

Bart Mahaffie Part I – Introduction

Further posts in this series:

[Bart Mahaffie Part II – Childhood and education](#)

Rule, Colo. 3.12.19

Dear Chas:

I received your letter a couple of weeks ago, but have been busy and didn't notice how long it had been. Cattle are pretty thin and have to be watched mightily closely to see that they get to feed and don't stray too far.

The loss has been very light, think I've only lost about 10 so far and if the weather will just partly behave from now on there should not be much more loss but most everything is thin now, even the range horses are weak so of course the cattle are bound to be thin.

I was in town last week and got the Heckler papers straightened out and ordered the abstracts. I expect that I'll buy that land this spring, as he is going to leave and I can't afford for anyone else to get the place. There are several places around me that are going to be for sale as soon as they are "proved up" and they are sure making me figure. Don't want to buy anything that I can get a lease on.

Yes, I've been getting a novel every once in a while, and am ashamed that I've never even acknowledged the receipt of them but I always write in a hurry so forget about them. The Four Horsemen didn't come but the W_____ did come about that time. I've started to read it but have not finished it yet. Have not had much time for reading in the past month.

Do you expect to visit Oklahoma this summer? It is probable that at some yet uncertain date I'll go down there to get me a housekeeper. There is no definite date yet other than before summer, for it is doubtful yet when I can get away. But if it is convenient and can be figured out far enough in advance I'd like for you to be there.

Must get to bed.

Yours,

G B M Jr.

George Barton "Bart" Mahaffie, by 1919 having lived almost five years alone on his remote southeast Colorado homestead, was joking in this letter to his brother, that he wanted to "get me a housekeeper." He meant he wanted to marry his sweetheart, Marye Traylor, and he wanted Charles to be there. Bart had lived alone almost 5 years on 480 acres of rough, dry, grazing land in southeastern Colorado, a bachelor rancher.



George Barton "Bart"
Mahaffie, 1911

When I was six or seven, I remember my Great Uncle Oscar Beatty Mahaffie visited my grandparents at their Washington, DC home. It was the mid-1960s. Uncle Beatty and my grandfather, Charles, sat in the upstairs front room in large armchairs, Beatty about ten feet away from my Granddad, two grey, balding old men. They were "visiting," which for old men like these, prairie-raised, meant sitting almost silent, sipping liquor, and immensely enjoying each other's company.

But there was a brother missing, George Barton "Bart" Mahaffie. It's hard to imagine him there. He died of the Spanish Influenza in 1919 at 29, young and in his prime, on his remote Colorado ranch.

The old pictures show the young Bart as an athlete, uniformed and with his teammates, as a scholar at Kingfisher College, and later, branding cattle or on horseback, on his Colorado ranch.

Bart died with most of his potential ahead of him. He endures for me as a tragic story. Yet I have fixed him in my mind as that young man from the old pictures, in his prime. The occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Spanish Influenza of 1918 made me think of Bart. I wanted to remember more than the tragedy, so I will tell the story of his life as far as we can know it.

Bart Mahaffie in the winter of 1919



Bart Mahaffie on his ranch
late 1910s

In the late winter of 1919, Bart Mahaffie, aged 29, was hard at work on his ranch in rural southeast Colorado. Winters there were hard. He was at work "proving up" his homestead claims. That meant gaining title to free Federal land by living on it and improving it for stockraising and agriculture.

Bart planned to marry Marye Traylor of Elk City, Oklahoma that May and bring her to his ranch. The lonely bachelor's life on the ranch would soon be over. He would have a partner to help him build his life in Colorado.

Marye was the daughter of W. E. Traylor. Her father had operated a Hobart, Oklahoma grocery in the mid-1910s. Marye, born in 1892, she was three years younger than Bart, but likely knew him from Hobart High School, or social events in town.



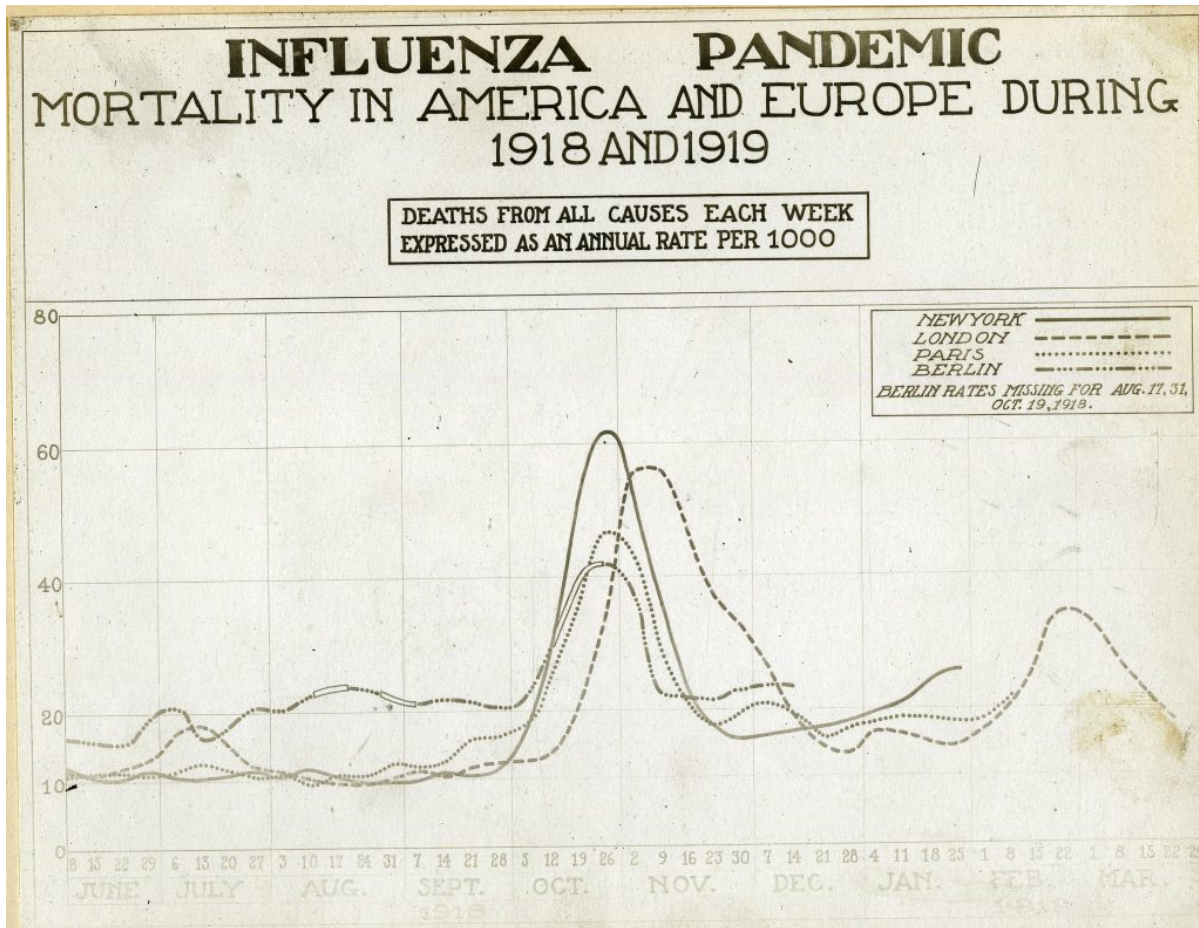
Marye Keith Traylor, Bart's
fiance

Marye was an accomplished young woman. She played basketball at Hobart High School. The Hobart papers noted her piano playing at weddings, performing Mendelssohn's Wedding March for the bride and groom. Later she had a long career in business, working as a book bookkeeper and office manager. It's not hard to imagine her being integral to Bart's success as a rancher.

Despite the hard winter, Bart could look forward and see his dreams coming into view.

The Spanish Flu of 1918

The Spanish Influenza hit hard in the U.S. the fall of 1918, particularly among massed and returning troops from World War I. Emerging in 1917, it was at first a mild flu; three days of fever, cough, and runny nose, and then a rapid recovery. But the flu virus, which mutates quickly, turned deadly in the summer and fall of 1918. It became a global, deadly pandemic, killing 20 to 50 million people, worldwide, and 675,000 in the United States. The biggest share of its victims were young adults. The lucky got the infection early, before it mutated. They were then protected against the new strain.



A public health chart of deaths from the Spanish Flu, 1919

The Spanish Flu's symptoms were fever, nausea, aches, and diarrhea. Many victims developed severe bronchopneumonia. Patients would have dark spots on their cheeks. The body under attack by the virus overran with immune response, attacking most aggressively in the lungs. Victims turned blue with a lack of oxygen as their lungs filled with a frothy, bloody discharge. They drowned in their own fluids before treatment could save them.

The flu spread easily and quickly. Doctors could not keep up. People often died before they could get help, but medical help was limited in any case. The flu had no direct treatment, with no antiviral medicines were yet developed. Doctors were not even clear that the disease was viral.

The flu in Colorado

The first cases in Colorado came in late September 1918, with a spike in infections at the University of Colorado in Boulder. The most deaths worldwide were that fall as well.

Mary Allen Hurd, grew up on a neighboring ranch to Bart's. Years later she remembered: "the flu epidemic came along killing lots of people. Laughing Joe Smith knew there was a couple of new families who lived in a half dugout. He

rode over one morning to see if they were all right. He saw stock in the corrals with cows bawling so he went to the house. This couple had four small children and a brother and his wife who lived there also had four small children. Laughing Joe Smith asked the children where their parents were and they said, 'They are asleep and we can't wake them up.' So Joe went in and they were all dead."

Later posts in this series:

[*Bart Mahaffie Part II – Childhood and education*](#)

[*Bart Mahaffie Part III – To Colorado for land of his own*](#)

[*Bart Mahaffie Part IV – The flu reaches the 500 Ranch*](#)