

Flu killed family's beloved mother

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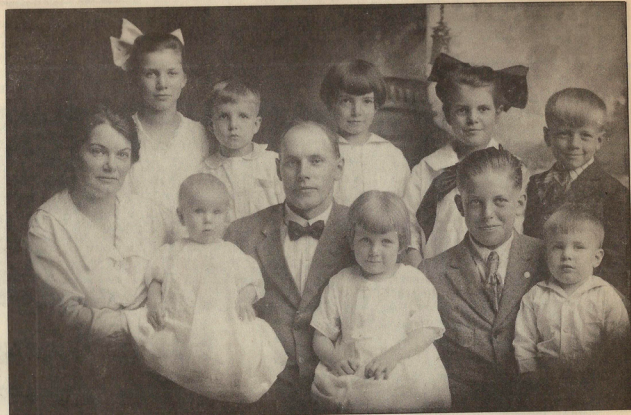
Grown children recall sad funeral

In 1918, an influenza epidemic killed an estimated 20 million worldwide, 548,000 in the United States alone.

In Richmond one of the many casualties was the wife of German immigrant George Finning.

Finning and his wife, Frances, were typical of many immigrants who had settled on the city's southside. They and their nine children spent evenings enjoying the company of neighbors and each other.

"Our dad was a great one to do things at home," said Esther Finning Youngflesh. "We'd clear the room to



This photo was taken just two weeks before the Finning family was stricken with influenza in 1918. Front row from left: Frances (mother), Robert, George (father), Martha, Richard and Edward. Back row, from left: Edith, Paul, Esther, Ruth and George. Frances was one of 548,000 nationwide who died during the epidemic.

Richmond remembers

By Mary Ellen Donat



dance. Sometimes we had taffy pulls or would play cards."

The Finnings were members of Trinity Lutheran Church where George was a trustee and elder.

The grown Finning children remember walking to church as the bells pealed. Outside, their father gave them each a penny for the offering plate and cleaned messy faces with his handkerchief.

"Our father would look us over before we entered church and slip a piece of candy or cracker to us. He'd march us in like a little army. We took up a whole pew, smaller ones separated by older ones. There was usually a baby in the family, so Mama sat at the back of the sanctuary," said Youngflesh.

Life was happy for the Finning family until the fall of 1918. That's when the epidemic reached Richmond.

Edith, the Finning's eldest daughter, was the first to come down with the illness. Within days the entire family was stricken, including baby Robert.

"I remember seeing him blue in his cradle," said Edith Finning Morris. "He was so sick they didn't expect him to live, so they put him aside and worked on the others."

None of the family went to the hospital or were put under a doctor's care. Mrs. Claude Adelman, a neighbor, and Elsie Beyer, Frances' cousin, came to help. It was believed at the time that women with young children were in most danger of coming down with flu, so Frances' two sisters, Mrs. George Klute and Mrs. Lester Turner, were kept from the home.

On the morning of Oct. 17, 1918 the Rev. Oscar Tressel, father of Marjorie Varnell Meredith, visited the Finning

home. As he knelt to lace the high-top shoe of 12-year-old Edith, he told her, "The angels came last night and took your mother to Heaven."

"I can remember him yet," said Esther, "waiting on us that day."

The funeral and calling were held in the home. Richard remembers his father was so ill that he couldn't get up. He had to be carried downstairs by George Klute and Oscar Nolte to view Frances' body. The children who were well enough were sent to homes of neighbors and family.

"I was able to look through the fence and see the funeral cortege," remembers Edith. "I saw them put my mother's coffin in the hearse."

The rest of the family survived the flu epidemic, but a month later the illness claimed the life of business partner Oscar Nolte. That's when Richard joined his father in the grocery business.

Freda Von Pein came to care for her cousin's family and eventually married George.

"She worked awfully hard for us," said Esther. "She was a good mother. And later when Rudolph was born, we never thought of him as a stepbrother; we felt he was a very valuable addition."

Mary Ellen Donat is a Richmond native who writes a weekly column on local people, places and events of the past.