



# Don't Spit on the Sidewalk!

**M**ark Twain has been credited with saying, “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes.” The origin of that quote might be debatable, but it seems to be ringing true around the world with the current global coronavirus pandemic and a similar one that occurred in the early 1900s, which infected about 500 million people or one-third of the world’s population. The 1918 “Spanish” flu, an H1N1 avian virus, is widely believed to have been borne early that year at a hog farm in rural Haskell County, Kansas. Scientist and epidemiologist still do not really understand how the virus came to be, but the end result is well known. It remains the single deadliest public health disaster in American history. An estimated 675,000 Americans were killed, including 12,000 Kansans.

The illness was first identified in January 1918, by a country doctor in southwest Kansas. Dr. Loring Miner noted a severe flu-like disease. He wrote a report and sent it to the U.S. Public Health Service, stating that “this flu is a killer.” It was largely ignored.

Like the current pandemic, Spanish flu hitched a ride around the world through modern travel methods, where it mutated, became more deadly and menaced the world in multiple waves. From Haskell County, the Spanish flu virus is believed to have hitched a ride to Camp Funston at Fort Riley, where thousands of over-crowded soldiers



**Portrait of Samuel Crumbine**

*Photo Credit: Kansas State Historical Society*

**Crumbine’s health crusades included simple but memorable and effective slogans such as “Bat the Rat,” “Swat the Fly,” and “Save the Baby.” He convinced brick factories to create the now legendary “Don’t Spit on the Sidewalk” brick after observing known tuberculosis patients spitting on the floor of a train and recognized it as a likely form of transmission.**

*Photo credit: Doug Helmke*

were stationed to prepare to fight in Europe during World War I. It initially sickened hundreds of them within days, but then quickly subsided.

By October 1918, the deadly outbreak was reported in 24 countries. Due to the war efforts, information about the spread of the disease was often kept under wraps as those details could be an advantage to an opponent. The Americans gave it to the allies and the allies gave it to our enemies. Worldwide news about the outbreak did not surface until the pandemic reached Spain, which is how it got its (incorrect) name.

A now prominent Kansan was Secretary of the Kansas State Board of Health during the Spanish Flu pandemic. His name was Dr. Samuel Crumbine. Born in Pennsylvania, Crumbine moved to Dodge City with his new bride in late 1800s. Crumbine gained prominence in political circles after caring for the sick child of Ford County Attorney Edmond H. Madison, who then lobbied Kansas Governor

William Stanley to appoint Crumline to the state health board in 1902 and he was made Secretary in 1904. For eight years he also served as Dean of Medicine at the University of Kansas.

Prior to the Spanish Flu Pandemic, Crumline gained national recognition with his response to the spread of other infectious diseases, including tuberculosis. A disease caused by a bacterium called Mycobacterium tuberculosis, TB generally affects the lungs in infected people, but it can also attack any part of the body such as the kidney, spine, and brain. Not everyone infected with the bacteria will show symptoms or become sick. He convinced brick factories to create the now legendary “Don’t Spit on the Sidewalk” brick after observing known tuberculosis patients spitting on the floor of a train and recognized it as a likely form of transmission. He also did away with the “common” drinking cup on railcars and other public places, and the “common roller towel” in public restrooms. His health crusades included simple but memorable and effective slogans such as “Bat the Rat,” “Swat the Fly,” and “Save the Baby.”

Food safety became a priority for Dr. Crumline. The Kansas Pure Food and Drug Act of 1907 was passed after finding that Kansans were eating “flour bleached by electrical process,” “jellies made from the refuse of cider mills treated with sulfuric acid,” “chocolate icing made of brown paint and glucose,” lemon juice laced with lead, vegetables containing copper to make them appear greener, and hamburger “doped” with embalming fluid. Described by historian Thomas N. Bonner, in his 1959 book *The Kansas Doctor*, as a “courageous, likeable warrior ... with a flair for drama and publicity,” Crumline “went forth to defend the people against the trusts, food chains, dairies, and packing-houses which were poisoning and defrauding them.”<sup>1</sup>

Crumline was also an early pioneer in the methods of source water protection. In his 1911 article on “The Pollution of



**A statue of Samuel Crumline can be found in front of the Kansas Health Institute, near 8th and Van Buren streets in Topeka and across the street from the State Capitol. KHI annually bestows the Samuel Crumline Award for Excellence in Food Protection to a local health department that exhibits exemplary food handling practices.**

Underground Waters” for the Transactions of the Kansas Academy of Science, he warned that the unwise placement of cesspools, slops, privy vaults, sink drains, barnyards, cemeteries, and other sources of pollution would cause nearby wells to become “intensely polluted.” In one instance, to prove that a cesspool was polluting a nearby well, he placed iron sulfate in the cesspool and within 48 hours, the people drinking water from the well were able to identify the bitter taste of the chemical in their drinking water. “Of the 121 public water supplies in Kansas,” he wrote, “89 are groundwater supplies, 4 of which are springs and 85 from wells. In view of this large per cent of the city population, together with the greater number of rural population who are dependent for their domestic water-supply upon the underground waters, it is at once

<sup>1</sup> “Who Would Command Greater Respect?” KUhistory.com, Friday, December 9, 2010 <https://kuhistory.ku.edu/articles/%E2%80%99Cwho-would-command-greater-respect-%E2%80%9D>

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