

From “Union County’s Role in World War I”

by the late Charles McCool Snyder

“It wasn’t easy for Americans to decide to become involved in World War I. Recurring crises arising from competition for empires, disagreements over boundaries...militarism, and...nationalism were considered to be European problems, not American, since we were shielded by the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.”

Attacks on American ships changed all that.

“With a standing army of just over 200,000, and a... need for more than a million more, the focus in Union County was ...on Troop M, a company of cavalry in Lewisburg...one of four including troops I of Sunbury, L of Bellefonte, K of Lock Haven, collectively identified as the MILK Squadron...commanded by Major Wallace Fetzer of Milton. Major General Charles Clement of Sunbury commanded the Regiment. Captain Samuel B. Wolfe of Lewisburg...head[ed] Troop M. On September 11, 1917 the troops departed for war...joined by the machine gun troop from Boalsburg and the Governor’s Troop at Harrisburg, requiring twenty-five cars, with nine Pullmans, six horse cars, seven box cars and three flat cars.”

Volunteers for ambulance companies “were recruited at Bucknell University in the spring of 1917 from younger faculty...and students....The second...Bucknell Ambulance unit, Company 525, arrived in France in January of 1918.” T. Burns Rearick of Mifflinburg wrote home: you can imagine what it is like to repair a battered automobile in the dark without a light, and wearing a gas mask....In some towns there wasn’t a house standing...About the fiercest thing I ever saw are the French tanks just coming out of an attack, hanging full of barbed wire, and full of dents where the shells struck them.” His group was cited for bravery and received the Croix de Guerre.

Union County residents contributed to the YMCA, Red Cross and Salvation Army, bought war bonds, and planted ‘victory gardens.’ Buffalo Township women met regularly to sew and knit for the needs of the soldiers.

Food and commodities, needed for the war, were rationed. Union County FA administrator Guy F. Roush “enforced a strict code of regulation upon the use of flour...Hoarding was prohibited, and wheatless days were enforced.” Sugar was rationed. “Heatless Mondays were required through the winter of 1917-1918” for home heating and industry, to conserve coal, and there were gasless Sundays to conserve gasoline. Electricity and kerosene were conserved with the institution of ‘daylight savings time.’

In September 1918, the area learned of the deaths of Colonel Wallace Fetzer, Bright Kratzer, Ralph Dull, Robert Rimert, Leon Pierce of Milton, and Edward Shannon. Tennyson Steininger of Vicksburg wrote home: “horror of France was no comparison with the awful destruction, distress and terror of Belgium” and Miller Johnson of Lewisburg wrote: “Have been on front a month. No signs of a rest.”

News of the Armistice arrived by telegraph on November 11, 1918. Some of the original Troop M returned to Union County April 12, 1919. The Bucknell Ambulance Unit, 22 ambulance drivers led by Lieut. Parsons, arrived in May. On July 17, 1919 a homecoming celebration for Union County WWI veterans was held in Lewisburg. “At the fountain at Third and Market Streets a bell was tolled 31 times to commemorate those who had given their lives, and as each name was called, a girl stepped forward to present a wreath in memory.”

The full, in-depth article “Union County’s Role in World War I” by Charles McCool Snyder, plus WWI veteran list, is Heritage Volume XI, available from the Union County Historical Society. Call 570-524-8666 or email hstoricl@ptd.net for details.



At The Train Station