

Cross of Christ Chronicles

1918 — A Horrendous Year!

It has now been 100 years since our families experienced a truly horrific year, one marked by unimaginable suffering and sorrow. They'd already lived through many years of difficulties and distress, but now had to face an almost unbearable double onslaught. The miseries of war have been with us throughout history, but nothing could have prepared them for the almost worldwide pandemic known as the Spanish Flu, which many believe to have been the worst plague in the history of our planet. For some, the following two years were even more severe as the disease persisted and in those days they could do little but watch helplessly as their loved ones were taken from them, very often in the prime of life.

In addition to this misery, those living in the northeastern part of our state suffered a *third circle of hell*—a devastating fire which raged through a large portion of the northern pine forests in mid-October, causing great loss of life. Just one heart-rending example of this was a young man who returned from the battlefields in France unscathed only to discover that his five siblings and 10 nieces and nephews had been taken by the fire, leaving *him* the only remaining member of his family. (I will say no more about this fire since it didn't involve our people here.)

All wars are tragedy, even if the “right” side wins. The thrill of victory and the advent of peace can never assuage the feelings of suffering and loss experienced by so many, but at our current level of human development they appear to be inevitable. World War I was a war of wars, The Great War, *The War to End All Wars!* — if only it could have lived up to that resolutely desired designation. It was a war that could not have occurred in previous centuries and the technology that made it possible also made it terrible!

We had reached that tipping point during the Civil War when improvements in guns and ammunition could turn any battle into a massacre. Those who were familiar with the previous methods of war were horrified! “*We cannot continue like this — the carnage and death are just too great!*” were the thoughts of many of them, but it's almost impossible to stop a war and even harder to turn back time, to discount any new advancements that might give an edge to one side over another.

A century ago, in the trenches of western Europe, our forebears were experiencing this type of wholesale slaughter first-hand, coupled with the devastation of the Spanish Flu epidemic. The logistics and circumstances of war create a perfect environment for illness and disease. So many far-flung people brought together in very close proximity for an extended period of time, wholesale movement between countries and continents, unsanitary conditions, and a lack of modern medicine all made contagion very difficult to avoid.

Disease is an adjunct of war and its development often causes far more pain and death than arrows or swords, bullets or bombs. Such was the case in the Civil War and the World War that followed a half-century later, but in this new war they needn't have suffered the privations experienced by the soldiers, both on and off the battlefield, to be vulnerable to sickness. The majority of those afflicted pulled through, but since there was no cure and the doctors and nurses were often completely overwhelmed, many places had an area to which those patients who were considered beyond hope were moved so attention could be given more easily and efficiently to those who still might have a chance.

I first learned of this many years ago from Gladen Sanden. How this topic ever came up I don't recall, but he told me that when his father, Thor, was in the service and afflicted with the flu, he was one of those carried to a large room full of other soldiers on stretchers who were unresponsive and left to their fate. He happened to be conscious and aware of this dire situation, so when a nurse walked by he summoned up the strength to reach out and beg her not to let him die! As it turned out he was one of the lucky ones, thank God. (*Continued next month.*)

— *Shelley and Jim, Cross of Christ Archives, May 2019*