

Here are some first-hand accounts of World War I by some local residents. Their reminiscences have been taken from the oral history project conducted by the Orleans County Historical Association back in the late 1970's and early 1980's under the guidance of Helen McAllister. Many of the people interviewed back then are now deceased. This is an invaluable record of their first-hand knowledge of the past. The photo shows WWI draftees on the Court House steps.

McAllister: You said that you graduated in 1917, and of course, we were getting ready for World War I.

Myra Colton: War was declared, I believe, on the 6th of April. But about two weeks before that, we had an assembly in the high school. We had assembly about once a week. Mr. Merriman was the principal and the Easter vacation was coming up. At the assembly I remember he said, "before we are gathered here again, America will be at war!" Those words made quite an impression on me because it seems as though all the boys I knew were eligible...And that was true; by the time we went back to school after Easter recess, America was at war and Company F moved out.

McAllister: A lot of your classmates went with them?

Colton: Oh yes. Not just my class, but all through the high school. Many of the boys had belonged to Company F and I think probably some of them probably had lied about their age, but they belonged to Company F, you know.

McAllister: Wouldn't they have to be a certain age to go (to war)?

Colton: Yes, but I know one boy who ran away and went out to Cleveland (Ohio) and enlisted, and I don't think he was over 17. He didn't dare enlist in Medina because people knew his age. But it took boys: James Clark, for whom the Post (American Legion Post) was named, was about my age. Many of them came back, and many of them didn't.

Earl Harding: All my friends were going to camp, so I went up to the Draft Board, most of the boys were drafted in those days, and told Isaac Schwartz, head of the Draft Board, that the next time they sent a group to camp, to include my name. So in about a week, I was on my way.

McAllister: How did your family feel when they found out what you had done?

Harding: Well, I don't know that I had told Mother or not before, but I remember that it was kind of a sad day, the day that I went. They weren't very happy about it. As it turned out, the week that I was drafted was the week that the Germans started to retreat. Whether they knew I was coming or not, I don't know. (Chuckles). But that's the way it was. Really my experience in camp was a good vacation. I spent two months at New York University for the Army, studying to be a telegraph operator. From there I went to Fort Hamilton for a little while, out on the island near New York City. Then I went to Fortress Monroe, Virginia where I was in the officers training camp until the end of the war. At the end of the war, I was very quickly discharged and was home only a month after the war was over. So I didn't have any experiences that were at all dangerous.

McAllister: When you left for the Service, was there a whole contingent that left?

Alonzo Waters: Yes. I went from Medina to Fort Dix, and I was only in Fort Dix six weeks before I went overseas. I actually had no training at all. I was a part of the 308th Field Artillery, the 78th Division. The regiment was practically completed. They only needed a few more to fill out the regiment and I was one of them. So I went in the spring (I think it was in April) and I was overseas shortly thereafter. After landing at Liverpool, we went immediately to a camp in France and our first engagement was the Meuse-Argonne. In October I was wounded and I went to a camp in Dijon. The war was over on November 11th, and afterwards they kept evacuating those medical camps; so I think I was in seven before I finally landed in Camp Mills, Long Island in February 1919, when I returned to Medina. I went then with The Journal-Register.

McAllister: So, your first teacher's experience was during the war. Did you help the government sell war bonds, Dorothy?

Dorothy Cox: We sold war bonds, we plucked ducks that someone had shot! (laughter). The teachers spent hours plucking these ducks which were to be sent over to Mineola, to the Army. We took Red

Cross courses in first aid, of course. I remember being invited into New York City to one of the most fashionable night clubs by the president of the bank. There were several of us, to dinner and the show, in payment for our work and for selling the War Bonds.

McAllister: Did you have a chance to date any of the service men? As a young attractive woman, I imagine that you did!

Cox: That was a very exciting period. Men who were in the service and were stationed at Mineola would contact a girl that they knew and then they would come over and they would bring two or three other officers. They had to be officers, at least Second Lieutenants. They wore the leather leggings (puttees), and a silver bar on their epaulets. Of course, we wouldn't want to be seen with an ordinary Private with the cloth leggings.

McAllister: What did you do on a date, go to dances?

Cox: We had dances in private homes. We had a victrola and danced and had light refreshments, but they were always in private homes.

Wilson Fox: Well, I'll tell you, there was quite a shortage of food at that time too, if you remember. This country had to feed the countries over there; you remember that. Of course, I told you that once in the war that I had to be drafted and examined and everything. But they left me alone on the farm here to harvest the crops, see, until November. And then the war was over. Otherwise I'd of had to went too. You remember how the Germans was taking the ship-loads of produce going over there to England and everywhere. And all they could do was feed them. That's the reason they kept me on the farm I suppose. Just as important as it was to go over there, wasn't it? 'Cause you couldn't fight on an empty stomach.

Sidney Eddy: I think those two years with the French Army — I wouldn't trade those — my college four years — for those. Those two years were more important.

Marjorie Radzinski interviewer: What happened? Could you tell me anything about the "French Connection?"

Eddy: Well, we were only 50 guys in a division of 15,000 Frenchmen. Fifty Americans, and we had to learn French pretty fast! They were very nice to us. The Priest would go along with us, and officers too. Our French Division was very active; it was young fellows, the Dismounted Cavalry. They were very active, so we got credit for eight major battles. The Division was cited five times — the Croix-de-guerre — for Combatant Forces; the Engineers and the Medical workers, we got our own citations. It was a very interesting experience. We enlisted for the duration, whatever that might be...Just then the Bolsheviks were starting in Russia. They tried to get a lot of us to go there after we occupied Germany. Some of them did, they went to Russia. See, the White Russians were trying to make a Democracy, but the Bolsheviks got in there and promised everything, and that sold the whole thing out. No, we didn't want to go over there.

McAllister: Let's talk about your remembrances of World War I, or that period of time. What do you remember?

Marjorie Johnson: Well, I remember the night the Armistice was signed, how people got out in the streets and did everything imaginable.

McAllister: Made a lot of noise?

Johnson:...I remember that night, down by (my home) Wheelman's Rest. There was a bunch of people that got out of the car and they found a keg of tar along the road. They put that in the road and set fire to it! Just anything for excitement you know...During the War I corresponded with a young man in Minnesota. I had put my name in the sweater that I knitted, like everyone did at the time you know.

McAllister: Did you knit for the Red Cross?

Johnson: Yeah. Then the serviceman would answer when he got the sweater.

McAllister: Did he go overseas?

Johnson: Yes. Afterwards I was out in Minnesota with some cousins. We drove around that way and saw him.

McAllister: I haven't heard about knitting for the Red Cross before this.

Johnson: Oh we knitted sox and mufflers and sweaters, sleeveless sweaters. It was horrible gray yarn. 'Twasn't very fine at all. Kinda smelled of mutton, you know. (Chuckles).