimated twenty to forty million people dead worldwide.

Many people exposed to the 1918 flu in Macon simply got a bad cold. Others became severely ill, but recovered. And some people died - a quick but brutal death often caused by suffocation from fluid in the lungs. In as little as 12 hours, victims would turn blue, cough up blood-tainted froth and become delirious from fever. The virus attacked all genders, races and ages, killing many soldiers fighting in Europe as well as infantrymen training in close quarters at bases such as Camp Wheeler in Macon.

Long-term Maconite Gus Kaufman recalls having heard a story that the bodies of soldiers who died at Camp Wheeler were stacked high at the Terminal Station awaiting transportation back home. Towns across the US ran out of coffins and resorted to mass graves.

No one knew what to do because science didn't really understand viruses then. Local officials figured that the flu was highly contagious so they canceled schools, churches, courts and all other public gatherings. Residents were ordered to wear masks, even though we now understand that trying to ward off a virus with a gauze mask is like trying to block mosquitoes with chicken wire.

Mini Phillips lived in a downtown Macon neighborhood when her mother and father were stricken with influenza. The frightened five-year-old played her toy piano at the foot of her parent's bed, hoping that one of them would wake up to give her some money to go to the food store. Her parents survived, but two neighbors on her street died.

Dr. Charles Ridley Jr. remembers stories of how his father, a country doctor in 1918, was so tired from treating flu victims all day that he would pass out from exhaustion on his horse as he returned home at night.

Prominent Middle Georgians such as Dr. W.B. Hardman, a physician and Mercer University Trustee, and W.D. McNeil, a prominent lawyer and politician, also died of the flu that fatal fall.

Twenty-year-old Troy Peak enlisted in the Army in mid-November, 1918. He must have been quite excited to be assigned to a base in Virginia for training. Within three weeks he contracted influenza and died of pneumonia. His body was returned to his family in Middle Georgia.

Statistics for the number of deaths in Macon are unreliable. In fact, the 1918 pandemic launched many of the public health programs and record keeping that we take for granted today. The state of Georgia reported 30,768 influenza deaths in 1918. Based on 1920 census ratios, about 750 people would have died in Macon of the flu, but it could have been many more if Camp Wheeler and the first few months of 1919 are included.

Influenza pandemics struck again in 1957 and 1968, but never came close to the scale of the tragedy of 1918. Today West Nile, Mad Cow, Ebola and other diseases grab all the headlines, but influenza remains the granddaddy of all health risks - capable of killing millions of people who simply breathe the same air.