“We felt like true soldiers”: Kentucky Catholic Sister-Nurses in the 1918 Flu Pandemic
MaryAnn Thompson and Sara Bolton, June 22, 2017

John Stern  0:00

Good afternoon. I'm john stern. I'm a member of the board here at the filson. And I want to personally welcome all of you to what I think is going to be a very educational and entertaining afternoon here at the filson Historical Society. I want to mention that this subject matter the influenza, or flu epidemic pandemic, which they'll be concentrating on what took place in Louisville, was an international event that affected 500 million people. So while they'll be talking about it in a local aspect, it was just a small part of what was encountered internationally and all over the world. The speakers we, you're getting two for the price of one. We have to the two ladies who have researched the subject. First Sarah bolts. Bolton has a Bachelor's from Harding University, a Master's from the University of Cincinnati, in 2015. She was the recipient of the mckendree, his outstanding faculty award, which said that Sarah is a selfless and dedicated educator who's passionate about nursing, and who guides and supports her students as their teacher and advisor. Marian, Dr. Marian Thompson, received her nursing degree from Johns Hopkins, her master's from Yale and her PhD from Columbia. She not only has she taught at mckendreee, but she's taught here in Bella at Bellarmine. And she was the recipient of one of the 2014 outstanding Illumina alumna awards. So please help me welcome our two distinguished educators and researchers.

Dr. Marian Thompson  2:13

Thank you. And good afternoon. Sara and I are delighted to be with you here this afternoon. We originally did this research about a year and a half to two years ago, in order to hopefully present a paper at our professional organization, which is called the American Association for the history of nursing. And we were successful at having our paper accepted. And we did present in Chicago last September. a much shorter version of the paper than that and what you're going to hear today because professional organizations only give you 20 minutes. But in our hearts, we really wanted to present this to a Louisville audience because this is certainly a Louisville story. So we would like to express our appreciation to two people here, sister, Martha Jacob from the ursuline order who advocated for us. She's here in the audience today to the filson and to Scott Scarborough who's way in the back, who invited us to come and finally to the filson for inviting us so that we could actually present to people from Louisville. We are going to share the podium today. I'm going to start off by talking a little bit about the flu. And a little bit about camp Taylor, and then a little bit about how the sisters came to come to camp Taylor. Sarah will follow on telling you some of the things that the sisters actually did at Camp Taylor. She will talk to you about some of their memoirs, and also about the morbidity and mortality. Some of the not so pleasant things that can kill her. And then finally some of our conclusions for our research. There we go. As probably most of you know who are here today, war was declared in Europe in August of 1914. But the United States did not enter the war until April of 1917. And of course the armistice was declared in November of 1918. Therefore, the United States was officially in the war for only about 20 months, but they were dealing with flu for about 10 of those 20 months. The flu that struck that year leading to the worst flu pandemic in history, as you've already heard, is oftentimes
referred to as the Spanish flu. But that is a misnomer. In reality, we probably should call this flu, the Kansas flu due to wartime censorship. Few countries were publicizing the fact that they had an epidemic on their hands spread. However, was neutral in the conflict. And so when flu broke out there in the middle of 1918, there was a lot of publicity about the fact that their civilians were ill and dying. Thus, people thought that the flu started in and spread from Spain. But it did not. All of the statistics related to the 1980 flu are estimates, because there was no worldwide mandatory reporting of cases or deaths. So we really don’t know the actual numbers. Scientists hypothesize that about 25% of the world’s population were infected with a flu that year, and perhaps two to four to 5% of those people died. The United States military infection rate, however, ran between 25 and 40%. So think about it for a minute, almost half of our soldiers during that conflict became ill with the flu. It is again estimated that there were between 50 to 100 million deaths worldwide from the flu that year. There is consensus among scholars that we had a pandemic due to the conditions of war, mostly because of the movements of the troops. Without the war, it is very possible that the flu would have died out without any major consequences. What were some of the contributing factors to this becoming a pandemic, these are just four there were many, and they’re in no particular order. The first I’ve chosen is wartime censorship. Civilians and soldiers were basically unaware of the magnitude of the number of people who were infected and dying in the United States. In the United States, it was considered a treasonous act if any person or media outlet spoke or wrote negatively about the war. In addition, the Allies did not want Germany to know that the soldiers were suffering and dying from the flu, because it would indicate weakness in troop strength.

The second reason I chose was the frequent movement of the troops from infected to non-infected basis. And that certainly helped spread the disease. At various points during the military epidemic. The army Surgeon General and the military physicians asked the government including the President, to stop the draft, to stop troop movements, and especially to quarantine ships that were heading to France. But they were refused. The war had first priority. They were interested in soldiers who were well, they were not interested in soldiers who were ill. Because of the continuous movements, the virus had new and healthy populations to infect, and therefore it mutated and became more virulent, instead of dying out. Third, is obviously the living conditions in the barracks and in the trenches. And fourth, is that people were contagious with the flu before they were symptomatic. Thus, they were spreading the illness to other people before they knew they were even ill themselves. What were some of the characteristics of the flu that year? We know it was very contagious. We know there was a very rapid onset and quick deterioration into respiratory distress, and possibly bacterial or viral pneumonia. In our research, it was not unusual for us to read about somebody who became ill in the morning, and they were dead by the evening. Keep in mind, this was 1918. There was basically no effective medical treatment for the flu. There were no antibiotics. There were no flu vaccines. There were no antivirals. Scientists of the day did not even know it was a virus because they did not have microscopes that could see the very tiny virus that caused the infection. One of the unusual and memorable facts about this flu was that it infected and killed young adults aged 20 to 40 at a very high rate, hence the high risk to the soldiers. And what I have here is an old mortality curve from two years and in the early 1900s. And oops, well, here we go. What you see is on the dotted line right there for 1911. You see a typical mortality curve for flu year, where you have high rates among young people, children, and high rates of death among the elderly. What we have in 1918 is a W curve, because we have this blip indicating the deaths among the people
-aged 20 to 40. Scientists and historians have determined that there were three waves of the flu that
year in the United States. The first wave was in the winter of 1918 with the onset in a rural community
and a nearby military base in Kansas, and that’s why I said the flu perhaps should be called the Kansas
flu. This was a mild flu, nothing unusual, but the thought is that the soldiers carried the virus to France,
where it mutated and became more virulent. Then, when they came back, they carry the more virulent
virus with them by returning troops. The second wave of flu appeared in August of 1918. At a military at
a naval base sorry, in Boston. Due to continue to movements, it spread quickly to almost all of the 39
military bases in the United States, including camp Taylor. This wave of the flu died out in October or
November of that year. Finally, the third wave of the flu was in the winter of 19 8019. And it was not as
severe as the second wave. So now we come to camp Zachary Taylor, and I’m sure most of you if you're
from Louisville, you are familiar with a camp Taylor neighborhood. Camp Taylor was built in the summer
of 1917, especially for World War One. At the time, it was the largest military base in the country, able
to accommodate over 40,000 soldiers. The base had about 3000 acres and 1500 buildings. It offered
artillery training, officers training and chaplaincy training. After the war is served the demobilization
center and a hospital and it is probably most of you know, it was torn down in the 1920s.

This is a very basic math of campiello. But if you're not familiar where the military base really was, this
will help you see it. What you'd see on here at the bottom is the current Watterson expressway 284.
And you see how it cuts through the camp. You also see poplar lubber road which went right through
the middle of the camp, and Trevelyan way. The camp would have extended into the current Louisville
zoo, the Joe creason Park and up to around where the Audubon hospital is today. It went over to
Preston highway, the northern boundary right here would have been the Audubon Country Club. And I'll
just point out to you that the hospital the base hospital was down here off of dirt lane, where the old
dirt High School was, but now the mail High School is. These are some Postcards from the internet that
show you what the barracks look like at Camp Taylor. And we show you this because these are the types
of buildings where our sisters work. The barracks were turned into emergency hospitals, and so they
would have been working in buildings that look like this. Another picture posted the same thing of the
barracks. This is a picture with the base hospital. In the background. You can see the base hospital is a
single single storey building. The hospital had about 2400 beds, but it was extended to about 3200
during the flu epidemic. It was served by 157 nurses who were from the army or the American Red
Cross. And we will say to you probably three times today, the sisters did not work in the base hospital,
they worked in the barracks. This is an actual panoramic photo of the base hospital and unfortunately,
it's panoramic. So it's a little bit difficult to see. And this is a picture inside the base hospital during the
flu epidemic. And we know it's during the flu epidemic because the nurses are wearing masks and
they're also wearing covers over their uniforms. The timeline of the spread of the fluid camp Taylor was
very similar to the timeline at other military bases in the country. Newspapers, including our own here in
Louisville would report a few cases. But don't worry. Then the next day there would be 50 cases. And
within a few days there would be 1000s of cases. The date of the first outbreak at Camp Taylor we think
was on September 22 1918. Three days later, the commander confirms to the courier journal that there
is an outbreak. And by the 27th they put a partial quarantine on the camp. What they wanted was they
didn't want the soldiers coming out into the city of Louisville to spread the flu into our city. But at the
same time they didn't want the soldiers gathering in large groups on the base because they didn't want
them spreading it to each other by September 29, which is only seven days later. With a report the first
death of a 21 year old soldier. Now there are more than 1700 cases on base with the flu. The nursing staff is overwhelmed including becoming ill with flu themselves. The local newspaper publishes the first of two requests for additional nurses. And this is one of those calls and it's a little bit difficult to see, but this was in the newspaper. And if you see at the bottom, it says all Louisville women who have had as much as three months hospital experience, are urged to volunteer for the work. Any women who are properly qualified or asked to register at the Red Cross headquarters, they were absolutely desperate for nurses to help. However, if you were a nurse, then you were probably working in a hospital or in a homecare agency. So you probably would not have been free to volunteer to go to camp Taylor. If you were not working as a nurse, you were probably helping to care for your own family who could have had the flu and or your neighbors. So there really weren't that many nurses available to volunteer. Our conclusion was that the response to the ads was poor, as the base commanders organized a meeting to try to come up with some ideas on how to cope with the epidemic.

So we have this very interesting man called father Regis Barrett enter the picture. Father, Barrett was a Benedictine priest, not from Louisville. One of the sisters recollections of father Barrett was the one that was that he was and I’m going to quote, high strung, impulsive, very outspoken, and emphatic. And Sarah and I would say, that is an understatement. That is a true understatement. He was a wild and crazy guy. And Father Barrett’s own words, I’m going to read to you from a letter he wrote to a priest about the meeting that the commanders had on base. I was told to the existing conditions and asked if I had any solutions. I told them, I have a thought in my head. And then I mentioned the sisters as nurses. You should have seen the look on their faces. One Colonel said bring sisters out here. I'd like to see that. I asked him what his objections were. He was on his feet in a moment and he shouted, where it Hades will you get them? I said, I knew Louisville and Kentucky word trifle near Hayes. But even so I need not go out of the state to get nuns who would do good work. Then he gave in and said, Well, if you can get sisters, you are a wonder. That's all father Barrett needed. He left the base and he began to a Sarah and I like to say vigorously recruit from six orders of nine starting with the Sisters of Mercy here in Louisville. From a memoir of one of the Sisters of Mercy. I’m going to quote about their recruitment. Father Barrett called at our convent on East Broadway to ask for nurses. He had called the day before on the phone and not receiving and decided to answer he made a stormy appeal in person. I say stormy, for he came like a whirlwind. Finding the outer screen door the convent locked. He wouldn’t wait for the portress to answer the ring. But he broke the lock in the hinge. He tore the door open, and he stopped into the hallway calling loudly for the superior. He demanded to know how many nurses he could take with him. Reverend Mother told him she was not able to give him an answer because the bishop was out of town. This excited him all the more. And he declared that made no difference as he had authority from the Bishop of Louisville from the Apostolic delegate and from President Wilson himself. And except for a few of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth and the Franciscan sisters, the nuns were not professional nurses. The superiors all told this to father Barrett, but he said it didn't matter. They needed help. Most of the sisters who went we feel were school teachers and since the schools in Louisville and in the state were closed by October 7 because we were put under quarantine the sisters were free to go. And this shows you how and when the sisters arrived and which orders by the fourth and fifth of October the sisters began arriving at Camp Taylor and that's just like three days after the meeting. Although we saw different total accounts of the numbers who served we believe 88 sisters in all cert worked in the barracks. They lived in converted officers quarters they ate in the mess hall with the soldiers and they
had mastered every day by the one of the chaplains. On my slide up there you see the first DICOM were 10 Sisters of Mercy and they came from Louisville next with 34 Sisters of Charity of Nazareth who came from both Louisville and Lexington and I'll say again, some The Sisters of Charity were professional nurses, the Dominican sisters of peace who sent 12 and they came from both St. catharines and Louisville. On October 6, we have the ursuline sisters of Louisville who came sending 15 and October 11 11. sisters from Loretto Kentucky came. We know that our three ursuline sisters from Maple mound Kentucky came, they did not stay very long and we're not really sure what day they arrived and we also are unsure of when the Franciscan sisters from again St. Anthony's hospital arrived and we're not sure when they left.

This is a wonder one of the wonderful photos we have to show you of the sisters representing all six of the orders that were present. And of course, Father Barrett is in the picture. He was not going to be left out. So to to all of our rights to all of our rights. The first nun is and they you you may know the habits of these sisters, but what they have on here are men's over shirts are nurses aprons. And so their their habits are not probably the ones you're used to seeing. The first sister is a Dominican. The second sister is a sister of Loretto, and her name is sister Fulgencio The third is a sister of charity of Nazareth with a typical bonnet that they wore. The next is a sister of mercy sister Gertrude McEvoy, and then a Franciscan sister, and finally, an ursuline sister. The last person in the picture is a man named Mr. Thomas Klein, who was with the Knights of Columbus. Now I'm going to turn you over to my colleague.

Sara Bolts  21:50

So then, when the nuns arrived, they were put straight to work. Like Marian had said most of them were not nurses by trade. The majority of them were school teachers. Some of them have hospital experience, but the orientation was all on the job. The sisters from Loretto arrived about 8pm on October the 11th, and three or four of them were sent immediately on night duty even before they saw their quarters. The others ate dinner and reported for duty the next morning at 730. All of the sisters like we said conserved in the converted barracks. The professionally trained sister nurses, sort of supervised and help train the school teachers and others and we know that sister just sell a Conlon who has a sister of charity was put in charge of all of the nuns. They assigned one to two sisters per Barrick to care for 125 to 150 soldiers each. They worked 12 hour shifts seven days a week. And they took one hour either midday or midnight for a meal break. Sister Carmel Smith who was a teacher reported that she worked her first day in barracks be 17 with sister Hilda and sister Hilda was a nurse. But by the following day sister Hilda had the flu. So from that point on, she worked alone with about 140 patients. So I have taught nursing for a long time and all I through the years, nurses consistent complaint is I have too many patients. I like hold up pictures and show on the nurses the sister nurses had two primary responsibilities. The first was TPR, or temperature pulse and respiration. They were done twice during each 12 hour shift for each patient. And that ensured a that they they knew what their temperatures were and stuff but it also allowed a chance for each soldier to be assessed, give or take every six hours. And and the primary responsibility they were given was to see that soldiers that became progressively ill and became critically ill were transferred to the base hospital out of the barracks. And they had very strict instructions that no soldiers were to die in the emergency hospitals. So one of their main functions was to see that they got moved when they they required a higher level of care. We think they were very
effective in this and that we found no reports in their Memoirs of any soldiers dying in the emergency barracks. So that was good. Another task that they had were to give medications, although there were not very many and certainly they were of limited effectiveness. They spent a lot of time bathing people for to get fevers down. They provided food and meals Some of them reported sending orderlies out to forage for food between meals. Things like bread and jam and the ingredients to make eggnog. And this was during Prohibition. So eggnog was without fortification, which they regretted and some of the sisters especially the sisters from Loretto, realized that the orderlies had connections so they would frequently send the orderlies out to find strengthening drink for the soldiers that they felt like needed it. There were also many reports of emotional and spiritual support many stories of finding family for soldiers writing letters to mothers and to wives, praying for and comforting the sick. And we found some instances of nuns reporting sort of deathbed conversions, if you will. This is a not great picture, but it was taken from one of the barracks hospitals. And if you see the conditions they are versus what Maryann showed you in the base hospital. They were just on camp cots right next to each other 125 to 150 in a building. And I don't know about you, but I look at that. And I think caring for patients in those cots for 12 hours makes my back hurt just thinking about it.

We have some quotes from some of the sisters that were there. This one was from Sister Mary Agnes and I think they are good to explain what they did 100 patients and she, one was vomiting one with a violent hemorrhage another with a throbbing headache, and that they did what they could to care for each of them. These were really sick men, these weren't just people with bad colds. There were 135 men in that Ward so crowded together, one could hardly get in and out among them. On each bed lay a poor sick soldier between blankets without a sheet or a pillow. They finished the temperatures of the whole Ward and found there was not one man there whose temperature was under 103. So so they were sick.

And again, just another quote about how they spent their days. And she secured a strengthening drink. One thing that we were continually amazed that is in all of the the journals and the personal recollections that we reviewed, we did not find a single complaint in any any record from the nuns. They didn’t complain about the working conditions or the food or the the lack of rest or anything they they complained not not all and we reviewed at least 22 separate journals of the nuns that served even the sisters that became ill made no report of their own illnesses. If they made any notation at all, it was just that on November 1, I became ill and was taken to st they took most of the sick nuns to St. Joseph's infirmary and I remained there until you know whatever date they returned to their convent, and that was the only mention they made up their own illness. This is Sr. Bonaventure med. Her picture hangs on my computer now. She's my new hero. She took if you do the math, she took over 630 temperatures in one day with old glass thermometers that had to be shaken down if you remember old glasses. And this was a woman that was in her mid 50s at the time that she did this.

And this was just a quote that referenced the sending of patients to the base hospital as they became more ill and that each morning after breakfast, we stopped at the information desk and heard sometimes as many as 80 or 90 had died in one night. So they worked in in trying circumstances. We can
assume that many lives were saved by the sisters triage ng if you will, those patients to the base hospital to receive higher levels of care. And it's also likely that many more lives were saved by the basic nursing care that the sisters provided and preventing the late complications of flu like pneumonia and things that we had no treatment for in 1918. On the epidemic crested around October 14 However, even though new cases declined, the emergency hospitals remained full until the end of November, end of October, early November. It was the camp Taylor had the fourth highest mortality rate among us military bases. And we actually recently saw some statistics about flu deaths and British military camps during the flu epidemic. And they had connected the size of the camp with the risk of death. The larger the camp, the higher the risk of death from the flu. And we have not seen statistics like that for the US. But it would probably be true because of the five military bases that had the highest number of deaths in the US or the highest percentage of deaths. They were also the largest military bases and camp Taylor was one of those. At least 22 of the 88 sisters that served became ill with the flu. All but one of the nuns that became ill were younger in their 20s and 30s. Most of the nuns that did not become ill were in their 40s 50s and 60s. We initially or I initially associated that many more of the nurses that were working on the night shift became ill, then the nurses that were working on the day shift, and 2017 we know that when you alter somebody's circadian rhythm or their sense of day and night, you suppress their immune system, which would make them more susceptible. But when we began to look at numbers, it also is true that they put the younger nurses on the night shift and the older ones on the day shift. So it may have been a combination of those factors. One of the nuns that served Sister Mary Jean Connor succumbed to the flu. After working for a time at Camp Taylor. She was the only death of the sisters. But there were several of them that were quite ill and to others besides sister Jean ultimately received the last rites but went on to recover so they were very ill. Many of them had prolonged recoveries. And we know that at least two of them had pulmonary permanent pulmonary injury from the flu that followed them throughout their lives. Sister Mary Jane became ill was taken to St. Joseph's infirmary where she died. She was given a military funeral at Camp Taylor, and she's buried at the Loretto motherhouse and that's a photo of her. Here's a photo of her funeral service at the Knights of Columbus Hall at Camp Taylor. And this is her casket being taken to the hearse by the military escort followed by the Sisters of Loretto and a picture of her grave at the Loretto motherhouse.

As the flu cases began to decrease and the emergency barracks were no longer needed as hospitals they were converted back to normal use beginning in early November. The remaining sisters from Loretto left on November 2, most others left on November sixth or seventh because many of them were teachers, and the school quarantine was lifted and so they had to return to the classroom. The last group, which were Sisters of Charity of Nazareth and the Sisters of Mercy left on November 9. The disagreement with the military on hierarchy regarding their release, I just find it kind of entertaining. The base commander thought the army was going to tell the the sisters when they could leave but the sisters were unpaid volunteers and did not view themselves as working for the army but for the Lord. So when their superiors called them they left. And this did not sit well with the base commander apparently. This did mark the end of an era. Up until this point, Catholic sisters had served as voluntary military nurses in every war epidemic and time of crisis from the Revolutionary War until this point, but when these nurses left camp Taylor, Catholic sisters never served again as military nurses. In terms of conclusions, we feel like they made a great difference in outcomes, although we don't have hard statistics then that we would have now to support that We'd like this quote because this influenza epidemic, not just not at
Camp Taylor but but worldwide medicine had relatively little to offer people and this epidemic, physicians were really powerless to do anything. The only thing that made a difference was warm bedrest care, food, nutrition, hydration, that were all elements of nursing care.

The one thing that are another thing that really struck us as we reviewed all of these journals, was that the the sisters themselves felt a great sense of gratitude at being allowed to serve or being chosen to serve. And they always felt honored by that. And which that seems almost opposite of what we would would expect. We again were struck by the lack of complaint that they, throughout their lives, expressed express gratitude and the opportunity to serve. We're not really sure how they managed to have Ada nurses in one place that couldn't find anything to complain about because that is certainly never happened since. And again, just another quote that talked about their their sense of duty and their their joy and service.

That we felt like true soldiers sharing the same life as Uncle Sam's boys marching out to duty every morning and bringing back weary bodies to rest on bunks, with a blanket folded for a pillow, partaking of what they styled their Chow retiring at taps happy happy all the time to be able to serve our deer stricken sammies. It was interesting to me that the base commander sent a letter of thanks to the Archbishop, no letter of thanks was ever sent to the orders that sent the nurses or to the nurses themselves. In contrast, the Red Cross nurses that were serving at Camp Zachary Taylor, were issued individual letters of karmic commendation by the army. And in the Red Cross records of the epidemic at Camp Zachary Taylor. The nurses assigned there are listed individually by name and dates of service. At the end of that list, there was a little asterisk and an italicized print it there was a notation that some Catholic sisters volunteered in the emergency hospitals during the crisis. And that was all the recognition that was ever given. Fortunately, the scissors were not working for the praise or approval of others because they didn't get any. So just as well that they weren't. physicians and patients, however, expressed considerable gratitude to their for their work. And we just have some quotes for those.

And we'll close with this final group shot that was taken fairly soon after the assisters arrived probably during the second week of October, and included 66 of the 88 that serve. So that's a pretty good group, and you see his there with them. Our good friend, Father Barrett, and the habits all look quite because they were wearing men's night shirts backwards over their habits, you know, as a nursing, sanitary measure. Thanks to all of the many people that provided us with information and records. References. Thank you very much.

Unknown Speaker  39:16
We have some time for question and answers. If you just raise your hand. I'll be glad to pass the mic to you and you can ask your question. Okay.
Dr. Marian Thompson  39:26

You say it could have been the Kansas flu. How did you determine or focus in on the Kansas flu if if flu
was occurring naturally all over the world at

that particular time of year?

Did you all hear the question? Okay. She asked why did we focus in on the Kansas flow because maybe
the flu was occurring in many places. We didn't determine that the people who have studied this
influenza feel that that is where it started. However, I don't think we really know exactly where it
started. We have read so many stories about it started in Britain, it started in Canada. It started here, it
started there. So I don't think anyone will ever know the final answer. But certainly the scholars who
have studied this most recently feel that the major thrust of this came from this flu outbreak in in
Kansas in early 1918. The chances are, I mean, if you know anything about flu, it probably out there
were probably outbreaks throughout the world with with a similar h1 and one virus. But the one that
they seem to be focusing on in regard to the soldiers came from Kansas. Can we get a copy of the
presentation? I'm sorry, can we get a copy of the presentation? You can if you tell us who you are and
how to do that. I think I'm looking at you. I'm fairly certain that the presentation is available on the
Sisters of Loretto website. Do you know that for sure. Okay, we had been down there with a similar
presentation last September. And sister Eleanor asked us if they could post the PowerPoint on their
website. So you might check there but still give us your details when my grandmother died?