

Lee County folks recall deadly 1918 flu

50 million killed in WWI outbreak

TAMMY AYER • TAYER@NEWS-PRESS.COM • OCTOBER 26, 2009

Growing up in northern Illinois, Marilyn Tarr Meade heard the “you’re going to college” speech countless times. Whenever she and brother Paul complained about school, their father retold his familiar tale.

“We got this lecture about his dad dying and he couldn’t go to high school and he had to go to work,” said Meade, 78, of Fort Myers. Meade’s father, Jess Tarr, had just started eighth grade when his father, Frank, returned one evening from a day’s work at the International Harvester plant in Canton.

A few hours later Frank Tarr was dead, a victim of the 1918 influenza epidemic that killed an estimated 50 million people worldwide. And within days his only daughters — Jess’ two older teenage sisters — succumbed, leaving Jess and his mother, Margaret, alone on their farm.

Meade’s father quit school to support his mother, working in a bakery before selling insurance and eventually owning a successful real estate and insurance company. But he never returned to school.

The flu that swept the globe during World War I killed soldiers in training and in combat. It killed children, teenagers and, most surprisingly, otherwise healthy young adults. They coughed up bloody mucus as their hands and feet turned blue from lack of oxygen, and they slowly drowned in the fluid filling their ravaged lungs.

Today, as a new strain of the swine flu extends its reach around the globe, Southwest Floridians affected by the 1918 flu recall loved ones lost and the simplest dreams unrealized.

Sparsely populated and remote in 1918, Southwest Florida didn’t suffer the same impact as the cities and towns of the Northeast and the Midwest.

But that’s not the case today, and in a troubling reminder of the 1918 pandemic, young adults are particularly susceptible. A 30-year-old Cape Coral woman died recently — Lee County’s fourth swine flu death — and 131 Floridians had died of swine flu as of last

Tuesday, the most recent total provided by the Florida Department of Health.

Unlike in 1918, officials hope a vaccine will keep the death toll down.

The Lee County Health Department expects its first shipment to arrive Tuesday. It would begin offering the free swine flu vaccinations Thursday and Friday, then continue offering them Nov. 2 on its regular schedule of clinics Monday through Thursday and Saturday, said Jennifer James-Mesloh, spokeswoman for the department. It plans to administer 190,000 vaccinations.

A painful past

In 1918, the flu surfaced in early spring in Spain, near the end of the annual flu season. Always a killer to a small extent and constantly mutating, it sickened millions of Spaniards before spreading to the World War I battlefields.

It weakened in the summer but returned that fall as something far more deadly, first appearing in the United States in Massachusetts among soldiers at Fort Devens.

“This was ... the point where soldiers returning from World War I in Europe were quartered. The returning soldiers were suspected carriers of the flu and (contributed) to the outbreak in Massachusetts,” according to John B. Dolan Jr., who lives in Fort Myers and Worcester, Mass. and whose great-uncle died during the 1918 pandemic.

As the virus moved through the Midwest, twins Ruth and Ruby Wilcox of Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, were young women a few years out of high school. The flu’s impact on their lives was swift and almost unimaginably severe.

Both became ill, but Ruby died. So did 60 young men who had been drafted after graduating with the Wilcox twins.

“They died in the training camps. So many more died before they got into the fighting,” said Ruth’s son, Roy Wilhelmi of Cape Coral.

Ruby’s death saddened Ruth for the rest of her life even as she married and had four children. She occasionally spoke of her sister until she died on her 76th birthday in April

1972.

“I went to several of the class reunions with my mother, and they always talked about the ones who died because of the epidemic,” Wilhelmi said.

Without mercy

Sterling House assisted living facility in Lehigh Acres, will celebrate her 102nd birthday on Nov. 14. She’s survived two husbands, one daughter and the other 25 members of her graduating class at Columbus Junction, Iowa (Class of 1926).

But in the winter of 1918, stranded in a torrid netherworld between life and death, then 11-year-old Evelyn Allen fought the flu for six weeks.

Her mother, Louie, sat by her cot and fanned her for hours. A painful infection destroyed her hearing in her right ear.

Big brother Clement, stationed at the Army hospital near Des Moines, told his own stories of an overwhelmed medical staff ordering the bodies of flu victims taken out to the yard behind the hospital because there was no room for them inside.

Newspapers carried daily reports listing those who had died.

Evelyn and her family recovered, but she struggled to walk again and faced other challenges.

“They didn’t try to comb my hair every day. It got matted. I remember my sister telling my mother, ‘Why don’t you cut her hair?’ ” Foss recalled.

Louie said no. Instead she brushed it out bit by bit, a little at a time, until it attained its former burnished glory.