There are people who claim to know how and when it started, but it is very probable that no one will ever truly know how it started.

What is known is that between January of 1918 and December 1920, it affected 500 million people worldwide. The death toll is estimated to have been anywhere from a low of 17 million to 50 million to possibly as high as 100 million people.

Of course we are referring to the 1918 flu pandemic, or sometimes mistakenly called “The Spanish flu.” The Allies of World War I came to call it the Spanish flu, primarily because the pandemic received greater press attention after it moved from France to Spain in November 1918.

It needs to be appreciated in this introduction that in 1918 the United States was embroiled fighting in the First World War, and this alone would have dire consequences in enhancing the spread of this deadly virus due to close quarters and massive troop movement. When just one infected person would sneeze or cough, more than 500,000 virus particles can spread to those nearby. The war may also have increased the lethality of the virus. There is speculation that the soldier’s immune systems were weakened by malnourishment, as well as the stresses of combat and chemical attacks, increasing their susceptibility.

In the United States, the disease was probably first observed in Haskell County, Kansas, in January of 1918, prompting a local physician to notify the United States Public Health Service. The Health Service ignored this warning until in March of 1918 a soldier stationed at Fort Riley in Kansas reported ill. Within days of this reported illness in Kansas 522 men at Fort Riley had
reported sick. Failure to take preventive measures in March and April of 1918 was later highly criticized.

THE DENIAL

From the beginning to the end of the pandemic of 1918 there were countless denials that the health risk was not significant, that the health risk was exaggerated, and that if there was actually a health risk it would pass within days. To this very day there are posts on social media that claim the pandemic of 1918 never happened. As this headline in a Tennessee newspaper shows one physician publically denied the reality and severity of the deadly virus. This headline ran in October of 1918 – the most deadly month for deaths in the United States when 200,000 Americans died.

"Flu" Just as Harmless as Measles—Dr. Holtzclaw

The utter power of the psychology of the denial of death was just as powerful in 1918 as it is in 2020.

SOMEONE TO BlAME

Just as today in 1918 conspiracy theorist were up to their usual exaggerations and embellishments, but in 1918 there was one person who was singled out as planting the flu bug across the globe. This one person was an easy target because we were at war with the country he led. This person was the German Kaiser Wilhelm, and as this 1918 cartoon shows that many people globally were only too willing to blame the Kaiser for this health disaster. Of course when thousands of people started dying in Germany and in the German Army this conspiracy theory collapsed.
THE APOCALYPSE AND PSYCHOLOGY

Then some religious leaders began preaching the end of the world. Sermons abounded in the country pointing to Old Testament and New Testament scriptures as signs predicting the end of the world.

People involved in the new world of psychology offered their own ideas as to the real reason for the flu epidemic. As this newspaper byline indicates some very interesting reasons for why this was happening was being offered.

This is a 1918 version of “Power of Positive Thinking.” But positive thinking was ineffective in dealing with the deadly situation that was being experienced across the face of the globe.

SOBERING AND SCARY REALITIES

The flu pandemic of 1918 killed more people in 24 weeks than HIV/AIDS killed in 24 years.

In 1918 the United States had a population of 105 million and 28% became infected and it is estimated that between a low of 500,000 to a high of 675,000 Americans died.

October 1918 was the deadliest month of the whole pandemic with 200,000 American’s dead. This was known as “The Second Wave” and was utterly lethal. The second wave hit the country with a vengeance and after this suddenly new cases dropped abruptly. By November in Philadelphia, for example, a hard hit city the influenza flu had almost disappeared.

STRETCHED BEYOND THE LIMITS – TOUGH TIMES FOR THE FUNERAL AND CEMETERY SERVICES

When the flu epidemic of 1918 began it was basically underestimated. The country was in the midst of fighting in World War I and at the beginning the deaths were manageable.

In 1918 cremation was basically unheard. Earth burial, with the accompanying funeral rituals was far and away the social and religious practice of the United States.

Decedent’s were also still embalmed and laid out in the parlor or individual residences.

Then life in America began to change, and the death rates obviously were increasing with great speed. And then all hell broke loose.

The *Harrisburg Courier* on October 20, 1918 wrote: “The pall of death hung low over the city, and the end is not yet.” In Harrisburg the places that illustrated the massive loss of life which was to become a daily part of American life was the undertaking companies and morgues. In
short order many funeral home and morgues ran out of space and because of sheer numbers had no way to quickly bury the dead.

The funeral and cemetery professions like the entire country were unprepared for the outbreak partly because of advances in bacteriology which lead Americans to believe that they could control infectious diseases.

Cremation might have worked, but in 1918 there were so few crematories in the country and even if available the amount of time that it took to generate enough heat to thoroughly burn a dead human body also contributed to the conclusion that cremation would not help.

Back in Harrisburg the Boyd Brothers Undertakers were overwhelmed by the outbreak’s incredible power to kill and kill quickly. For example Boyd Brothers were summoned to the home of a Mr. Herman R. Sourbeer. This is what the undertaker’s found upon arriving: One home, that of Herman R. Sourbeer, 323 Crescent, was made particularly sad by the visitation. On Thursday morning at 3 the father died. An hour later, two children, newly-born, followed in death. Other homes have been sorely stricken. Mrs. Sourbeer died Friday evening.”

The Sourbeer family’s tragedy left three children orphaned.

Now across America, particularly in large metropolitan areas the officials declared jurisdiction and limited the size of funeral attendance.

Funeral directors were inundated with flu deaths. Many funeral directors such as William H. Sardo in Washington, D.C. were required to stack caskets in their living quarters at the mortuary and on the street. In New Haven, Connecticut six-year-old John Delano and his friends played outside a neighborhood mortuary, scaling a mountain of caskets piled on sidewalks. The boys thought this great fun playing the common child’s game “King of the Mountain.”

By October 1918 a genuine crisis began in the task of caring for the dead. Undertakers across the country, now in large and small communities were being compelled to bury influenza victims in rough boxes because of the big demand for casket the companies who manufactured caskets simply could not keep up with the demand. George Olinger was the President of the National Selected Morticians in 1918 and this is what he said: “The shortage of burial cases is acute. Undertakers are compelled to hold bodies for six, seven, and eight days; some have their buildings filled with bodies, and coupled with the difficulty to get coffins the funeral directors have found that the cemeteries are having trouble to get graves opened in time for funerals.”
One undertaker in Missouri absolutely could not get a casket and due to this scarcity went to the local lumber establishment and ordered 12 coffins. This undertaker at the time had nine bodies of flu victims in his facility awaiting burial.

Also suicides began to spike. One father killed his entire family and then took his own life. This was not an isolated incident.

Cemeteries struggled to handle the soaring death toll. With gravediggers absent from work – either because they had contracted the flu or were afraid that they would local officials had to revert to extreme measures.

An example of extreme measure would be that in New Jersey 15 workhouse inmates were handed spades and picks to dig graves under the watchful eyes of guards. In Baltimore, city employees were called into emergency duty as gravediggers while soldiers from Fort Meade in Maryland were pressed into service to bury at three-week backlog of 175 bodies a Mount Auburn Cemetery, in Baltimore.

Casket companies were working at and over capacity. American casket companies had already been busy supplying caskets for the thousands of American soldier’s killed in World War I, and the war was not yet over.

Then, some casket company over a month’s period began following a simple economic principle: as the supply fell and the demand rose, the price of caskets skyrocketed. This was called by the press “The Coffin Trust.” Most casket companies and most undertakers in this health crisis were generous and professional, but there were a few villains.

Local officials facing desperate shortages of caskets resorted to extreme measures.

District of Columbia Commissioner Louis Brownlow hijacked two train cars filled with 270 caskets bound for Pittsburgh and rerouted them to Washington, D.C. under armed guards.
As the health crisis worsened the War Industries Board ordered all casket makers to manufacture only plain caskets and immediately cease production of “all fancy trimmed couch and split panel varieties.” Also the rule limited casket sizes for adults of 5 feet 9 inches, and 6 feet, 3 inches.

The worst horrors for undertakers, possibly, was seen in Philadelphia where the number of death approached 1,000 a day at the pandemic’s peak. Entire neighborhoods were draped in crepe that was mounted on front doors to mark deaths inside. The well-known Philadelphia funeral director Oliver H. Bair recruited the J. G. Brill Company, a streetcar manufacturer to construct thousands of rudimentary boxes in which to bury the dead. City officials in Philadelphia also began hijacking train cars full of caskets and escorting the supply into the city under armed guard.

The City Morgue of Philadelphia was built to hold 36 bodies. In October of 1918 over 500 bodies were in the facility. The city scrambled to open six supplementary morgues and even placed bodies in cold storage plants.

Philadelphia was also the first city to turn to trench burial without benefit of any ceremony or ritual.

It was a common daily sight in Philadelphia to see throughout day and night, horse-drawn undertaker wagons in a constant parade through the streets of Philadelphia as relatives placed their dead on porches and sidewalks to be removed. In most undertaker wagons rode three people: A priest, a policeman, and the undertaker.

In Iowa the President of the State Board of Embalmer’s, John B. Turner prohibited public funerals and even the opening of caskets. In Iowa exceptions were made only for parents or wives identifying soldiers before burial, and even then, they could only open the caskets if the family members covered their mouths and noses with masks and refrained from touching the body.

Much later one Iowa funeral director. Norbert L. Blust, who worked under this particular state rule shared this thought: “In many Iowa communities, processing the loss of loved ones entails a
series of rituals and rites and laying a person to rest in a respectful way. In many Iowa towns, the restrictions on public funerals meant that families and communities had those valuable rites interrupted, so grieving didn’t take place in public but became an individual process, which had long-term consequences. Without an opportunity to share it with those around them, that grief was carried around for decades.”

One funeral director in western Nebraska who annually conducted about 30 funeral in 1918 conducted 76 funerals. It made no difference whether a funeral home was in a small village of a huge metropolitan area – all undertakers were overloaded with deceased human beings.

The cemeteries in Washington, D.C. were in a ghastly situation.

William C. Fowler the District health officer tried to convince people to volunteer to work temporarily as gravediggers. No one applied. Then Fowler offered to pay for grave digging. No one applied.

Then Fowler turned to his second plan. He turned to the Occoquan Prison, and the inmates could not refuse the Warden’s orders, and the graves got dug.

And so this went on and on for about 18 months. Then almost out of the blue the influenza epidemic was over. Churches opened, funeral services resume, and people and undertakers stopped having trouble finding caskets. The horror of World War I was about to end also.

During a wicked and intense 10 month period in this country life was turned upside down. As the influenza spread, so did fear. At the beginning the scoffers were in abundance but by the
time 200,000 people lay dead in one month the scoffer’s had long since been silenced and had mostly disappeared.

In 1918 people isolated themselves, not speaking to anyone, avoiding crowds, not having anywhere to go but stay at home. The rapid rate of death, and the fact there were so many dying, meant that most all of the undertakers and cemeteries in American could not keep up. Refrigeration for deceased people was yet to be invented so chemical embalming was of great importance, but even this was curtailed significantly simply because of the overwhelming number of dead people.

Interestingly despite the high morbidity and mortality rates that resulted from the flu epidemic of 1918 this experience began to fade from public awareness over the decades until the arrival of news about bird flu, Ebola and other pandemics in the 1990’s and 2000’s. This has led some to label the 1918 epidemic as a “forgotten pandemic” and there are even conspiracy theorists alive and well on social media that claim the epidemic of 1918 never happened.

There are various theories of why the epidemic of 1918 has been forgotten. The rapid pace of the pandemic, which, for examples, killed most of its victims in the United States within less than nine months, resulted in limited media coverage. The general American population in 1918 were familiar with the patterns of pandemic disease in general during the 19th and early 20th centuries: typhoid, yellow fever, diphtheria and cholera all were familiar to the American population. These outbreaks which happened routinely might have lessened the significance of the influenza pandemic for the public – in the beginning!

Additionally, the outbreak coincided with the deaths and media focus on the First World War. In 1918 when people read obituaries they saw the war and postwar death as well as the death from the influenza side by side.
THE WHITE AMBULANCE IS FROM THE HERTZ FUNERAL DIRECTORS IN KANKAKEE, ILLINOIS. THEY HAVE JUST TRANSFERRED A FLU PATIENT TO THE HOSPITAL – NOT THAT THE CROSS ABOVE THE HOSPITAL SIGN IS COVERED IN BLACK.

CONCLUSION

Crisis always reveals heroes and villains. For most funeral directors and cemeteries the situation simply overwhelmed their standard method of operation. There just was not enough of anything. People shared, people horded. People gave, people took. People confronted the crisis, people ran away. As with all life crisis the hard lesson is that whether we like it or not, a mirror is being held up to the human race. And looking hard into a mirror can be a very difficult experience.

The story of how our profession responded to the epidemic of 1918 is a jumbled up, untidy, messy account of how human being’s deal with the harsh realities of life and death which are totally out of their personal control. Human beings usually find this intolerable, but then when all is said and done they find they have to move forward and learn from the crisis. This seems to be going on right now in America.

In the end the dead were taken care of, not the way we wanted, but the dead were taken care of and time and history as they always do marched on. By Tvb.