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Humor and Verse in Newspaper Print:  
Social Commentaries on the “Spanish Flu” Pandemic of 1918-1919

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# Humor and Verse in Newspaper Print: Social Commentaries on the “Spanish Flu” Pandemic of 1918-1919

Bonnie M. Miller

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## Abstract

There has been a constant stream through the Covid-19 crisis of pandemic- and quarantine-related parody and humor consumed via various social media platforms. Such songs, memes, posts, and tweets provide a barometer of popular perceptions of the virus’s physical and social impacts, its means of spread and mitigation, and government response. During the 1918-1919 “Spanish Flu” outbreak, a parallel form of social commentary circulated broadly in nationwide newspapers: printed humor in the form of puns, comics, and poetic verse. These texts provided space for catharsis, levity, and reflection, creating a shared culture of experience for localized communities of readers. Through textual analysis of the newspaper humor pages, this study analyzes these witty verses and popular cartoons to gain insight into how Americans coped with the pandemic and its effects on domestic and public life.

In 1918, former lightweight boxing champion of the world Battling Nelson came down with the “Spanish flu”<sup>1</sup> and eventually recovered. His celebrity status made his influenza case national news, not unlike contemporary press reporting of athletes like basketball star Patrick Ewing or movie stars like Tom Hanks who contracted Covid-19 in 2020. The humor pages were quick to capitalize on public interest in Nelson’s case, as shown by this excerpt of a highly reprinted poem:

They tried to rend your slats in twain.

Bat Nelson:

You never showed a sign of pain,

Bat Nelson.

A hundred men have walloped you,  
And still you smiled, as brave men do.

And then you fell for Spanish flu,

Bat Nelson.

A fever burns upon your brow,

Bat Nelson.

And you are up against it now,

Bat Nelson.

And all the pals you staked of old.

When you were young and strong and  
bold,

Are distant now and mighty cold,

Bat Nelson.<sup>2</sup>

Why might readers chuckle at Bat Nelson’s expense? Humor is often rooted in incongruities, and this verse poked fun at

this world-class pugilist, who had faced great battles in the ring but now “fell” victim to Spanish flu. Popular fascination with and even gossip about the illness of well-known public figures took the disease out of the local realm and reinforced how anyone, regardless of their physical strength or financial worth, was potentially vulnerable.

During the waning stages of World War I, in the summer of 1918, came the arrival of an influenza outbreak that ultimately took the lives of about 675,000 Americans and 50 million people worldwide. Even still, these astounding numbers don’t account for the 95% of people with reported cases who did not die from the disease.<sup>3</sup> The pandemic came in three waves; the second wave, which occurred between September and December 1918, was the deadliest. This flu outbreak was unusual in that it had a higher death rate for people between the ages of twenty and forty than had previous manifestations of influenza. Predominantly African-American, Mexican-American, and Indigenous communities as well as people of lower socioeconomic status were the hardest hit. The epidemic was due to the spread of an H1N1 virus, though the viral source of infection was not known at the time and only came to light after the fact, in the 1930s.<sup>4</sup>

Newspapers reported on the epidemic in their feature spreads, but this analysis examines the proliferation of Spanish flu references on the news funny pages, in their

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1 I will hereafter refer to the illness as the Spanish flu without quotation marks with the implicit understanding that the disease was not of Spanish origin but rather, was popularly referred to by this label during that time. I would like to give special thanks to Christopher McKnight Nichols, whose invaluable feedback greatly enhanced the substance of this essay.

2 “Another View Bat for Old Bat Nelson,” *Washington Herald*, October 16, 1918, p. 8.

3 Christopher McKnight, Nichols, et. al., “Reconsidering the 1918–19 Influenza Pandemic in the Age of COVID-19,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 19, no. 4 (2020): 652.

4 Nancy K. Bristow, *American Pandemic: The Lost Worlds of the 1918 Influenza Epidemic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3-4, 21.

jokes, puns, verses, and cartoons. During the 2020 pandemic, there has been a profusion of Covid-19 parody and humor circulating widely via multiple social media platforms. In many ways, the printed and visual texts from 1918-19 parallel the social commentary we see in the present moment, despite circulating through an early-twentieth-century means of mass communication. A historical expert of the Spanish flu epidemic, Nancy Bristow, has argued that catastrophe often leads to the construction of shared cultural narratives of understanding and coping through crisis.<sup>5</sup> These texts played a critical role in shaping popular responses to the epidemic, providing a barometer of popular perceptions of and frustrations with the virus's physical and social impacts.

Readers of nineteenth and early twentieth-century newspapers had become habituated to seeing poetic verses, one-liners, and cartoons in their local papers. As Elizabeth Lorang has shown, "Readers encountered poetry in their daily lives, and such newspaper poetry had the potential to shape their experience and interpretation of major events, local happenings, and social and personal beliefs."<sup>6</sup> Such texts were widely reprinted in newspapers country-wide, often anonymously or with inaccurate attribution. Readers may have perceived these texts as locally produced when, in

fact, they were often reprinted from other papers. Perfectly suited for being clipped for scrapbooks and recirculated amongst friends and family, these accessible texts were the nearest equivalent to "viral media" back in that period. Michael Cohen has shown how such texts "facilitated actions, like reading, writing, reciting, copying, inscribing, scissoring, exchanging, or circulating that position people within densely complex webs of relation."<sup>7</sup> The appeal of these texts for readers came from their repetitive refrains; their catchy rhymes and meters; their blending of literary, emotional, and informational content; and, their deployment of a lexicon of familiar cultural reference points, such as Bat Nelson's recent illness in the example above.<sup>8</sup>

Given the timing of the outbreak, the nation's experience with the Spanish flu pandemic was deeply intertwined with enduring a global war. Nancy Bristow has argued, "The war and the epidemic were soon conflated into a single struggle in many Americans' minds."<sup>9</sup> Evidence of this can be seen in the influenza jokes published in nationwide papers, which often made analogies between the disease and the German enemy, both in terms of likening the flu bug to the foreign threat or directly accusing Germany of having a hand in spreading the disease. Here are a few

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5 Bristow, *American Pandemic*, 8.

6 Elizabeth Lorang, "Poetry, Washington D.C.'s Hospital Newspapers, and the Civil War," in *Civil War Washington: History, Place, and Digital Scholarship*, edited by Susan C. Lawrence (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 164.

7 Michael C. Cohen, *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 6-7.

8 Ryan Cordell and Abby Mullen, "'Fugitive Verses': The Circulation of Poems in Nineteenth-Century American Newspapers," *American Periodicals: A Journal of History & Criticism* 27:1 (April 2017): 29-52; Cohen, *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America*, 1-15; Andrew Hobbs and Claire Januszewski, "How Local Newspapers Came to Dominate Victorian Poetry Publishing" *Victorian Poetry* 52:1 (Spring 2014): 65-87; Natalie M. Houston, "Newspaper Poems: Material Texts in the Public Sphere," *Victorian Studies* 50:2 (Winter 2008): 233-242.

9 Bristow, *American Pandemic*, 10.

representative one-liners:

What we would like, too, is the unconditional surrender of the Spanish influenza germ. – *Syracuse Herald*, October 26, 1918, p. 8.

Wuncewuz Kaiser bill has a case of Spanish flu. Now is the time for every little flu germ to do its patriotic duty. – *Logansport Pharos Reporter* [Indiana], November 30, 1918, p. 4.

Some folks think this Spanish flu ought rather to be called German. And since we think of it, the disease is just about as welcome as the Huns would be. – *Sullivan Daily Times* [Indiana], October 23, 1918, p. 2.

The kaiser's shivers are not caused by the Spanish flu, but by the American grip. – *Baltimore American* [Reprinted in *Lincoln Evening State Journal*, November 13, 1918, p. 8.]

The wordplay of these jokes hinged on associations between the illness and specific national identities. To be sure, even though the epidemic became widely known as the “Spanish” flu, the outbreak is not believed to have begun there. Historians claim that it received that popular label because Spain did not censor reports of its spread, resulting in wider press exposure of the epidemic in Spain than elsewhere in Europe.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, the use of nationalist terminology for the disease spawned the use of puns that correlated European powers,

especially Germany, with the disease and likened military victory with subduing the epidemic. The nationalization of flu terminology became an integral part of wartime martial language, akin to patriotic-nationalist rhetoric conflating draft “slackers” with later mask “slackers”. Anglo-American newspapers and government officials often cast the disease in racist-nationalist terminology in order to deflect blame and leverage the epidemic to build patriotic sentiment around the war. It should be noted, however, that other nations employed similar rhetorical strategies (Spain called it the “French” flu, Germans termed it the “Russian pest,” etc.). American writers like Katherine Anne Porter, Willa Cather, and Thomas Wolf wrote about the anxiety produced from the invisibility of this public health threat;<sup>11</sup> counter to that, however, ascribing nationalist labels to the illness gave it an identity to direct popular attentions and fix accountability, even if it was misplaced. In line with this martial framework defining the epidemic, an Indianapolis newspaper printed:

The Germans have poisoned the wells  
in France;  
They have poisoned the soldiers' too.  
Now, do you suppose that they have  
been  
The cause of our 'Spanish flu?'<sup>12</sup>

*Omaha Bee* cartoonist Doane Powell's pictorial spread further demonstrates how the epidemic was viewed through the lens of the war (figure 1). With a magnified focus on the “flu germ,” Powell caricatured it to

10 Mark Honigsbaum, *The Pandemic Century: One Hundred Years of Panic, Hysteria, and Hubris* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 26.

11 Nichols, et. al., “Reconsidering the 1918–19 Influenza Pandemic in the Age of COVID-19,” 649–50.

12 *Indianapolis Shortridge Daily Echo*, November 8, 1918, p. 3.

have German features, using familiar martial imagery of the German armed forces. He further demonized the German threat by racializing the flu germ to appear in the form of a fly or mosquito. The cartoon also provided social commentary on the outbreak's impacts, showing, for example, people running away from a man sneezing, despite it merely being due to hay fever. Such a relatable scene of panic when

2020, with journalist Bob Woodward: “I was in the White House a couple of days ago, meeting with 10 people in the Oval Office and a guy sneezed innocently, not a horrible, you know, just a sneeze. The entire room bailed out, OK, including me, by the way.”<sup>13</sup> Powell’s cartoon further mocked public aversion with mask-wearing and the closing of public meeting places, particularly bars.

In addition to framing the outbreak



Figure 1: Doane Powell, “German ‘Flu,’” *Omaha Daily Bee*, October 13, 1918, p. 26.

exposed to common everyday symptoms is reminiscent of similar fears generated by Covid-19. In fact, CBS’s *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* as well as many news outlets found humor in how President Donald Trump himself, who resisted wearing masks and often downplayed the virus’s impact, nearly recreated this scene, claiming in a taped interview on April 13,

in racist or nationalist terms, the humor pages poked fun at the social implications of the epidemic on domestic life. Some of these squibs took an explicitly gendered slant. For example, some humorists found a silver lining in the crisis for women with the government’s shut down of bars and other public spaces of male vice.<sup>14</sup> The influenza outbreak occurred amidst political and

13 Cited in Zachary Halaschak, “‘So Easily Transmissible’: Trump Recounts Room-Clearing Sneeze In Woodward Tape.” [online] *Washington Examiner*, September 14, 2020. Available at: <<https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/so-easily-transmissible-trump-recounts-room-clearing-sneeze-in-woodward-tape>> [Accessed 21 September 2020].

14 Nancy Bristow demonstrates that this gender-inflected domestic humor was also present in the print culture surrounding the 1889-1890 influenza outbreak. See *American Pandemic*, 28.

social transformation. Women succeeded in gaining the right to vote with the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920, and temperance reformers (many of whom were also women) who advocated for Prohibition achieved the passage of the 18th Amendment to the Constitution in 1919, prohibiting the manufacture, sale or transportation of alcohol. Temperance reformers argued that alcohol consumption exacerbated social problems like poverty and domestic abuse. By late 1917, twenty-three states had already become “dry,” meaning they had passed state-wide prohibition laws.<sup>15</sup> Of those remaining “wet” states, the closure of bars during the epidemic held even greater social consequence than just containing the virus’s spread, leading humorists to play upon Prohibitionist themes. Printed in the *Lima Daily News*, “MISS LIMA” says, “Spanish Flu has no terrors for wifey who knows the closing order will keep hubby home nights.”<sup>16</sup> *The St. Paul Catholic Bulletin*, a newspaper aimed at a religious audience and especially women, similarly printed a satirical verse celebrating the good fortune of Danny’s wife since “he’s working now six days a week” and “Each week he hands me out his pay / And never asks a cent!” It concludes, “When Uncle Sam sent out the word, / The grog-shops all closed down. / My Dan can’t get a drop to drink / Since Spanish flu struck town!”<sup>17</sup> While wives rejoiced in the curtailing of their husbands’ drinking and spending habits, other verses sought to gratify a male audience. *The Rock Island Argus*, for example, printed a short poem describing one soldier’s amusing lament that the Spanish flu did not find him in the presence of a lovely and

nurturing female nurse (figure 2). Whether through lampooning drunkard husbands or lustful male patients, humorists integrated the pandemic into familiar refrains of domestic humor, allowing readers a moment of levity and emotional release while also connecting to real-life domestic issues.

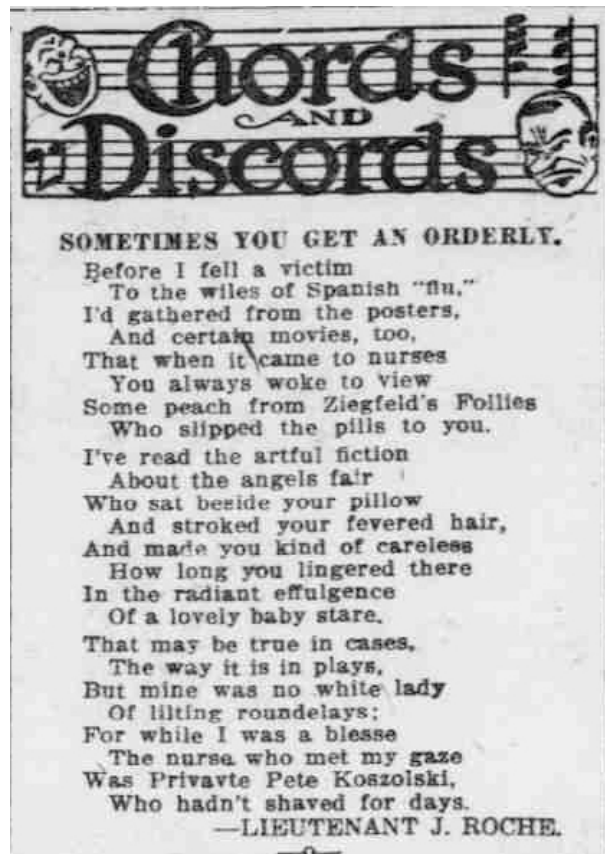


Figure 2: “Sometimes You Get an Orderly,” *Rock Island Argus* [Illinois], May 7, 1919, p. 6.

While some printed texts offered a cathartic laugh, others served an informational purpose, educating readers about the symptoms and potential treatments of the illness. One popular verse took the reader through the distinctive indications of Spanish flu: “A splitting head

15 W. J. Rorabaugh, *Prohibition: A Concise History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 44.

16 *Lima Daily News*, October 10, 1918, p. 6.

17 “It’s An Ill Wind,” *Saint Paul Catholic Bulletin*, December 28, 1918, p. 4.



and limbs of lead / A burning throat and dry,  
 / Add to these woes a snuffling nose / A red  
 and streamy eye / Thermometer beneath  
 my tongue / Reads 'one-ought-four point  
 two' / Instead of normal 'ninety-eight' / I've  
 got the Spanish flu."<sup>18</sup> Such poems may have  
 helped readers feel a sense of control over  
 what was happening by informing them  
 about what to expect if they contracted  
 the disease. At the same time, printed texts  
 also broadly circulated misinformation  
 about the disease, its prevention, and  
 treatments. Bud Fisher's widely reprinted  
 comic strip, *Mutt and Jeff*, found humor in  
 the widespread public confusion over the  
 illness and misuse of potential therapeutics  
 (figure 3). Without proven treatments, many  
 doctors overprescribed aspirin and quinine,  
 a known treatment for malaria, for their  
 flu patients, which often weren't effective.<sup>19</sup>  
 In one cartoon, Mutt asks Jeff why he has a  
 container of quinine, and Jeff responds, "I've  
 got the Spanish 'flu,' Mutt." Jeff chastises him  
 for not actually understanding the disease.  
 To prove his ignorance, Mutt challenges

him to give a sentence that uses the word  
 "influenza," to which Jeff replies, "I went  
 home last night and opened the window  
 and in flew Enza." The punchline would  
 have resonated with readers of that era  
 who knew of the popular children's tune,  
 "I had a little bird, and its name was Enza,  
 I opened the window and in flew Enza," a  
 nursery rhyme sung to the melody of "Ring  
 Around the Rosie."<sup>20</sup> Examining this cartoon  
 from our contemporary moment, we are  
 reminded that familiarity with "influenza" as  
 a disease was hardly universal in the 1910s.  
 Disease had been understood for centuries  
 as an imbalance of bodily humors or fluids  
 (melancholy, phlegm, bile, and blood), and  
 by the time of the epidemic, the medical  
 community—never mind the public—was  
 still new to accepting germ theory and  
 recognizing discrete diseases that affected  
 specific tissues and cells in the body. This  
 cartoon aptly pointed to a widespread lack  
 of public familiarity and knowledge about  
 the illness and its effects.

Given the lack of time-tested

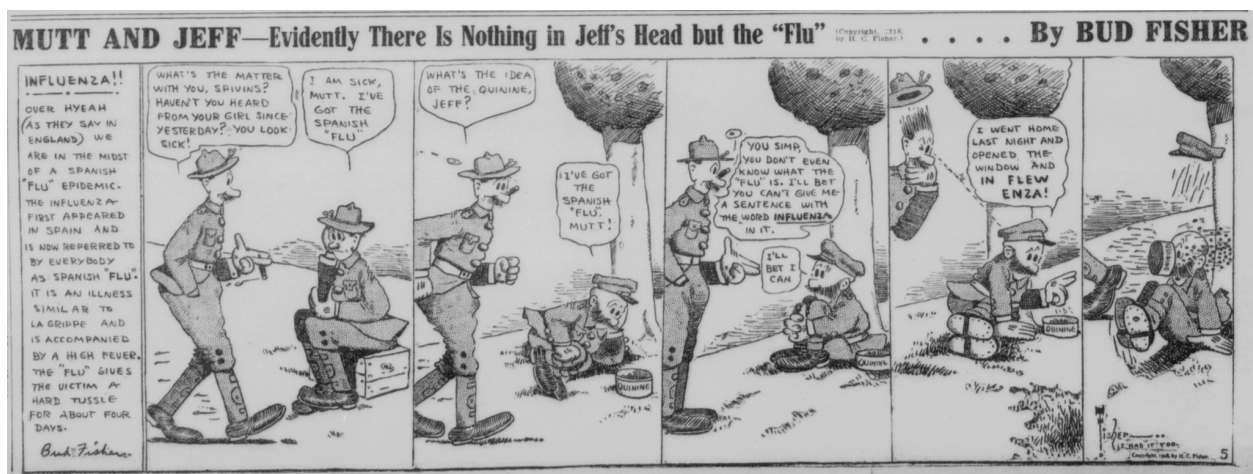


Figure 3: Bud Fisher, "Mutt and Jeff," *Boston Daily Globe*, August 13, 1918, p. 6.

18 "The Latest Victim Sighs," *Washington Post*, September 29, 1918, p. 64.

19 Laura Spinney, *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How It Changed The World* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2017), 121-126.

20 Another widely reprinted political cartoon that utilized the same punchline was one installment of W. R. Allman's "Doings of the Duffs" comic strip series. See *Burlington Gazette* [Iowa], October 23, 1918, p. 4.

treatments, some of those infected turned to homeopathic remedies to get relief. The humor pages served as a public forum to share ideas about managing the symptoms:

I will tell the world,  
You need not worry,  
The Flu left me in a hurry,  
That Castor oil was hard to take,  
And sometimes made me lie awake.

That bromo dope tastes worse than  
soap,  
But I'm telling you, this is the dope.  
Drink plenty of water and some  
whiskey,  
The Flu won't then be so frisky.

It is not necessary to go to bed,  
But keep quite warm with a level  
head,  
Take a hot sweat every day,  
And you bet the Flu won't want to stay.<sup>21</sup>

Such texts effectively provided a cultural repository of folk remedies—from Castor oil to whiskey—to aid in recovery and healing. Castor oil and Epsom salts were recommended to induce a laxative effect. While some treatments touted in print may have had some benefits for patients, many were quack remedies. A newspaper advertisement for Carl Wilke's Interurban Stand in Sandusky, Ohio, for example, advocated for the remedial effect of smoking and chewing tobacco. It printed this verse: "Smoke your pipe / Or Take a Chew / And start your fight / Against the 'Spanish

Flu,'" which was either an attempt to seek attention through sarcastic quip or mislead deliberately for purposes of promoting sales.<sup>22</sup> The press disseminated erroneous, even dangerous, information to readers about how to prevent or treat the disease, including smoking, consuming alcohol (which was particularly controversial given the push toward Prohibition), inhaling chlorine gas, and rubbing turpentine on one's face.<sup>23</sup>

Not all of the printed health guidance was misguided, however. Many printed texts reminded readers to get good sleep, eat well, wash their hands, and cover their coughs and sneezes. In the opening stanza of a poem composed by Mrs. O. E. Sam, she cautioned readers:

A barrel of disinfectant's comes to  
Our house to stay.  
To sterilize the dishes and scare the  
germs away.  
To shoot the flies off the porch and  
kill the 'skeeters too.  
To mop the floors and spray the  
walls to keep away the 'Flu';  
And all of us children when the sup-  
per things is done.  
We gather' round to hear the news  
and 'taint a bit of fun  
A ' listening to the awful tales the  
paper tells about.  
How the Spanish Flu'll git you  
Ef you  
Don't  
Watch  
Out.<sup>24</sup>

21 "Sure Cure for the Flu," *Sandpoint Northern Idaho News*, November 26, 1918, p. 6.

22 Advertisement, *Sandusky Star Journal*, October 18, 1918, p. 8.

23 For a popular poem suggesting such remedies, see "Jimmie," *Quincy Daily Journal* [Illinois], October 11, 1918, p. 6.

24 "Spanish Flu Verses by Mrs. O. E. Sams," *Harrisonburg Daily News Record* [Virginia], October 25, 1918, p. 4.

Through humor and repetitive refrain, Mrs. Sam urged readers to sanitize and stay vigilant. A short verse in the *Chester Times* similarly encouraged readers to take careful measures in public: “If you’d dodge the Spanish ‘flu’ / Do not sneeze and do not chew / any gum in public places. / Then the microbes won’t get you.”<sup>25</sup> Some of these recommendations were well intentioned while others were tongue and cheek, but they highlight a collective attempt to foster awareness of how to mitigate the disease’s spread.

Humorists and cartoonists took the pulse of a pandemic culture, relating many areas of concern that readers shared. One popular theme captured in these printed texts was the commonplace anxiety of misreading everyday symptoms as Spanish flu. One poet lamented how the epidemic had turned him into a hypochondriac: “My beard seemed to / Have grown pretty / Fast and tough / Overnight— / Spanish Flu! / Breakfast didn’t seem / To have its regular / Taste— / Spanish Flu!”<sup>26</sup> Such poems echoed an apprehensive climate that led people to overanalyze every feeling as a potential indication of illness. Cartoonist Walter Rease Allman conveyed a similar sentiment in one episode of his “Doings of the Duffs” comic series, which circulated broadly through the Scripps syndicate Newspaper Enterprise Association service (figure 4). When a baby sneezes after accidentally spilling pepper, the whole family begins to sneeze. The humor of the cartoon resides in their highly relatable reaction—immediate panic that they have all caught



Figure 4: Walter Rease Allman, “Doings of the Duffs,” *Burlington Gazette* [Iowa], October 29, 1918, p. 4.

the flu.<sup>27</sup> Maurice Ketten, whose “Can You Beat It!” comic strip appeared in many New York newspapers, penned a cartoon acknowledging another prevalent fear: catching the flu at the doctor’s office (figure 5). In this cartoon, a man goes to the doctor’s office to see about a cut on his finger and gets exposed to the flu from sick patients in the waiting room. Ketten taps into popular anxieties surrounding the safety of doctor’s offices and hospitals that may have deterred people from seeking necessary medical attention. This fear has resonance across pandemic cultures, from the Spanish flu to Covid-19; according to a Centers for Disease Control report, an estimated 41% of

25 *Chester Times*, October 7, 1918, p. 5.

26 “The Flu,” *Lowell Sun*, October 17, 1918, p. 6.

27 For an analysis of other comic strips focusing on the Spanish flu, see Jared Gardner, “The Spanish Flu in Comics Strips, 1918,” *Drawing Blood*, April 5, 2020, <https://drawing-blood.org/outbreaks/the-spanish-flu-in-comics-strips-1918/>.

American adults delayed or avoided medical care, including urgent care, in the spring of 2020.<sup>28</sup>

These printed texts put into words and image the fears, hopes, and shared suffering engendered by the pandemic. Some rhymes

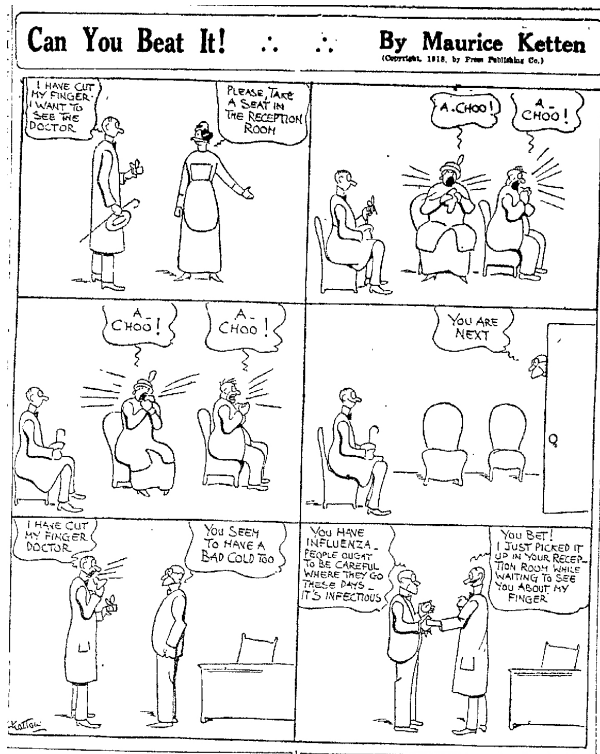


Figure 5: Maurice Ketten, “Can You Beat It!” *Syracuse Herald*, October 26, 1918, p. 8.

downplayed the threat and urged readers to live without fear, claiming optimism would yield a positive outcome: “Just think of pleasant, cheerful things, forget the microbe gang; Just talk of cabbages and kings and let the flu go hang.”<sup>29</sup> And regardless of whether

you were legitimately ill or not, some verses joked that the flu was a foolproof excuse for whenever trouble finds you: “If you’re feeling pretty blue, / If you girl’s at outs with you, / If your cred’tor’s want to sue— / You blame the flu.”<sup>30</sup> Along similar lines, print culture provided a space for disbelievers to proclaim that the public health threat was overblown. A Georgia newspaper printed the joke in the early fall of 1919: “Some of those big doctors up north are going to be disappointed if Spanish flu does not return this fall, as they insist on predicting that it will do so.”<sup>31</sup> Such a statement, though said in jest, gleamed of resentment at the negative tone of medical authorities calling for vigilance with their doomsaying predictions. Other writers confronted the physical and emotional trauma of the Spanish flu head on. A reprinted poem by Dick Coffin, titled “The Scar,” described a flu victim’s recovery from the physical effects of the malady. Although his physical symptoms have passed, his emotional scars lingered: “And yet, a spot all leperous and searing, / Is growing where it takes its daily toll, / In durance vile I sense the fates are leaving, / While mocking at the scar upon my soul.”<sup>32</sup> The heaviness of such verse contrasts sharply with the levity of others; nonetheless, in aggregate these pandemic-inspired texts provided a vocabulary for readers to express their pain and frustrations, to cope collectively with the devastation that the disease had wreaked upon individuals, families, and communities.

28 Mark É. Czeisler, et. al., “Delay or Avoidance of Medical Care Because of COVID-19–Related Concerns - United States, June 2020,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 69:36 (September 11, 2020): 1250. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, September 10, 2020), <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6936a4.htm>.

29 “Scared,” *Ogden Standard* [Utah], March 24, 1920, p. 3.

30 “Blaming it on the Flu,” *Mena Evening Star* [Arkansas], October 17, 1918, p. 6.

31 *Madisonian* [Georgia], September 5, 1919, p. 12.

32 Dick Coffin, “The Scar,” *Poison-Flathead Courier*, November 14, 1918, p. 3.

In one of the most reprinted poems during the pandemic, J. P. McVoy in the *Chicago Tribune* conveyed this darker tone of the illness's physical agonies (figure 6). His descriptions made intelligible the brutal physical and psychological effects of the illness and provided a communal expression of “the misery out of despair” that so many flu victims and their families felt. McVoy conveyed the desperate feeling

THE FLU

When your back is broke and  
your eyes are blurred,  
And your shin bones knock and  
your tongue is furred,  
And your tonsils squeak and your  
hair gets dry,  
And you're doggone sure that  
you're going to die,  
But you're skeered you won't  
and afraid you will,  
Just drag to bed and have your  
chill,  
And pray the Lord to see you  
thru,  
For you've got the flu, boy, you-  
've got the flu.

When your toes curl up and your  
belt goes flat,  
And you're twice as mean as a  
Thomas cat,  
And life is a long and dismal  
curse,  
And your food all tastes like a  
hard-boiled hearse;  
When your lattice aches and your  
head's a buzz,  
And nothing is as it ever was,  
Here are my sad regrets to you,  
You've got the flu, boy, you've  
got the flu.

What is it like, this Spanish flu?  
Ask me, brother, for I've been  
thru.  
It is by Misery out of Despair,  
It pulls your teeth and curls your  
hair;  
It thins your blood and brays  
your bones,  
And fills your craw with moans  
and grca's,  
And sometimes, maybe, you get  
well.  
Some call it flu—I call it hell.  
--J. P. McVoy in Chicago Tribune

that “you’re going to die” and concluded that “Some call it flu—I call it hell.” The sacrilege of likening the flu to “hell” in print was shocking indeed, so much so that many newspapers felt the need to excise the word in their reprints of this poem, replacing just that word with a single line: “I call it ——. ”<sup>33</sup> Censored or not, the implication was clear, achieving the same chilling effect.

It was neither their aesthetic quality nor their medical accuracy that drove consumption of these popular texts, but rather their cultural resonance, relatability, and accessibility to a wide audience of readers. Even as some of these texts narrated stories of pain, loss, and helplessness, they may have also helped to build community, promote healing, and imbue the experiences of living through the pandemic with shared meaning. I close with this short verse, which like many humorous tidbits from 1918-1919, yielded both comfort and fear, providing for readers a space for catharsis, levity, and reflection during a scary and uncertain time in American history:

A Jingle For Today.  
If pains lambast and wallop you,  
If you are tired and feeling blue—  
There's one thing sure that must be  
true—  
You've got the Spanish flu.  
- *The Quincy Daily Journal*  
[Illinois], October 8, 1918, p. 6.

Figure 6: J. P. McVoy, “The Flu,” *Neosho Daily Democrat*, January 8, 1919, p. 2.

33 Two examples of newspapers that reprinted variations of the poem with the word “hell” excised was “The Flu,” *The Galva News* [Illinois], March 13, 1919, p. 3; “A Diagnosis,” *Logansport Daily Tribune* [Indiana], December 15, 1918, p. 11.

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