

Farm life offers insight into life during the 'other' pandemic in 1918



The Pierce Rector barn is a classic hewn-log livestock barn.

Special to The News-Record & Sentinel

The beautiful and always mysterious barns of one hundred years ago give us hints about life on the farm during the early 20th Century.

One of the stories rarely shared among local farm families is of "the other pandemic," the so-called Spanish Flu of 1918. From the CDC's written history of that pandemic, "influenza killed almost 500,000 Americans—ten times the number of American soldiers who died in combat during the war (WWI). In a single week in October 1918, an estimated 21,000 Americans died.

In North Carolina 13,644 people died before the epidemic finally went away. During its peak in October and November, there were only two kinds of people in the state—those who were sick with influenza and those who were trying to save them."

A dramatic and tragic scenario from our home state. Yet what was happening here with farm families in Madison County? It was a surprise to learn that, after a quick sampling of 30 cemeteries across Madison County, looking at photos of more than 600 gravestones, researchers find there were only three deaths during the period of the 1918 flu pandemic represented by those graves. Were the hardy farm families somehow spared?

While researching the historic barns of Rector Corner and the Pierce Rector family a particular gravestone was found and stood out from the rest, depicting the death of 25-year-old Glennie Mae Rector who died on December 17, 1918. Glennie Mae was the daughter of Pierce Rector. It is not known that she died of influenza, but she was of the age



Researching the historic barns of Rector Corner and the Pierce Rector family led to a find hinting at life during the 1918 flu pandemic. PHOTOS COURTESY TAYLOR BARNHILL

for which the Spanish flu was most deadly: 20-40-year-olds. Her death also occurred within the second peak period of the flu recurrence.

The Rector family lived on this land for almost 200 years, from 1834-2007. Glennie Mae's father, John Pierce Rector, known as Pierce, raised his family there on the east slope of Rector Corner ridge, and built a simple vernacular Victorian house and a classic hewn-log livestock barn. Pierce was one of the patriarchs of the large Rector family of the south Marshall township.

The barn is elegant in its form, a two-story log structure that exemplifies care and the craftsmanship of the turn-of-the-century. Having arrived at a place of relative affluence by 1918, this family was tragically changed, perhaps by the flu pandemic. I wonder about their sense of loss, and their resilience, a week before Christmas, 1918.

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The Pierce Rector Family Cemetery offers hints at the potential impact of the 1918 flu outbreak on local life.



Though it is not known that she died of influenza, Glennie Mae Rector was of the age for which the Spanish Flu was most deadly: 20-40-year-olds. Her death also occurred within the second peak period of the flu recurrence.