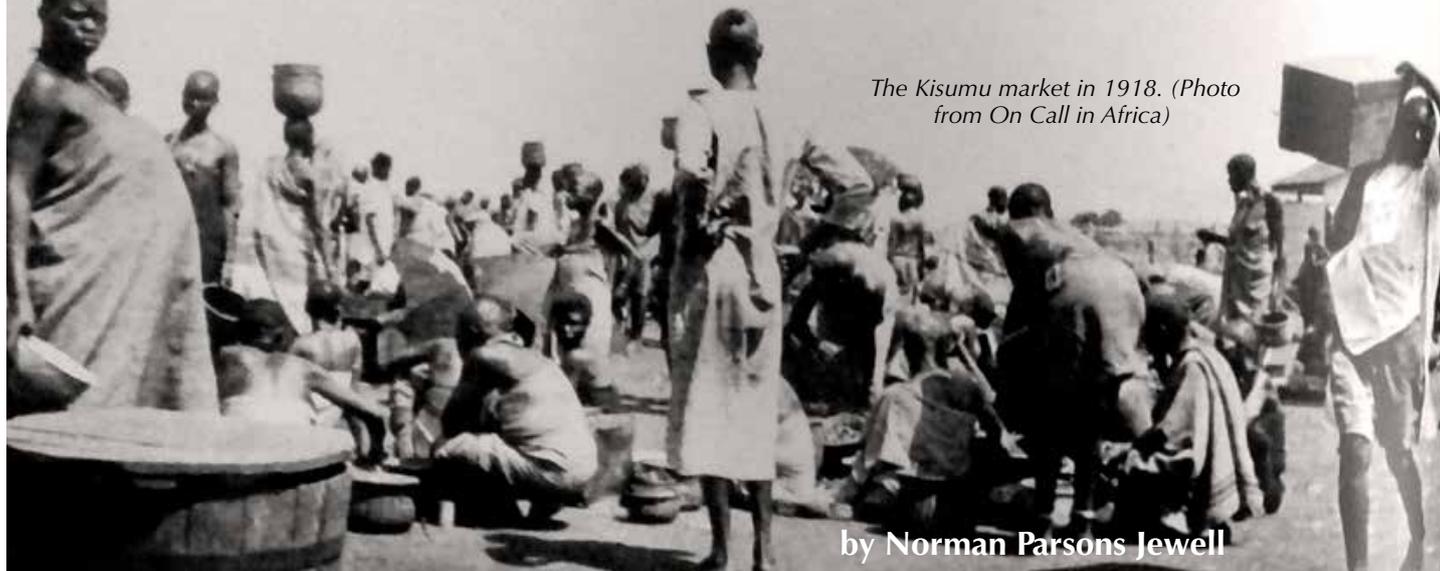


# SPANISH FLU EPIDEMIC HITS KISUMU

## TAKEN FROM ON CALL IN AFRICA



*The Kisumu market in 1918. (Photo from On Call in Africa)*

by Norman Parsons Jewell

**1918** As Dr Norman Jewell met the train arriving in Kisumu from Nairobi, he ordered everyone on board into a quarantine camp he had organized. However, one Indian passenger sprinted away and disappeared into the Indian Bazaar.

Dr Jewell had arrived in Kisumu in the summer of 1918, having been stationed there with the military three years earlier. Dr Jewell wrote:

“Kisumu was a vastly different place from the town I had known in 1915. The war had drifted away and the entire lake was in the possession of the Allies. There was an absence of military personnel and the trains and lake steamers ran their old peacetime schedules once again.

“My wife and three children had joined me from the Seychelles on my way to Kisumu and we were allotted one of the three-roomed administration bungalows, which overlooked the Kavirondo Gulf of the Victoria Nyanza. There was plenty of food, I was able to enjoy family life once again and the situation on the Rovuma River only a few weeks before now seemed to have been so many years ago. Life became pleasant and, with the attractions of the tennis courts and golf course within a few minutes’ walk, I became absorbed in my work in charge of the Native Hospital.

“The atmosphere, almost of self-satisfied complacency, was sharply jolted with reports reaching us from Mombasa giving details of an outbreak of influenza which was spreading with alarming and frightening rapidity and

causing many deaths. When the disease reached Nairobi and it was obvious that it was of a previously unknown strain of influenza virus, every effort was made to prepare for the inevitable epidemic. At this time Kisumu was still free of the infection and I was alarmed when I heard that a number of police from Kisumu were to travel to Nairobi to participate in a ceremony for the presentation of medals. My protests and my advice that every effort should be made to isolate Kisumu as much as possible were to no avail.

“When the police returned, they were ordered, along with every other traveller from Nairobi, into a special camp that had been set up on the outskirts of Kisumu to act as a quarantine station until the incubation period had passed. All of the passengers from the train, which brought the police back from Nairobi, were directed to the camp with one exception, an Indian who ran off and disappeared into the Indian Bazaar near the railway station. As soon as I was advised of the situation, I met the leaders of the Indian community and asked for their cooperation in finding the missing traveller. There were plenty of assurances that he was not in the bazaar and also that if he was found he would be handed over for quarantine. It became apparent that my pleas and attempts to persuade the Indian leaders of the seriousness of the situation were unsuccessful.

“Within two days, cases of influenza began to appear. By the end of the week it was obvious that the disease had got beyond our control,

as residents from every community were taken ill in masses. On the second day the Goanese Assistant Surgeon and the Indian Sub-Assistant Surgeon were hit by the infections. With the aid of a European Dispenser, Mr Gibb, I cleared all the beds from the hospital wards and laid mattresses on the floors to make as much accommodation available as possible.

"It was obvious that I would be unable to cope with the situation and I sent an urgent letter by boat to an old medical friend, Dr Peter Clearkin, who was involved in a medical survey for the government on an island at the mouth of the Kavirondo Gulf."

Dr Clearkin wrote about Dr Jewell's plea for help with the flu epidemic: "One morning sitting in front of the tent deep in thought, I heard the throb of a motor engine and was puzzled as there was no car on the island (Rusinga). Slowly the significance dawned on me; it was a motor launch. I jumped to my feet and ran to the beach. *The Humming Bird*, the only launch in Kisumu, was in sight and coming rapidly towards me. It beached and the Indian in charge handed me a note from Dr Jewell, the MO in Kisumu, to say that the influenza epidemic had struck the town, all Europeans had been attacked, the bank manager was dead, the African and Indian population were in worse case than the whites as they seemed to have less resistance, the hospital was overcrowded and there were many deaths. My assistance was necessary...

"Over dinner Jewell acquainted me with the situation; the whole country from the coast to the great lakes was suffering from the epidemic; there was not specific treatment. We arranged a division of labour, Jewell to look after the Europeans and Indians, I took charge of the hospital and the Africans. Two teams of stretcher bearers patrolled the roads and streets to bring the weak and feeble to hospital and the dead to the mortuary. Several of the stretcher bearers had already collapsed and replacements were in training."

Dr Jewell continued his story. "I was able to undertake a post-mortem on one of the earliest fatal cases and found a pneumonic patch over the front of the chest, corresponding to the clinical symptoms of pneumonia about the sternal area. This endorsed our suspicions that we were dealing with an epidemic type of pneumonia.

"The dispenser, Mr Gibb, was a tower of

strength in his dealings with the Africans. Speaking both Swahili and Luo, as well as being a preacher in the African church, Mr Gibb had the confidence of many of the African patients and did not spare himself in working day and night, making up the medicines and tending the sick. His work with the Africans became his whole life in later years when he was ordained as a clergyman and returned to the area.

"Others did what they could. 'Bwana Pumps,' who got his name from the bicycle pump he used and who 'had learned his medicine as office boy and sweeper before he ran a dispensary in South Nyanza region of Kenya.' He dispensed 'chiefly quinine and Epsom Salts' throughout the influenza epidemic of 1918.

"As the death toll mounted, those who died were taken from the hospital wards and the Health Office was notified to undertake burial. The situation, however, got completely out of hand and there were not enough fit men left to undertake all the burials.

"The Indian Bazaar was in a terrible state. The Indians seemed more susceptible to the disease



Dr Norman Parsons Jewell (right) and Stiles Webb at Maktau in about 1915, soon after the start of World War I. (Photo from *On Call in Africa*)



*The Kisumu Hospital Office where Dr Jewell worked in 1918. (Photo from On Call in Africa)*

than either Europeans or Africans. In one small room I discovered eleven people lying on the floor all seriously ill. Conditions throughout the Bazaar were tragic. This time, when I called the leaders of the Indian community together again they were more responsive and quickly organised food and fruit supplies for the sick, as well as teams of workers to provide as much assistance as possible.

"Peter Clearkin and I quickly fell into an organised routine, starting our rounds about six o'clock in the morning after a quick breakfast and then meeting again at six o'clock in the evening for our next meal of the day, and the opportunity to exchange views on the seriousness of the situation. One alarming side-effect of the disease was the creation of suicidal tendencies and this was brought home forcefully one evening as Peter Clearkin and I met for our evening meal. A small boy arrived to announce that the Indian Dispenser, who had developed the disease, had killed himself. The boy said 'Babu,' the Indian Dispenser who employed him as a servant, had climbed onto a large water-tank beside his house and tried to climb in. The boy said he had called to the Babu and pulled on his leg, trying to get him down. For his attempts he received a kick, so he told the Babu: "All right, drown yourself if you want to," and sat on steps nearby until he felt sure the Babu was dead and then decided to come and tell us.

"We suspected the plausibility of the story but decided to take no chance and, armed with

a lantern, went to inspect the water-tank. The boy's story was true. In the light of the lantern, I saw Babu's body, head down in the water."

Dr Clearkin recalled the event: "The Indian hospital dispenser lived in a house in the hospital compound. He had been ill but was now convalescent. Jewell asked me to see him one morning and I did so. Temperature and pulse were normal and he seemed well but I thought his manner a little odd. Around 5 pm when the day's visiting was over I was boiling water for tea over the primus stove, Jewell was entering notes in the day book, an orderly came in escorting a little ragged urchin and spoke to Jewell.

"'He says the dispenser is dead.' I joined Jewell at the desk and said, 'He seemed all right this morning, but a little odd, but as I did not know him it might have been his normal manner.' By this time it was dark and we hurried to the scene with a hurricane lamp. Looking through the manhole the body could be seen floating in the tank which was half full of water; he had been dead for some time for rigor to set in. The tank was drained, I climbed through the manhole with some difficulty, manoeuvred the head and shoulders out. Jewell grasped them and with a little difficulty removed the corpse."

Dr Jewell carried on the narrative: "It was obvious that the situation had become a matter for the police... We went to Club to find where the police superintendent could be found and discovered him behind the bar serving drinks to everyone, and they were obviously in a

mood of celebration. Drinks were thrust into our hands. 'The war is over!' everyone shouted.

"But our mental and physical state was such that we could not have cared less and our news about the Babu had an immediate sobering effect on the superintendent who departed to carry out his investigation while we continued our rounds of the influenza victims.

"The epidemic came and went in only a few short weeks leaving behind it pathetic stories of tragedy. Only one European in the small white community lost his life but the toll among the Indians and Africans was heavy but we were never able to assess accurately the number of deaths. Although we were involved with visits to centres near Kisumu, it was mainly a town disease and the farming area did not suffer to the same extent."

Dr Clearkin assessed the situation as follows: "Reports from the District told of many deaths. As Jewell and I were the only doctors in Kavirondo Province, a region the size of Wales with a population of approximately half a million, we were handicapped by lack of means of communication but as soon as the epidemic in Kisumu began to subside we were able to pay attention to the calls from the district." Dr Clearkin reported the death of the manager of a plantation above the station at Fort Ternan.

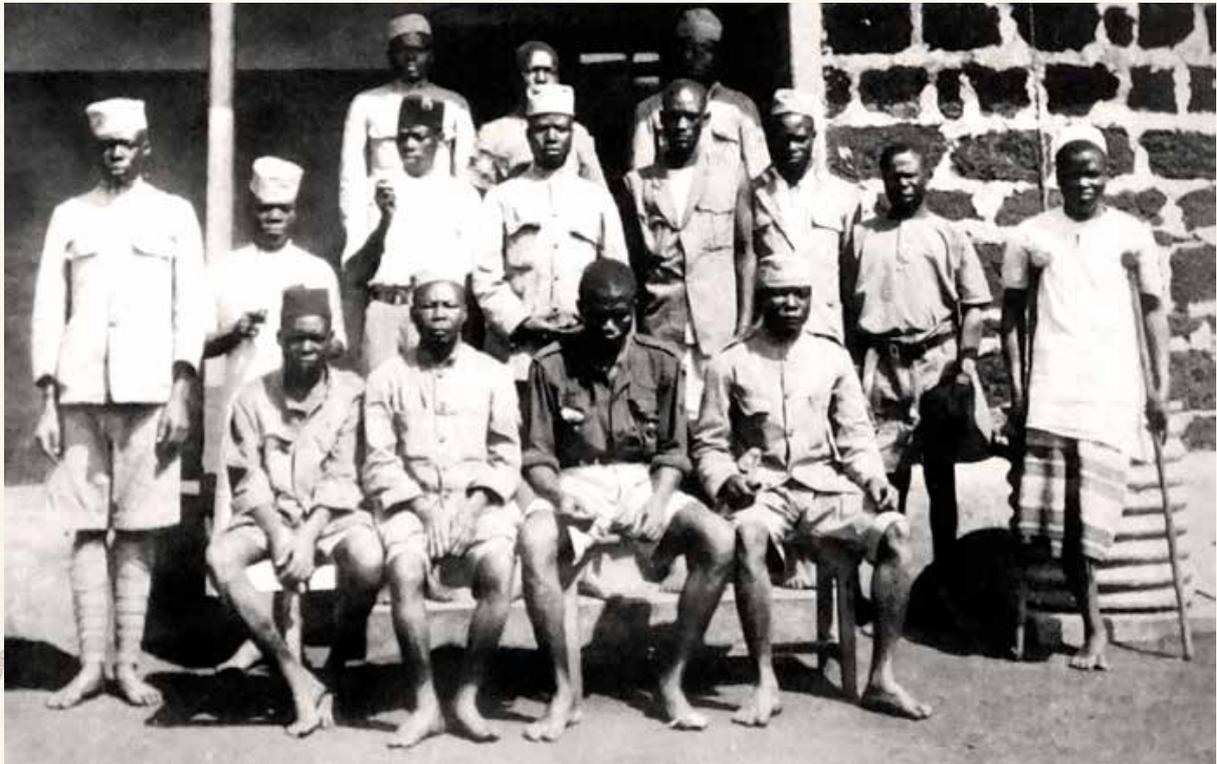
Dr Jewell concluded: "Gradually the

influenza epidemic disappeared and life in Kisumu returned to normal. It was strange that while we were aware of the cessation of hostilities the announcement had made little difference to our way of life, because the war had almost forgotten our area. My own health which had not fully recovered from my army experiences had again suffered severely with the demands on my services during the flu epidemic and Peter Clearkin insisted that he would stay in Kisumu while I took ten days leave with my family on a trip around the lake...

*The 1918 Pandemic flu or Spanish flu which raged from 1918-1920 is estimated to have infected 500 million people globally with 50-100 million deaths. It is believed to have claimed the lives of between two and five percent of the East African population.*

### Bibliography

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*The staff of the Kisumu Hospital in 1918. (Photo from On Call in Africa)*