

Pandemic Perspective for the Archives of Appalachia

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Having flipped my classes several years ago to reduce in class seat time and aid student learning, I was prepared for online teaching. ETSU OIT has done a super job of making my office computer accessible via VPN. Zoom has allowed me to attend committee meetings with colleagues and to interview medical school admissions applicants, as well as review their files. My YouTube videos have had more than 170,000 views since 2012. Just think what an awful situation this would be without computers, the web or even electricity. The Iron Lung a negative pressure non-invasive ventilator was used to aid breathing during the polio epidemic and modern mechanical volume control ventilators were developed in the 1970's.

"Unprecedented" has become a much-used cliché by politicians. Unfortunately, this COVID-19 pandemic was preceded by the much more devastating Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 that killed an estimated 50 million world-wide. Medical and scientific knowledge was far less advanced and penicillin (the first antibiotic) was not discovered by Fleming until 1928, and large-scale production via fermentation did not occur until 1944. The US had just produced enough to treat patients by 1944, which saved many injured during the Normandy invasion of WWII and beyond. My mother's mom age 38 died from the Spanish flu in February of 1919, leaving 6 young children motherless on a Henderson County farm. My Mom was only 2 at the time. Only 10% of rural homes had electricity by 1930, so there was probably no indoor plumbing and transportation was by horse or on foot. Fortunately, my grandfather remarried, and together they raised 8 children. He was successful and bought a farm near Jackson, TN that allowed his children to graduate from high school and all became productive citizens.

So, although social distancing is a change, it is far from devastating. Only when there is a better estimation of how many people are COVID-19 infected will it be possible to more correctly estimate the percentage made seriously ill and to estimate the death rate. Clearly, hand washing and face masks aid in preventing infections. Both are something we should all do more. During a recent trip to a home improvement store few customers were wearing face masks (~10%). Asians are more accustomed to face masks and Hong Kong and South Korea have both had fewer problems. An effective vaccine is the best disease prevention and hopefully one will be developed soon. It is my hope that this pandemic will raise awareness of the importance of vaccination for a host of diseases world-wide, but particularly in the US. When I was young, we all proudly carried the scar from smallpox vaccination on our shoulders and smallpox has now been eradicated from planet earth. We can beat this and many more diseases with medical science and industry.