

The Saga of the Great War

Noah Sangster

The First World War began in the summer of 1914, following the assassination of the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary in Sarajevo. The conflict sparked between Austria-Hungary and the small Balkan nation of Serbia escalated quickly as Russia, Germany, France, and Britain entered into the largest-scale war since the defeat of Napoleon. In addition to the major European powers, the war also encompassed their colonies and allies around the world, and saw battles on three continents, at sea, and in the air. By the time that the United States entered the war in April of 1917, the belligerent powers had already drenched the battlefields of Europe in blood, and thousands of soldiers and civilians had perished.

Although the United States fought in the war for less than two years, the war left a lasting impact on a nation that had become increasingly active on the world stage. Although isolated from Eurasia by two oceans and many miles, the United States asserted its power globally as the nineteenth century drew to a close. Expansion into the Caribbean and the Pacific followed war with Spain in 1898, and even the most ardent isolationist could not deny that American interests now extended far beyond her shores. The American people, long suspicious of European wars and diplomacy, nonetheless joined in the fight against Germany and her allies. Not only soldiers, but entire towns and cities became deeply involved in the war. Although the conflict is often overshadowed in American popular memory by the next war with Germany some two decades later, the American men and women who lived through the uncertain years of 1917-1918 were often gripped by profound emotions of hope and fear. It was a time when the ideals of righteousness and freedom mingled with the horrors of death and destruction in the popular imagination of the war, when apocalyptic visions of civilizations descending into chaos and destruction were accompanied by dreams of a new and better world rising from the ashes of dead empires. This paper's main purpose is to follow the saga as it played out in Decatur, Illinois, a railroad hub and major urban center for downstate Illinois that gave significant contributions to the American war effort. I will also recount my own family's connection to the war.

The Old World

My own family did not live in Decatur during the war, and only one served in uniform during those years. Their stories all began across the Atlantic, in the same Europe that descended into chaos and madness after the assassination in Sarajevo. My father's grandparents were all British, and lived through the Edwardian period that began the twentieth century. One of his grandmothers came from the small northern Welsh town of Llanystumdwy, the same town where wartime Prime Minister David Lloyd George spent part of his youth. She claimed to have known the future Minister when they were children, and according to my father did not hold him in high regard. Her husband, Frederick May, came from the Hampstead area of London. Already married and in his thirties by the time that war broke out in 1914, he was not conscripted until at least the winter of 1916 (when the draft was expanded to include married men)¹ and did not see combat. My father's other grandfather, Guy H. Sangster of Brighton, had served in uniform overseas as part of the British Empire's forces in the Gambia in West Africa. He did not live to fight in the First World War, however, and died in the Gambia in 1912, supposedly the victim of a local shaman's curse after shooting a sacred crocodile.

¹ Millman, Brock. "HMG and the War against Dissent." *Journal of Contemporary History* 40 No. 3 (2005): 429.

My mother's family, Eastern European Jews, emigrated from Prussian and Russian territory to the United States before the war. Her grandfather, Samuel Weinstein, had been working as a teacher in Minsk when he was inducted into the staff of Russian Grand Duke Sergei Mikhailovich as a clerk. He was informed that to keep this position he would have to convert to Christianity. Fearing persecution as a Jew, he fled Russia in the 1890's and joined a brother already living in Chicago, where he became involved in the garment industry and later married one of his workers, a Jewish woman from the Prussian part of what would become a re-constituted Poland after the war.² Due to his advanced age (he was at least 40 by 1917) he was not drafted into the American army, but his old benefactor the Grand Duke served on the Russian military staff (*Stavka*) as an artillery officer during the war. After the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II, Sergei would leave active military service, and he was with his Romanov relatives when they were held captive by the Bolsheviks following their coup in November 1917. Along with the Romanov royal family, he was executed (as was his secretary) in July of the following year.³ Had my great-grandfather kept his job with the Grand Duke, he possibly would have ended up as another casualty of the Bolshevik Revolution that brought Russia out of the war and into years of animosity and conflict with the West.

In Memoriam

My family did not come to Decatur until after the Second World War, but in researching this paper I came to understand that the First World War, although now often overshadowed by the second, profoundly impacted the lives of both the soldiers who left Decatur to fight in France, at sea, or to serve in the Illinois Army National Guard, and the civilians who stayed behind. A memorial was erected to the World War II generation in Decatur during the summer of 2012, and is on display outside of the Civic Center. By comparison, the First World War has faded from public memory. One old monument listed in the local history has disappeared entirely, a bronze "honor roll" plaque that was probably melted down for scrap during World War II.⁴ The remaining World War I monument stands atop a quiet hill overlooking Lake Decatur, scratched but still readable, it lists the names of those from Macon County, of which Decatur is the largest city and county seat, who gave the "Supreme Sacrifice" during the war. It was erected by members of the Castle Williams Post No. 105 of the American Legion. The post was named for Sgt. Castle Williams, the first Decatur soldier killed in the war, and is located at the southwest end of Decatur off of Illinois Route 48.⁵

The plaque lists 56 names, including Castle Williams, and at the bottom quotes a well-known bible verse, "Greater love hath no man than this, that he laid down his life for his friend." At the crest of the hill, a flagpole continues to bear the waving tricolored banner not so different from the flag that those men and women died to serve, but the old flower beds surrounding it have gone, and the bronze plaque memorializing the dead now shares the hill with a number of other monuments, donated benches with plaques dedicated to loved ones. Rather than a distinct monument, the plaque has become the oldest and most weathered attraction on what bears the vague name of "Memorial Hill." I had passed by the spot many times growing up without ever giving it a second glance.

² I never met my great-grandparents, but my aunt transcribed this part of the family history while interviewing her grandmother, Samuel Weinstein's wife Jean, between 1974 and 1980 at her home in Miami, Florida.

³ Maylunas, Andrei and Mironenko, Sergei. *A Life Long Passion*. New York: Doubleday, 1997 (638-39).

⁴ Banton, O.T. ed. *History of Macon County*, 393.

⁵ Guillory, Dan. *Images of America, Wartime Decatur: 1832-1945*, 63-64.

Decatur in Wartime: Food and Speculation

The First World War left a profound impact on the city and its people. During this time, Decatur served as a major railroad hub for downstate Illinois, situated between the larger urban centers of Chicago and St. Louis. Goods and people traveled through the area, and made use of the Wabash depot, with its train station, mechanics, and variety of shops. The Midwestern city, hundreds of miles from the nearest ocean, might not be expected to have much of an international outlook. However, its situation among some of the most productive farmland in the country, coupled with the railroads and a thriving industrial sector (A. E. Staley, a major processor of corn and other foodstuffs now a part of Tate & Lyle, was founded in 1906),⁶ made the city and surrounding regions of great importance during the war.

With the major exchange of agricultural commodities only a few hours north in Chicago, and with food processing key to Decatur's industrial output, the ebb and flow of agricultural prices held a devoted following among industrialists and farmers in Macon County. To that end, the *Decatur Herald*, one of the city's main newspapers, kept close track of the exchange to the north. Even before the entrance of the United States into the war in April of 1917, those involved in the exchange had good reason to monitor closely the events unfolding in Europe. With millions of men put into active military service, the agricultural production of belligerent countries declined. With increasing food needs for both soldiers and civilians, the importation of foodstuffs formed a critical part of war efforts in Europe. As a neutral nation, the United States profited from the freedom of merchant ships to enter ports of hungry nations, and with vast tracts of land suitable for food production, American farmers and traders sometimes saw in the turmoil a chance to increase their profits, both the British and German navies attempted to divert this trade away from the enemy by use of a naval blockade and submarine warfare, respectively.⁷

Rising demand in belligerent nations led to an increase in the price of key foodstuffs, and the *Decatur Herald* kept close watch on wheat and corn especially. The speculation over food prices and demand during the final months of official neutrality in early 1917 followed the events in Europe closely. Before Chicago had its well-known sports franchises, the *Herald* monitored the progress of the city's "Bulls" and "Bears" on the commodities exchange, traders making risky bets on rising or falling prices. News in early January of deadlock on the Western Front, of German advances along the Danube, and what was seen as a 'warlike response' by the Allies to President Wilson's appeal for a statement of peace goals led to a spike in the price of corn and wheat especially on January 4.⁸ However, over the next two days, when news arrived from Washington of a renewed peace effort by the President, the prices began to fall again.⁹ The trend again reversed itself after January 7, and the *Herald* credited the new rise to Kaiser Wilhelm's message to his troops that the war would continue, coupled with growing demand in Europe and a shrinking supply on the domestic markets.¹⁰

The failure of Wilson's efforts to negotiate peace between the belligerent powers of Europe continued to impact the practice of food speculation in the following months leading up to the entry of the United States into the war. However, another factor began to take a toll on the markets as well, when Germany resumed its campaign of submarine warfare in the

⁶ <http://www.tateandlyle.com/AboutUs/history/Pages/History.aspx>.

⁷ Brose, Eric Dorn. *A History of the Great War*, 227.

⁸ *Decatur Herald*, "Wheat Exports Rise," 01-04-1917.

⁹ *Decatur Herald*, "Dread of Re-selling by Foreigners in Event of Peace Brings About Decline," 01-06-1917.

¹⁰ *Decatur Herald*, "Corn Reaches Highest Price since 1892," 01-07-1917, "Wheat Prices Highest Since Civil War Time," 01-09-1917, and "Wheat Market Lifted by Reply of Entente," 01-12-1917.

Atlantic.¹¹ Although the primary effect on commodity prices was negative due to fears of unreliable shipping to European ports, even for traditionally non-contraband items such as foodstuffs, this was not always the case. German activity was not only directed against shipping from the United States but also from the neutral nations of Latin America as well. The loss of shipping there served to strengthen the hand of speculators in the United States betting both on rising food prices and the ability of the United States to provide for shortfalls in the European food supply.¹² Although Wilson's peace and mediation efforts continued, exerting downward pressure on the prices (along with the curious incidence of German-sounding "Hessian Fly" afflictions on Midwestern crop yields),¹³ the Germans resumed a campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare in February of 1917. The move would lead to a formal break of diplomatic relations between Germany and the United States, and when a formal declaration of war came in April, the government and public increased efforts to end or at least mitigate speculation in the interest of regulating an increasingly vital food supply, with stricter controls and voluntary conservation efforts.

Food conservation became a major part of the Home Front effort in the United States, and Decatur was no exception. In the section for "church news" in the *Herald* on July 2, 1917, the words of local clergy challenged the citizens of Decatur to do their part in promoting thrift and ensuring the steady supply of food to troops being mobilized for war. Reverend Frank Fox of the First Congregational Church denounced the "wickedness of waste." Reverend F. A. Havighurst of the First Methodist church preached the connection between food security and military security in starker terms, stating that "the war will be won on our farms and in our kitchens as surely as on the battlefields of Europe."¹⁴ Local restaurants got on board with the move to conserve food as well, acting on the popular slogans of "meatless" Mondays and "wheatless" Wednesdays, moves that reduced consumption of these key food products locally. The campaign was pronounced a great success by the restaurant owners as well as Decatur mayor Dan Dinneen, and broadly supported by the public.¹⁵ Women often took the lead in promoting food conservation, such as those of the First Presbyterian Church who organized to distribute pamphlets and give lectures on how to stretch food resources.¹⁶ In an advice column, the *Herald* ran a Mrs. Parr's suggestions for incorporating food conservation into Thanksgiving meal preparations. These included recipes for "War Bread," that could be made with less wheat, and using corn syrup and shortening rather than sugar and fat or lard in cooking.¹⁷

Of course, when it came to promoting food security during wartime, the desire to provide profits and ensure the flow of money into the local economy was not entirely supplanted by patriotic action for the war effort. A.O. Bolen, a local entrepreneur with an office in the Millikin building downtown, used the war as an opportunity to sell farmland that he held in Canada. With so many Canadians already fighting in Europe and elsewhere, Bolen stated that the war had created opportunities for cheap land up north, and implored prospective buyers to act "before the war is over."¹⁸ An ad run in the *Herald* in July of 1917, signed by members of local

¹¹ *Decatur Herald*, "Wheat Prices Drop," 01-11-1917, "German Sea Rovers Stop Wheat Export," 01-20-1917, and "Rising Rates of Vessel Insurance on the Atlantic Depress Wheat Market," 01-20-1917.

¹² *Decatur Herald*, "Wheat Market Sags but is Lifted After Loss of Merchant Ships," 01-17-1917.

¹³ *Decatur Herald*, "Wheat Prices Drop after Wilson's Address," 01-24-1917, "Possible Peace Move by Wilson Lowers Wheat Prices," 02-01-1917.

¹⁴ *Decatur Herald*, "Churches Speak on Food Conservation," 07-02-1917.

¹⁵ *Decatur Herald*, "Food Conservation Efforts Pronounced Success," 11-02-1917.

¹⁶ *Decatur Herald*, "Church Women Organize for Food Conservation Effort," 11-02-1917.

¹⁷ *Decatur Herald*, "Suggestions for a Simple Thanksgiving," 11-04-1917.

¹⁸ *Decatur Herald*, "Buy Land in Canada," 01-20-1917.

dry goods companies, promising that with high yields expected for the year, “several million” bushels of corn would be sold “at top price to our allies across the sea.” It also encouraged any able-bodied men available for agricultural work to sign up, promising better wages with so many men entering military service and a shortage of agricultural laborers.¹⁹ Another ad from the McClelland Grocer Company, sporting an illustration of a spread-winged eagle and a uniformed soldier underneath the word “Loyalty,” encouraged Decatur residents to “buy your goods in your own town, from your own merchants,” and stating that loyalty to one’s community is just as important as loyalty to the nation.²⁰ Clearly, the goals of patriotic action and profit motivation were not always considered mutually exclusive.

Decatur in Wartime: Preparing for Preparedness

Mobilization of the city and its resources, both human and material, went well beyond the agricultural industry. Some members of the German high command, when conducting their risk assessment on the choice to reboot unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917, scoffed at the American military potential and amateurism of its forces.²¹ While the Americans had not seen combat on the scale it had been waged in Europe since 1914, the notion that Americans of the generation that fought the First World War were completely unaccustomed to military service was not well-founded.

It is true that Decatur residents largely did not clamor for war against Germany during the first years of conflict in Europe. New Year’s celebrations of 1917 at St. Paul’s Church featured a sermon on peace as the ‘salvation of the white race,’ and condemned the conflagration in Europe.²² Peace rallies were held in Decatur before the war, such as one by the National Peace Association in January of 1917 that drew at least four hundred to the auditorium of the Decatur high school, and featured the release of white doves by local children.²³ Decatur man T.B. Jack, along with representatives of the German Methodist and Lutheran churches, met at the YWCA to advocate for peace and declared that the U.S. must keep out of war in Europe.²⁴ However, with the renewal of the German campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare and the infamous “Zimmerman” note to Mexico from the German ambassador encouraging Mexico to attack the United States, public opinion grimly turned in favor of war as a necessary measure. Editorials in the *Herald* condemned the German actions in no uncertain terms. “Nothing furnishes more convincing evidence of Germany’s desperation, not even the food shortage, than the yielding to the Von Tirpitz-Von Hindenburg cabal,” went one, denouncing leaders in the German army and navy for the renewed submarine campaign, while another lamented Germany’s loss of “the friendship of the greatest neutral nation,” and that the Kaiser “now seeks victory by the inhuman submarine.”²⁵ The full Zimmerman telegram was published with great indignation in March, adding to fears of German belligerence and the potential for an escalation of the conflict to the South.²⁶

After the Mexican Revolution began in 1910, the United States’ southern neighbor descended into chaos and violence for the better part of a decade. Americans did not simply read about the fighting and turmoil in their local newspapers, many participated directly.

¹⁹ *Decatur Herald*, “Three Billion Bushels of Corn!” 07-01-1917.

²⁰ *Decatur Herald*, “Loyalty,” 07-01-1917.

²¹ Brose, Eric Dorn, *A History of the Great War*, 199-200.

²² *Decatur Herald*, “Watch New Year Come at St. Paul’s,” 01-01-1917.

²³ *Decatur Herald*, “National Peace Association Rally Draws 400,” 01-06-1917.

²⁴ *Decatur Herald*, “Peace Advocates Meet at YWCA,” 03-10-1917.

²⁵ *Decatur Herald*, “German Folly,” 02-02-1917, and “Unrestricted Submarine Warfare,” 02-14-1917.

²⁶ *Decatur Herald*, “Zimmerman Note,” 03-01-1917.

General Jack Pershing, who would later lead the American expeditionary forces in Europe, led a punitive campaign into northern Mexico to hunt down the Mexican revolutionary Francisco “Pancho” Villa after the latter conducted a raid into United States territory and killed a number of American citizens. The anticipation of war heightened the sense among some in Decatur that more preparedness was needed, leading to the creation of a local gun club, although interest had waned by 1917.²⁷ The conflict might have escalated into a full-scale war with Mexico if the events in Europe had not drawn the United States into war with Germany. Indeed, although the Mexican government’s response to the Zimmerman was tepid, the *Herald* editorial staff warned its readers that it might have had more success if Villa had succeeded in gaining power in Mexico.²⁸

Even as violence continued across the southern border, the formal break with Germany came in February of 1917. Decatur’s reaction was largely in support of Wilson’s policy, viewing it as a necessary measure directed against a belligerent and enemy nation. Covering the reaction of Decatur residents to the break of diplomatic relations, the *Herald* interviewed a number of Decatur residents, including an A. Siegfried. Siegfried had come from Germany, but became a U.S. citizen and declared that he would remain one “all the way through.”²⁹ Although he did not believe that war would break out, the staff editorial for the same day was not so optimistic, asking the rhetorical question, “What recourse will we have? ...none but war.”³⁰ Local churches weighed in on the matter as well, with Reverend Frank Fox of the First Congregational Church declaring that “diplomacy has failed where united prayer may have won,” and this sentiment was echoed by Reverend C. E. Jenney of the East Park Baptist Congregation, stating that if “Christian forces had been working as the Lord commanded them...there would be peace instead of war.” The Reverend William Heyne of St. John’s German Lutheran Church described Wilson’s break of diplomatic ties as necessary, but insisted that war with the Germans was not.³¹

As relations with Germany were breaking down, the soldiers who had served with Pershing in Mexico began to return back to the United States, and many of them passed through Decatur’s train station at the Wabash depot. In January, a letter from a Decatur soldier stationed at the Mexican border was published in the *Decatur Herald*. H. J. Heinz wrote to his family in Decatur that his unit of the 4th Infantry of the Illinois National Guard was expected back by February 1st.³² However, the 4th did not return until March, arriving at the Wabash depot along with a New York regiment passing through on the way back home.³³ There was no indication in his letter that he expected the unit to be called up again, but the large numbers of troops continued to pass through the Wabash station in the coming months as relations with Germany continued to sour, and preparing for possible war with the Central Powers was most likely a factor in the withdrawal from Mexico. Troops from a Michigan Cavalry unit returning from the border stopped at the station on January 23, and an impromptu military parade sprang up as the soldiers marched through downtown to the sound of military music.³⁴

²⁷ *Decatur Herald*, “Decatur Rifle Club Closes,” 01-14-1917.

²⁸ *Decatur Herald*, “Why Zimmerman Failed,” 03-03-1917.

²⁹ *Decatur Herald*, “Shock, Regret over Wilson’s ‘Necessary Action,’” 02-04-1917.

³⁰ *Decatur Herald*, “What Next?” 02-04-1917.

³¹ *Decatur Herald*, “Decatur Churches React to Break,” 02-05-1917.

³² *Decatur Herald*, “4th Infantry to Return from Mexican Border,” 01-07-1917.

³³ *Decatur Herald*, “Decatur Man meets Friends in NY Regiment,” 03-17-1917.

³⁴ *Decatur Herald*, “Michigan Troops at the Wabash Station,” 01-23-1917.

Some of Decatur's men had already been involved in military service. Of these, perhaps the most well-known was Rear Admiral C.B.T. Moore. Moore had come from a long military tradition in his family, as his father General Jesse Moore fought in the Civil War, and a great-grandfather had been present at the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown in 1781.³⁵ Admiral Moore had served with Commodore Dewey at the Battle of Manila Bay in the war with Spain in 1898, and during the war commanded the United States' naval station in Hawaii until 1915, helping organize an ultimately futile attempt to rescue the crew of submarine F-4 that exploded near the naval station.³⁶ He was back in Decatur by 1917, and headed a patriotic parade through downtown Decatur at the beginning of April that saw Decatur residents invoke the "Spirit of Stephen Decatur" and the "Spirit of (18)64" while calls were made outside of the Lincoln Square Theater for universal military training, at the same time as Wilson was pushing Congress for a formal declaration of war against Germany.³⁷ His wife was also involved in the war effort, helping to organize local women for Red Cross work.³⁸

Mobilization went through both official and unofficial channels. The railroads continued to be of vital importance, and the Wabash station bosses and employees pledged early and lasting support to the war effort. Outlining Illinois' potential for the war effort, the *Herald's* interview with representatives of the Wabash station pointed to the presence of powder and cartridge/shrapnel manufacture in the state, as well as a central location secure from foreign attack and located at the nexus of grain, coal, alcohol-producing districts as well, with "unequaled transportation facilities by rail" that could forward these supplies to either coast.³⁹ By July, Wabash employees had donated \$1,501 to the war effort. The *Herald* praised these efforts as indicative that "Uncle Sam has the backing of the men and women who work hard for their money...to help win this war for liberty and democracy, and not for personal gain."⁴⁰ Other contributors to local commerce and industry gave material and moral support to the cause as well. Local photographers donated high speed lenses for use in airplane scouting missions.⁴¹ Col. J. M. Clokey of the City Club of Decatur wrote a letter to the editor declaring that "the time for preparedness is now," and encouraging especially any men with military experience to enlist. He also organized the arrival of Adj. General Frank Dickson for a city-wide campaign on preparedness, also backed by mayor Dinneen and meant to coincide with rallies in Chicago and other cities.⁴²

The paper itself became involved in the war effort. Several editorials stressed universal loyalty to the nation, and especially the failure of Germany to play off of internal divisions of the United States. Most interesting perhaps was the insistence on the loyalty of German-Americans from an editorial in February, just as the renewed German submarine campaign was fast turning public opinion against the German government. The staff of the *Herald* declared that "The hyphen is being wiped out," and encouraged all patriotic Americans to tolerate no persecution of the German community in the United States.⁴³ The paper ran an ad for the 1916 film *War Brides* to play at the Bijou Theater in both English and German.⁴⁴ The *Herald* also

³⁵ Johns, Jane Martin, *Personal Recollections of Early Decatur*, 136.

³⁶ Castle, William Richard, *Hawaii, past and Present*, 98. The story of the submarine's recovery can be found on the Arlington Cemetery web page, <http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/sub-f4.htm>.

³⁷ *Decatur Herald*, "Decatur's Loyalty is pledged to President," 04-01-1917.

³⁸ *Decatur Herald*, "Mrs. C.B.T. Moore Plans Red Cross Work," 02-28-1917.

³⁹ *Decatur Herald*, "Wabash Station Prepared for War," 02-19-1917.

⁴⁰ *Decatur Herald*, "Wabash Employees Donate \$1,501 to War Effort," 07-23-1917.

⁴¹ *Decatur Herald*, "High-speed Lenses Needed," 11-02-1917.

⁴² *Decatur Herald*, "Letter to the Editor," 03-28-1917.

⁴³ *Decatur Herald*, "German-Americans are Loyal," 02-13-1917.

⁴⁴ *Decatur Herald*, "War Brides at the Bijou," 01-07-1917.

represented Decatur in the “Our Boys in France Tobacco Fund,” a program approved by the Secretaries of the War and Navy that worked to purchase cigarettes at discounted prices in order to send a pack of cigarettes and a postcard to “every American soldier in France.”⁴⁵

Decatur was also a focal point for Illinois Red Cross work, spearheaded by the local Women’s Club. Workers created care packages for soldiers, issued recommendations for Christmas parcels to troops overseas, and engaged in a wide-scale campaign selling Red Cross Seals to raise funds for wartime work. By January 7 of 1917, over 78,000 seals had been sold in Decatur. Half of the proceeds went to the Decatur Women’s Club, deeply involved in Red Cross work, and the sales also entitled Decatur to complimentary service for one month from a renowned medical expert.⁴⁶ The Women’s Club also operated a canteen hut at the Wabash station to provide friendly company and refreshments to soldiers leaving or passing through Decatur for military service.⁴⁷

Religious and secular organizations also became involved in relief efforts directed at reducing the human and societal costs of the war. The local Jewish congregation, at the direction of Rabbi Kaplan, donated about \$50 per month to the needy in war zones.⁴⁸ Professor Thomas Oliver came from the University of Illinois in Urbana to give a free lecture at Millikin University on his work with the Belgian Relief Commission, encouraging Decatur residents to give charitably to the victims of the German invasion, and asking the city to adopt 100 Belgian children to prevent them falling victim to disease and malnutrition.⁴⁹ The local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution adopted a French war orphan, André Richard, donating money to provide for his housing and welfare.⁵⁰ The Association Allied Relief of Decatur had sent 4,000 garments to the war effort in less than a year by the war’s end.⁵¹

The churchgoers of Decatur also became subject to increasingly-militant language from their pulpits during the war. Reverend D. C. Beatty of St. John’s Episcopal Church declared that “the Christian peace is that of the warrior...for Christ holds out both hands to you--in one hand he holds a sword, in the other peace. You cannot take one without the other and be a Christian.”⁵² In a later sermon, Beatty declared that Jesus himself had provided the ideological basis for the Red Cross, and that killing in a righteous cause was justified in the bible, describing the German soldiers as “innocent tools of a gang of murderers...stricken with moral blindness,” going on to state that “their injury and death cannot be avoided.”⁵³ He described the Great War as “the beginning of the great Battle of Armageddon.”⁵⁴ Reverend Hurley of the First Baptist Congregation issued his “Mobilization Sermon” in March, stating that “whether we like it or not we are coming to think in military terms...the church is not an institution for taking life but saving it. Yet, its object is conquest.”⁵⁵ He would also give a sermon to members of L Co. of the Illinois National Guard, stating that he “cannot find anywhere in the scriptures

⁴⁵ *Decatur Herald*, “Herald to Represent Decatur in Tobacco Fund,” 11-04-1917.

⁴⁶ *Decatur Herald*, “82,386 Red Cross Seals sold in Macon County,” 01-07-1917.

⁴⁷ Banton, O.T. ed. *History of Macon County*, 388.

⁴⁸ Due to a misunderstanding, the *Herald* had originally reported that the Decatur Jews were unwilling to make donations during Passover, but this was retracted the next day. The mistake came from the unwillingness of the congregation to celebrate and lend support to the Revolution in Russia. *Decatur Herald*, “Correction,” 03-25-1917.

⁴⁹ *Decatur Herald*, “Illinois Professor to Give Lecture on Belgian Relief,” 03-05-1917.

⁵⁰ *Decatur Herald*, “DAR Chapter hears from E. B. Hitchcock on return from Paris,” 11-02-1917.

⁵¹ *Decatur Herald*, “Allied Relief of Decatur,” 11-01-1918.

⁵² *Decatur Herald*, “Christian Peace,” 01-15-1917.

⁵³ *Decatur Herald*, “Jesus Founded Red Cross,” 07-09-1917.

⁵⁴ *Decatur Herald*, “Rev. Beatty gives sermon on the Great War,” 07-02-1917.

⁵⁵ *Decatur Herald*, “Mobilization Sermon,” 03-05-1917.

where Jesus advocates peace at the price of compromise with evil.”⁵⁶ Preachers also weighed in on the dangers of domestic dissent, such as Reverend Frank Fox, who warned that those who take a long-distance view of the war ignore the fact that “our most dangerous foes are in our own country.”⁵⁷

In addition to churches, schools also became involved in the militarization of Decatur during wartime. Millikin students as well as those in the Decatur high school organized for drilling practice in conjunction with L Co. of the National Guard, around 300 students throughout the city. Captain J.P. Barricklow published a request in the *Herald* for old Springfield Rifles to help with the effort to train young men for enlistment.⁵⁸ Drilling took place on the grounds of the Millikin campus, so that the young men of Decatur could “prepare for preparedness.”⁵⁹ Even the younger generation became enamored with the spirit of mobilization. In the summer of 1917, children turned out on West Prairie Avenue to drill. The *Herald* reported, with somewhat militaristic fashion, that “if the boys keep their present pace until they are grown up, they will be ready to join Pershing in ten years, providing the war is still going on.”⁶⁰

The Soldiers

By war’s end, Macon County had 3,960 veterans of the First World War, of whom 1,558 were inductees into the draft. 56 of them died, the first being Orville Moyer on November 3, 1917.⁶¹ Many enlisted voluntarily, often from the desire to contribute their own special skills to the war effort. Ira V. Maffet, formerly a cashier and credit man at the Danzeisen Packing Company, became the first Decatur man to receive a commission in the Army Reserve’s Quartermasters Department, a job that entailed the managing of supplies and logistical support for army units, not so different from his peacetime role of keeping track of company inventory and expenses.⁶² Bert Hill was sent to Fort Kelly, Texas, to train for the fledgling Army Air Force (at that time a branch of the Signal Corps). He had worked on cars before the war and his experience as a mechanic and driver suited him well in his new occupation.⁶³

Captain Krigbaum headed the L Company of Illinois’ National Guard, stationed in Decatur, and saw his position as an ideal one to promote enlistment among fellow Decatur residents. He was a frequent source for the *Herald*, keeping the paper up to date on the progress of L Co. and encouraging patriotic young men to sign up for the militia rather than entertain dreams of enlisting as an officer by enrolling in a formal military academy. He also used the newspaper to assure parents that he would turn away any recruit who was not of age, if and “when parents object.”⁶⁴ During the war, L Co was sent to guard bridges and munitions plants in Kentucky, and was officially drafted into war service by President Wilson the day before Draft Registration numbers began appearing in the *Herald* in the summer of 1917.⁶⁵

Experiences in war sent back to families via letters were sometimes published in the *Herald*. Captain Charles Sweeny’s experiences were published in serial fashion during the summer of 1917. He described in vivid detail the transformation of a raw and untested recruit

⁵⁶ *Decatur Herald*, “Members of L Co. Attend Sermon,” 04-02-1917.

⁵⁷ *Decatur Herald*, “Church News,” 11-05-1917.

⁵⁸ *Decatur Herald*, “Millikin Students Turn Out to Drill,” 03-30-1917.

⁵⁹ *Decatur Herald*, “Military Training to take place at Millikin,” 03-23-1917.

⁶⁰ *Decatur Herald*, “Children of West Prairie in Drilling Practice,” 07-01-1917.

⁶¹ Banton, O.T. ed. *History of Macon County*, 388.

⁶² *Decatur Herald*, “Decatur Man to receive Commission,” 02-14-1917.

⁶³ *Decatur Herald*, “Bert Hill in Fort Kelly,” 07-01-1917.

⁶⁴ *Decatur Herald*, “L Co. will Turn Away Underage Recruits,” 03-31-1917.

⁶⁵ *Decatur Herald*, “First Installment of Registration Numbers,” 07-10-1917.

into a modern warrior of the trenches, with all of their peculiar horrors. Describing the rush for cover during one of the frequent artillery barrages, he says of his first night under fire in the trenches, "We felt cheap, humiliated. It was as though we were doing an unsoldierly thing. Later we learned taking cover is good common sense."⁶⁶ Rudy Sleeter's one word reply to his father back in Decatur upon his arrival in France was also published: "Safe."⁶⁷ Billy Shellabarger, serving in an ambulance unit on the Western Front, recounted his first experience of near death on the battlefield as something of an understatement, "Our last trip to the Front proved to be the most exciting of all. We had a good scare when a shell hit in front of our car...and cut up the head of a horseman whom we were just getting ready to pass."⁶⁸

Lt. Arthur Alexander's story was one that even brought the attention of General Pershing. While on a bombing raid across the German lines, his plane was ambushed and had to make a fighting escape, outnumbered, back to safety. Wounded in the abdomen and nearly blacked out, he continued to pilot the plane even as his observer fainted from shock after being hit in both legs. Landing safely back behind friendly lines, he collapsed. He would later be awarded the Distinguished Service Cross by General Pershing for valor and steadfastness in combat.⁶⁹

Some families gave tremendously to the war in terms on enlistment and military service. Alexander Von Praag's family sent five sons into the service, and all returned home safely.⁷⁰ Other families were not as lucky. Castle Williams, the namesake of American Legion Post 105, had enlisted into L Co. and was stationed in Kentucky, but would be sent over to France and gain the dubious distinction of the first Decatur man killed in war, dying under German fire near Verdun in 1917. His brother Okey D. Williams also enlisted into the Navy, and was killed later in the war.⁷¹ Castle Williams' name was chosen for the American Legion post to honor his sacrifice six years later when the Legion gained its permanent home near Illinois route 48.⁷²

Victory and La Grippe

When the ceasefire took effect on November 11 of 1918, the mood in Decatur was one of jubilation. A twenty-two hour long celebration took over the city, centered around the office of the *Herald*, as the first source for international news. The flag fluttered down from the office window to the cheers of the crowd gathering below. Singing and "religious sublimity" characterized the celebration, and the Reverend Frank Fox as well as mayor Dinneen squeezed out onto the building's fire escape to address the ecstatic crowd. Church bells rang nearly nonstop with news of the armistice, with Father Murphy of St. Patrick's Cathedral ringing the bell himself for nearly a half hour after being too impatient to wait for the custodian to arrive at the building.⁷³

The most surprising thing about the victory celebration is that it occurred in the midst of an epidemic of influenza. Having already wreaked havoc among European armies and cities, the "Spanish Flu" brought many American cities to a near standstill. The *Herald* reported seven

⁶⁶ *Decatur Herald*, "First Night in the Trenches," 07-09-1917.

⁶⁷ *Decatur Herald*, "Rudy Sleeter arrives in France," 11-02-1917.

⁶⁸ *Decatur Herald*, "One Night at the Front," 11-04-1917.

⁶⁹ *Decatur Herald*, "Decatur Man Receives Distinguished Service Cross," 11-01-1918.

⁷⁰ *Decatur Herald*, "Service Flag with Five Stars for Von Praag Home," 11-02-1917.

⁷¹ *Decatur Herald*, "Castle Williams and Okey D., brothers enlist for war," 07-01-1917. Both names can be found on the memorial in Nelson Park overlooking Lake Decatur.

⁷² <http://castlewilliamspost105.org/History.htm>

⁷³ *Decatur Herald*, "22 Hours of Celebration," 11-12-1918.

cases on the last day of October, 1918, bringing the total up to 710. The same day had also seen two deaths, for a total of 66 (including 19 local soldiers). A strict quarantine was placed on the city, closing down Sunday Schools, theaters, and schools. While churches and libraries remained open, they operated under intensive restrictions designed to prevent the spread of infection. City Commissioner J.F. Mattes and mayor Dinneen traveled to Springfield to ask for an ease of these restrictions, but the plea was rejected.⁷⁴ Mattes himself would fall ill with the grippe only a week later, the same day that the *Herald* reported on the death of one of its own employees, Willis Walker, who had already lost two sons to the epidemic.⁷⁵

The influenza epidemic was not the only dampening of high spirits around the time of the armistice. Men working for the Wabash station began a strike immediately after the declaration of ceasefire, protesting pay cuts from \$3.60 down to \$2.88 per day. The paper went on to report that “only a few years ago the trackmen were getting 85 cents to \$1.10 a day for their work,” an indication of the labor shortage during war contributing to a changing of the relationship between workers and employers.”⁷⁶ Manufacturers saw opportunities in the postwar era and the rebuilding of Europe, but the question of labor disputes and the need to keep troops in Europe would lessen the sense of jubilation brought by the end of the war.

Conclusion

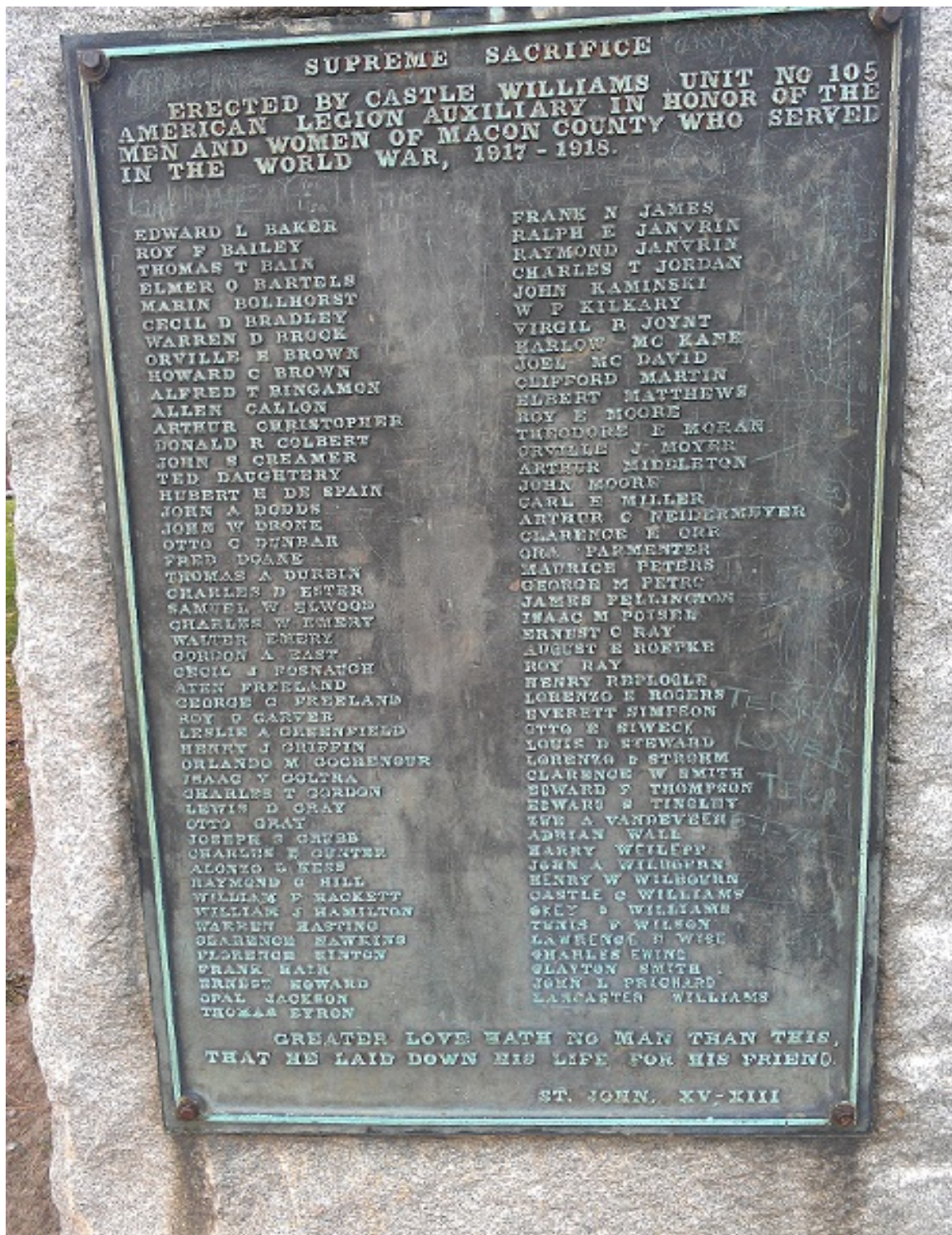
This paper brought me a new understanding of the First World War. Growing up, it was always hard to view the conflict without the context of the Second World War, a much more well-known conflict. But for those living, fighting, and dying in the years up to 1918, it was truly the “Great War.” The impending sense of apocalyptic disaster gave way to hopes that a new world order would arise from European ruins, hopes that would seem increasingly futile in the years afterwards as war again loomed on the horizon. And yet, the idealism that brought many to war stands in its own right as a testament to its profound impact on the human experience, its nuanced meanings in the minds of both soldiers and civilians. Decatur native Will Westerman, who helped draft the Versailles Treaty that sought to create a lasting peace between former enemies, recalled the lofty spirit of the time, and the perception that it was a chance to truly impact the world.⁷⁷ Even though the United States was only in the war for a short time, the conflict transformed an entire generation that saw the most advanced peoples in the world spend years fighting and killing one another. When hostilities ended, many could scarcely understand what the fighting had been for. In the stories of both my family and my hometown, I found tales of cruelty and compassion, heroism and greed, and a whole spectrum in between. Even if the war has lost its intensity and emotional power in popular memory as the centennial of 1914 approaches, the stories of war and the people trying to cope with its horrors, its myths, and its sacrifices will never lose their power for me.

⁷⁴ *Decatur Herald*, “Influenza Victims, Quarantine Remains in Effect,” 11-01-1918.

⁷⁵ *Decatur Herald*, “Mattes ill with Influenza,” 11-10-1918, and “Herald Employee Victim of Flu Epidemic,” 11-10-1918.

⁷⁶ *Decatur Herald*, “Wabash Section Men on Strike,” 11-11-1918.

⁷⁷ *Herald & Review*, “Decatur native Will Westerman Helped Draft Versailles Treaty,” 3-27-1977.



World War I Memorial plaque commemorating the dead of Macon County, located in Nelson Park on the northeast shore of Lake Decatur.