

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH MS. JOSIE MABEL BROWN

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A Winding Sheet and a Wooden Box: A Navy Nurse Recalls the Great Flu Epidemic of 1918-1919

Josie Mabel Brown was born on a farm in southwestern Missouri in 1886. When the harvest failed 12 years later, the family was forced to move by covered wagon back to her father's former home in Illinois. "I ran practically half way across the state of Missouri, I think, because the horses went too slow," she recalled. When her brothers left home to seek their fortunes, Josie helped with the farm work, driving the horses before the rake, harrow, and disk.

But a backbreaking farm life was not what Josie had in mind. She thought about medicine and becoming a doctor or nurse. In 1914 she began her nurse training and graduated 3 years later just a few months after the United States entered World War I. She remembers that new graduate registered nurses were then obligated to serve in the military. "I had to go. There was no choice about it. When my paper came back, it said, 'You are in the Navy now. Do not leave St. Louis; do not change your address; do not change your telephone number.'"

Miss Brown was interviewed by her niece, Rachel Wedeking, a few years before her death at age 104.

One day I was at the theater and suddenly the screen went blank. Then a message appeared across the screen "Would Josie M. Brown please report to the ticket office?" I went back and there was a Western Union boy with a telegram from the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery in Washington, DC. It said, "You are called to duty. Do you have enough money to travel? And when is the earliest date that you can travel?" And I wired back, "I have money. I can pay my way." About 45 minutes later a reply came back. "Proceed to Great Lakes, Illinois. Keep strict account of your expenses. Do not pay over \$1.50 for your meals or over 50 cents for tips. You will be reimbursed."

My train was an old pullman going to Chicago. I went right through our town and saw the light in the window that mother put there. I got to Chicago in the morning. When someone opened a paper in front of me I saw "6,000 in the [Naval] hospital have Spanish Influenza in Great Lakes, Illinois." I said, "Oh, that's where I'm going. What **is** Spanish Influenza?"

I got to the gate and showed my Red Cross pin and my orders. They put me on a bus and sent me to the main hospital, then took me for my first meal in the service. It was cold pork, sweet potatoes, and apple sauce. Afterward, my supervisor took me to a ward that was supposedly caring for 42 patients. There was a man lying on the bed dying and one was lying on the floor. Another man was on a stretcher waiting for the fellow on the bed to die. We would wrap him in a winding sheet because he had stopped breathing. I don't know whether he was dead or not, but we wrapped him in a winding sheet and left nothing

but the big toe on his left foot out with a shipping tag on it to tell the man's rank, his nearest of kin, and hometown. And the ambulance carried four litters. It would bring us four live ones and take out four dead ones.

The morgues were packed almost to the ceiling with bodies stacked one on top of another. The morticians worked day and night. You could never turn around without seeing a big red truck being loaded with caskets for the train station so the bodies could be sent home.

There were so many patients we didn't have time to treat them. We didn't take temperatures; we didn't even have time to take blood pressure. We would give them a little hot whiskey toddy; that's about all we had time to do. They would have terrific nosebleeds with it. Sometimes the blood would just shoot across the room. You had to get out of the way or someone's nose would bleed all over you.

Some were delirious and some had their lungs punctured. Then their bodies would fill with air. You would feel somebody and he would be bubbles. You would see them with bubbles all through their arms. Oh, it was a horrid thing. We had to wear operating masks and gowns all the time. We worked 8 hours on a ward sometimes. If nobody had a nurse on another ward, we would go back to our quarters for an hour and then work another 8 hours. It was 16 hours a day until the epidemic was over.

The worst was over just a little before Christmas 1918. I was assigned to another ward by that time. One day a man came through and said the armistice was signed. The boys just about hit the ceiling they were so glad.

It was March 1919 when I got sick. They didn't have a room for me so they curtained me off in a ward with other women. They didn't know what I had because I was never diagnosed. I ran a temperature of 104 or 105 degrees for days; I just don't remember how many days. They put an ice cap on my head, an ice collar on my neck, and an ice pack over my heart. My heart pounded so hard that it rattled the ice; everything was rattling, including the chartboard and bedsprings.

During the epidemic, though, our Navy bought the whole city of Chicago out of sheets. There wasn't a sheet left in Chicago. All a boy got when he died was a winding sheet and a wooden box; we just couldn't get enough caskets. They died by the thousands. There were 173,000 men at Great Lakes at the time, and 6,000 were in the hospitals at the height of the epidemic. I suppose no one knows how many died. They just lost track of them.

Josie Brown was discharged from the Navy in September 1919 and took a job as a nurse in a military school.