

GERMS & Farm Animals

by Andy Baker, FARM PARK ADMINISTRATOR



THE H1N1 VIRUS IS IN THE NEWS as I write this article and will, I am sure, still be in the news when this Almanac is published. The H1N1 has mistakenly been called “swine flu” because it was similar to viruses that occur in North American pigs. However, it is actually a new virus that has two genes from flu viruses that normally circulate in pigs in Europe and Asia plus genes from bird (avian) and human flu viruses.

Viruses take advantage of the relationship between humans and animals. Its ability to replicate, recombine and evolve has made the virus responsible for some of the worst diseases that humans experience. The close proximity between animals and humans, particularly poultry and swine, enables certain types of virus to jump species, recombine and potentially become more virulent. The recent news that the H1N1 virus has appeared in North American pigs has raised that potential fear again.

However, the close relationship between humans and animals also has the effect of building up a level of immunity among the human population as a whole. According to Guns, Germs and Steel, the interconnections between domestic animals and humans in the Old World built up a level of immunity that ameliorated the affect of certain diseases over the long term. This immunity gave Europeans the ability to survive disease epidemics that decimated the Native Americans in the years after contact with Europeans.

Though it may be a small comfort to those of us who end up suffering because of this new virus, it is well to note that our relationship with animals may actually, in the long term, help the human race survive future viral combinations.

pig photo by Ellen McFarland

