ALBERT GITCHELL GETS SICK

During 1918, and after, no one was sure how to prevent "Spanish Influenza" from spreading. This scene, from the Philadelphia Naval Aircraft Factory, reveals at least one precaution: "Don't spit." Image online, courtesy U.S. Naval Historical Center.

Albert Gitchell, a company cook at Ft. Riley's Camp Funston, didn't feel well during the night. Little did he know that his flu-like symptoms were about to send the world into chaos. **

Not that the world wasn't already in turmoil. When Gavril Princip shot Archduke Ferdinand, in the summer of 1914, a mindless series of events resulted in a "war to end all wars."

The United States kept out of the fray for awhile but, by April of 1917, American troops were fighting in Europe. By November of that year they were dying on French soil. In the spring of 1918, many thousands more were preparing to leave their own country to join the conflict.

On the morning of March 11, 1918, Gitchell—some accounts refer to him as "Albert Mitchell"—couldn't take it anymore. He was just too sick to make breakfast for the men in his company.

At the infirmary, Gitchell said he had a bad cold. The doctor told him he needed bed rest. Up to that point, everything seemed typical. But then ... a really strange thing happened.

By lunchtime ... reportedly ... 107 soldiers were sick, just like Gitchell. By week's end, 522 men were ill. Some of them developed severe pneumonia. Many of them would die. Camp Funston had so many sick people that emergency "tent hospitals" had to be set up.

As American soldiers congregated in close quarters elsewhere around the country, preparing to go "Over There," many more troops were exposed to the illness. An airborne disease, it spread rapidly on military training grounds like those at Camp Hancock, Georgia.

Decades later, experts wondered whether burning manure at (and near) Ft. Riley was the wind-swept, airborne catalyst which sent a mutating virus from animals to people. No one was sure then; no one is sure now.

When American soldiers left the U.S. on transatlantic ships, the flu-like illness had a direct path to Europe. By May of 1918, it had infected approximately 8 million people in Spain.

Not involved in World War I, Spanish authorities grappled with the effects of the devastating pandemic even as the Spanish press reported the unbelievable story. Officials there were convinced strong winds had blown influenza into Spain from the battlefields in France.

Ever since its outbreak in Spain, Albert Gitchell's illness has been known as "Spanish Influenza," or "Spanish Flu." But its first wave (when Gitchell and others fell ill in America) was nothing compared to what would happen later (when U.S. soldiers returned home).

** We cannot be sure that Albert Gitchell was "patient zero," even though he's been called that for decades.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/ALBERT-GITCHELL-GETS-SICK-Spanish-Flu-Pandemic

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/ALBERT-GITCHELL-GETS-SICK-Spanish-Flu-Pandemic

Questions 2 Ponder

What in the World Is Going On?!

When American soldiers arrived in Europe, during WWI, they carried a deadly virus which spread like wildfire. No one knew what was going on, but people everywhere were dying.

By the time the war was over, the virus—which caused a deadly illness which became known as “Spanish Flu”—had killed millions of people. Historians estimate that it actually killed more people than the war itself.

What would it have been like to have one catastrophe (the Spanish Flu) pile on another (the war)?

As people tried to determine what in the world was going on, do you think they were fearful of the next bad thing which might come their way? How would you cope in such an environment?

Media Stream