

“Maybe They Should Call it the Kansas Flu” Transcript

Underwriting: *Lost Highways*, from History Colorado, is made possible by the Sturm Family Foundation, proud supporters of the humanities and the power of storytelling, for more than twenty years.

Noel: When the Spanish Flu hit Colorado in the late summer of 1918, it hit hard and moved fast, even in remote mountain towns.

Dr. Duane Vandebusch: You could say they didn't know anything about it because this was an entirely new type of flu, a new type of virus that had hit, that had never really hit before that anybody knew anything about.

Tyler: This is Duane Vandebusch, Professor of History at Western Colorado University in Gunnison and a member of the Colorado State Historian's Council.

Dr. Duane Vandebusch: So what you're learning is what you're learning on the fly. And, you know, it is pretty tough to learn on the fly when a lot of people are dying around you. You know, give you an idea of what happened in Colorado, Hotchkiss was hit very hard. Trinidad was hit very hard. Cimarron was hit very hard. So, in a lot of these areas, nobody really knew. They only knew that it was very infectious, but that's what made it so dangerous.

Noel: Despite the fact there were only 1,500 residents in the central mountain town of Steamboat Springs, there were so many cases that they stopped trying to keep track. Here's Derek Everett. He teaches at both Colorado State University and Metropolitan State University.

Dr. Derek Everett: The newspaper in Steamboat Springs stopped printing the list of people with influenza, not because they were being targeted for for discrimination or anything. But according to the newspaper, if they printed a list of the people in Steamboat Springs who had the Spanish influenza, they would essentially be printing the city directory every day.

Tyler: But one mountain town got hit harder than all the others.

Dr. Derek Everett: It's biggest blow from the influenza was in the first outbreak in October into November of 1918, in large part because of the town's isolation. And once the virus got in there, it spread so rapidly, and in particular because it affected some of the most important people in town. Like the doctor, like the undertaker. People who would be responsible for helping deal with a public health crisis were suddenly out of commission.

Noel: Professor Stephen Leonard also teaches history at Metropolitan State University in Denver.

Dr. Stephen Leonard: There were a lot of miners in Silverton or the Silverton area, high altitude, combined with people whose lungs were probably already somewhat compromised or maybe largely compromised and not sufficient health workers to take care of the problem. And even with sufficient health workers, it wouldn't have been really possible to take care of the problem. All that combined created a situation in which they had a huge number of deaths.

Tyler: By the time the first wave of Spanish Flu made its way through Silverton and the surrounding areas, about 250 people died.

Dr. Derek Everett: The estimate is that roughly half of the population of the town contracted influenza and about 10 percent of the residents of Silverton died as a result of it. And Silverton

is considered to be one of the most affected communities per capita in the entire country as far as the Spanish influenza is concerned.

Dr. Stephen Leonard: Silverton was a poster child of the worst case scenarios, and a lot of other high mountain towns suffered. Also, Colorado had a higher average death rate than other states, probably because of the altitude, the miners, and the fact that a lot of people had come here because they had lung disease already, tuberculosis particularly.

Noel: Despite the fact that Colorado had a population of just under a million at the time, it had one of the highest rates of death in the entire United States. And that rate was often even higher in the small mountain towns. All except one in central Colorado where not a SINGLE PERSON DIED during the first two waves of the outbreak.

[Lost Highways Music]

Tyler: From History Colorado, this is *Lost Highways: Dispatches from the Shadows of the Rocky Mountains*. I'm Tyler Hill.

Noel: And I'm Noel Black. On each episode, Tyler and I explore overlooked stories from our home state of Colorado and the American West.

Tyler: On this episode: The Spanish Flu in Colorado, and what we can learn from it.

Noel: Two mountain towns in the centennial state saw both the highest and lowest death rates in the country.

Tyler: And a cautionary tale about social distancing in Denver.

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Noel: The only thing certain about where the Spanish Flu started is that it DIDN'T start in Spain.

Dr. Duane Vandebusch: Most evidence indicates that it began at a place called Haskell in Kansas, and then when American soldiers went over to Europe in World War I, they carried it with them.

Tyler: No one can be positive where it started. It may also have started in Europe. Either way, a military outpost called Fort Funston, Kansas was an early hot spot.

Dr. Stephen Leonard: The current notion is that it started maybe as early as late 1917 in a different form that it spread to the United States, probably started in Europe, and infected people in military camps. One of the hardest hit was that Camp Funston, which is in Kansas. There are other theories that suggest that it actually began in Kansas. Maybe it should be called the Kansas flu.

Noel: Derek Everett says that the deadly virus got the name "Spanish Influenza" because of restrictions on what newspapers could report in the countries fighting in World War I. Spain was neutral and had no such restrictions on the press.

Dr. Derek Everett: And so the word gets out and Spain, essentially gets labeled with this disease for the rest of time for the strict reason that it wasn't restricting its press the way other countries more actively involved in the war were.

Tyler: Not to mention that Alonso the 8th, the King of Spain himself, came down with the flu.

Noel: Whether it started somewhere in Europe or in Kansas, (and there are several other theories), all of the historians agreed that troop movements during World War I helped it spread quickly.

Dr. Duane Vandebusche: And then when American soldiers went over to Europe in World War One, they carried it with them.

Tyler: And it was likely troops from Kansas who brought it to Colorado. Here's Derek Everett.

Dr. Derek Everett: As far as we can tell, the first cases of the Spanish influenza in Colorado were at the University of Colorado in Boulder, and they came to the university through U.S. Army students who were stationed there at the school and training as students there.

Noel: But it wasn't just troops spreading the virus. Blanche Kennedy, a student at the University of Denver, likely brought it back on the train from Chicago. For some reason, The Spanish flu was particularly deadly for those in their 20s and 30s. And Kennedy became the first fatality in Denver.

[Music]

Tyler: Denver was the central hub for the railroad in Colorado at that time. And once the Spanish flu got loose in Denver, there was no stopping it from spreading all around the state.

Dr. Derek Everett: Because of the interaction in the state, you've got a lot more trade, a lot more business going on, a lot more movement going on because of the wartime demands. And so the same issues that are helping it spread globally, help it spread in the state of Colorado as well.

Noel: Trains were a huge part of the way the Spanish Flu spread not only into the mountain towns, but up and down the Front Range. Growing communities like Pueblo, Colorado Springs, and Greeley were quickly overrun by the virus.

Tyler: Duane Vandebusch says that once symptoms began to manifest, it often tore through the lungs, sometimes killing its hosts within hours.

Dr. Duane Vandebusch: What happened was the Spanish flu kind of infected the upper respiratory tract. And then it went deep into the lungs with bacterial pneumonia. And people didn't last very long after contacting it. There were examples of people getting on a subway feeling ill in New York and in an hour, when they tried to get off, they were dead.

Noel: Vandebusch reads a description of some of the physical horrors of the Spanish Flu from an article he wrote in 1989.

Dr. Duane Vandebusch: "Victims died within hours of the first symptoms. Foamy blood coughed up and then bleeding from the nose, ears and eyes, towns ran out of coffins and people were buried in mass graves. In many cases, coroners died of the flu with dead bodies all around them. So this thing is very infectious. And I don't think anybody ever knew what the incubation period was.

[Music fades out]

Noel: Public health officials at the time didn't understand how the virus spread. But it WAS commonly presumed that it passed through close proximity or contact with the sick.

Tyler: Colorado Governor Julius Gunter and Denver's manager of public health, Dr. William Sharpley, had the foresight to immediately order social distancing measures not unlike those being practiced now during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Dr. Duane Vandebusche: Churches closed, saloons closed, theaters closed, everything closed.

Noel: But while it was recommended that coughs and sneezes be covered, there was little understanding of handwashing or the fact that asymptomatic carriers could still spread the infection.

Tyler: And the fact that most people believed the virus couldn't be spread outdoors, making asymptomatic transmission a big problem.

Dr. Stephen Leonard: When they let kids out of school, especially older kids in Denver, that - some of them went out to work harvest and in various places in the state and thereby spread the flu in other other sections. And - and - there was - you know, there was a lot of contact, a railroad track through, you know, a huge number of towns in Colorado. So it was just about impossible to contain it.

Noel: John Allnutt was 15 years old when the Spanish Flu ravaged Greeley, Colorado. The son of an undertaker, Allnutt witnessed some of the worst of it first hand.

Tyler: In this oral history from the mid-1960s, Allnutt remembers how the confusion and helplessness led some to grasp for solutions.

[John Allnutt oral history audio]

John Allnutt: That was before the days of antibiotics or the use of oxygen and things like that. And the doctors were as much at a loss as anyone. And each doctor, I think, had a different pet theory about how to treat it. Some of 'em thought a lot of whiskey would do that. (laugh) It was hard to come by because the country had gone dry. And - but I do remember - I can't phrase it - oh. It was a specific... Almost - almost everyone that died had a flannel pad on their chest, too saturated with castrated oil - (laughs) - no - camphorated oil. And a pharmacist, after they closed the store at night, would heat up a gallon or two of oil and then melt a big block of camphor in that and bottle it up and have it all sold out by the next day.

[End of clip]

Noel: Colorado newspapers at the time ran ads promoting all manner of quackery and snake oil from the regular consumption of onions, and bowel cleanses, to bicycle rides.

Tyler: But people were desperate.

[Music fades in]

[John Allnutt oral history audio]

John Allnutt: Almost every pregnant woman I expect without almost without exception, every pregnant woman who got the flu had a miscarriage. And both - I can remember so many times - putting a baby in a casket with her mother. And it was almost invariably fatal to the mother.

[End of clip]

Noel: Funerals in Greeley sometimes happened back-to-back every half an hour, said Allnutt, and casket makers could barely keep up with demand.

[John Allnutt oral history audio]

John Allnutt: We were so busy that we got some express man who would load up these outside boxes, these pine boxes, crossways on his truck, three high and seven long, so he could take twenty one boxes out to the cemetery, which would be enough for, oh, sometimes a week and sometimes less than a week. And it would be quite a sight to see that load of - we call them rough boxes - going out to the cemetery that way.

[End of clip]

[Music fades out]

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Tyler: Though most of Colorado was rural at that time, Denver had already become a small metropolis.

Noel: And with a population of more than a quarter million, Director of Public Health, Dr. William Sharpley, had to figure out how to keep so many people from getting sick. Here's Stephen Leonard again:

Dr. Stephen Leonard: There was considerable knowledge about containing diseases. In a sense, they - they knew that it was a highly communicable disease. They knew that it was a good idea to wash your hands and to not cough on other people. And - they - they had an idea that masks would be a good idea. And so they - they used masks. But beyond that, they - they didn't really know.

Tyler: Just as with the corona virus now, businesses, schools, theaters, and churches all got shut down and people were ordered to stay home.

Noel: But unlike now, there was no understanding of the necessity of social distance outdoors.

Tyler: In fact, they believed that fresh air was the best thing for it no matter how many people or how close together they might be.

Dr. Stephen Leonard: They had mass rallies for selling war bonds. They just didn't recognize it. You know, if you sneezed on somebody outside, it could be just as deadly as if you sneezed on somebody inside. So essentially, their response was not - well, not as effective as it might have been had they realized how serious - well, initially realized how serious it was and then kept their distance once they did realize how serious it was.

Noel: And just like now, the economy suffered and people got restless.

Tyler: After the first wave of Spanish Flu hit Denver in October of 1918, many believed the worst was over and called for an end to the quarantines and closures.

Noel: The owners of the theaters, in particular, had had enough.

Dr. Stephen Leonard: Well, there was tremendous commercial pressure, in Denver, for example, they closed the theaters. Theaters were incredibly important forms of entertainment then, and it was just a total loss to the theater owners. So they were very upset at that. I think they were one of the major, major factors in getting the closing order lifted in Denver. In fact, they lifted that. One of the orders that they put in, they lifted, I think, on November 10th or 11th of 1918.

Tyler: At that same time, nearly 20,000 people gathered in Cheesman Park on November 11th, 1918, to celebrate the armistice of World War I.

Dr. Stephen Leonard: You know, they were standing right next to each other. So it was incredibly bad. They, you know, they - they had this rather stupid notion. But, you know, that's 20/20 hindsight, that if you're outside, you're good. You know, it's inside air that kills you (laughs).

Noel: Not long after Armistice, the end of social distancing, and the reopening of Denver businesses, there was another outbreak.

Tyler: Governor Gunter and Dr. Sharpley tried to issue another quarantine order to slow the second outbreak. But citizens and business owners who'd already been cooped up for months weren't having it. There were almost immediate protests outside the Capitol.

Noel: Gunter and Sharpley quickly reversed the order. Instead, they required everyone to wear gauze facemasks in public. Sharpley knew the masks probably wouldn't do much, and they didn't. And by the time it was over, the second outbreak was even worse than the first.

[Music]

Noel: When the Spanish Flu outbreak finally began to slow down in early 1919, the young state of just under a million had roughly the same rate of infection as other states. But, says Stephen Leonard...

Dr. Stephen Leonard: They were in a - especially a - difficult position. So, Colorado seems to have had a higher death rate. I should point out that many states did not have good reporting. And so it's very slippery when you talk about the death rates. But - Colorado seemed to suffer more than most.

Tyler: Here's Duane Vandebusch again.

Dr. Duane Vandebusch: Colorado *eventually* had 49,000 cases and 8,000 people died of the flu.

Noel: Despite these numbers, and the tragic 10 percent death rate in Silverton, Colorado also had one mountain town that made it through the first two waves of the Spanish Flu without a SINGLE DEATH and hardly any infections.

Tyler: Only 100 miles northeast of Silverton, many factors helped Gunnison, Colorado have the LOWEST death rate in the United States. Some of those factors were luck, and some were quick thinking.

Dr. Stephen Leonard: Being an isolated place just sort of naturally, they evidently didn't have an infection in Gunnison early on.

Noel: Because Silverton got hit so early, the mayor and sheriff of Gunnison saw what was coming for them if they didn't act fast. And since they only had one road in and one road out, it was easy to regulate traffic, with the exception of the train.

Dr. Stephen Leonard: And so they realized that they were in a position to sort of blockade themselves and not allow anybody to come in. And so they did that.

Tyler: Unlike Silverton and so many other Mountain towns, Gunnison *wasn't* a mining community. There was a teaching college, and a number of businesses. But beyond that it was mostly small farms and ranches.

Noel: That meant it didn't have a lot of people trying to come in from outside the community.

Tyler: This allowed the mayor and sheriff to enforce a harsh lockdown. Here's Derek Everett:

Dr. Derek Everett: You'd have to drive sort of, skirting around the edges of Gunnison rather than driving right through the middle of town. And automobile traffic was not allowed to stop in Gunnison. Train service still did. But every time a train arrived in Gunnison, a law enforcement officer from the town would get on the train wearing a mask, wearing protective clothing, and inform anyone who was planning to get off the train that they would be required to spend at least four days in a town-run quarantine. You could not get off the train and just go to your sister's house, or to the store, or whatever. Anybody who got off a train went into a town-run quarantine.

Noel: And if you didn't like that...

Dr. Derek Everett: ...then you were not allowed off the train. And so Gunnison put in one of the strictest measures to try to prevent outsiders from potentially bringing the Spanish influenza into town that any community in the country could have.

Tyler: Here's Stephen Leonard

Dr. Stephen Leonard: They were very effective. At one point, one of their citizens died and was shipped back in a coffin and they wouldn't allow the coffin to be opened. It was very carefully sealed so that nothing could get out. So they were both smart and lucky. You know, it could have been that had they had an early case, they wouldn't have been so lucky. But they - they were - they were lucky and smart.

Tyler: Once the blockade and the orders to stay at home went into effect, residents of Gunnison were already mostly spread out and accustomed to hunkering down for the long winter. Here's Duane Vandebusch again:

Dr. Duane Vandebusch: They had gardens in the summertime. They canned. They put things in blockhouses. They had their own milk. So, you know, at that time you didn't run over the city market or Safeway if you wanted something to eat.

Noel: These factors, along with the sheer luck that the virus didn't arrive sooner, gave Gunnison a head start on their neighboring mountain towns. But they also had to amuse themselves indoors for months on end.

Dr. Duane Vandebusch: What they did was they read, they wrote in their diaries. Many of them had home-schooled their children anyway.

Tyler: The residents of Gunnison spent close to 4 months in quarantine. And all of it was essentially under de facto martial law.

Dr. Duane Vandebusche: And there was an article in the paper that said that the people of the Gunnison country were 100 percent in favor of what the mayor, the council, the people who made those decisions, along with the law enforcement people were doing. They realized how bad this could be. And they were in total support.

Noel: Just as it began to look like the Spanish Flu had run its course across the state of Colorado, Gunnison relaxed their restrictions in February of 1919.

Dr. Duane Vandebusche: Unfortunately, a third wave hit. And in March of 1919, there was a headline of the Gunnison paper that said, Flu Gets us at last. And one hundred cases appeared in Gunnison and there were a total of nine people who died by the end of March, early April. And then by the late spring of 1919, the Spanish flu burned itself out.

Tyler: Even with the 100 infections and 9 deaths late in the Pandemic, Gunnison was PERHAPS the least affected place per capita in the United States.

[Music fades in]

Noel: Globally, the Spanish Flu was unlike anything the modern world had ever seen.

Duane Vandebusche: So, I mean, this was a *tremendous* pandemic. And it's equivalent to the bubonic plague of the Middle Ages. And then the black death that occurred around 1350 in Europe, which took out about one third of the population in Europe. In the weeks during the fall of 1918, to give you an idea of how serious this was, 12,000 people died in Philadelphia, and 20,000 in New York City.

Tyler: And it's surprising it wasn't worse, since scientists knew so little about viruses and their transmission in 1918.

Noel: A hundred years later, it's hard to say if any clear lessons can be drawn from the Spanish Flu in Colorado. Yes, Gunnison's success in isolation and Denver's failure to keep people indoors clearly show that quarantines work to stop the spread of infectious diseases if we're all willing to sacrifice.

[Music fades out]

Tyler: But as Derek Everett notes, it's not always that simple.

Dr. Derek Everett: And that's easy to say, standing here in 2020, except, you know, tell people today, you know, if you just do this a few more months, things will be OK. Yeah, it sounds great in retrospect, in hindsight. But when you're living that day to day, hour to hour, month to month thing, it gets wearing, it gets exhausting. And that's the biggest challenge right now, is trying to maintain that balance of safety and - and, you know, mental and social health. How long - how long can we take it? How long can we endure? And yet if we relax too soon, how quickly is everything going to backfire? All the restrictions we put in place, how - how long is it going to take for them to essentially fall apart?

Noel: And can we even begin to compare the rural mountain town of Gunnison, population 1,300 and Denver, a city of a quarter million at the time?

Tyler: Imposing a lockdown on a city that size would have been nearly as impossible then as it would be now. People in the United States place a high value on civil liberties. Often even more than their own lives.

Noel: Then there's luck. If an early infection HAD made it to Gunnison, it could easily have suffered the same fate as Silverton.

Tyler: Stephen Leonard says that if the history of the Spanish Flu in Colorado teaches us one thing, it's that public health preparedness can't be ignored.

Dr. Stephen Leonard: Well, the biggest lesson that we can carry away from it, and one that we should have carried away in 1918, and really didn't to the degree that was necessary, was that we simply have to invest more in public health. If we could come to the realization that we lose huge numbers of people to disease, more people than we lose to wars. In the 1918 epidemic, far more people worldwide died from disease from - from the influenza than died because of battlefield deaths. And there were huge numbers of battlefield deaths. I mean, that the worldwide estimate, 1918 runs as high as 50 million people in the United States, as five hundred, six hundred, seventy five, thousand - and those are excess deaths. Those are those over and above what you would normally expect. But just normal public health kinds of things saves huge numbers of lives. And we've got to constantly be prepared in a public health sense, for things like this.

[Music fades in]

Noel: Derek Everett, for his part, cautions that it's easy to make decisions in hindsight, but that history is made day by day. And often in the midst of enormous pressures from many directions. However...

Dr. Derek Everett: I think the best thing that we can do is trust to the people who have been doing the research, the scientists, the epidemiologists whose job it is to try to study these things, whether in the past or in the present, and come up with suggestions on how to make this hurt as

little as possible, because there's no way anybody's getting through this unscathed. It's just a matter of trying to make the best decisions we can. And that's why I think it's so important to trust the people who study this on a daily basis and who have dedicated their lives trying to understand how to make it through a crisis like this as best as we can, keeping our heads above water. Recognizing that it's going to be painful.

[Music fades out to *Lost Highways* music]

Credits:

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Tyler: And even if you don't become a member, you can still get \$2 off admission to any of our museums just by mentioning the podcast.

Noel: Special thanks to Susan Schulten, our history advisor on this episode, and to Chief Creative Officer, Jason Hanson, our editor.

Tyler: The music for this episode was by Earth Control Pill, and our theme is by Conor Bourgal.

Noel: Many thanks to our editorial team:

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Tyler: And to our Advisory Group, which includes:

Stephen Sturm

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and Cara DeGette

Noel: Finally, thanks to the entire staff at History Colorado. I'm Noel Black

Tyler: And I'm Tyler Hill. Thanks for listening.

[Music fades out]