

A WOEFUL STORY - THE 1918 INFLUENZA PANDEMIC

At times, the Lafourche region has been visited by devastating epidemics. Perhaps the worst of the 20th century was the Great Influenza Pandemic. It affected the entire world, caught our area by surprise, and created panic. Fed by conditions from World War I and spread quickly mainly on and from military bases and ships, it began in winter 1917-18. By the late summer 1918 the virus still baffled everyone. John Barry in his marvelous history of the pandemic, *"The Great Influenza: The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History"* (Penguin Books, 2009), states that the flu invaded the nation: cities and hamlets, families, schools, farms, mines – everywhere. And it tested scientists to the limits.

There was little if any news about the problem in Thibodaux as the pandemic built and spread. Research of issues of the weekly edition of the 1918 Thibodaux Comet does not turn up anything until October. Much of the United States already was in siege mode. On October 10, however, on page 1 of the newspaper, a notice stated that "schools and other public places" had closed "temporarily" as a precaution. "The situation is well in hand," incorrectly opined the editor, John B. Taylor. Noted on the same page was news that "the members of one family were all sick this week with the flu" and had offered unsuccessfully to pay someone to nurse them. Page 5 contained a notice from the State Board of Health about self-care. One local man was reported to have died from the

flu, and another, named Anatole Naquin, perished while stationed at Camp Beauregard, located near Pineville.



Each week thereafter - October 17, 24, and 31, and on through December - the newspaper reported the local situation. By October 17, the Lafourche was so desperate that an emergency hospital was established in the "Old Woodman hall over the Thibodeaux Drugstore," and an ambulance was made available to bring the sick to it. Dr. F. W. Wirt was among local doctors caring for the ill there. Eventually the hospital became restricted to town dwellers, despite dire needs of many who lived beyond its limits. Also mentioned: "Ten days ago all of [the 52 employees] at the Percy Lobdell Company [the building which is now our National Park Service facility] were well. Today 40 are laid up with influenza. . . ." Only three people remained on duty.

In the October 24 edition of the Comet, a notice was given that Mayor N. T. Bourg forbid "congregating at street corners and within stores, saloons and barber shops." Because of a shortage of telephone operators, citizens were asked to limit telephone usage. Thibodaux and surroundings came to a dead stop, and relatives often were indifferent to attending to their dead lying in state. On October 31, the editor hoped to salvage some dark humor out of the situation: "Since the coffin supply is about exhausted, isn't it about time to cease the recent dying habit?" In December the paper estimated the national death toll at a maximum 350,000 people; author Barry gives a more recent figure of 675,000 out of a population of 105 million. Worldwide estimates of deaths are over numbered 100 million.

What happened in local churches, and how would they have responded? The most impact was to the large Roman Catholic population, but St. John's Episcopal Church of course was affected. A count using Findagrave.com shows that about seven burials occurred in our Historic Cemetery during the six months when the flu and its effects were strongest. Among those succumbing to influenza were Mary Nations deGravelles, the mother of our recently deceased parishioner Norbert deGravelles, and two members of the prominent Williams family of Sunnyside Plantation – Ruby Bertha and Eudora. The pandemic, notes author John Barry, hit everyone hard, but especially young adults.