

Cross of Christ Chronicles

1919 — Another Year of Suffering and a Celebration of Life

1919 must have been a rollicking year—the war was over, which was a great relief for most, and it had been celebrated on a grand scale back in the previous November, but at the same time the nation was grieving profoundly for all of its lost youth. They should've had a break—they *certainly deserved it*—but the flu pandemic was still raging around the world, still killing way more people than the war ever could. Add to it the fact that they didn't know when or even *if* it would ever stop!

The so-called Spanish Flu, and its attendant illnesses, was unlike any disease they'd seen before. Instead of taking the young, old, and infirm, it preyed heavily on adults who were healthy and robust, and at the time they had no idea why. So many questions, so much uncertainty can often be almost as stressful as dealing with the circumstances at hand.

A prime example of how the flu effected a typical family can be found in the experience of the Charles and Sarah (Skree) Kragness family in Sheldon. They were my Grandpa and Grandma Skree's brother and sister, which made their children my Dad's double cousins. One of those cousins, Gladyne Kragness Houge, told me that she was (as she put it) "first man down – first man up" so it was then up to her to take care of those who were still sick.

It was an intensely trying time, her mother Sarah having just recently given birth to what would inevitably be her last child, Mabel. Since newborn babies and their mothers are blessed for a time with a kind of natural immunity neither of them got sick. Gladyne and the two older boys, Leonard and Gilmer, were spared lasting side effects, but their father, Charles, and youngest brother, Elner, weren't as fortunate and it was now time for the pestilence to take its toll.

Since there was no treatment, all they could do was stand by as their father succumbed to the insidious disease and wonder with hopeless distress, as Gladyne told me — "*How can we ever go on?!*" Elner survived, but not without lasting consequences. I don't know if his lungs were compromised before, but they were certainly in bad shape after. He was plagued with chronic bouts of pneumonia, etc. for the rest of his life and died at the young age of 40. (So, that truly reprehensible flu may well have been responsible for both *he* and his father's deaths, just as they were entering their fifth decade of life.)



As it was in those days, the funeral service began in the home where the deceased lay in repose. Once Rev. Ostrem had arrived, a bowl of water was brought out, placed on the lid, and baby Mabel was then "baptized from her father's coffin." After that it was time to proceed with the home service. One can hardly imagine the conflicting emotions of that day.

I was told by others that since people weren't supposed to congregate, the casket was placed on one of the farm wagons and hauled down to the cemetery where it was buried with little or no ceremony. Whether the pastor or immediate family were in attendance I don't know. Baby Mabel was born February 3rd and her father, Charles, died March 15th at age 41. The baptism and funeral service took place on Wednesday March 19, 1919.

Those were definitely "the times that try men's souls," but the family managed to stay on the farm with the help of their devoted uncle and



Children of Charles and Sarah (Skree) Kragness (Ca. 1919)

L-R: Leonard, Elner, Gladys, holding onto the back of Mabel's dress so she won't fall off the chair, and Gilmer.



Charles L. Kragness With Funeral Flowers (Bue Photo)

Now days people refer to World War I as “the forgotten war,” and I’m definitely finding out why. It was ugly and horrific, and a very shocking introduction to the modern warfare of the 20th Century. Just as the Kragness family had to resign themselves to the requisite celebration of their new addition to the family in the face of heart-rending tragedy, so too our town and the rest of the nation had to start putting the war behind them and celebrate the life of those who survived. This was done by hosting Armistice Day

Homecomings throughout the land which coincided with the one-year anniversary of the blessed cease-fire, which began at the 11th hour (a.m.) of the 11th day of the 11th month in the year of our Lord 1918.

Houston was no exception and a large group of soldiers, congregants and well-wishers gathered at the Stone Church on Tuesday November 11, 1919 for a “Home-coming” Festival to give thanks and rejoice in the knowledge that all of their “boys” except one, had safely and blessedly returned home. We will revisit this joyous occasion in next month’s *Parish Visitor*.

Shelley and Jim, Cross of Christ Archives, October 2019

P.S.- The children of Charles and Sarah Kragness gathered at M.O. Bue's studio in Houston for this post card photo. It was taken less than a year after the terrible tragedy that befell the family, changing their young lives forever.