

EPIDEMICS and PANDEMIC FLU OF 1918-19

By Tricia Brown

Native Alaskans had no natural immunity against the terrible diseases that swept through their people following contact with Europeans and Americans. As a result, more Natives died from foreign diseases than any other cause. As early as 1742, Russian fur traders were carrying viruses with them as they hunted, traded and settled in the Aleutian Island chain, spreading disease among the Aleut (Unangan) people. As a result, by 1800, some 80 percent of the Aleut (Unangan) population was dead.

In a historical survey of epidemics among Northwest Native populations, author Greg Lange writes: “Worldwide studies show that the fatality rates to people never before exposed to smallpox are at least 30 percent of the entire population and sometimes as high as 50 to 70 percent.”

Smallpox was the big killer in the 1770s, and through the efforts of Russian Orthodox priest Father Ivan Veniaminov, vaccinations were made available; however, only those closest to the churches were most likely to be vaccinated.

“The 1770s smallpox epidemic affected a large area of the Northwest Coast of North America ranging from Alaska to Oregon,” wrote Lange. “In 1787, English fur trader Nathaniel Portlock noticed it to the Far North. Upon entering a harbor near Sitka, Alaska, he expected to find a ‘numerous tribe’ but met only six adults and seven children. Portlock stated, ‘I observed the oldest of the men to be very much marked with the smallpox, as was a girl who appeared to be about fourteen years old.’ Portlock went on to say, ‘The old man . . . told me that the distemper carried off great numbers of the inhabitants, and that he himself had lost ten children by it . . . ’ ”

In a report by the Alaska Natives Commission released in 1994, its Health Task Force offered an overview of the smallpox toll, citing Dr. Robert Fortune, author of *Chills and Fever*: “Although the first recorded case of smallpox in Alaska was noted in 1770, it was not until the mid-1830s that the disease became rampant. When that epidemic was over,

between 20 percent to 66 percent of all the Natives in southern and western Alaska had died. Many of those who were left were easy prey for other infectious diseases.”

Smallpox was one of the first-known epidemics in the Norton Sound region, wrote Dorothy Jean Ray in *Eskimos of the Bering Sea*. The spread of the disease in 1838, she wrote, was “severe and apparently trimmed the population along the eastern shore of Norton Sound by one-third or even one-half. It did not extend north of Koyuk.”

Yet another epidemic broke out in the Aleutians beginning in June 1900. This time influenza was the killer that barreled from west to east in a sweep that is remembered as the “Yukon Indian Influenza Epidemic.” It first erupted among the Aleut (Unanagan) people, then spread north and east through Yup’ik country and into the Athabaskan villages along the Yukon River. From there it coursed eastward along the river into Yukon Territory. The effects of the epidemic are recorded in the *Encyclopedia of Plague and Pestilence*: “A woodcutter who accompanied the priests to the camps wanted to burn sixteen Indian corpses too putrid to handle; the Indian survivors, however, refused to allow him to build cremation bonfires. Untold hundreds of Indian died from influenza during the epidemic, which spread south [from Yukon Territory] into British Columbia by December 1900.”

A measles outbreak in the winter of 1901-1902 killed three hundred people in Kijik on the western shore of Lake Clark. Kijik had been a fairly large Athabaskan settlement, dating from pre-contact with Europeans, until the Spring of 1902, when the dead outnumbered the living. Jack Hobson, the grandfather of Nondalton elder Agnes Cusma, saved the lives of many children there when he prevented them from running outside to cool their feverish bodies. Dozens of adults perished, not from the disease but from exposure to the cold. According to Cusma, a priest came and urged the people to leave the village because of unsanitary conditions. So they chose a new place for a new village, which they named Nondalton, now known as Old Nondalton. Kijik remains a culturally important site among Athabascans of the area. Cusma remembered her father and others making annual trips back for many years after the village was abandoned, to tend the graves near the old church. The Kijik Archeological District was named a National Historic Landmark in 1994.

With each wave of viral attacks, Alaska's Native population has suffered grievous losses, attacking them culturally and spiritually as well as physically. However, the worst of them all was the worldwide pandemic of Spanish influenza, which decimated the Native population as it swept through Alaska in the autumn and winter of 1918-19. Not one village or city was spared.

Around the world, as many as 40 million people died, as the disease seemed to hit hardest among the healthiest young adults. There were 10 million deaths in the United States alone; at its height, the flu killed more than 10,000 people per week in some U.S. cities.

In the October 2003 issue of the scientific journal *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, a group of researchers traced the path of the virus to Alaska through military transports and installations, and eventually through the shipping lanes to the Seward Peninsula.

"Influenza probably reached Brevig Mission, Alaska, via Seattle, Washington. The pandemic reached Camp Lewis, Washington, in mid-September, following the arrival of a troop ship from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and spread to Seattle by late September. After careful screening to exclude sick passengers, a ship left Seattle for Nome, Alaska, in mid-October, but days after its arrival local residents began falling ill. An account of the pandemic as it occurred in Brevig Mission reports that visitors from Nome brought the disease to the village in November. This chain of events suggests that the Alaskan outbreak was not the result of a separate introduction of the 1918 influenza from Asia to the West Coast of the United States."

More than eight decades later, Alaska played an important role in analyzing and identifying the virus's characteristics and how it may have mutated as it moved across the country. Families on the Seward Peninsula allowed tissue samples to be taken from the graves of their loved ones to help identify the strain, and perhaps answer how such a pandemic might be avoided in the future.

"These epidemics decimated the Alaska Native people physically," reported the 1994 Alaska Native Commission. "A reasonable assumption can also be made that their entire world, including the most important aspect — the spiritual — was thrown into disarray."

Researchers have found that the populations of survivors, many of whom had lost their entire families and most of their fellow villagers, dispersed and shifted. The population decline also undermined leadership, disrupted personal relations, and demoralized the people.”

((PLEASE TREAT AS SIDEBAR MATERIAL))

On April 13, 2006, Mike Leavitt, Alaska’s Secretary of Health and Human Services, delivered these opening remarks about the Great Pandemic of 1918 at an Alaska Planning Summit:

“That Great Pandemic also touched Alaska.

“When the pandemic flu became rampant in the lower 48 states, Alaska territorial governor Thomas Riggs, Jr. imposed a maritime quarantine and restricted travel to the interior part of the territory. U.S. Marshals were stationed at all ports, trailheads, and river mouths. Schools, churches, theaters, and pool halls were closed.

“In Juneau, residents were instructed to ‘keep as much to yourself as possible.’ Fairbanks established quarantine stations, also guarded by Marshals. People were checked periodically for flu and, if healthy, were given armbands reading ‘OK Fairbanks Health Department.’ Vaccine was imported from Seattle and distributed throughout the area, though it, of course, didn’t work. In Native villages, shamans encouraged people to plant ‘medicine trees’ that could protect against influenza.

“Unfortunately, despite these precautions, influenza spread throughout the territory. Half of Nome’s white population fell ill. Walter Shields, Nome’s Superintendent of Education, was one of the first to die. The Alaska Native population in Nome was decimated—176 of the 300 Alaska Natives in the region died.

“Elsewhere, entire Native families too sick to feed their fires froze to death in their homes. Many who were brought to a makeshift hospital believed that it was a death house, and so, instead, committed suicide. Spit the Wind, widely considered Alaska’s greatest musher, died at the age of 25. He had survived a grueling expedition to the North Pole in which he had been forced to eat his snowshoe lacings, but he couldn’t survive the flu.

“On November 7th, the governor issued a special directive to ‘All Alaskan Natives.’ Natives were urged to stay at home and avoid public gatherings-something anathema to their communal lives. The pandemic swept through communities, killing whole villages. One schoolteacher reported that, in her area, ‘three [villages were] wiped out entirely, others average 85 percent deaths. . . . Total number of deaths reported 750, probably 25 percent [of] this number froze to death before help arrived.’

“Because they were so sick with the flu, many Alaska Natives and others were unable to chop wood or harvest moose so, after the pandemic had passed, many more died of starvation. Some people were forced to eat their sled dogs, and some sled dogs ate the dead and the dying.

“When it comes to pandemics, there is no rational basis to believe that the early years of the 21st century will be different than the past. If a pandemic strikes again, it will strike in Alaska.”

LINKS:

Online encyclopedia of Washington State History, “Smallpox epidemic ravages Native Americans on the Northwest Coast of North America in the 1770s,” Greg Lange, 2003:

http://www.historylink.org/essays/output.cfm?file_id=5100

Alaska History & Cultural Studies website, “Maniilaq: Preparing for Change”:

<http://www.akhistorycourse.org/articles/article.php?artID=279>

State-by-state overview of the Pandemic of 1918-19:

<http://www.pandemicflu.gov/general/greatpandemic.html>

***Emerging Infectious Diseases*, October 2003, serial online:**

<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/EID/vol9no10/02-0789.htm>

University of Alaska Justice Center, 1994 Alaska Natives Commission report:

http://justice.uaa.alaska.edu/rlinks/natives/ak_commission.html

VISIT THE LIBRARY FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Alaska's libraries hold audio, visual, and written material about epidemics in Alaska and particularly the 1918-19 Spanish flu pandemic. Visit your local library or go online to see what's available in holdings all over the state. Take these simple steps:

1. Access **SLED** (State Library Electronic Doorway) at <http://sled.alaska.edu/library.html>.
2. Click on the listing for **ALNCat** (the Alaska Library Network Catalog) to view the Basic Search window. Go to the Keyword field, and type in **ALASKA EPIDEMIC or SPANISH FLU**.

MORE READING:

Alaska Natives Commission, Volume II, Report of the Health Task Force. Anchorage: Alaska Natives Commission, 1994.

Boyd, Robert. *The Coming of the Spirit of Pestilence*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 1999.

Crosby, Alfred W. *America's Forgotten Pandemic: The Influenza of 1918*. Second edition. Cambridge, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Fortune, Robert. *Health Care and the Alaska Native: Some Historical Perspectives*. Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth College Library, 1975.

Fortune, Robert. *Chills and Fever: Health and Disease in the Early History of Alaska*. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1989.

Kolata, Bina Bari. *Flu: The Story of the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1918 and the Search for the Virus that Caused It*. First edition. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.

Porterfield, Kay Marie and Emory Dean Keoke. *The Encyclopedia of American Indian Contributions to the World*. Checkmark Books, 2003.

Vanstone, James W. and Joan B. Townsend. "Kijik: An Historic Tanaina Indian Settlement." Reviewed by Don E. Dumond in *American Antiquity* magazine, Vol. 38, No. 2 (April 1973) pp 247-248:

ARCHIVAL PAPERS:

Papers of Robert Fortune, 1957-1999. University of Alaska Anchorage. The collection consists of Robert Fortune's published and unpublished writings, as well as papers relating to the International Symposium on Circumpolar Health and the American Society for Circumpolar Health, published photographs, and miscellaneous materials. The published writings are arranged chronologically, as are the manuscripts of published and unpublished writings. *Bio/History:* Robert Fortune is a public health physician. He received his medical degree from McGill University in 1960 and his Masters of Public Health from Harvard University in 1968. Fortune first came to Alaska in 1963, and has held the following positions: service unit director for the United States Public Health Service (USPHS) Alaska Native Hospital in Kakanak (1963-1964), service unit director for the USPHS Alaska Native Hospital in Bethel (1964-1967), director of the USPHS Alaska Native Medical Center in Anchorage (1971-1977), and deputy chief of family medicine (1980-1987). Dr. Fortune has also been active in national and Alaskan medical professional associations, as well as the American Society for Circumpolar Health and the International Symposium for Circumpolar Health. He has published numerous articles on medicine and Alaskan and native medical history, and has authored books including: *The Alaska Diary of Adelbert von Chamisso: Naturalist on the Kotzebue Voyage, 1815-1918* (translator and editor, 1986), *Alaska Native Medical Center: A History, 1953-1983* (1986), and *Chills and Fever: Health and Disease in the Early History of Alaska* (1989).