

# State Spanish Flu May Have Started Among Trainees

The disease in Colorado — known as the Spanish flu in those days — apparently started in the Student Army Training Corps at the University of Colorado at Boulder in the fall of 1918.

Harvey T. Sethman, 76, of Denver, retired executive secretary of the Colorado Medical Society, was there as an infantry private.

"One morning our company lined up for roll call, and one of the fellows who hadn't even seemed sick staggered forward 10 or 15 feet and fell flat on his face," Sethman recalled. "We got an ambulance and took him to the hospital. Two days later he was dead."

Soon the little hospital built on campus by the Army couldn't handle all of the sick, and some were moved to other hospitals. Possibly as many as one-fourth of the men in military training at the university came down with the flu within a two and a half month period, according to Sethman. Many died.

The disease spread quickly.

By early October, Pueblo, Colorado Springs and Denver had closed schools and public gathering places, and were allowing only open air funerals. On Oct. 5, the State Board of Health ordered, upon the appearance of the disease in any town in Colorado, "all theaters, churches, schools and other places where people assemble . . . closed until the epidemic has run its course."

By Oct. 15, the Spanish flu was taking such a heavy toll that Denver health officials banned all visiting, even among neighbors. Persons from other communities were not permitted to enter the city, and the Denver Bureau of Health ordered staggered work hours and the arrest of residents who continued to hold meetings and society functions against its orders.

The Denver Post of Oct. 16, 1918, reported that scarcely a town in Colorado was not touched by the flu. The State Board of Health that day ordered all visiting stopped statewide, all outdoor and indoor assemblies closed, and physicians to placard all houses where there were cases of influenza.

Vital statistics records of the Colorado Department of Health indicate that an estimated 6,000 "excess" deaths occurred from influenza in 1918, with a total of 17,546 deaths in Colorado that year, compared with 10,725 deaths in 1917.

Around the world, the toll was estimated at 20 million in what ranks as one of the deadliest episodes in the long history of

man's fight against disease.

After the epidemic began to ebb in late November 1918, health officials lifted the ban on assembly but ordered Coloradans to wear masks as they went about their social, religious and business activities.

"It really looked strange," Sethman recalled, "seeing folks on the street cars and in the stores, wearing masks."

Only Hinsdale County escaped the flu, according to The Denver Post of Feb. 3, 1919. Dr. B.F. Cummings of Lake City, the Hinsdale health officer, wrote Dr. Erlo Kennedy, secretary of the State Board of Health, that the "shotgun" quarantine established in October kept his county free of the disease.

No one was allowed to come into or leave Hinsdale County without being placed in quarantine for five days. A man with a shotgun met every train and escorted those who got off to the quarantine headquarters where they were forced to remain until proven free of the flu germ.

That is the historical backdrop against which the 1976 swine flu immunization campaign must be projected.

Could it happen again? No one really knows. But a major antigenic shift, such as appears to have happened in 1918, has again occurred in the virus that causes influenza. When this happens, virtually no one has immunity to the flu virus, creating the potential for a major epidemic.

Neither does anyone know whether the flu strain which surfaced last winter at Fort Dix, N.J., is as virulent as the strain which took such a heavy toll in 1918. They know only that the two strains are closely related.

The bacterial pneumonia which caused so many deaths then can now be treated with antibiotics. But there still is little that medicine can do to treat some of the other complications, including inflammations of the heart and brain, which occurred 58 years ago.

Sethman escaped the Spanish flu in the fall of 1918, but he got it in the second wave which hit Colorado the next spring and was sick in bed for 10 days.

Having lived through that devastating epidemic, would he recommend immunization against the swine flu this year?

"Remember, I'm not a doctor," Sethman replied, reflecting his long role as a layman in a medical organization, "but it's my personal belief that immunization against the swine flu is wise."