

## TALES FROM THE WASTELAND

# Unprepared

It's 1918 all over again.  
By Barry Perryman, Ph.D.

**B**eginning in January 1918 and lasting until about December 1920, two waves of influenza were responsible for the deaths of 50 to 100 million people worldwide. It is still unclear exactly where the outbreak began, but it is certain that troop movements in and out of the trenches of war-torn Europe brought it to the United States. In fact, improved methods of transportation at the beginning of the 20th century were likely the cause of its quick and widespread movement across the globe.

Influenza paralyzed day-to-day life in the countries, villages and towns where it landed. It disrupted schools, hospitals, fire departments, police departments, transportation systems, and almost every facet of life. My grandmother told stories of how folks would put together baskets of food, medicines, and laundry for the families who

had contracted it. Rather than go inside the houses for fear of infection, they would leave the baskets on the front porch. There were so many dead that grave diggers couldn't bury them all in a timely fashion because they too had the flu.

My paternal grandfather serves as a good example of how things went. On Oct. 20-21, 1918, he lost his wife, a nephew, his youngest daughter (and the child she was carrying), and her husband. Four adults living in the same house died in one 24-hour period. Now that's some hard rain, and their story is no exception. This went on all over the country during that awful time. According to the Department of Health and Human Services, in the United States about 28 percent of the population contracted influenza, and 500,000 to 675,000 died. Neither the United States nor the world was prepared for this cataclysmic and disruptive event.

Considering recent occurrences, has anything changed? We are still unprepared. *Atlantic* magazine released a piece last October that dealt with the mysterious, polio-like disease that was rattling around the country.

Neurologists working on the challenge seem to think it may be a more virulent form of the Enterovirus 68 that swept across the United States last summer. According to its website, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) denies any relationship between the outbreak and the coincidental arrival of thousands of illegal, unaccompanied minors to the United States in 2014. The CDC claims the children had no symptoms. The Association of American Physicians and Surgeons responded to that claim by reminding

the CDC that people do serve as carriers of diseases for which they have no symptoms (something CDC must have forgotten from its Diseases 101 class).

The Ebola virus situation is no different. The Department of Homeland Security and the CDC

both took the Keystone Cops approach to managing this challenge. It could be called a comedy of errors if people weren't actually dying of the disease. CDC director Dr. Tom Frieden's now famous official guidance on Ebola gave us the confidence-inspiring statement: "You cannot get Ebola by sitting next to someone on a bus...but infected or exposed persons should not ride public transportation because they could transmit the disease to someone else." Now I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer, but it didn't take me long to figure out: (1) That he's not a very good liar; and (2) Those who are calling the shots are incompetent beyond any and all description. Of course, his official response was predicated on the presumption that U.S. citizens are completely stupid and will believe anything.

We have a lot of deranged people in the world now who are emboldened to blow themselves up in order to kill as many Americans as they can take with them. It seems to me that if they are willing to do that, they just might be willing to go to the trouble of infecting themselves with who knows what, cross our somewhat invisible border, and once here maybe throw themselves into Hetch Hetchy Reservoir or Lake Michigan. About 80 percent of all beef slaughtered and shipped in the United States is controlled by four companies. It's not hard to imagine how some group of nut jobs (foreign or domestic) could somehow improvise a coordinated effort to contaminate our supply chain of beef with mad cow disease or some other virulent bug. U.S.

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*News and World Report* confirms that a van full of Ebola-infected blood was recently stolen in Guinea. Now combine that with tainting the drinking water of millions of people. Talk about disruption of daily life! It could cripple our infrastructure for months, if not decades, not to mention the death toll.

In 1918 we didn't have the wherewithal to anticipate or deal with the influenza outbreak, but we certainly have knowledge of the threat today. Rather than using the Ebola and Enterovirus 68 situations as proving grounds, testing and learning opportunities for our national safety, all we have done is expose our weakness to our enemies. Can you imagine a highly sophisticated, motivated, intelligent, well-funded think tank of terrorists listening to the television when our official government spokesman talks out of both sides of his mouth? I would guarantee you part of the response would be, "Those guys are idiots." What does that official statement tell terrorists? How about, you can smuggle Ebola or something else into the United States with no problems and, once you get here, the government will suggest you don't ride public transportation. (I have to quit thinking about this now or I'm gonna lose what's left of my mind.)

Where is the protection from enemies, both foreign and domestic, that our federal government is specifically authorized to provide? Given its recent behavior, those in charge don't exactly inspire a lot of confidence. Our national leadership has to get better across the board—period. Ignoring problems and hoping they will go away or passing solutions through a political filter are not pathways to success.

The future of our way of life is at stake. One of the responsibilities of a shepherd is to look out for predators while the sheep have their heads down eating. If the appointed shepherd isn't keeping a good watch, some of the sheep are gonna get eaten. If recent history isn't enough to call for new, competent leadership, I don't know what is. As for me, I don't want to see folks leaving baskets of food on front porches like it's 1918 all over again. ■

*Your Wasteland Guide is Barry L. Perryman, who has a Ph.D. in rangeland ecology. He is an educator, researcher, author, speaker and part-time philosopher specializing in natural resource management issues of the western states. He may be contacted at bperryman1296@charter.net.*

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