K-State Keepsakes: Influenza and K-State

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INFLUENZA & K-STATE

1918

As K-Staters endure the COVID-19 pandemic, an experience from our past may serve as a touchstone of courage. Between 1918 and 1920, there were multiple waves of influenza that ravaged people throughout the world. Infection estimates are as high as 500 million people—about a quarter of global population at the time. Death estimates vary widely from 17 million to 50 million. People connected to K-State were not immune to the disease. Throughout 1918 and 1919, K-State was affected by influenza, resulting in 11 deaths. Fatalities would have been much higher if the home economics department had not transitioned quickly into a temporary health care unit. With help from community members, these courageous women played an essential role in nursing nearly all the infected back to health.

Other contributions to the sick included linens, sleepwear and pillows from fraternities, Red Cross and K-State. Such service came at a cost—regardless of their status as faculty, staff, alumni or community members—became infected and a few of them died. Those five weeks of closure in 1918 became the university’s inaugural experience with handling a pandemic. While fatalities occurred, they were not the result of negligence. Instead, K-Staters and Manhattanites exhibited great diligence as they cooperated to help those afflicted on their path to recovery. As we cope with challenges during our present crisis, we can reflect on how K-Staters faced an earlier plague with strength and courage.

To view historical issues of the Collegian, Kansas Industrialist and Royal Purple online, visit lib.k-state.edu/digital-collections.

Left: Kansas native Oscar R. Lindstrom did these cartoons in the 1919 Royal Purple as a humorous attempt to cope with the influenza pandemic.

Above: Delta Sigma Phi house, former YMCA building used as a hospital during the pandemic.

Above: When the pandemic began in 1918, soldiers ill with Spanish influenza were treated at a hospital ward at Camp Funston, a U.S. Army training camp located in Fort Riley, Kansas. Photo from National Museum of Health and Medicine, Otis Historical Archives.