

Alice Williamson McAdams to Mary McAdams Payne
November 16, 1918
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Letter from Alice Williamson McAdams to her daughter, Mary McAdams Payne.

This letter was written on November 16, 1918. Alice contracted influenza and died only one month later, on December 18, 1918. This was during the great influenza epidemic of 1918.

World War I claimed an estimated 16 million lives. The influenza epidemic that swept the world in 1918 killed an estimated 50 million people. One fifth of the world's population was attacked by this deadly virus. Within months, it had killed more people than any other illness in recorded history.

The plague emerged in two phases. In late spring of 1918, the first phase, known as the "three-day fever," appeared without warning. Few deaths were reported. Victims recovered after a few days. When the disease surfaced again that fall, it was far more severe. Scientists, doctors, and health officials could not identify this disease which was striking so fast and so viciously, eluding treatment and defying control. Some victims died within hours of their first symptoms. Others succumbed after a few days; their lungs filled with fluid and they suffocated to death.

The plague did not discriminate. It was rampant in urban and rural areas, from the densely populated East coast to the remotest parts of Alaska. Young adults, usually unaffected by these types of infectious diseases, were among the hardest hit groups along with the elderly and young children. The flu afflicted over 25 percent of the U.S. population. In one year, the average life expectancy in the United States dropped by 12 years.

An estimated 675,000 Americans died of influenza during the pandemic, ten times as many as in World War I. Of the U.S. soldiers who died in Europe, half of them fell to the influenza virus and not to the enemy. An estimated 43,000 servicemen mobilized for WWI died of influenza. 1918 would go down as unforgettable year of suffering and death and yet of peace.

Saturday Nov 16

Dear Mary,

I intended to write you yesterday but neglected it. It just rained here yesterday and night before last too. We intended to send for Era yesterday but it rained so we couldnt. I am getting along alright but she keeps thinking it would be better for her to come home and stay awhile. I know it will set her back in her studies but I guess we will send for her as soon as the roads dry off. Have you taken the flue yet

Pearl is still here dont know how long whe will stay but am going to keep her a good while if she will stay I dont have but very little fever but I am mighty slow gaining any strength. But don't be uneasy for we will keep writing you and when you feel strong enough I want you to come.

Mama

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