

HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF

Echoes of 1918

Just over a century ago, a fur-trapper vanished during a early winter storm on Werner Peak, just north of Whitefish.

But it wasn't the weather that struck him down. Instead he was one of the first victims of the of Spanish Influenza the Flathead Valley. Before his body was found, the world would experience a plague of the likes not seen until 2020. The scenes across the Valley eerily reflect those of today.

Before the outbreak ran its course, at least 50 million people worldwide would die, including 675,000 in the U.S. The toll would exceeds AIDS as the deadliest epidemic of the 20th Century.



A winter storm strikes Werner Peak near Whitefish.
Photo by Rick Hull

The date was late October, 1918, in the last weeks of World War I. The trapper was Ichinojo Sakurai. Sakurai was unique among trappers – he was Japanese. A former army officer, he had originally came to Whitefish as a railroad laborer. But he had been lured by the potential riches of fur-trapping, where marten pelts went for \$100-\$125, at a time \$40 a month was considered good wages.

He had told a friend he had a touch of the flu. But he wanted to make it to a former fire lookout cabin on Werner Peak before the storm struck.

There was little warning that this flu was different. A few people had died, but that was typical for the disease. “No need or undue alarm,” said Dr. G.A. Fuson, Kalispell city health official, in mid October.

With two cases hitting Columbia Falls, City Health Officer Dr. John Robinson, ordered all public meetings postponed. Included in the closures were churches, theaters and campaign rallies for the coming election.

The Columbian reported, “Dr Robinson advises that there is no need for alarm, but rather urges everyone to keep calm and not to become panicky, as the disease is not dangerous and is easily handled with proper care.”

A week later, schools throughout the county were ordered closed. In early November the epidemic appeared to be dying down. Dr Robinson pleaded, “Do not go into a house where the disease exists. Do not converse or approach with three feet of any person who has the disease.”



The Masonic Temple in Whitefish served as a temporary hospital.
Photo by Rick Hull

But local cases took off again. First there were seven a day, then twelve, then twenty. The Inter Lake ran a strong editorial advocating a strict quarantine.

The national health department noted that national death toll had exceeded all loses among America soldiers during the just-concluded war. New York eventually had 33,000 dead. In Philadelphia, coffins from city morgues spilled into the street. Police, tasked with removing dead from homes, could not keep up.

By late November, the hope that the local ban could be lifted on Dec. 3 had faded, and there was talk of canceling the entire school year.

“The experience of many cities throughout the country which opened up too quickly serves as a lesson to keep on the safe side,” declared the Columbian. Blue placards, with the word “influenza” were placed on all houses with the disease.

The Columbian also complained, “It is nothing unusual to see those barely recovering stand on the

street corners and coughing and spitting upon the sidewalks, and these are the ones who are doing more to spread the germs than any other source.”

In Kalispell, the old Crescent hospital reopened to house the flood of victims. In Whitefish, the Masonic Temple was filled with beds. The flu struck one of every three people, and the newspapers carried obituary after obituary.

In October, 1,021 Montanans died. Another 1,415 died in November. In mid December, the Columbia Falls ban on public gatherings, including churches and movies, was replaced with a strict quarantine on anyone with the disease. It was a policy used with past outbreaks of scarlet fever and diphtheria. Saloons remained closed, something that would become permanent Jan. 1 when prohibition took effect. Local deaths continued to be front-page news.

The epidemic made another run across Montana in the spring, killing 2,065 in March and 2,665 in April.

It was a vicious disease. It had a special affinity for the lungs. Unless victims stayed in bed at least four days, pneumonia would sweep in to administer an often fatal blow. The flu could also trigger an over-response by the immune system. Families could be fine in the morning and dead by evening.

And, unlike most influenza, it hit healthy young people the worst. One theory is an similar, less-fatal outbreak in 1889-90 had immunized the older population.

The origins of the epidemic remains a mystery. Potential sources include Kansas and China. Though it raged through most of Europe during the summer, wartime censorship had hidden the fact. The only reports came from neutral Spain, giving the disease its name.

Germ theory was in its infancy at the time, and no one could state with authority how it was spread. Some blamed open windows, where “in flew zena,” and there were rumors of German agents disguised as nurses, injecting American soldiers.

Much of the mystery continued into the 21st century. Attempts to retrieve the virus from bodies buried in permafrost and sealed coffins had failed. But finally tissue from Alaska burials and 1918 laboratory specimens produced enough material for modern analysis. It appears similar to swine flu, with an ultimate origin in birds. But the reasons for its virulence remain a mystery.

As for Ichinojo Sakurai, his friends became alarmed when his hungry dogs showed up in early November. They hired a local woodsman, Bill Murphy, to find out what happened. A search along the Whitefish divide as far as Red Meadow Lake found nothing.

In June of 1919, Murphy made another search of Werner Peak and this time found Sakurai's body. After a quick exam by the coroner, who had seen enough flu deaths that winter to last a lifetime, the friends built a cremation fire and gathered the ashes for burial in Japan.

While the misnamed Spanish Influenza was quickly forgotten, Sakurai remains immortalized on the maps of the Whitefish Range. The alpine meadow where he died has since been known as the similarly misnamed “China Basin”.

