

The Influenza Epidemic of 1918 in Forsyth County - Part 1

By Rebecca Wall

One hundred years ago this fall, Forsyth County endured an epidemic of historic proportions. The 1918 influenza epidemic killed more people around the world than have died from any other disease, including AIDS and the medieval plagues. Estimates of the number of deaths worldwide vary from 21 million to 50 million or even 100 million, in a time when the world population was much smaller than it is today.¹ And of course the number of people who *had* the “flu” in 1918 must have been even greater, since most of those who got it survived, even though the 1918 virus was considerably more deadly than the usual yearly versions of influenza.

There are a number of good books about the epidemic as a whole, and they make fascinating reading. (A suggested reading list will accompany the second part of this article.) For a sense of what it was actually like to live through the epidemic, the historical and scientific books sometimes recommend two literary works: Katherine Anne Porter, who actually had the disease and recovered, based her short novel *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* on her experience and gave a memorable picture of the fevered world of the very sick and also of the lingering lethargy that many sufferers experienced. The experience of the family members of those who died was vividly described by the North Carolina-born writer Thomas Wolfe. In Wolfe’s autobiographical work *Look Homeward, Angel*, the hero’s brother Ben Gant, who dies of influenza in chapter 35, is based on Wolfe’s real brother Ben, who had lived in Winston-Salem before World War I began. A notice of the real Ben’s death appeared in the *Winston-Salem Journal*:

*Mr. Ben Wolfe, who for several years was connected with local newspapers, died at the home of his father in Asheville, Friday night of pneumonia, following influenza. Mr. Wolfe's last work in this city was with the advertising department of The Journal, which position he resigned several months ago to go to Asheville to await call to military service. Mr. Wolfe was a splendid young man and had many friends in the city who will regret to learn of his death. He was about 30 years of age.*²

There were many such notices about residents and former residents in the Winston-Salem newspapers during the fall months of 1918. Readers must have looked through the papers with a certain amount of dread, although they would also have seen happier notes reporting that someone was improving or even was now able to leave the house.

Books about the 1918 epidemic suggest different points of origin for the virus, but all agree that there was also a spring 1918 epidemic that was much milder but was probably caused by a version of the same virus. Those who contracted influenza in the spring seem to

¹ John M. Barry, *The Great Influenza*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 12, Kindle. Barry says that a similar proportion of today’s world population would be roughly 150 to 425 million people.

² “Death of Mr. Ben Wolfe,” *Winston-Salem Journal*, October 20, 1918, Newspapers.com.

have had some immunity to the mutated fall version, and therefore the fall epidemic was somewhat less virulent in areas where the spring influenza had been active.

It may have been fortunate, then, that influenza was active in Forsyth County during the spring months. An examination of the death certificates filed for Forsyth County from March through May of 1918 shows that during that time, 19 people were said to have died of flu.³ This is a relatively small number, but it shows that there was influenza in the county during the spring months. The disease would be much more deadly when it returned, but at least some citizens of the county probably had some immunity to protect them.

No one died of influenza in Forsyth County during the summer (July-September) of 1918, at least according to the death certificates. During that period, however, and particularly in September, the newspaper reports painted an ominous picture of an infection spreading down the East Coast and then inland. Inevitably it arrived in Forsyth County. The first death occurred on October 5, when J. R. Evins, a 33-year-old Kernersville barber, died of influenza after a three-day illness. Health authorities moved quickly, and on October 6, which was a Sunday, the *Journal* reported that church services were to be cancelled and schools and theaters in Winston-Salem must remain closed. Nevertheless, on October 8, Robert Lee Brinkley, a 29-year-old mechanic, died in Winston-Salem of "Spanish Influenza & Pneumonia." The deaths came in ones and twos at first, but the numbers increased quickly, and by the end of October, 202 people had died in Forsyth County of the effects of influenza. That was probably almost .3% of the population—equivalent, for today's population, to losing over 1100 people to one cause in one month.⁴

At the end of October, health officials hoped that the worst of the epidemic was over, but there were still some bad times to come. The death toll in November was considerably lower than in October, with only 60 deaths, but in December the numbers went up again, with

³ Since causes of death are not one of the indexed fields in the Ancestry.com North Carolina death certificate database, I examined each image in the file of certificates for Forsyth County from October 1917 through October 1919. If a certificate listed influenza or "la Grippe" (an old name for flu) as either the main cause of death or a contributing cause, I counted that death as a death from influenza. Ancestry.com. *North Carolina, Death Certificates, 1909-1976* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2007. Original data: North Carolina State Board of Health, Bureau of Vital Statistics. *North Carolina Death Certificates*. Microfilm S.123. Rolls 19-242, 280, 313-682, 1040-1297. North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, North Carolina.

⁴ According to the 1910 and 1920 censuses, the population of Forsyth County in 1910 was 47311, while the population in 1920 was 77269. If the growth is assumed to have been steady, the 1918 population would have been about 71277. The most recent population figure the Census Bureau gives for the county is the 2017 figure of 376,320. See "Quick Facts: Forsyth County, North Carolina," United States Census Bureau, accessed Oct. 3, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/forsythcountynorthcarolina/PST045217>.

139 Forsyth County deaths attributed to influenza. The January number, 50, was only slightly lower than that of November, and although numbers decreased after that, they did not reach single digits until May of 1919. If the spring 1919 deaths are included, 506⁵ people died in Forsyth County in the “1918” influenza epidemic, about .7% of the population. An equivalent percentage of the current population would be more than 2600 people.

The 1918 epidemic is often said to have been nearly forgotten, whether because it came so closely on the heels of World War I, which actually ended during the epidemic, or because it was horrific but also short, the kind of thing the mind often prefers to block out. Many of the people who lived through it remembered it well, though, and some of them told stories. Sometime in the 1980s, my father’s older sister Maud Ellen Wall Vickory, who was born in 1907, sat down to write about her life, and she included the 1918 epidemic. It was, she said, an event which would “always live in my memory.”

In 1918, Aunt Maud was the third of the seven living children of Charles William Wall and Mary Alice Malinda Newsome Wall. The family lived in Rural Hall, where Charlie (according to his World War I draft registration) worked as a mechanic at Vest and Wall Garage. Their oldest child, Vernon, was 15. Then came Truman (13), Maud (11), Walter (8), Alton (7), and Harold (3). Baby brother Shirley was born on October 11, 1918.

Aunt Maud’s story opens a window on the epidemic as it looked to one ordinary family living in Forsyth County:

After Shirley’s birth in 1918 an epidemic of “Flu” swept over the U.S.A.

A “clean up” day was scheduled for our school grounds for a Saturday. Vernon, Truman and Maud [the author of this account] were scheduled to go help. We raked leaves all afternoon. I was stricken with a bad headache about supper time and had to go to bed. Sunday a.m. I was still very sick and, much to my dismay, was not allowed to go to Sunday School. (This was an unheard of thing. I’d always gone to S.S. And most times sang solos during the S.S. hour.) By late Sunday p.m. I still had a fever and my parents agreed they should call Dr. [S.S.] Flynt. I was duly examined and my condition was pronounced Flu.

Naturally, the whole family had been exposed and everyone took to his bed. Shirley was only a few weeks old & developed pneumonia. So did Alton. Even Dad succumbed to the rigors of Flu and our friends and neighbors brought huge kettles of nourishing soups and foods of all kinds and would leave them sitting on a shelf on the back porch. Dad would call the grocery store, give them an order and someone from Dad’s business, “The garage,” would pick up the order & bring it to us.

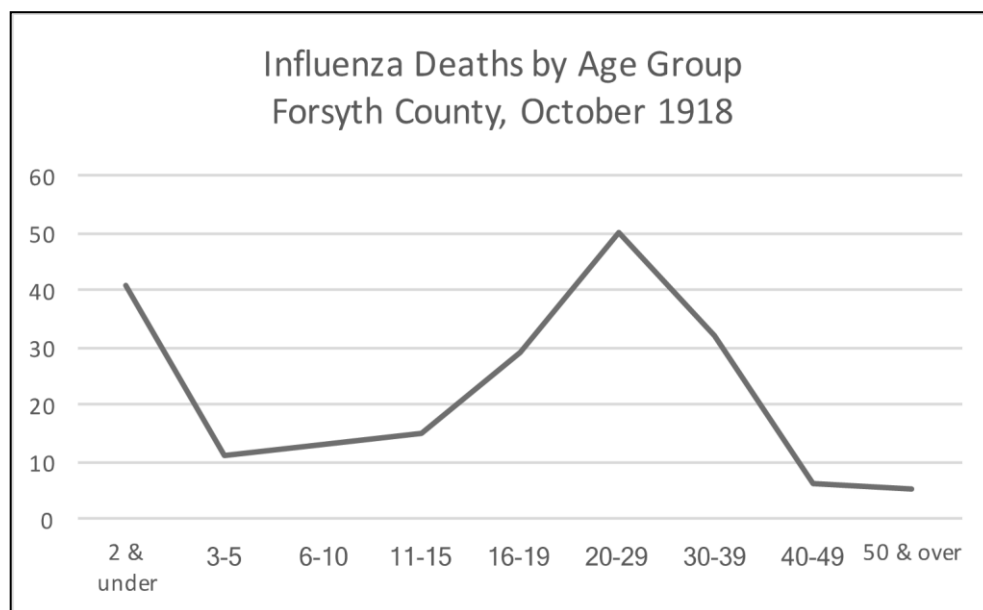
Since it seemed we were to be forever in our improvement, Dad contacted a distant cousin, Una Rutledge, who was a trained nurse, to come and nurse us back to health. She consented to come and about that time I began to improve. Soon, I was feeling very good & went into the kitchen and in one day everything was clean and

⁵ There are 507 death certificates that mention influenza, but two seem to be duplicates.

shining. My mother had taught me well.

There are a number of things about Aunt Maud's story that were typical of the 1918 epidemic:

- The disease struck very quickly. People who felt well enough to help clean up a playground (or go to work, or otherwise go about their daily business) might be suddenly overtaken by the disease. There were even reports of people leaving home feeling well and becoming sick so suddenly that they fell down on the street.
- The infection was very contagious. Whole families often became ill, leaving the sick to struggle to care for the sick.
- In spite of the fear of contagion, friends and neighbors tried to help. In this case, they brought food and left it where family members could get it. My mother remembered that her mother, who had a good supply of slowly ripening tomatoes picked before frost came, spent much of the epidemic making tomato soup to leave on her neighbors' porches.
- Unlike most illnesses, the 1918 influenza was most dangerous to young, healthy adults. Probably this was because many of its victims were actually killed by the violence with which their own immune systems attacked lung cells infected by the influenza virus. Immune systems take some time to develop and then weaken with age, so it was the young adults who had the strongest immune systems and were in greatest danger. Maud's father was 40, and her mother was 38. Her oldest brother was just 15. That put the whole family, except for baby Shirley, in the safer age ranges for this epidemic.





This picture, made about 1927, shows Charlie and Mary Alice Wall with all their children.

On the first row, the youngest sons Hobart (born after the epidemic) and Shirley flank Mary Alice and Charlie.

The back row, left to right, includes Harold, Walter, Truman, Vernon, Maud, and Alton.

There are also some things about the Wall family's experience of the flu that were quite different from the experiences of many others:

- Most notably, no one died. Even 7-year-old Alton and baby Shirley, who both developed pneumonia, lived to grow up. The 1918 influenza was much deadlier than the usual strains of influenza, and it killed many of its victims, either directly when they died of influenza itself or indirectly when they died of a disease that followed it, most often some kind of pneumonia. Many remedies were tried, but none of them were really effective, and that made the need for skilled nursing even more acute.
- Thanks to family connections, Charlie Wall was able to get a trained nurse to help them. Una Rutledge would have graduated from City Hospital's nursing school on October 10 if public meetings had not been forbidden, so she must have been in great demand. As the epidemic progressed, graduate nurses and even experienced amateur nurses were in very short supply, and the shortage was exacerbated by the number of nurses who had left home to work in military camps either in the United States or overseas. Some localities were also desperately short of physicians, but the news reports from Forsyth County don't suggest a serious shortage here, although the local doctors like Dr. Flynt must have been very busy.
- The Walls were fortunate enough to live in a county that coped rather well with the infection. Books about the overall epidemic report grisly stories of U.S. cities where sick families lay unattended for days and undertakers were so overwhelmed that the dead could be buried only if someone in the family could dig the grave. There must have been families in Forsyth County that needed more help than they received, but newspaper accounts from that time give no reason to think that many sufferers were left completely without help or there was difficulty burying the dead.

***The second installment of this article will provide
a list of those whose death certificates say they
died of influenza between October of 1918 and April of 1919.***

***The third installment of this article will detail
some of the ways Winston-Salem and Forsyth County
coped with the epidemic.***