

My Family and the Influenza Pandemic of 1918

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As a member of the New England Historic Genealogical Society, I receive their weekly newsletter. Each week they have a Genealogist Survey covering all kinds of topics, such as whether one of our ancestors was a published author, was involved in organized sports as an adult, was on an orphan train, and the like. Recently the survey asked whether our family was affected by the Spanish Flu Epidemic of 1918-1919. That triggered memories and even a little more research to detail how my family was involved.

The first family member to die in that epidemic was my father's little brother, William Shields Robinson, who was about 10 months old when he died October 22, 1918. My father was not quite three years old at the time, but all his life he could remember hearing his brother cry when he was so sick.

The next to die was my great-grandfather's younger sister, Polly (Robinson) Wright, on Mar 27, 1919. About that time, my great-uncle Bert Robinson came home from World War I, sick with the flu. His mother, my great-grandmother Frances Elizabeth (Cook) Robinson, had had the flu but was thought to be recovering. She gave up her place in a warm room so that Bert could recover. Then she had a relapse, probably pneumonia, and died April 1, 1919. The family blamed Bert for her death.

According to John M. Barry's book, "The Great Influenza," often pneumonia followed the initial influenza, caused by a massive immune response to the virus. That is undoubtedly what killed my great-grandmother, but at that time, little was known of the disease itself, let alone how it affected the body.

At any rate, the family continued to blame Bert, who was the baby of the family and his mother's pet. He had probably served overseas during World War I, and may have been suffering from PTSD, which was unknown at that time. Sometimes it was said that veterans were "shellshocked" but the syndrome was not understood. All the family knew was that 25-year-old Bert was a different man than he had been before. He had always been a gentle man, and after he came home he was seen beating his horse.

One morning in February 1921, Bert woke up with a stomach ache, and decided that his family was trying to kill him. He got his gun and went looking for them. He found his brother Will and killed him, then killed his brother Jim, whose wife had just had their third baby girl the day before. Jim's wife hid the baby under the bed when she heard the shooting, and put the two older girls in bed with her. Bert came into the room and looked at her. He said "I'd kill you too, but someone has to raise these children." Then Bert shot his father. He didn't kill him with the first shot, but realized that the old man was in bad shape, so he shot him again and finished him off. "I wiped them out," he was quoted as saying when he gave himself up, as if speaking of a German machine-gun nest.

At the trial, Bert's lawyer used the insanity defense, but nevertheless Bert was declared guilty and sentenced to twenty years in prison. Jim's widow testified that Bert was sane, and then lived the rest of her life in fear that he might be released and come after her. The baby, Juanita, lived the rest of her life with the first thing anyone knew about her being that she was the one-day-old baby hidden under the bed.

Bert was never released; he spent the rest of his life in a psychiatric hospital. He died in 1968 and was buried in Waco, TX, far from the family plot in Fort Worth where the rest of the family are buried.

After the trial, Bert's next older sister, Mattie Maud, started showing signs of insanity. She lived with a sister for a time, but finally committed herself to the Texas State Mental Hospital, and spent the rest of her life there.

The family was devastated not only by the deaths, but by the notoriety in their small town of Benbrook, Texas, and by the knowledge that they had insanity in the family. They decided that the next generation should never be told about the murders or the insanity. It wasn't until several years after I had started researching the family that an uncle who didn't know it was a deep dark secret asked me if I had ever found out anything more about the murders. "Murders?" said I. "What murders?"

And so, my answer to the question about whether my family was affected by the influenza epidemic is yes. Definitely yes.