

## American Women in World War I: Army Nurse Corps, Red Cross Volunteers, and Civilian Aides from Illinois State Normal University

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World War I was a global conflict involving men and women of all nationalities, races, and creeds in a long, bitter, and bloody campaign that lasted four years. President Woodrow Wilson resisted United States involvement in the fight and maintained a policy of isolation and peace until 1917; however, with the sinking of the *Lusitania* and the release of the Zimmerman Telegram, President Wilson “grudgingly accepted the necessity of war.”<sup>1</sup> On 6 April 1917, the United States officially declared war on Germany. With the declaration of war came a call to arms and thousands of men registered for military service. Women too answered the call by enlisting in the military, by joining the Red Cross as nurses, and by dedicating themselves to the war effort. Many alumni, faculty, staff, and former students associated with Illinois State Normal University, joined the fight as soldiers or nurses.

Ange Milner, a librarian at Illinois State Normal University (ISNU) during World War I undertook a letter writing campaign with those who were affiliated with the school and serving overseas. The letters and various other documents collected over the years and are now available at the Illinois State University Archives in the War Service Records Collection. The project’s goal is to focus on the thirty-one women whose “wartime activities are documented in the collection.”<sup>2</sup> Four of the women were faculty members, one graduated in 1890, five graduated between 1900 and 1910, six graduated after 1910, seven did not graduate, and three were graduates of the University High School. These women served as nurses, Red Cross workers, and civilian aides; roughly half served in Europe. Although each of these women are fascinating examples of the roles women played during World War I, there is not enough information available to dedicate an entire paper to one individual. Therefore, this paper will focus on five of these women—two military nurses and three Red Cross workers/ civilian aides.

### Nursing Corps

The Army Nurse Corps was founded in 1901. From its inception, the corps lacked a defined military rank and structure. It was comprised of just over 100 female nurses “who lacked appropriate titles, military status, or even uniforms.”<sup>3</sup> By the end of World War I, 21,000 women either served in France or at home as members of the Army Nurse Corps.<sup>4</sup> It was the distinguished actions of these women that expanded the Nursing Corps and led to the development of an early rank structure, as well as a system to allocate money for retirement.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Dorn Brose, *A History of the Great War: World War One and the International Crisis of the Early Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 249.

<sup>2</sup> Jo Rayfield, “Women of World War I,” *Illinois State University* (14 December 2001) <http://www.isuarchives.org/women.php> (accessed 10 October 2009). Updated URL: <http://www.mlbilstu.edu/women/archive/women.htm> (accessed 28 February 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Lisa M. Bureau and Richard M. Prior, ed., *Answering the Call: The U.S. Army Nurse Corps, 1917-1919: A Commemorative Tribute to Military Nursing in World War I* (Washington D.C.: Office of The Surgeon General, Department of the Army, United States of America Borden Institute, Walter Reed Army Medical Center, 2008), xii.

<sup>4</sup> Ross F. Collins, ed., *World War I: Primary Documents on Events from 1914-1919* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008), 285-286.

<sup>5</sup> Bureau and Prior, xii.

Elizabeth Taylor Cleveland, an 1898 graduate of University High School, joined the Army Nursing Corps in May 1917, serving in France and Germany. During her time in France, she worked with U. S. Hospital Unit Number 12, more commonly known as the Northwestern Unit.<sup>6</sup> The unit was established in October 1916 by Dr. Frederick A. Besly, a surgeon from Northwestern University Medical School. The medical officers were primarily from Northwestern University, Rush University, and the University of Illinois; the majority of the nurses came from Cook County, Mercy, Augustana, and Evanston hospitals.<sup>7</sup> The hospital was posted at the Dannes-Camier area in France on 11 June 1917 to take the place of the British Expeditionary Force's (BEF) Base Hospital Number 18.<sup>8</sup> While stationed there, Cleveland wrote a long letter to Milner, discussing the diversity of the patients she treated. The BEF was comprised of British subjects as well as subjects from her colonies. Cleveland specifically mentioned meeting Canadian, Australian, New Zealand, and South African soldiers. Due to the language barrier, they could not "understand each other at all."<sup>9</sup> Cleveland also mentioned that the patients she saw typically had chest wounds, fractured bones, or had suffered gassings.<sup>10</sup> She pointed out that the men who were gassed recovered rather quickly, stating that, "in a few days they [soldiers] are able to be about and we can put them to work."<sup>11</sup> Although she was not on the front lines, it is interesting to note that Cleveland did not mention any cases of amputees. Since she was on the coast, one can imagine the possibility that severely wounded men, who were evacuated, went through this area on their way to England. Cleveland may have censored her letters to protect those back home from the horrors of war. It was not all work for Cleveland and her fellow nurses though. The women were able to take a short vacation to Paris in February 1918.<sup>12</sup> Cleveland sent Milner a postcard briefly stating how wonderful the city was.

The Northwestern Unit treated roughly 60,000 patients over a twenty-two month stint.<sup>13</sup> After the war was over, Cleveland transferred from U. S. Hospital Unit Number 12 to Evacuation Hospital Number 26 in Germany. She stayed there until the end of her enlistment and was honorably discharged in September 1919. Unfortunately, information concerning Cleveland and her life after the war is not available. A search of the Illinois Statewide Death Index shows one Elizabeth Cleveland who died in 1935, and whom may be the same Ms. Cleveland as the one under discussion.<sup>14</sup> Since her family could not be reached, this is an uncertainty.

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<sup>6</sup> *The Daily Bulletin* (Bloomington), 20 December 1917.

<sup>7</sup> All information concerning U.S. Hospital Unit No. 12 was taken from Northwestern University Archives, "History," *United States Army Base Hospital Number 12 World War I and II, Records, 1917-2006: Series 0/20/7* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Archives, 2008), 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Taylor Cleveland, France, to Agne Milner, Normal, 5 November 1918, transcript in the hand of Illinois State University Archives, War Service Records Collection, Milner Library, Illinois State University, Bloomington.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Taylor Cleveland, Paris, to Agne Milner, Normal, 12 February 1918, transcript in the hand of Illinois State University Archives, War Service Records Collection, Milner Library, Illinois State University, Bloomington.

<sup>13</sup> *United States Army Base Hospital Number 12 World War I and II, Records, 1917-2006, 1.*

<sup>14</sup> Since Ms. Elizabeth Taylor Cleveland graduated from University High School in 1898 and graduated at the presumable age of 18, we can deduce that she was roughly born in 1880. In 1935, Cleveland would have been around the age of 55 (give or take a few years since we do not truly know what year she was born in). The death record indicates this woman died at the age of 53. The index does not list cause of death. *Illinois Statewide Death*

Like Cleveland, Alice Orme Smith also served in France, entering the Army Nursing Corps in May 1917.<sup>15</sup> She spent her entire enlistment period in several hospitals throughout France.<sup>16</sup> While in Paris, she survived nighttime enemy air raids, although, this was not her last brush with death.

In July 1918, the high command expected a German offensive; therefore, Smith and her unit were moved to Reims for preparation. On 14 July, the Germans began shelling near the hospital.<sup>17</sup> Smith and the rest of the medical staff manned the operating rooms through the barrage— their helmets on and gas masks within reaching distance. After the operating room took a direct hit, an evacuation was ordered.<sup>18</sup> For bravery in the face of an enemy, Smith and her regiment were awarded the Croix de Guerre in August 1918.<sup>19</sup> The final post Smith mentioned was St. Mihiel, the first American offensive in World War I. The battle took place in mid-September 1918. Smith noted that this battle was strange for the medical staff since they did not receive many wounded. She also mentioned that the soldiers did not want to talk about their experiences.<sup>20</sup> This is a particularly interesting section of her notes. Although we do not know exactly what happened to the soldiers simply from Smith's description, we can surmise that it must have been an awful experience. Since this was the first American offensive, it is not surprising that the battle was so shocking to American troops that they did not want to discuss it. Smith was discharged in February 1919.<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, there is no information available concerning Smith after her service in the Army Nursing Corps ended.

### Red Cross and Civilian Aides

In addition to the brave women who served in the Army Nurse Corps, thousands of women supported the war effort through their work with the Red Cross. The American Red Cross was founded on 21 May 1881 by Clara Barton. Barton and her associates were first inspired to create the organization after hearing of the “Swiss-inspired International Red Cross Movement while visiting Europe following the Civil War.”<sup>22</sup> The organization received its first congressional charter in 1900. Its second charter, received in 1905, remains in effect today. It outlines the purpose of the organization— to provide relief for American armed forces, serve as a communication channel between the soldiers and their families, and provide national/international disaster relief. Prior to World War I, the Red Cross initiated its water safety, first aid, and public health nursing programs. After 1914, the organization staffed hospitals and ambulance companies and recruited 20,000 certified nurses to serve the military. When the war ended, the Red Cross focused on taking care of the veterans.<sup>23</sup>

Ellen Babbitt, a former student of Illinois State University, lived in Washington, D.C. during World War I. She was called to service with the Red Cross in March 1918 and was

*Index, 1916-1950* (2009) <http://www.ilsos.gov/GenealogyMWeb/idphdeathsrch.html> (accessed 17 November 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Jo Rayfield, “Alice Orme Smith,” *Illinois State University* (14 December 2001) <http://www.isuarchives.org/women.php> (accessed 28 October 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Alice Smith, *The Index*, 1919, transcript in the hand of Illinois State University Archives, War Service Records Collection, Milner Library, Illinois State University, Bloomington.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Commendation Awarded to Alice Smith's Unit, 14 August 1918, transcript in the hand of Illinois State University Archives, War Service Records Collection, Milner Library, Illinois State University, Bloomington.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Jo Rayfield, “Alice Orme Smith.”

<sup>22</sup> “A Brief History of the American Red Cross,” *American Red Cross Museum* (2009) <http://www.redcross.org/museum/history/brief.asp> (accessed 28 November 2009).

<sup>23</sup> This paragraph is a summation of the information available on the website cited in footnote #25.

assigned to the Children's Bureau in France, Scotland, and England.<sup>24</sup> The Bureau was founded by Dr. William Palmer Lucas, a well-known and respected physician, who had previously "[w]orked with Mr. Hoover for the children of Belgium...."<sup>25</sup> Babbitt discussed the role of the Children's Bureau in an interview:

The first demand was for food and clothing for the refugees. Along with these supplies went the doctors and nurses to staff and equip hospitals, dispensaries, and convalescent homes. So large a percentage of the medical men of France and Belgium were in service that large areas had long been left without medical supervision of any kind. Obviously, where there were no physicians to cure the sick, it was necessary to teach the mothers how to keep the children well.<sup>26</sup>

Because all available resources were sent to the front to assist the soldiers, there was a desperate need for assistance on the home front throughout Europe. Babbitt briefly commented that there was a noticeable amount of appreciation from the visiting or returning soldiers, grateful that someone was taking care of the women and children in their absence.<sup>27</sup> This is an aspect of war which is usually glossed over in the traditional history textbooks, but it is an important aspect, nonetheless. If there was no home to return to, what was there to fight for? The work of Babbitt and the other Red Cross members provided a great morale boost since the men knew their loved ones were cared for. During her last few months of service, Babbitt outlined plans for the British and French government for the health, education, and supervision of children once the Red Cross left.<sup>28</sup> After leaving the organization in May 1919, Babbitt devoted her life to educating people about childcare.<sup>29</sup> She worked as a specialist in exhibits to promote knowledge for infant welfare.<sup>30</sup>

Ida Frances Foote, more commonly known as Frances Foote, was a former ISNU faculty member who joined the Red Cross in June 1918.<sup>31</sup> She was stationed at Base Hospital Camp Pike in Arkansas. In a letter between Foote and David Felmley, President of ISNU, Foote described that after being offered two positions, she finally received one with a salary she desired. Foote noted how excited she was to serve, even if it was "only in a small way."<sup>32</sup>

After a year of service, Foote once again wrote to Felmley. This letter was quite different though. While the official peace talks were taking place at Versailles, there were rumors spreading around Camp Pike which made Foote apprehensive. She worried about finding a job after her term of service ended and directly asked Felmley if she would be able to return to her position.<sup>33</sup> She noted that with her experience in the Red Cross at Camp Pike, she qualified for a deanship. Her job at the camp was to supervise the 250 nurses and "their officer friends" during

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<sup>24</sup> Jo Rayfield, "Ellen Babbitt," *Illinois State University* (14 December 2001) <http://www.isuarchives.org/women-display-one.php?id=11> (accessed 28 November 2009).

<sup>25</sup> Interview of Ellen Babbitt, transcript in the hand of Illinois State University Archives, War Service Records Collection, Milner Library, Illinois State University, Bloomington. The date of the interview as well as the name of the stenographer is unknown.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Jo Rayfield, "Ellen Babbitt."

<sup>30</sup> *The Bloomington Pantagraph* (Bloomington), 19 October 1920.

<sup>31</sup> Frances Foote, Carbondale, to David Felmley, Normal, 2 June 1918, transcript in the hand of Illinois State University Archives, War Service Records Collection, Milner Library, Illinois State University, Bloomington.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Frances Foote, Arkansas, to David Felmley, Normal, 22 March 1919, transcript in the hand of Illinois State University Archives, War Service Records Collection, Milner Library, Illinois State University, Bloomington.

evening outings.<sup>34</sup> Although Foote's letters do not directly speak of working with wounded, children, or returning soldiers, or of participating in any major battles, her letters are valuable in the fact that they address a common concern over employment issues after the war. After her term of service, Foote was expected to take a position as the teacher of Expression at Stephen College for Women in Columbia, Missouri; however, she did not.<sup>35</sup> The last record of Foote is found in an article from November 1919, which stated that she was "keeping house for an invalid brother and his two daughters" in Colorado Springs, Colorado.<sup>36</sup>

Working for the Red Cross was not the only avenue in which women could help the war effort. Ruth M. Cook, a former junior high school teacher in Decatur, Illinois joined thousands of women in supporting the war effort at home by working as a civilian aide.<sup>37</sup> Cook, an ISNU alumna from the class of 1915, was a stenographer in Washington D.C. for the Adjutant General's Office from July to October 1918.<sup>38</sup> Her application to serve as a Reconstruction Aide in Occupational Therapy was accepted and her job was to instruct wounded soldiers at the base hospital in France in arts and crafts.<sup>39</sup>

Although scheduled to work overseas, when the Armistice was signed in November, Cook was reassigned to Base General Hospital Number 10 in Boston, Massachusetts.<sup>40</sup> In a letter to "The Index," an autobiographical record dedicated to keeping track of alumni, Cook described her job at the hospital. Her responsibilities included caring for amputee soldiers and helping them learn new job skills. Cook aided in reintegrating soldiers back into society. She taught workshops on typing and other necessary skills needed to succeed in the business world.<sup>41</sup> The majority of the patients at the hospital were amputees, as evident in Cook's statement that "one gets used to seeing the boys with empty sleeve and trouser legs pinned up with safety pins, or hobbling around on crutches, or getting about in a wheel chair with legs in splints or casts, or trying on a new arm or new leg."<sup>42</sup> It is not surprising that she mentioned this; however, what is surprising is the passing tone her letter takes in regards to working with amputees. Cook mentions this as a side thought, as opposed to being a shocking aspect to her job. This sentiment is reflected time and again in letters from nurses, as well as soldiers. People adjusted rather quickly to deformities, as it was a common presence in their everyday lives. It is also interesting to note that the letter from Cook resonates with bitterness over her lost chance at going "over there."<sup>43</sup> In 1919, Cook was transferred to General Hospital Number 41 in Staten, Island, New York.<sup>44</sup> She served until her discharge in August 1920. In 1927, Cook moved to California and worked as a library clerk at UCLA.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> *The Daily Pantagraph* (Bloomington), 19 July 1919.

<sup>36</sup> *The Daily Pantagraph* (Bloomington), 13 November 1919.

<sup>37</sup> *The Bloomington Pantagraph* (Bloomington), 24 October 1918.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ruth Cook, *ISNU Military Service Survey*, date unknown, transcript in the hand of Illinois State University Archives, War Service Records Collection, Milner Library, Illinois State University, Bloomington.

<sup>41</sup> Ruth Cook, Boston, to "The Index," Normal, 17 April 1919, transcript in the hand of Illinois State University Archives, War Service Records Collection, Milner Library, Illinois State University, Bloomington.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Handwritten note card of Ruth Cook's Mailing Address, 1919, transcript in the hand of Illinois State University Archives, War Service Records Collection, Milner Library, Illinois State University, Bloomington.

<sup>45</sup> Jo Rayfield, "Ruth Cook," *Illinois State University* (14 December 2001) <http://www.isuarchives.org/women-display-one.php?id=27> (accessed 22 November 2009).

## **Conclusion**

After the Armistice on 11 November 1918, the firing stopped on the battlefields of World War I. The need for nurses, however, did not end. Thousands of women answered the call to serve during the war. Those same women finished out their enlistment caring for the veterans they had bandaged during the war. The Army Nursing Corps, the Red Cross, and the civilian aides all worked to protect the lives of soldiers, the families of the armed forces, and those on the home front in Europe. The women discussed in this paper worked in the highest levels of danger, but also helped veterans recover at home. Each of them reflect in their letters the pride they felt in contributing to the cause—even if it was in just the smallest way. These women show us that there is still much to discover about World War I and its effects on each person who served. It is through these local studies that we can further our understanding of World War I and its legacy.