

You're In The Army Now

The sun was shining, the dust was whirling, and officers were waiting, September 5, 1917, when the first recruits, conscripted men from Iowa, Minnesota, Illinois, and North Dakota, breezed into Camp Dodge, the Thirteenth District Cantonment, a few miles north of Des Moines.

Jack Newman, Charles Darlington, and I were there, too. Our Model-T was parked in the shadow of the registration building—the day was hot. Then, here came our first recruit! He was George Whitmer, a big, blonde boy from Des Moines. With the Reverend F. W. Mutchler, chairman of the Fourth District Draft Board, he left Des Moines at 8 a.m., reached Camp Dodge at 9 a.m., and at 10 a.m. was registered and assigned to the supply company, 350th Infantry Regiment.

When I talked to him, he was balancing a metal cot, and hoping he soon would have his uniform and rifle. "I think carrying a gun will be as easy as juggling these beds," he grinned, mopping his perspiring face. "I don't know a thing about drill, but I'm anxious to learn. All the men are anxious to get started."

Many years passed before I heard of George

Whitmer again, but recently we have had some pleasant correspondence. The young recruit has had an interesting career, and right now (1966) is MAYOR WHITMER of Des Moines.

A strange and wonderful miscellany of humanity reported to the camp that hot, dusty day. Some of the young men were farmers. Some were college men. Some could not speak English. There were barbers, cooks, truck drivers, tailors, cobblers, grocery clerks, office workers, and some who would miss the country club crowd.

On that opening day a comparatively small contingent arrived by train and automobile. By the time the 88th Division was demobilized in 1919, more than 150,000 men had passed through the Cantonment. Some were transferred to other camps; thousands went to France; and many who had drilled, studied, sung, and worshipped at Camp Dodge were killed in battle overseas. War-time security regulations precluded announcement of the total number of men in training in camp, but at full strength the number was said to be between 40,000 and 50,000 men before the 88th Division went overseas.

Charlie Darlington took many pictures. Jack Newman assembled fact and figures. I snooped up and down the company streets, talking with officers and men, and watching the cross section of Middle West humanity lining up at the registration building.

"Three cheers for Uncle Sam," yelled a boy from Grimes as his flag-draped car, filled with draftees and proud townspeople, passed. Before the registration building, bands played vigorously. Some contingents were accompanied by Civil War fife and drum corps.

Week after week the newcomers poured into camp. They were outfitted with army gear and learned to wrap those woolen puttees neatly about their legs. They discovered that the fellows wearing the tailored uniforms and leather boots were officers.

I overheard this exchange on Depot Street, the camp's main thoroughfare:

Recent arrival: "What's it a sign of when a guy is wearing leather puttees?"

Alert comrade: "It's a sign his pay is more than thirty dollars a month."

Learning "squads left" and "squads right" was a problem for some neophytes. One harassed sergeant, desperate with his squad's ineptitude, gave each man a rock to hold in his left hand, to distinguish it from his right. All went well until one beginner made a wrong turn.

"What's the idea," yelled the non-com.

"I dropped my rock," was the unhappy confession.

Winter had Camp Dodge in its icy clutches, and our "Lizzie's" isinglass was covered with frost, when a group of Negro soldiers arrived

from Alabama. I loved talking to these voyageurs, most of whom had never been in the frozen north.

"Man, look at that snow!" one chuckled, as they straggled toward their barracks. Some had tucked a few necessities into cigar boxes or knotted bandanna handkerchiefs. All were happy when they were issued warm uniforms and stout shoes. This was the nucleus of the 366th Infantry Regiment, the first unit of the 88th Division to go overseas, and which received acclaim for bravery under fire in France.

One member of the regiment told me:

I wasn't even drafted. I was on the back platform of the train, saying good-bye to my buddy, when this officer busted up and said, "I'm one man short — come on!" And here I am.

Another, definitely lost, waited anxiously in a Y.M.C.A. hut. Told by the kindly "Y" secretary that he must report promptly to his quarters, he moaned, "O, Lawdy! I don't know where my house is. I'll just wait here till my general comes and gets me."

And how they sang! Their chorus became famous in Des Moines where they appeared in concert many times. And, as they went about their chores in camp, I often heard them harmonizing: "We're the boys from Alabam', and we work for Uncle Sam."

That winter of 1917-1918 was cold! I wore my four-buckle galoshes and my chamois-lined

belted trench coat with its raccoon collar and cuffs. My cloche hat was pretty cozy over my wind-blown bob, and a well-insulated muff kept my hands warm. I was always made welcome in Division headquarters or at other well-heated buildings at the camp.

Typical of the shivering Camp Dodge soldiers was Frederick Cox of Iowa City, who wrote to his father:

Am enlisted in the front line artillery and we are supposed to work light field pieces, trench mortars, etc. We have good food and barracks but it is darn cold drilling outside at -10 with a rifle. Several men froze their noses and fingers, and one man froze his ears right through his helmet. Yesterday our practice march was given up because it was too cold. We started out, but it was -15 and windy so we had a lecture instead. I froze one side of my nose a little, yesterday.

But, cold or not, the men sang as they marched through dust, mud, or frozen ruts at the camp. Soldier Patrick Reynolds wrote these words and they were sung to the tune of *Tipperary*:

It's a hard job to lick the Kaiser;
It's a hard thing to do.
It's a hard job to lick the Kaiser
And our Allies know it, too.
Good-bye Little Italy,
Farewell, England, too —
There's but one flag that can lick the Kaiser—
That's the Red, White and Blue.

Those of us who attended performances of the

Metropolitan Opera Company, that first winter, were ushered to our seats in the Coliseum by Camp Dodge soldiers who were given passes for this plush event. Many other officers and men from the Cantonment were in the audience to applaud Nellie Melba and Galli-Curci who sang the leading roles in *Faust* and *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

Perhaps some of the fellows, in town for an evening, preferred to see Theda Bara in *When a Woman Sins* — a story of love and sin and its burning cost. Or they chose Florence Reed in *Today*, which was advertised as "Not a Picture for Children." William S. Hart, Harry Carey, Douglas Fairbanks, and other virile stars also were featured in the local cinemas. There might be burlesque, too, at the Elite Theater or occasionally at the Berchel, where "Billy Watson's Beef Trust" with a ton or so of mature feminine pulchritude sometimes rocked the theater.

At the base hospital, distinguished doctors and well-trained nurses capably cared for ailing patients. The soldiers came through their first winter with few illnesses. Listed among their infirmities were German Measles, quickly re-christened "Liberty Measles."

But in October 1918, when Spanish Influenza swept the country, Camp Dodge soldiers were laid low with the scourge. More than 10,000 men were hospitalized and 702 soldiers died. The camp was quarantined and passes were suspend-

ed. Des Moines Red Cross workers made thousands of gauze masks for the camp personnel. In the city, all of us wore masks as we went about our chores. Churches, schools, theaters, and other public places were closed during the height of the epidemic. It was reported, that in proportion to the number of men in service, the toll from flu at Camp Dodge was less than at several other cantonments.

The first spring days brought sunshine and showers to the big camp, now a city with nearly 2,000 buildings. Soldiers, who had choked on camp dust and slogged through mud, cooperated happily in planting shrubs, flowers, vegetables, and laying sod in strategic areas.

We all wondered how soon the 88th Division would be embarking for overseas service. The young draftees were really soldiers now and sang with vigor these words, written by Lieutenant G. C. Whitcomb to the tune of *There's A Long, Long Trail*:

With the Stars and Stripes before us
We'll go over the top.
With your spirit there to guide us
We will never stop.
With a cheer we'll all rush onward;
With a cheer we'll break through;
Then, America, they'll know that we
Are fight, fight fighting for you.