

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, October 11, 2010

Epidemics and Quarantines, Early 20th Century: The flu epidemic of 1918–19 was one of the worst in U.S. history and in the world. Over ½ million Americans died, and it is thought that between 25 million and 50 million perished worldwide. It came in three waves, the first being detected at a Kansas military base early in 1918. Although American troops spread this to Europe, it was relatively mild and was on the wane by early summer. A second outbreak, a few weeks before the November 11 Armistice ended World War I, was much more severe and was carried by ships to ports all over the world. Where sanitation was almost unknown, such as in India, the death toll was the greatest. The third outbreak was early in 1919, but it was relatively short-lived (perhaps medical authorities had gained knowledge on how to minimize the effects).

My mother and her class of about 20 graduated as nurses at Baltimore's Union Memorial Hospital in early fall of 1918. They were dispatched on all types of assignments, many to cope with the dreaded influenza. Mary E. Glenn (1892–1976), who was one of my mother's closest friends for the rest of their lives, was sent on a hospital train to Quincy, Massachusetts, where she worked for many weeks to care for the many infected people of that community. My mother went home to Middletown for a few days before being assigned, but Dorsey W. Lewis, M.D., one of the local family doctors in that community, prevailed upon her to stay and care for the many ill patients as she was the only nurse in Middletown. This she did and nursed many, some of whom passed away, until she finally caught the flu herself. It's hard to realize how serious this was before the advent of antibiotics during World War II. She lay ill at her mother's home for many weeks before the fever broke, and she began to regain strength. Knowing how contagious influenza was (and still is, but today it is called a virus), homes with the sick were often under quarantine; that is, a sign would be posted on the door warning potential visitors not to go inside as dangerous germs could infect them.

I remember quarantine signs on the window next to the front door at Auburn Heights when I was down with pneumonia, chicken pox, and measles in 1932–34. The most serious quarantine, however, came in the summer of 1932, when we were at Rehoboth. Sara D. Rodney, age 13, came down with Infantile Paralysis, or "Polio," and all the children about her age and younger for two blocks around were quarantined in their homes. No going out, going to the beach, or playing was permitted. Dr. Bear (possibly Bare) from Baltimore had a summer cottage on Columbia Avenue in the "Pines" of Rehoboth, and he was a specialist on polio. He cared for Sara D. (as she was always called), eventually the quarantine was lifted after 10 days or so, and she recovered with no paralysis. However, it had been a very scary time for her family and the 15 or so kids who were quarantined.

Through the steam car hobby, I first knew Frank Gardner (1920–2004) in 1946, and I considered him a close friend until his death. Early in 1952, Frank, his wife, Eloise "Weezie," and their three daughters, along with Frank's brother, contracted polio while at their summer place on Cape Cod. Frank's brother died within 24 hours. Frank was paralyzed from the waist down. Weezie and the girls recovered, although Weezie has had a weak back from that time to the present. Undaunted, Frank maintained his love for antique cars, had his partially restored 1912 Stanley completed and equipped with hand controls through the expertise of Calvin Holmes, and drove this car with gusto and great enjoyment until he sold it to Brent Campbell in 1994. He also enjoyed his several fine gas cars, including Packards and Franklins. We had many great times together. With the perfection of the Salk vaccine in 1955, polio has since been all but forgotten.