

The  
**PALIMPSEST**

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SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 1986

PLAN OF THE  
VILLAGE OF CONTREXÉVILLE  
VOSGES FRANCE



Showing Location Of Buildings  
Occupied By Base Hospitals 31~32  
Feb/20<sup>th</sup> 1918







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Ginalie Swaim, Editor

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Cover: Merle Wright Carter and a map of Contrexéville, France, the site of evacuation hospitals in World War I. In this Palimpsest, former nurse Merle Wright Carter recounts her experiences in Unit R, a medical unit from southeastern Iowa sent to Contrexéville in 1918. A popular resort town before the war, Contrexéville and its large hotels were used as evacuation hospitals during the war because the town was on a railway system and was only fifty miles behind the fighting line. (map from Benjamin Hitz, *A History of Base Hospital 32*; photo courtesy Merle Wright Carter)



*The Meaning of the Palimpsest*

In early times a palimpsest was a parchment or other material from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete, and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the record of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.



# Hospital Unit R in World War I: Fairfield to France

*by Merle Wright Carter  
and Dean Gabbert*



*"On a long walk one day we found this homesick soldier, so blue because he hadn't received a letter from his girl. We tried to cheer him," writes coauthor Merle Wright Carter of her service as a World War I nurse in Contrexéville, France. (courtesy the authors)*



Less than twenty-four hours after America entered World War I, a Fairfield physician was busy organizing Iowa's first hospital unit for overseas duty with the United States Army. Dr. J. Fred Clarke, fifty-three, was a doer and a motivator. With characteristic alacrity, he sent a telegram to Washington, D.C., on April 6, 1917, the day Congress declared war on Germany.

"What can I do to help our cause?" Clarke asked in a wire directed to Colonel Jefferson R. Kean, who had charge of all military hospitals, and with whom Clarke had worked in the Spanish-American War. The next day he received word that the Army would soon call for hospital units to be formed throughout the country. Details were lacking, but Clarke had the answer he wanted. Immediately he began compiling a prospective list of doctors and nurses who would be willing to serve their country during what editors were calling "the war to end all wars."

Within a few weeks, Clarke's proposed hospital unit had won the enthusiastic support of Red Cross chapters throughout southeastern Iowa. Money, supplies, and equipment poured into Fairfield, along with notes that in one case read: "Do the best for our boys."

At the same time, the Army's hospital program also began to take shape. The Fairfield group was designated as Hospital Unit R, with the Jefferson County Hospital in Fairfield as the parent organization. The organization called for twelve doctors, twenty-one nurses, and fifty enlisted men. Initially, all such units were to be under the direction of the American Red Cross.

Of the eighty-three men and women who served with Unit R in France, Merle Wright Carter, ninety-four, is believed to be the only survivor. "Dr. Clarke was a man of many talents," she recalls. "He had a warm and compas-

sionate consideration for others. He was a person who knew his own worth; at the same time he was generously tolerant of those who sought his counsel. He had a good sense of humor and an ever-present sense of dignity, which was inspiring."

Fairfield residents were not surprised by the magnitude of Clarke's undertaking. On the contrary, they would have been surprised if he had done anything less to help the war effort. Clarke had earned two degrees at the University of Iowa before graduating from the University of Pennsylvania Medical College in 1889. Following a two-year internship at Philadelphia General Hospital, he had been a post-graduate student at Johns Hopkins University and the University of Göttingen in Germany.

During the Spanish-American War, he had been in charge of the medical wards of the Second Division Hospitals in Florida and Cuba. While in Florida, he was the first to employ trained female nurses in Army field hospitals.

Clarke had owned Jefferson County's first automobile. He had been mayor of Fairfield and a member of the Iowa legislature. He had organized what is believed to be the first golf club west of the Mississippi River. He had also led a successful drive to build the Jefferson County Hospital. He had taken the first x-ray picture and performed the first appendectomy in Jefferson County.

Despite a large medical practice, Clarke handled all of Unit R's administrative work. Clarence Johnston, who wrote a one-chapter history of Unit R in Benjamin D. Hitz's *A History of Base Hospital 32*, described Clarke's labors: "Far into the night the director of the unit pored over his records, studied his applications, sifted and sorted, adjusted and checked, always in an effort to get the best."

But others worked long hours as well. Area Red Cross volunteers rolled miles of bandages. They stitched and packed hundreds of dozens of pajamas, bed socks, towels, caps, gowns,



masks, and other hospital supplies, all of it earmarked for Unit R.

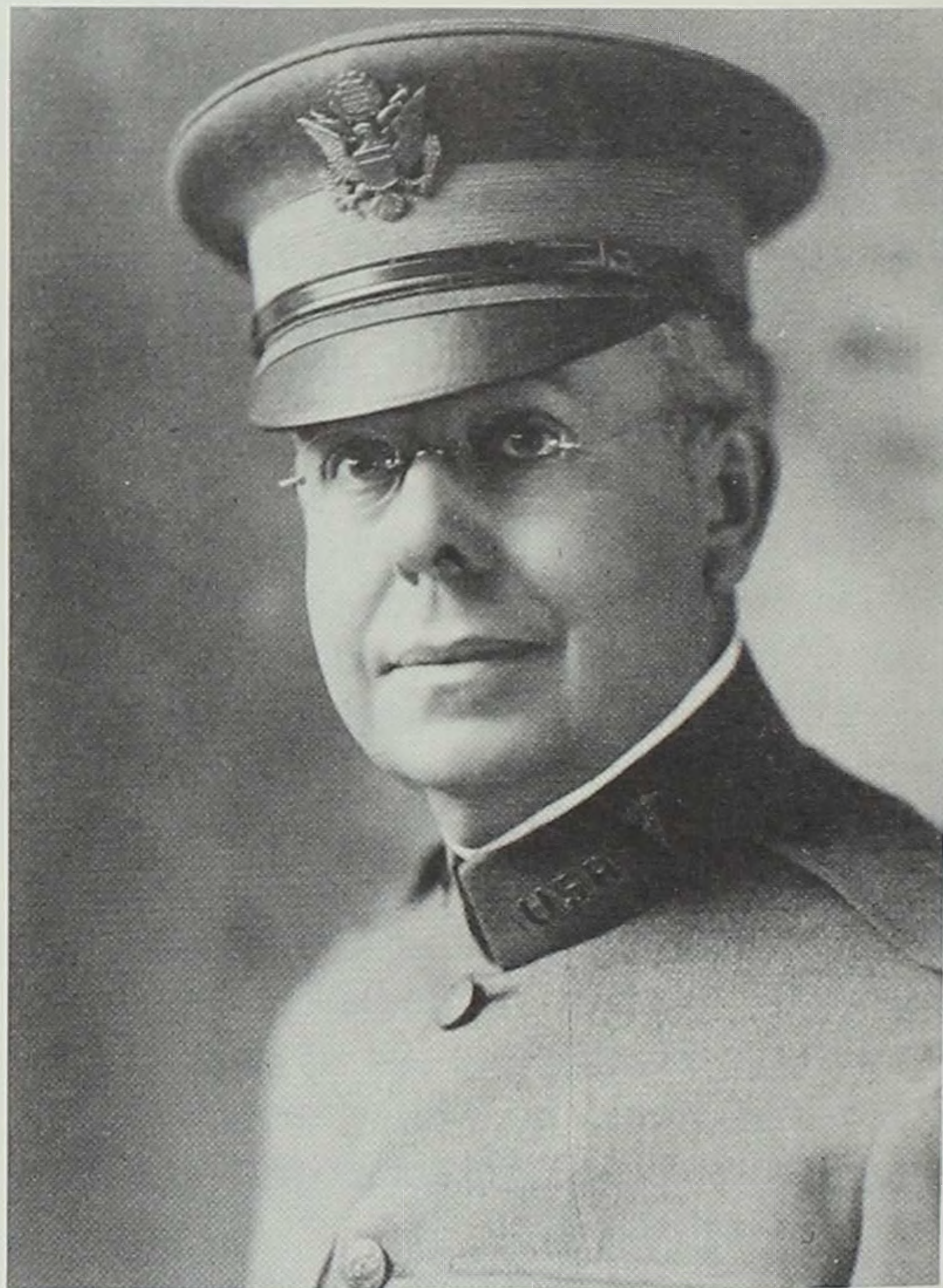
Johnston summed up the summer's work as follows:

*The purchase of equipment began, and as the summer wore on, additional warehouse room had to be secured in Fairfield to hold the generous contributions of these people of southeastern Iowa. An x-ray machine came from Burlington, a truck from Mt. Pleasant, Ottumwa sent \$10,000 in cash and box after box of supplies. Centerville, Oskaloosa, Keokuk, Washington, Bloomfield, all the centers of population in that section of the state were represented in the vast array of equipment with which the unit was furnished during the summer and early autumn. With the cash contributions which continued to pour into the Fairfield headquarters during this period, surgical instruments, operating tables, beds, cots, kitchen supplies, blankets and the thousand and one other things which go to equip a hospital were purchased. Dr. Clarke supervised all this work. F.C. Morgan of Centerville was the purchasing agent for the unit, and Frank Ricksher, Fairfield banker, was the organization's bursar.*

Dr. Clarke was now Major Clarke of the Medical Reserve Corps. He hand-picked his officer-doctors with care, six captains and five first lieutenants. He also chose fifty enlisted men, several of them recruited from the campus of Parsons College. They were sworn in as members of the Enlisted Medical Reserve Corps in early August.

Filling Unit R's quota of nurses was the responsibility of Amy Beers, superintendent of the Jefferson County Hospital. As chief nurse of the unit, she became a member of the Army Nurse Corps. Later she was to serve as one of Base Hospital 32's three chief nurses.

One of her choices was Merle Wright, who



J. Fred Clarke, Fairfield doctor, organized and served with Unit R in Contrexéville. (courtesy the authors)

had first come to Fairfield in 1912 after convincing her family that she was not cut out to be a rural schoolteacher.

[Editor's note: The following narrative was written by Merle Wright Carter. Transitional sections and the preceding introduction were written by Dean Gabbert. Newspaper headlines are from 1917 and 1918 issues of the *Fairfield Ledger*.]

### *Merle Wright Carter Remembers:*

I lost my parents early in life — my mother when I was eight years old, and my father six years later. We were fortunate to have loving relatives, who divided us up among them and made a home for each of us until we could go on our own. I was chosen to live with my paternal grandparents and an aunt who was teaching and living at home, in the small Mahaska



County village of Wright, named after my family. During my grandmother's last illness, I fell in love with the nurse who cared for her. I decided at that time that I wanted to be a nurse.

However, my aunt decided that I should prepare for teaching. So I enrolled in the Penn College Academy. Staying in school through summer sessions for two years, I was able to pass the examination for a teacher's certificate.

I taught one year and one term of the next year. My teaching involved all eight grades in a rural school. I drew the line! I was sure I wanted to take nurses training.

My friend, Iris Funk, was in training in the Mahaska County Hospital in Oskaloosa, where Rosetta Hoskins was administrator. After a few months Rosetta married and moved to Pleasant Plain in Jefferson County. The woman who succeeded her didn't maintain Rosetta's high standards and my friend became unhappy. But she encouraged me to enter training and I did, staying three months.

In the meantime Iris learned about the new hospital being built in Fairfield and Rosetta advised us to make application for nurses training there. Iris and I had an interview with Amy Beers, who was organizing the Jefferson County Hospital's nurses training school. We were accepted as probationers, without credit for our service in Mahaska Hospital, and became two of the first five girls to finish the three-year course of training.

After graduation in 1915, I stayed on at the hospital as night supervisor. After doing private duty for a while, I was asked to go to the Washington County Hospital as assistant to Miss Robinson, who was administrator.

I was there when Miss Beers called and asked, "Do you want to go to France?" I said, "Yes." She said, "Resign at once, have a physical, and come to Fairfield." I immediately went to the office and resigned. Miss Robinson was not happy and said, "Dr. D. will not let you go." I said, "We shall see."

When I asked the doctor to fill out the physical report, he stated on the form that I had chronic appendicitis. I knew that such a statement would keep me at home. I called Miss Beers and she called Dr. Clarke. Dr. Clarke said, "Tell Miss Wright I will take care of her. However, I will have to have a satisfactory report." The next morning I went directly to Fairfield and the office of Dr. Fordyce and told him my sad story. He said, "Do you think you have chronic appendicitis?" I said, "Of course not." Then he asked, "Do you really want to go with Unit R?" I said, "Yes." He gave me a checkup and a satisfactory report.

I stayed in Fairfield for all the preliminary shots that were required. Then I was allowed to go to my home in Wright to await traveling orders. After a week or so of visiting and going to farewell parties, I received the call to proceed to Fairfield, prepared to head for New York City.

My family was supportive but kept asking if I



*Merle Wright (later Carter) in 1919, after her return from Contrexéville. (courtesy the authors)*



was sure I wanted to go. The trip to Fairfield was a little hard. Uncle Dan and Aunt Gail took me to Fremont, where I was to take the bus to Ottumwa. On the way we stopped in the little town of Cedar to bid my sister Bessie farewell. Later in Fremont I was met by my baby sister, Mamie, who was in high school there. My brother Russ had already gone into the Navy, and my brother Harry had married and moved away.

The doctor who was our family physician when we lived near Fremont and who had given me my physical examination when I entered training in Mahaska Hospital was also on the bus going to Ottumwa. He was happy I was going into the service and wished me god-speed.

I spent a few more days in Fairfield, where the ladies of the Red Cross had a reception for Amy Beers and me. There was also a farewell dinner at the hospital. There were, of course, many things to do, like sewing name tapes on the long underwear that Amy and I would wear in France.

## HOSPITAL UNIT R ORDERED TO DUTY

Out of Town Men Ordered to Report  
at Fairfield Armory by  
Noon Today

For officers and enlisted men of Unit R, active duty began on December 12, 1917, when they reported to the Fairfield National Guard Armory. Three days later they departed for Fort McPherson, Georgia, where they joined other hospital units for training. The nurses were not called for another month.

"Long cloudless days were spent on the McPherson drill field and parade grounds," Johnston wrote in his history. "Still longer nights were spent in the rickety wooden bar-

racks trying to keep warm under a couple of cotton blankets, while the wind whistled through the pine trees.

"The boys thought they knew Dame Rumor pretty well before they left Iowa, but they soon found out that they had only a mere passing acquaintance with the lady. . . . Six times from January 1st until February 4th, they were leaving. Once they had the equipment loaded on the train, and twice it was on the trucks on the way to the station. On February 4th, at noon, the unit did pull out for Camp Merritt, New Jersey."

Twelve days later Unit R officers and men marched out of Camp Merritt in a heavy snow and boarded a train for New York City. A few hours later they were joined by the unit's nurses on the Cunard docks, ready to board ship.

### *Merle Wright Carter Remembers:*

Unit R nurses were required to be state-registered, which meant they had completed a three-year course of training in an accredited school of nursing. They also had to be accepted by the Red Cross as qualified Army nurses. Any additional training we received was to be administered by the doctors who were traveling with us. However, they didn't know any more about what we would be getting into than we did. So Dr. L.D. James lectured to us on the giving of anesthesia. Dr. Frank Fuller instructed us in the use of the metric system. Later in France we were to learn about the bedside technique of applying Car-Dakin solution to our badly burned soldiers, under supervision of the doctor in charge of our ward.

Unit R nurses came from different areas of the state. When Amy Beers and I boarded the train in Fairfield for New York, we were greeted by two of our group. They were Eva Bell Van Dyke and Philomena Bauer, who had boarded in Ottumwa. When the train stopped in Burlington, we picked up seven more nurses





*Most Unit R personnel were from southeastern Iowa. From Ottumwa came (from left) Eva Van Dyke, Philomena Bauer, Mary L. Elder, Captain John F. Herrick, Nelle Davies, Mabel Lusk, and Madge Baldwin. (courtesy the authors)*

from that area, which included Fort Madison and Keokuk. They were Margaret Henke, Dora Blank, Grace Bell, Olive Graber, Elizabeth Connelly, Elsie Thompson, and Mary Elder. In Chicago we found Grace Van Evera waiting to join us. Elizabeth Bonfield was also there with a bag of goodies for Amy and me. Elizabeth was on a buying trip for the Fair Store in Fairfield. During the train trip we had get-acquainted gatherings, and Amy and I shared the cookies, sandwiches, and fruit which Mrs. E.C. Bock and Mrs. Henry Snyder had so thoughtfully provided for us.

When we arrived in New York City on January 30, 1918, we were instructed to proceed to Ellis Island. At the South Ferry station we found Sarah Greenhalgh from Des Moines waiting to join our party. We went directly to the Immigration Hospital for Contagious Diseases. There were many nurses arriving from other states, and quite a battalion from Canada. We wondered, "Who said there was a shortage of nurses?"

We stood in line a long time for identification checks and verification of our vaccination dates. We were assigned beds in a big ward,

directed to the dining room and instructed to appear in the assembly room to answer roll call at 9 A.M. every morning thereafter. There we were to live, to await further instructions, and to prepare for sailing. Ethel Lessenger joined us while we were still in line. She had come all by herself from Council Bluffs, with a stopover in Pittsburgh where she had attended a movie between trains. Ethel proved to be the life of the party — she played the piano all the way over.

Only a few passes to the city were issued each day. For the ones who were not lucky enough to receive them, the days were long and quiet — although we could go to the assembly room for music, cards, and visiting. It was there one afternoon that we met the officers of Unit R. We decided it wasn't going to be such a bad war after all.

On February 5, Agnes Swift and Esther Albright arrived from Camp B. The next day Mabel Lusk, Nelle Davies, Olive Whitlock, Bessie Whitaker, and Madge Baldwin joined us. Now our Unit R nursing staff was complete.

On February 9 we received passes to the city to be equipped for overseas duty. We were



happy with the street uniforms: two-piece navy blue suits, two white blouses, a red-lined Red Cross cape, hat, shoes, and everything. However, when we saw the ugly gray duty uniforms, we were sure that the officers' wives and enlisted men's sweethearts had been instrumental in designing them. They were awful! So, sure enough, we were in the army now.

All along, everything had been very secretive. Our letters were censored and we were not supposed to talk about the trip or even mention the war.

One day I went to the city and managed to find the McAlpine Hotel where Mrs. Clarke was staying until the ship sailed. By that time Dr. Clarke was Major Clarke. He took us to dinner at Childs; later we met Amy, who had had dinner with her sister, Adelaide, and we all went to Cohen's Revue. Other nurses had similar outings with friends to break the monotony of waiting.

Our uniforms arrived on February 14, and Dr. Clarke carried a calendar around upside down with the red ring around "16." There was much hustling around to send home our old clothes. I kept back a silk dress and a pair of pumps "just in case." Finally, on the sixteenth we left the breakfast table, formed a marching line, and followed Old Glory to the ferry. We sailed to Hoboken and boarded HMS *Carmania* while the band played "We're Going Over."

## UNIT R PROBABLY ON WAY TO FRANCE

No Definite Information, However,  
Available, as to Sailing of Unit  
From New York

Members of Unit R were bound for Contrexéville, France, and U.S. Army Base

Hospital No. 32. Organized in Indianapolis, Base Hospital 32 was commanded by Major Edmund D. Clark. The Indiana personnel had sailed on December 4 and by the time Unit R arrived in March, the hospital was ready to accept patients on an emergency basis. Contrexéville, located in the foothills of the Vosges Mountains, was 160 miles southeast of Paris. Before World War I, it was a popular resort town famous for its mineral baths.

### *Merle Wright Carter Remembers:*

When we were all aboard the *Carmania*, and all accounted for, we were directed to assemble in the Red Room, a large drawing room where social events were held in normal times. There we were given a few general instructions regarding life aboard ship. We also received stateroom assignments, with about four to a room instead of the usual two.

When the gong sounded for lunch, we found that Dr. Clarke had reserved a table for the Unit R nurses. That made us appear a little conspicuous. Some of the Canadians resented us; their attitude seemed to be: "Well, who do they think they are?" We soon took care of that. We said, "Never mind him — he's our dear old dad and really means well." Soon we were just one big, congenial group on our way to France.

We sat in the harbor until 4 P.M., then waved goodbye to the Statue of Liberty and sailed to Ambrose Channel Lightship, where we remained until midnight. Then we headed north along the coast toward Halifax. We anchored a mile out in the inner basin and waited while a group of seven destroyers took their places alongside our ships. Finally a sleek, swift cruiser with the silken folds of Old Glory flapping in the wind took her place as our leader and we were off to sea. It was 4 A.M. The sky was blue and the air clear — a really beautiful moment for embarking on a voyage. It was interesting to watch the little destroyers as they tugged along at the right pace, maintain-





A postcard view of Contrexéville before the war, when it was a popular resort town. (courtesy the authors)

ing the perfect defensive patterns to ensure our safety.

It was a long way "over there." Our course changed often and we zigzagged to avoid danger spots. There were conferences and lectures to bolster morale and military drills for exercise on A Deck. We usually had our eyes *left* when the captain said, "Right dress!" We sat through a lecture which informed us that seasickness was only mental. The worst experiences of all, however, were the lifeboat drills. We were instructed to get into our rubberized jump suits with leaded feet, in formation, ready to hit the water if the whistle blew. The captain said, "There will be not one word spoken from the time the bugle sounds until dismissal." Unfortunately I was assigned to stand beside Mary Elder, who *never* shut her mouth.

After dinner in the evening, the officers joined us in the Red Room for music and dancing, with Ethel at the piano. Or if we preferred, we could promenade on deck. Ethel, when she finally tired of providing the music for everyone else, would stand up from the piano and announce, "I want to dance. Somebody can whistle!"

Captain John F. Herrick, who was assigned

to keep watch over the Unit R nurses, was very strict. Once when gale winds were blowing, he advised us not to promenade on deck because the wind blew our skirts too high. It didn't matter; there were other things to do, such as playing bridge or dancing. On February 23, after a very rough night at sea, I wrote in my diary: "If seasickness is only mental, why were there only four at breakfast this morning?" Overall, however, it was mostly smooth sailing.

Soon we were in the danger zone. The cruiser and the little destroyers turned back toward America and we were met by a fleet of more heavily equipped destroyers. They ushered us into the port of Liverpool, where we anchored at 2 A.M. on March 4.

After disembarking at 9 A.M., Captain Herrick and the nurses were taken in wagons to the North Western Hotel, where we had lunch and coffee with no cream or sugar. We went shopping in the evening and left Liverpool at 11 P.M., marching to the South Western Hotel in columns of two. We had breakfast there before boarding the *Worilda* at 9:30 A.M. Finally at 6 P.M. we started our journey across the English Channel, with all of our clothes securely fas-



*Before the war, wealthy French strolled through Contrexéville, seeking the cure of the mineral baths. In 1918, ambulances roared into the village, bringing the wounded from the front line, fifty miles away. (courtesy the authors)*



tened with life belts. There was no room to lie down and we sat up until we anchored in the Seine at 4 A.M.

We embarked at Le Havre at noon and went in ambulances to the Hôtel Moderne, where we lunched. Then we marched to the Continental Hotel where we had a really good rest and a much-needed cleanup. I had my first French shampoo and hairstyling there.

Alas! The next day we received orders to leave this haven of rest. After breakfast at 3:45 A.M., we were taken in trucks to the train and headed for Contrexéville. Aboard the train we soon found out what Captain Herrick meant when he presented us with oyster buckets and said that we would find the French trains overcrowded and the facilities for hygiene scarce and very inaccessible. Hence, the oyster buckets — in order that nature's call not go unheeded. At about 9:30 P.M. our train came to a stop. All lights were turned out while we watched the Fritzies bomb Paris.

When daylight came, the train rumbled on up through the Marne River Valley and the devastated areas of France, where we had our first glimpse of machine guns poised for action. At 11 A.M. on March 10, 1918, we arrived at

Contrexéville and joined Base Hospital 32, which was already set up and in action.

## INTERESTING LETTER FROM DR. CLARKE

Major of Hospital Unit R Tells of Conditions in War Ridden Country

Base Hospital 32 consisted of five former resort hotels. Originally it had been designated as a 500-bed facility, but with the assignment of Unit R the decision was made to expand it to 1,250 beds. Base Hospital 32's basic function was that of an evacuation hospital. Wounded soldiers were treated there and then moved on to other medical facilities as soon as their conditions would permit. Ironically, Unit R nurses arrived for duty at the hospital three days ahead of the officers and enlisted men.

*Merle Wright Carter Remembers:*

In Contrexéville we were assigned temporary housing while awaiting the arrival of Dr.



Clarke and the Unit R men. Aboard a troop train, they had been delayed while workmen rebuilt a section of track damaged by a bomb that had fallen during the night raid on Paris. They arrived at the hospital on March 13.

Dr. Edmund D. Clark and his Indiana command had arrived earlier in Contrexéville, on Christmas Day, 1917. At that time the unit included 22 medical doctors, 3 civilians, Bishop Francis who served as chaplain, 22 registered nurses, and 180 enlisted men who had been trained as Medical Corps men. We usually referred to them as orderlies.

Contrexéville was the site of both Base 31 and 32 hospitals. The village was chosen because it was served by a railway system and was only fifty miles behind the fighting line. There were also many hotels which could serve both as hospitals and housing for military personnel. Letters were used to identify the buildings which made up Base Hospital 32. The

Hôtel Cosmopolitain, the largest building, with a bed capacity of 560, was named Hospital A. Set a little apart from the others, it contained the main surgical department. The Hôtel de Paris was called Hospital B and was used for surgical patient overflow (200 beds). The Hôtel de la Providence became Hospital E. It was a four-story building with large rooms which served as patient wards (225 beds). The Hôtel de la Providence Annex was Hospital C, and the Hôtel Royal was Hospital D. They housed x-ray equipment and a total of 325 beds, including those for isolated cases. The work of cleaning and remodeling the hotels was done by the personnel of Base 32. Then as equipment arrived it was installed in the proper hospital.

While we waited for the arrival of Major Clarke and the men of Unit R, we explored Contrexéville. It was a charming little village lying in a narrow basin at an altitude of 1,100



*Lace curtains and decorative grillwork of the resort hotels contrasted sharply with the grim work of Unit R personnel who treated patients burned by mustard gas. Above, Base Hospital 32 officers, January 1919. (Hitz, Base Hospital 32)*



feet. We walked all over the place, out into the country and even to some of the neighboring villages.

March 23, 1918, was the day we received permanent housing assignments. By that time Sarah Greenhalgh, Ethel Lessenger, Mabel Lusk, Nelle Davies, and I had decided that we wanted to be roommates. We were assigned to a double room on the third floor of Hospital B and there we lived for the duration of the war. March 23 was also the day our first contingent of patients arrived — about 400 of them, most of whom were American boys. They were but the beginning. After that they came by train load and by ambulance caravan. Sometimes we had advance notice of their arrival and sometimes we did not.

The procedure for receiving patients was well established. The boys were met by medical officers who directed the ambulance drivers where to take the patients. The ones in need of immediate surgery were sent to Hospital A. The others were directed to the bathhouse, where our orderlies bathed them and put them in pajamas before delivering them to the designated hospital. First the M.D. officer in charge of the ward wrote orders and instructions.



*On the third floor of Hospital B, nurses Merle Wright, Ethel Lessenger, and Sarah Greenhalgh shared this room during the war. Mabel Lusk and Nelle Davies lived in an adjoining room. (courtesy the authors)*

Then the nurses went to work. There was preparatory work before surgery and follow-up procedures after. Sometimes there were whole wards full of boys suffering from cruel gas burns which required application of Car-Dakin solution.

We found nursing in the war zone very different from civilian nursing. For one thing, we did not have the satisfaction of watching our patients recover. We were constantly urged by the surgeon general to keep our patients moving. As soon as they recovered from the first shock and were diagnosed and classified, they were sent to hospitals farther back for recovery and convalescence or, in some cases, for return to the lines.

I especially remember the case of one patient. He had multiple wounds and was in such a state of trauma that he could not move his body. One morning as I was caring for his wounds and had finished all of the spots I could get to without moving him, I summoned the orderly and said to the patient, "OK, old sport, roll over." The absurdity of the request started him laughing. He laughed until he cried. Then we all cried a little.

"Nobody, but nobody, has called me 'old sport' for oh, so long!" he said. We were half laughing and half crying. The boys were making crazy remarks trying to come to a state of composure but getting nowhere, so I said, "All right, you guys, cut it out. I can't see what I'm doing when my glasses get wet." Finally, with the corpsman holding the patient upright, I covered all of the wounds with fresh dressings. We left the patient in a different position and ready for a nice long nap. We went on to the next one and then to the next and the next.

What was so frustrating was that in just a few days when I went on duty again, that seriously wounded soldier, and all the other forty-nine boys in that same ward, had been moved out. The room was filled with new faces. It made me wonder what ever happened to "old sport" and if he ever got back to his home in Chicago. We





*Injured soldiers from the front line arrived by train load and ambulance caravan. Those needing immediate surgery were sent to Hospital A. The less critical were taken to the bathhouse (above). (Hitz, Base Hospital 32)*

just had to hope that they would all be cared for as they were moved back to other hospitals and that eventually they would be sent home.

There were a few dull periods when for a day or two we wondered why we were hanging around. Then bang, bang! The little old town crier was beating on his drum to alert us that another convoy was on the way. It was time to get ready again!

By now the Unit R nurses were mixed in with the Indianapolis girls. I worked in Hospital E most of the time although sometimes I was assigned to Hospital A. Once I was sent to nearby Vittel when some of the nurses there were hospitalized with influenza. I was put on night duty and I got so lonesome for my friends in Contrexéville that after breakfast, I would bum a ride in an empty ambulance, or with a

policeman on a motorcycle, or any way I could get there. Sometimes I even walked back to Vittel in time for duty at 7 P.M. Fortunately this lasted only about a month and then I was back with my friends.

The nurses were well taken care of in Base Hospital 32. When we were on night duty, a midnight supper was prepared in Hospital A. Nurses working in the other hospitals were escorted to and from supper by an assigned corpsman. One night my escort was very late in coming for me and I grew more and more hungry. The corpsman on duty with me said, "I'll walk you up the hill." I said, "No, we don't leave patients unattended, remember?" (I was referring to the night when three boys, feeling frisky, had gone out a window when no one was looking. The M.P.'s had found the boys raiding





*Unit R nurses hoe and water their garden for the pleasure of fresh vegetables. (Hitz, Base Hospital 32)*

the refrigerator in the mess hall.) Finally I decided to walk to supper by myself. My escort was on the way and saw me as I came through the door. He hid behind a bush and as I came to that point, he grabbed me. For a second I was scared stiff. Then I gave him a good lecture for being late. It happened that the cook had overslept. As we walked along, I said to him, "After all, wasn't that just a little stupid? What if I had screamed?" "Oh my God," he replied. "If you had screamed, all the M.P.'s in Contrexéville would have been after us!"

Then there were our sad moments. There were times when the workload was shifted so that some nurses could attend a burial. We stood in the little cemetery which had been set aside for the American boys who died in our hospitals. We bowed our heads as Bishop Fran-

cis led us in heartfelt prayer for the family of the soldier who had given his life and who, with military honors, was being lowered into his grave, so far from home and his loved ones.

The American Red Cross was the organization that helped us hang on to our sanity. They were the ones who wrote letters for the boys and to bereaved parents. They visited and brought goodies to the boys. They opened a theater so that we could have movies and home talent shows, put on by the personnel of Base Hospitals 31 and 32. Their services were endless.

Another greatly appreciated improvement was the restoration of the bathhouse. What a change from the "pitcher and sponge stage" to a modern bathhouse with porcelain tubs and working faucets, plenty of towels and soap, and



spacious dressing rooms. It was situated on one side of the beautiful Colonnade Building. There were two wings with twenty-eight rooms each: one whole wing was reserved for enlisted men and the other was divided equally between the nurses and officers. The hitch was that when we had a heavy load of patients, working personnel were barred from using the facilities. We didn't have time anyway. So it was back to the two-and-a-half-quart basin and the tea kettle.

As the war was winding down, the officers of Base 32 organized a dance for all personnel, including the enlisted men. I thought to myself that if ever I was going to wear that silk dress and the pumps, this was the time. An Army general happened to be visiting in Contrexéville and he was invited to call the dances. After the general, as caller, got the dance moving along, he tapped my partner (Paul Ferrell of Unit R) on the shoulder. Paul came to atten-

tion, gave him a snappy salute, and said, "Yes, sir!" As I danced away with the general, he said, "Nice little kid." I said, "Yes, a private first class." We had several dances before he went back to his post. I danced the rest of the evening with the enlisted men. Once I was sitting out a dance with Ed Hunt, also of Unit R. He said, "My sister has some shoes like those, only she has never been in the Army." I said, "Never tell her what she is missing."

That was one of our last social occasions.

## UNIT R RECEIVES MANY PATIENTS

In slightly more than a year, Base Hospital 32 treated a total of 9,698 patients. Of that number, 8,506 were Americans, 884 French, 119 British, and 189 German prisoners of war. Hospital records showed 5,063 patients were returned to duty after treatment and the rest were evacuated to other hospitals. One hundred eighteen deaths were recorded at the hospital, a mortality rate of only 1.22 percent.

During a four-day period in July 1918, Base Hospital 32 received more than 1,000 patients, most of them wounded in the Battle of Château-Thierry. Enlisted personnel were moved into tents to make way for the wounded and all leaves were temporarily suspended. In August the emergency capacity of the hospital was increased to 2,116 beds. The hospital's peak month came in September 1918, when admissions totaled 2,319.

### *Merle Wright Carter Remembers:*

The day after the armistice was signed, Miss Beers called Sarah and me into the office to make arrangements for our six-day leave, which we had not yet had. We chose to go to Nice, with an overnight stop in Paris. Aboard the train, we shared a nice roomy compartment



*In a quiet moment, some members of Unit R gather for a group photograph. By July 1918, quiet moments were seldom, as the wounded from Château-Thierry poured into Contrexéville. (courtesy the authors)*



with two nurses from Base Hospital 23 who had boarded at Vittel.

The train was loaded with servicemen going to Paris. Four young lieutenants walked through the aisle several times. Finally they stopped at our compartment and one said, "There's more room here than anywhere. Why don't we just stay with the nurses?" They entertained us and also kidded us a lot because we were going to Paris without hotel reservations.

Paris was wild. People were dancing in the streets. Taxi drivers were all honking their horns and weaving in and out to avoid hitting anyone. It seemed like we drove for hours with the same luck at every stop, until finally we did find a vacancy sign.

When we got settled in, we reported to Major Clarke, who was stationed at Headquarters there. He was able to make it through the crowds and joined Sarah and me for dinner. Sarah was more experienced than I in dining out and knew how to order the wine. I said, "I think I'll pass." But Major Clarke said, "Oh, no, we're in Paris, we must have wine. I'll order for you."

The ride from Paris to Nice was less hectic. Our train was crawling along the shores of the Mediterranean and we decided not to get off at Nice. Instead we rode on to Mentone to enjoy more of the scenery. When the conductor looked at our tickets in Mentone, he said, "This says Nice but I will have to punch Mentone. Sorry, girls, hope you don't get in trouble."

We explored the area around Mentone and reached the Swiss border, where guards were stationed. In a day or so we worked our way back to Nice. We happened upon a captain and a lieutenant, and they invited us to ride along in the captain's car to Nice. Nice was beautiful too. We enjoyed tours into the country and we also got to see some of the ancient buildings with their fabulous gardens.

On the way back to Paris, we heard that Versailles was being opened to tourists on the

day we were supposed to be back in Contrexéville. We thought about it and agreed to stay over another day — thus enjoying a complete tour of the famed Versailles gardens, even though we were a day late getting back from our leave. Miss Beers didn't scold us very much. "I probably would have done the same thing," she said with a twinkle in her eye.

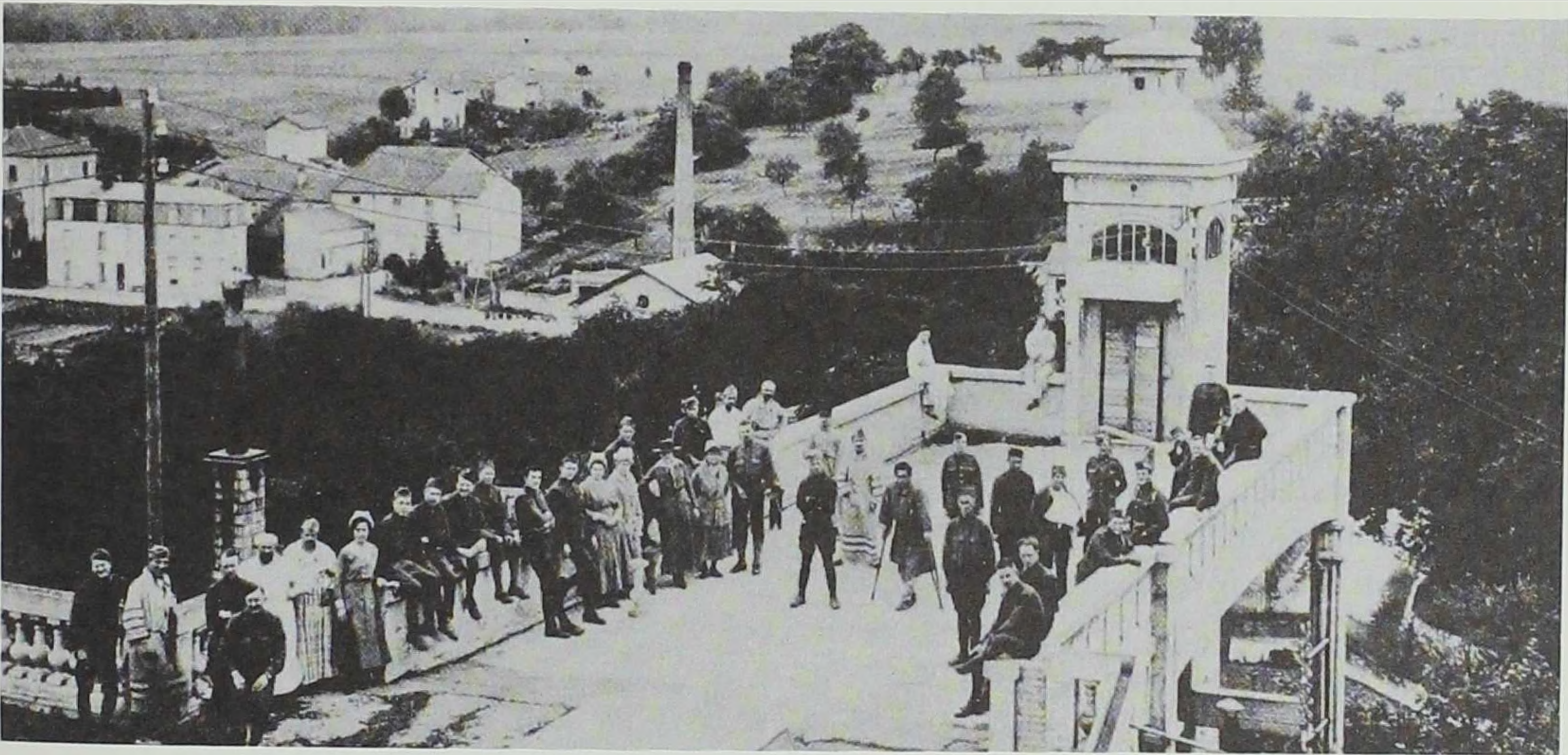
Even after the armistice was signed, we continued to receive patients and there was considerable confusion and restlessness. Everyone was anxious for the order to pack up and go home. Base Hospital 90 was the first in our area to receive the welcome word. However, they still had patients. A call was issued for volunteers to relieve the nurses at Base 90. A group of sixteen nurses from Base 32, including nine from Unit R, volunteered and made the journey to Chaumont by ambulance.

Chaumont was General Pershing's headquarters and we felt honored to be serving there. However, I became ill with an attack of influenza and had few days of service at Base Hospital 90. Shortly thereafter we were recalled to Contrexéville to await traveling orders. Our orders for home came on February 19, 1919. We left early the next morning for the west coast of France with Captain McGuire and Sergeant Lukens in charge. There were still 336 convalescent patients remaining in the hospital, but they were turned over to Base 31.

The trip from Contrexéville to St. Sebastien was long and slow. Finally we were lucky enough to be attached to a good American train, arriving in St. Sebastien on February 24. Here the nurses received orders to proceed to Brest, where we had another waiting period. On March 4 the transport *America* was available, but space was limited and nurses whose names began with the letters S through Z were left in La Baule for a few more days.

Unit R nurses caught in the delay were Agnes Swift, Elsie Thompson, Eva Van Dyke, Grace Van Evera, Olive Whitlock, Bessie Whitaker, and, of course, Merle Wright.





Patients and Unit R personnel take in the fresh air on a balcony of the Hôtel Cosmopolitain. Renamed Hospital A, the hotel housed 560 beds and the main surgical department. (Hitz, Base Hospital 32)

Finally we boarded the *SS Louisville*. The only good thing about the trip was that we were going home. The ship had transported troops to Europe throughout the war and it was dirty. Perhaps it would be better described as slimy. The few times that I was not too seasick to go to the dining room, I wore the French kid gloves that I had bought as a gift for a friend at home so I wouldn't have to touch the dirty railings going down stairs.

We landed in New York on March 22, and on April 14, 1919, I was back home in Wright, Iowa.

## VICTORY IN WAR WELL CELEBRATED

Third Time for Peace Celebration  
Was the Right Time—Jefferson  
County Joyous Over News

For personnel of Base Hospital 32, the months following the armistice were marked by boredom, frustration, and deteriorating morale.

Like the nurses of Unit R, the officers and enlisted men began their homeward journey on February 19, 1919, but their progress was infinitely slower. Finally on February 24 they arrived in St. Sebastien, where they remained for six weeks, undergoing inspection of records, equipment, and the physical condition of personnel.

On April 3 most of the officers of Unit R were ordered to St. Nazaire. They sailed two days later on the *USS Zeelandia*, landing in Charleston, South Carolina, on April 17. The enlisted men arrived in St. Nazaire on April 10, and on April 13 they boarded the *Freedom* after a two-mile march in the rain. There were forty-nine of them and by then they had lost their Unit R designation. During those final weeks their orders listed them only as the Camp Dodge Detachment of Base Hospital 32.

The *Freedom* was a small German freighter of very questionable seaworthiness. It took fifteen days for the vessel to reach New York and in that time food supplies were nearly exhausted. Next came the longest wait of all—ten days of inactivity at Camp Mills.

The Unit R men left New York on May 9 and



the next day they were on Iowa soil when their Rock Island train rolled into Davenport. Johnston described the homecoming in his history: "At three o'clock on what seemed to them to be the most beautiful of all Iowa Sunday afternoons, the men of Hospital Unit R crossed over the Mississippi singing 'Iowa, My Iowa.' It was the first vision of their beloved state in 18 months, and a very different vision than they [had] had when they [had] left Fairfield in a blinding snowstorm two winters before."

The train reached Camp Dodge a few hours later. By 6 P.M. on May 12, 1919, the last man had been discharged and was on his way home to southeastern Iowa. □

#### Note on Sources

Merle Wright Carter's narrative of her service in Unit R forms the bulk of this article. The major source of background information was the chapter written by Clarence Johnston and titled "Hospital Unit R" in *A History of Base Hospital 32 (Including Unit R)*, edited and compiled by Benjamin D. Hitz (Indianapolis, 1922). Articles from the *Fairfield Ledger* (October 2, 1939; June 25, 1964) provided information on J. Fred Clarke.

*At the first reunion of Unit R in Fairfield, actors performed skits spoofing the officers, French customs, and life in Contrexéville. (courtesy the authors)*

## First Reunion of the Hospital Unit R, Old Veterans Association

FAIRFIELD, IOWA, AUGUST 27-30, 1920

CAMP CONTREXEVILLE

7:00 P. M.

Reception to the friends whose labors made the Unit's war service possible

8:00 P. M.

l'Opera Contrexéville August 28th, 1920  
Skits by the Unit R Opera Co.  
(Organized Six P. M., August 28th, 1920)

(Friends are asked to excuse two embarrassments of the actors: 1. Fatigue from long over training; 2. The use of English to which they are not accustomed).

Music by Gaumers' Orchestra

Following the ancient custom the OLD TOWN CRIER of Contrexéville will announce the Skits. This is an exact reproduction of the French village Crier.

1. Captain Herrick makes final preparations for overseas travel.
2. Captain Walker and Captain McGuire, famous hunters, pursue the ferocious WILD BOAR in the Vosges Forests near Contrexéville.  
Note the steady aim of McGuire.  
Note the quick movements of Walker.  
Note the abject terror of the boar.  
No one need have the slightest fear of anyone or anything being injured.
3. Captain James makes his daily inspection of men's quarters at the "Glass House", Contrexéville.  
Note the Captain's courtesy and mild manner. He never found fault with anything.
4. Introducing Francois, the Unit's prodige mascot.
5. Captain Walker takes Earl Power and Irwin Atwood for an evening in Paris.  
Note the beauty, modesty and retiring disposition of the Paris girls, on the Champs Elysses at midnight.
6. Douglas Fairbanks presents "The Mollycoddle".

Friends wishing to visit the large hotel hospitals of Contrexéville in which the members of Unit R worked, will be compelled to climb to the 4th and 5th Etages by stairs. There are no elevators.





After the war Merle Wright Carter and her roommates continued their friendship. In a 1920 photograph they relax at Ethel Lessenger's home in Harlan, Iowa. From left: Nelle Davies, Sarah Greenhalgh, Ethel Lessenger, Merle Wright (Carter), and Mabel Lusk. (courtesy the authors)

### UNIT R PERSONNEL

Nearly all members of Unit R were from southeastern Iowa. The following were the personnel who reported for service at Contrexéville, March 13, 1918.

#### OFFICERS

Major James F. Clarke (commanding)	Fairfield
Capt. John F. Herrick	Ottumwa
Capt. Henry A. Gray	Keokuk
Capt. Frank M. Fuller	Keokuk
Capt. Roy A. McGuire	Brighton
Capt. Lora D. James	Fairfield
Capt. Ben S. Walker	Corydon
1st Lt. Kenneth L. Johnston	Oskaloosa
1st Lt. Edward J. Wehman	Burlington
1st Lt. Ira N. Crowe	Marengo
1st Lt. Frank R. Mehler	New London
1st Lt. Robert S. Reimers	Fort Madison

#### NURSES

Amy Beers (chief nurse)	Fairfield
Esther Albright	Danville
Madge Baldwin	Ottumwa
Philomena Bauer	Ottumwa
Grace Shirley Bell	Mt. Sterling
Dora Blank	Keokuk
Elizabeth Connelly	Gilmore City
Nelle Davies	Ottumwa
Mary L. Elder	Ottumwa
Olive K. Graber	Burlington
Sarah Greenhalgh	Des Moines
Mabel Lusk	Ottumwa
Margaret Henke	Keokuk
Ethel Lessenger	Council Bluffs
Agnes Swift	Washington
Elsie Thompson	Burlington
Eva Van Dyke	Ottumwa
Grace Van Evera	Davenport
Bessie Whitaker	Grinnell
Olive Whitlock	Valparaiso, Ind.
Merle Wright	Wright

#### ENLISTED MEN

Sgt. William J. McGiffin	Fairfield
Sgt. John G. Barwise	Fairfield
Cpl. Clarence S. Johnston	Ottumwa

Cpl. John E. Lukens	Chariton
Roy P. Anderson	Ottumwa
Wells B. Andrews	Mt. Pleasant
Robert C. Anstead	Salt Lake City, Utah
Irwin W. Atwood	Fairfield
Sylvester W. Barnett	Centerville
Lowe F. Berger	Winfield
Paul J. Bishop	Glasgow
Archibald M. Cantrall	Fairfield
Merle C. Caris	Fairfield
Orion O. Coppock	Fairfield
Vincent E. Diemer	Des Moines
Claude E. Downard	Fairfield
Joseph A. Duffy	Los Angeles, Calif.
Cornelius M. Edwards	Fairfield
Paul O. Ferrell	Libertyville
Harvey E. Gaumer	Fairfield
Warner A. Glotfelty	Libertyville
Clifford C. Haumerson	Ft. Atkinson, Wis.
Creigh C. Heminger	Donnellson
William L. Hobbs	Ft. Madison
Edmund V. Hunt	Fairfield
Brace E. Hutton	Batavia
Paul B. Jericho	Mt. Pleasant
William A. Johnson	Birmingham
Charles S. Lamson	Fairfield
Milton F. Larimore	Russell
John C. Larmore	Hedrick
Ellwood Lindbom	Fairfield
Clarence M. McCarty	Ottumwa
Bruce A. Mellis	Ottumwa
Fred N. Newkirk	Ft. Madison
Joe C. Norris	Birmingham
Sherman H. Oatman	Mt. Pleasant
Ralph C. Parrott	Fairfield
Earl D. Power	Fairfield
Warren K. Rogers	Mt. Pleasant
Curtis G. Schillerstrom	Fairfield
Calvin L. Scovel	Fairfield
Harold C. Self	Monona
Berl C. Shearer	Winfield
Paul G. Spainhour	Spartansburg, N.C.
Roy L. Walgren	Sundance, Wyo.
Stanley S. Watts	Birmingham
Afton J. Wesley	Wapello
Dan L. Winter	Middletown
Guy A. Woellhaf	Fairfield



## Public and Private Words from Unit R

Other members of Unit R recorded their immediate impressions of wartime France. Kathryn Olive Graber, from Burlington, kept a diary while at Contrexéville. Curtis Schillerstrom, J. Fred Clarke, and William J. McGiffin, all from Fairfield, sent letters home that were printed in the *Fairfield Ledger* on the dates shown. The following excerpts reveal the build-up of the war and the increasing numbers of patients at Contrexéville. (Alterations in spelling and punctuation have been made in the diary excerpts.)

— *Editor*

**Kathryn Olive Graber. March 24, 1918.** Worked all day at the Cosmopolitan Hospital. Assisted Capt. Martin and Dr. Walker with dressing for burns and wounds. The boys are badly burned with mustard gas. Eyes and body all over. Our 1st American funeral, one boy from Ohio died. . . .

**William J. McGiffin. April 17, 1918.** When you pass, as we did, through miles of fields dotted

with graves over which the tri-color of France was floating, you have serious thoughts, believe me. And then again the first night out we had the real side of the whole business. We were (censored). Probably the next time we see anything like this we will be more interested in hunting cover than we will watching the scenery.

**Kathryn Olive Graber. April 30, 1918.** Several of my patients left for the trenches. Hated to see them go. My hrs. off — gathered wild flowers, Miss Lusk, Davis and I and sent [them] to our soldiers' graves. Brewer, the sergeant of our hospital, met me at the cemetery, to fill up the graves of American soldiers. . . .

**J. Fred Clarke. June 5, 1918.** Of course when a Red Cross train comes and fills our wards with disabled men, the inside of the hospitals is not like peaceful Iowa. But outside the flowers bloom and the skylark mounts to as great heights and the moonlight floods the bath house colonade,







*Kathryn Olive Graber (left) kept a diary while serving as a Unit R nurse in Contrexéville. The diary and photograph of the cemetery were part of materials donated by her family to the Manuscript Collection of the State Historical Society. William J. McGiffin (right) was a first sergeant in Unit R. His letters often appeared in the 1918 Fairfield Ledger, in which he was listed as the "junior editor." (SHSI)*



just as though the world were not disorganized. . . .

It is forbidden that I write of our work in the hospitals. Of course you know that when I speak of flowers and birds, these are seen in the between times. The flesh torn by shells, the eyes blinded with gas, these things are our daily care and to give each soldier our best labors is our ambition.

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**Kathryn Olive Graber. June 28, 1918.** At Baccarat [on volunteer duty in front-line tent hospitals] was in an air raid. The Germans dropped 8 bombs and had a large machine gun on airplane. The machine was about 100 feet above our place of sleeping. Miss McDonald was head of the evacuation hospital. She was wounded in an air raid with the British service. Had one eye lost by shrapnel. Was there from Monday until Sat. and worked 12 hrs. a day. Was very tired. But was glad to do what I could for the boys. Came home June 29. Went to church Sunday a.m. and on duty Sunday p.m. at the Cosmopolitan Hospital.

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**William J. McGiffin. July 17, 1918.** We are fairly busy in the hospitals now, although we are not filled to entire capacity. Quite a number of American boys and I meet lots of Iowa fellows. I have seen three Fairfield boys here and in a neighboring town. . . . We have some Tommies and yesterday morning a dozen German prisoners, wounded, came in. Poor fellows, I really felt sorry for them, for they were so young and looked so forlorn. They had been told by their officers

that they would be killed if captured and they looked as if they were expecting that event almost any minute. One boy had been in the trenches but [only] one day when he was taken. He was shot through the jaw and part of his tongue was torn away.

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**Curtis Schillerstrom. September 11, 1918.** We have received perhaps over a thousand patients in the last week and many of them were in critical condition. Some have passed on to their great reward, others are in such a bad shape that we are expecting them to pass on to Blighty. . . . I thought before I came in contact with it, that I could understand their suffering and their bravery through it all, but it is beyond me. I don't see how it is possible for a mere man to suffer so.

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**Kathryn Olive Graber. [Date uncertain.]** All through August, Sept. and Oct. did nothing but dressings. Always having more than 150 patients and mostly boys from the New England states. I had nothing to begin with, only army cots and a box for my surgical table.

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**William J. McGiffin. October 23, 1918.** Just now the guns are booming to the north of us on the St. Mihiel salient, and from all appearances America's initial big drive is under way in good shape. I can see plainer than ever before that Iowa turkey which must suffer at my hands on Christmas day, 1918. I can hardly wait, for it seems so close.

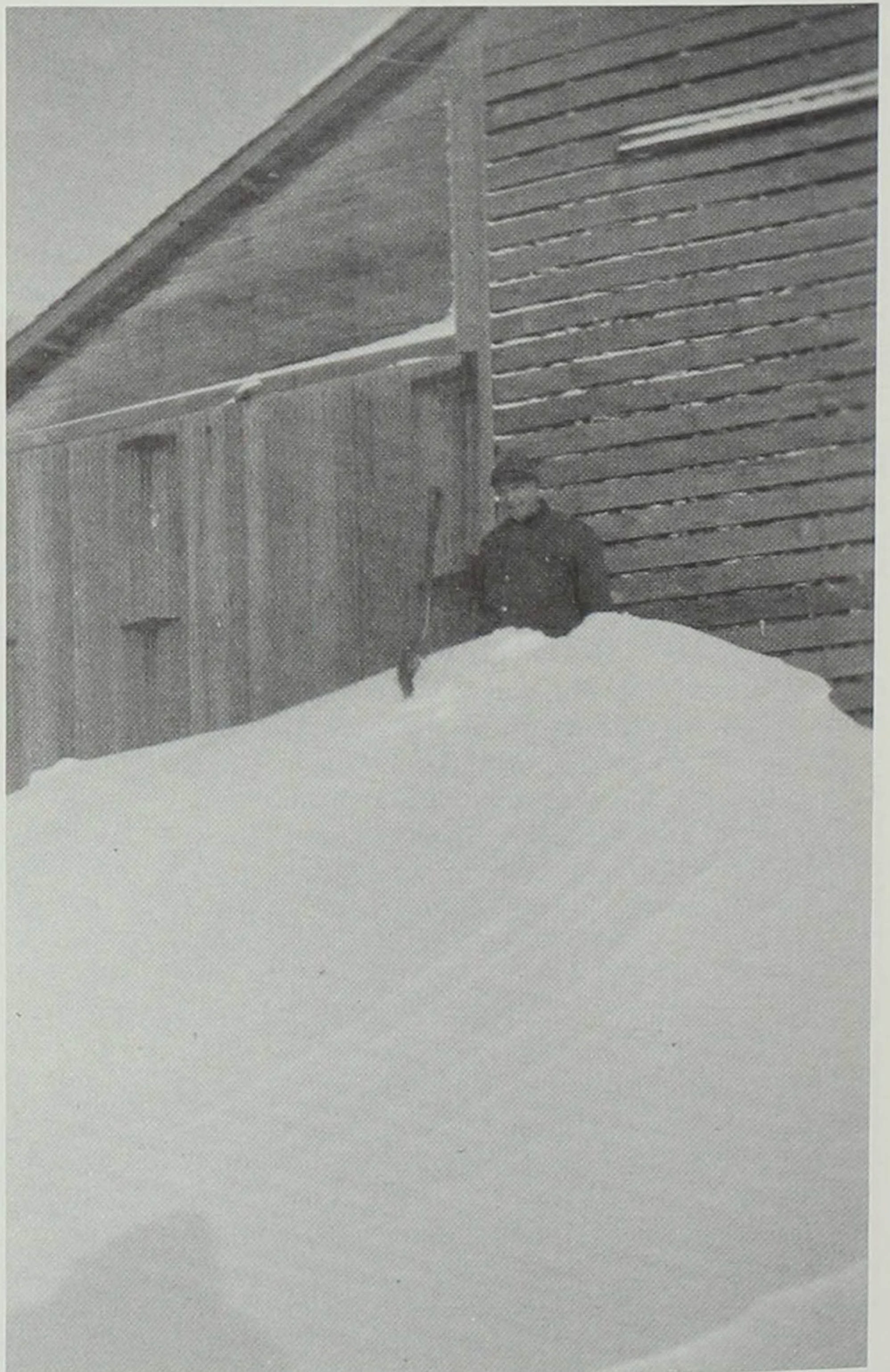


The  
Winter  
and  
Summer  
of 1936

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by  
Irma J. Long

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**Editor's Note:** *The weather of 1936 tested Iowans already weary from the Great Depression. "In the short space of about 6 months," summarized the Iowa Weather and Crop Bureau's monthly review in July 1936, "Iowa has experienced the most prolonged severe cold and the most prolonged severe heat in a period of at least 117 years." Severe blizzards and a month-long cold wave froze Iowa to a standstill. Frequent high winds blew the light, dry snow into drifts ten to fifteen feet deep, taunting the efforts of road crews. Half of Iowa's farmers, living on side roads, were snowed in for weeks. Trains and mail were delayed. Coal was in short supply. Schools and churches closed, and businesses cut back. The ground froze to depths of five or six feet, and some rivers to two or three feet. The summer was no easier, as heat and drought locked Iowa in their grip.*

*In 1936 Irma J. Long wrote a letter and a "memorandum" that present the weather in a context of a few square miles in Grant Township, Woodbury County. The letter and memorandum (edited slightly for publication here) give a strong sense of community and of the people within that community. In 1936 the author was a teacher at Grant Township Dis-*

*trict School Number 8. The school was eight miles from the Long family farm, where Irma lived with her parents. Her brother Harold lived in an adjoining house and farmed with her father. Irma's sister Helen taught school in Mapleton, twenty miles from home. Bethel Church was three miles from the Long home. The lawn and grove by the church were called the "community grounds," the site of picnics, Fourth of July celebrations, and other neighborhood get-togethers.*

*In the brittle cold of February 1936, daily tasks became small dramas of survival. In the July drought, trying to fall asleep at night was exhausting. The two following pieces speak of the cruelty — and the beauty — of nature. They speak, too, of the humor that Iowans called upon to make it through the winter and summer of 1936.*



*Irma J. Long in 1938. Left: Her father in 1936, at the crest of a snowdrift. (courtesy the author)*

WOODBURY COUNTY, IOWA  
FEBRUARY 14, 1936

DEAR HELEN,

Do you remember that poem about cutting the heat because it was so thick? Well, I think it might almost be said of the cold we've been having — a thick, biting cold that penetrates clothes, buildings, and even nooks a few feet from a fire.

I am going to try to describe as accurately as possible some of our own experiences and those of others about us during these last few weeks — weeks which will be memorable, and which we can use to match the stories of the old-timers (as Harold says), and also which, in future years, we as old-timers can tell to other generations. The future generations may think

we are simply telling wild tales in order to hold our audience, for really conditions are worse than you'd think would be possible in this progressive age. One would naturally think that the weather, along with the years, would acquire some of the dignity and culture of the world, but it seems to have reverted to the stone age in all of its brute strength, fury, and tenacity. Like Mussolini, it seems impregnable to criticism as well as to suffering and want.

But why mention the conditions which we are all familiar with through our reading of the newspapers? Perhaps I had better limit myself to those local conditions in which you would be interested because they deal with the people you know. The difficulty is that I scarcely know where to begin.

I guess I'll start with two weeks ago next Monday — though that makes us begin a week



or so after the sub-zero weather and some snowstorms began. On that particular Monday Harold took me to school and walked with me up the last hill which could not be used by cars on account of the snow. He took my bag and went over to Iva Bennett's with it, so that I might stay there that week. Before noon we were in the throes of an old-fashioned blizzard. Snow was whirling across the fields in wavy clouds. The wind roared about the schoolhouse and flung the snow from one drift to another. At times the sheets of snow were almost blinding.

Shortly after noon, Jimmy Miller came for the children. I sent the Huey boys also, in order that they might have someone to make a path for them. The boys bundled up securely and started off. Jimmy was in the lead, making a path. William followed and made the path a little wider. Little Junior was next and then the rest of the boys brought up the rear, all in single file. I waited until 2:30 and then I left for Iva's. You should have seen me! Galoshes, leggings, an old pair of knickers over my dress, a woolly cap, a woolly scarf, overcoat, mittens! I was so bundled up that I bulged in all directions. I wallowed out of the schoolyard through snow about waist high, and started on my mile-long walk. I made the journey safely, but others were out in the storm and Harold was one of them.

He had taken his old Ford down to the garage to be fixed. On his way home, east of Huey's, he got stuck in a snowbank. He shoveled a long time. At last Woody Willmott came along behind him, and Earl Smith came from the other direction to help Woody get home. After about three hours of shoveling they all went on. They encountered enormous snowdrifts after leaving the gravel, but at last landed at Willmott's. Harold left the old Ford there and started for home on foot. He was already tired out from shoveling, and the drifts made walking cruelly hard. Between the church and our old mailbox he began to give out. In order to keep his feet going, he kept muttering to



*Irma and Harold Long bundle up to face an Iowa winter. (courtesy the author)*

himself, "Left, right — left, right — left, right," until the words and the accompanying step became automatic. At times he squatted down in the snow to rest a minute, but he dared not stop long or he would have frozen in a short time. He really became fearful that he was not going to reach home. But when he reached the old mailbox, strength seemed to return and he got along better. Cora saw him coming along the road so slowly that it didn't seem like Harold at all. Mother said that he stopped in the shelter of the little cedar tree by our gate and then came on. Another safe arrival.

The next morning after having slept at my birthplace for the first time in a quarter of a century (how long that sounds!), I had a touch of anxiety for myself, though it was nothing like Harold's. I waded from Iva's to the gravel, went on to Jackson's, where I stopped for a little pail of water, and started on. When I left the gravel the walking was hard. I had always thought I should be able to wade through anything, but I knew before I got to the top of that hill that wading can take more strength than I had expected. I started up the road, but the walking was so hard that I went into a field. That, however, was worse; I wearily climbed



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## The weather seems to have reverted to the stone age in all of its brute strength, fury, and tenacity.

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back onto the road. The hard crust broke with each step, and my mind struggled with the problem as to whether I ought to try to keep going or if I dared to stop and rest. My feet either ached or were numb. The rest of me was so hot that my clothes were damp. At last I got through that last drift, which brought me onto the school ground.

I was so tired that day that I didn't even try to clean off the porch. I had only three pupils, and so I sat a good share of the time. I don't remember ever being so tired for a whole day. But by night I felt pretty good and got along much better — partly, of course, because going downhill was easier than going uphill.

The following Saturday was to be Claud Renneker's funeral. He was to be buried at Bethel. The roads had been opened that far for the procession. But on Saturday we had the blizzard that climaxed the whole weather situation. It raged all day. At times we could not even see the gravel road plainly, for the air was hazy with snow, driven by a wild wind. People who had been away from home late the night before could not get home; the roads were blocked.

Sunday afternoon Dorothy and I started out for the gravel to see if I could get through to the school. We had a real lark, trying out great snowdrifts to see if they would bear our weight — and many of them did. When we sank in, we would manage to roll out in some manner or other and try some more. As it happened, we had no school the following Monday and the Oto school was closed, too. So Dorothy and I went to my school, to try out the road. We got along splendidly, because some of the drifts

which filled the cut were hard enough to bear our weight.

About twenty men and a snowplow were opening the gravel so that the funeral could be held on Monday, but that had to be given up, as they got only a mile or two out of Oto the first day. In one place the men scooped snow to men standing above them, and these in turn scooped it on over the drifts. Tuesday night the snowplow got to Willmott's but could go no farther, for the scooping which had been done was too narrow for the plow to pass through. There was some talk of bringing Claud's body down that night, before the roads filled again, but that had to be abandoned. The next day the crew of workmen came out again, and the road was opened to the cemetery.

Our men had seen to the digging of the grave, of course, but Dad didn't go to the cemetery on Wednesday, as walking through the drifted fields was so hard it tired him out terribly. Wednesday morning Harold went to the cemetery and told the men that Mr. Hudgel was coming with the body. At last, about noon, three cars including the hearse arrived at the cemetery. They had to wait there about fifteen minutes or so until the last-minute shoveling could be done. The cars were very lucky to have had no longer a wait than that. Needless to say the service was a hasty one. Rather a pathetic and lonely ending for Claud, but he was past worrying about it, and it was the best that could be done under the circumstances.

After the funeral Harold and Jess rode to town with Leonard and Leo Dicks. Everyone was about out of supplies, and so Leonard's



car was loaded down (to say the least) on the return home. I presume that the combined weight of Harold, Leonard, and Jess must be about 600 lb. Well, between Jess and Leonard in the front seat were two half-sacks of flour. Under Jess's feet was a box of supplies. So Jess of necessity sat with his feet stretched out straight in front of him. Leonard had a three-gallon can of apples under his feet. In the back seat between Harold and Leo was a fifteen-gallon can of kerosene, besides a big box of groceries. Harold held a gunny sack of groceries and also had a two-gallon can of gas. Leo was likewise weighted down. In the empty spaces were empty cream cans that had been taken to town. Once Harold got a cramp in his foot and had to get out of the car. Once in a while a loaf of bread would land behind somebody's neck and have to be rescued. But again a safe landing was made with only one casualty, and that was a poor benighted loaf of bread badly twisted and mangled from having been sat upon by Leo.

All the schools were being closed; no town schools in the county were open, and Wednesday I had none either. I rode home — that is, as far as Earl Miller's with Earl and Wesley. I

walked on to Jess's where Harold was waiting for me. He then loaded himself down with his gunny sack of groceries; I took a great stack of belated mail and the gasoline, and we started out.

We walked through the shoveled road in the cemetery, and it was such a beautiful spot that I can't forget it. The evergreen branches with their deep, rich green, weighted here and there with splotches of snow, and the perfect whiteness of the cemetery itself with only the stones, tree trunks, and a few of the taller shrubs breaking the whiteness seemed to signify nothing more nor less than a perfect, peaceful, and beautiful silence. And then to climax the beauty was the shoveled pathway with the snow banked a couple of feet on either side of us, as we walked up the snow-covered lane. Surely Claud couldn't have wished to be taken up a more beautiful aisle than that path.

Jess and Clarke saw us over the fence into Paulson's pasture. Harold went ahead and I followed in his footsteps. One step would be high, the next would go down a couple of feet, the next would be plain wading, and then we'd suddenly find ourselves on top of the snow again. The old path was covered, and so we had

*Blizzards of 1936 forced Iowa farmers to tunnel through drifts to reach livestock in outbuildings. (SHSI)*





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## Men scooped snow to men standing above them, and these in turn scooped it on over the drifts.

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nothing to follow. Harold did a good job of looking after me and had me stop to rest now and then.

When we reached home, Mother mentioned that you had thought of coming home, but she thought you must have decided to go with Dorothy. Harold, very untactfully, said, "Well, don't you *know* whether she's coming or not?" Neither Mother nor I voiced any feelings, but his question set us both worrying within our own minds. I thought, although I knew better, that you might have come to the church and started on without letting Jess know that you were there. If you tried to come by the road I knew you never could make it, and in my imagination I could see you lying in a dark heap on top of the snow south of the old mailbox. I should, of course, have seen only the point of your cap with the rest of you sticking straight down in the snow, if my imagination had made a little truer picture of what would have happened in such a case. I knew you weren't out there, but the picture recurred several times. Anyway, we were all glad when you called from Merville the next day.

Wednesday Ruth Miller's school closed, and as she had been boarding at O.C. Hoyt's just across from the schoolhouse, she didn't know how bad the roads were. She started walking home — a walk of six miles. The roads were, of course, impassable. At times she had to crawl on her hands and knees. When the Curtins saw her coming she was just barely moving. I guess she was completely played out. She rode the rest of the way with the Curtins. Both sides of her neck are very sore where they were frozen. Her nose was also frozen quite badly.

Yesterday (Thursday) we began to get shoveled out. Mr. Pederson and Lindy came down

and with our men and Mr. Rahtz made a road through our forty across the road into Paulson's field and on down to Paulson's. They were almost out of supplies and so the Pedersons went on to Sioux City. Their car was already down at Paulson's. Along toward evening a strong wind came up. (You know about this as you were stuck in it on your way to Graham's.) Lindy and Mr. Pederson got stuck on the gravel over by Pithan's. After shoveling about an hour, the car struck gravel and the wheels spun so, that the chain broke. They could go no farther. They carried their groceries to Pithan's and started to walk home. But the drifts were terrible. Already the wind had blown everything full. At times they, too, had to crawl on their hands and knees. By the time they reached Ettler's, Mr. Pederson was worn out and so they stopped there for the night. Mr. Pederson's face was frozen, but they got it thawed out, and he said he was given a comfortable bed.

Mr. Pederson stopped in this afternoon; I wish I could give you his conversation with its funny little brogue. Dad can mimic him to perfection but I can't, even on paper. After he had gone this P.M., Harold asked Jess which one could mimic Mr. Pederson better, Dad or Mr. Pederson himself. It was surely funny to hear him tell of his experience, but the experience itself must have been terrible.

This morning he started to walk home and made arrangements to meet Lindy on the gravel nearer home. Dad asked Mr. Pederson how he came and he said he did not know — over fences and fields. He was about "petered out" when he got home. He had then done his chores, gone down to Paulson's again, and stopped in here. When he got here he was just



worn out. But he could laugh and chat as if he'd had no trouble at all. We phoned to Lindy for him, and let him know that the roads were too blocked for his father to meet him, and so he, too, had to walk home.

Ione has been going to school on horseback. Millard rides with her on one horse and she on another. One day one of the horses got down and couldn't get up until it was shoveled out.

**B**efore I stop my epistle I think I should tell you about Iva. We don't think of her in the role of a heroine, but her courage is remarkable. There she is with just Dorothy and all alone so far as the work is concerned. Every day she has to pump a great big tank full of water. I tried it a time or two, and after about three minutes I was tired out. Nearly every day, too, she pumps her well dry. Each day she splits wood for two stoves, besides doing all her chores of milking, watering, feeding, etc. Then she comes in the house and cheerfully goes about the getting of a big meal. The road from her place to the gravel is filled with snow. It seems as if it would be weeks before she could get out. She was getting awfully low on supplies and had no way of getting to town. We were almost out of kerosene. One lamp went

out Tuesday night, but we still had a little kerosene in the other lamp. She had run out of gas for her gas lamp some days before. Her wood was getting short, and she needed to have some more hauled. Her wagons were so deep in snow that they couldn't be moved without shoveling. She tried to get help, but neither Wesley nor Jess could help her. I certainly felt sorry for her. At last Jimmy Miller came over, and we hauled wood; Mr. Moore brought out a few supplies, and so now I think she must be fixed for a little while. I doubt if she has any money to speak of, but no complaint comes from her. And just think! Every day for the last three or four weeks has been below zero, and Iva has to do all this work in such bitter weather. Her outbuildings are poor and the cold just pours into them.

**T**his morning was the coldest we have had — 26 degrees below zero with a bitter wind. It is getting cold again tonight. When Dad came in from the milking, he asked me if I was busy. I stopped my writing and went out to assist him in any way I could. He then asked me if I thought that little can which I put under the eaves for the purpose of catching the water where the eaves leaked would be about full of water and need emptying. You see, the situation hasn't gone beyond the possibility of humor.

Right now the clock is striking nine. Dad is dozing in his chair by the fire, and Mother is knitting. The telephone wire is singing quite merrily, and the roads are again blocked as badly as ever. With this homey picture I shall bring my long drawn-out letter to a close.

LOVE,

*Iona*



*The author and her cousin Ione taught in country schools two miles apart. Here, Ione's school (District Number 5 in Grant Township) on a less snowy day in 1936. (courtesy the author)*



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## Gardens are filled with little dry, brown monuments recalling the green plants that once grew there.

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### MEMORANDUM CONCERNING JULY 1936

This is July 18th and another hot day. The thermometer has been above the 100 mark every day since the Fourth of July. We planned to go to the community grounds to celebrate the Fourth, but before we were ready to go, I got frightened because the thermometer began to soar and it seemed as if the day couldn't go on without our dying from heat, a tornado, or lightning. Helen looked the house over and Mother helped her in an attempt to find some treatment for sunstroke and heat exhaustion. We went to the picnic prepared to heroically render first aid to the many who would surely succumb to the heat before the afternoon was over, and who would thereafter feel eternally grateful to the "Life-saver Longs." Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, we were not given the opportunity to be efficient (or hysterical). Yet the thermometer reached 113 degrees.

Heat, heat, heat! We have been literally buried in it ever since. It is all about us; we can't get away from it! It stifles and burns and saturates everything. We are drowning in a great, never-ending sea of heat. The beds feel actually hot most of the night. The furniture, too, is not immune. Sometimes we seek stools or chairs without backs in order to get away from the heat on *our* backs. People all over the countryside are sleeping out of doors, for the houses do not cool off in the evening. For a few days we kept the house shut to keep out the heat, but now it never becomes cool enough to warrant that.

People are getting tired, worn out. Sleep is

often impossible. In Iowa over 400 have died because of the heat; in the United States the number is over 5,000. It doesn't seem safe or sane to stay out in the bright sunshine of the afternoon. The thermometer usually stays above the century mark from nine A.M. until five or six in the evening.

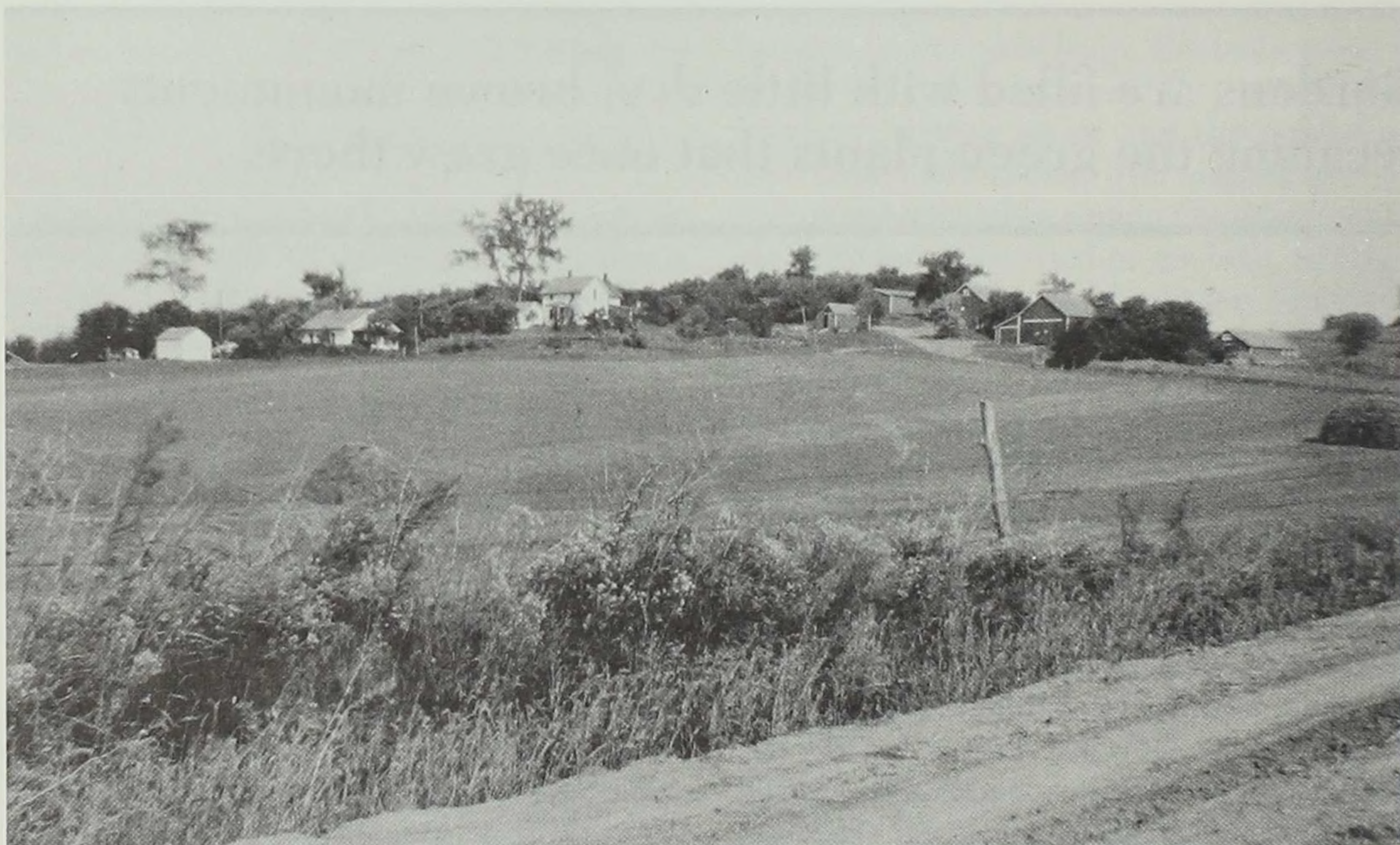
Day after day the sun glares down upon us. No longer does she veil herself from us with a cooling cloud but shoots her rays at us with saber-like strokes, and we are helpless before her onslaught.

For weeks we have had no rain — until this



*On the shady "community grounds" around Bethel Church, the Long family and their neighbors often gathered for picnics and celebrations. This photograph was taken in 1955; Bethel Church is no longer open. (courtesy the author)*





*The Long farm, Grant Township, 1942. Harold lived in the smaller home in the front. (courtesy the author)*

morning, and then not enough to help. Wells are going dry, creeks have long ago given up all their moisture, gardens are filled with little dry, brown monuments recalling the green plants which once grew there. The very leaves of the trees are becoming brown and sere and are falling to the ground prematurely. The grass crackles dryly under one's feet, and the heat from the ground makes the soles of one's shoes uncomfortably hot.

The corn, especially, has staged a brave fight for life. A couple of weeks ago it seemed as if it must have rain immediately, but none has been forthcoming. Mother said it seemed actually pitiful to her to watch it. The corn east of the house was her pride a few weeks ago — the best around. Day by day it curls a little more, gets a little browner, bends a little more forlornly, and at last, still bravely fighting, has to admit that it can give the farmer nothing this year. Mother thinks its struggle is almost human.

Many birds are dying from lack of water.

Harold saw a little squirrel go nearly crazy with delight one day when it found some water drops on a water pipe. Some of the chickens have died because of the heat.

The oats crop is almost a total loss. We are not even going to thresh. Much of the corn is past redemption. Rain would not help it anyway in all this heat, for then the corn would simply be cooked. Dad says he has never seen a drouth such as this promises to be. The men don't know how they are going to get their stock through the winter. Either they will have to be killed or expensive feed will have to be bought. It is a problem they have not yet solved. Mother and Cora have sold many of their chickens in order to conserve on feed. Other people are just as bad off as we are, and it remains to be seen how people will act and react to these new and hard experiences.

We expected to have lots of apples this year. They still hang to the trees but have not grown much for a long time. Mother doesn't know whether she will be able to make a little jell of



## A breeze was coming in the north window, and so I right speedily hied me off to my bed.

them or not. It is rather a terrible thing to see one's hopes for the entire year slowly yet surely disappear into nothingness.

Yesterday was the hottest day of our lives. The thermometer reached beyond the 116-degree mark. There was a breeze which, though hot, kept it from seeming hotter than usual. Last night, however, seemed a little worse than nights prior to it. Dad insisted on sleeping in his own bed, but Helen and I slept on some springs out in the yard and Mother slept on the cot on the porch. I lay watching the stars and trying to sleep. Frequently I would know that I was not the only one who was still awake for Helen would whisper something to me. I rolled, fought off bugs, drowsed, and rolled some more. Helen seemed to be quite peaceful, but at last had to cool her parched tongue by getting some cool water from the hydrant. After a time Mother made a similar excursion.

When sleep was upon us, we were awakened by a few — very few — errant drops of rain. Helen roused herself to ask if I was sprinkling her to make her think it was raining. I assured her that the water came from some little clouds and we dozed again. After a little while three or four more sprinkles roused us. I thought we might as well go in the house; so at about midnight Helen went to her own bed and I went to the downstairs bedroom. And was it HOT? IT WAS! Helen lay with her head on the window sill until she feared she would get callouses on her ears and had to forgo even that chance of getting a breath of fresh air some time before morning. Mother had to get another drink of water; Helen, too, felt the need of

moistening her dry mouth and made another excursion. We sprawled, rolled from one spot to another, felt sorry for ourselves, tried unsuccessfully to find a cool spot somewhere on our beds but to no avail. About four o'clock I went outdoors to get a drink and incidentally looked at the thermometer. Suffice it to say that the outdoor temperature was below ninety, even if the indoor temperature was not. I think the farther in one went, the hotter things became. I'm sure if my disposition were taken into account, that my "inside temperature" must have been about 150 degrees.

After a while Mother sought a change of scenery by moving to the davenport. She informed me that a breeze was coming in the north window, and so I right speedily hied me off to my bed. Such comfort! The breeze came in coolly from the east.

Helen still sweltered in her bed. At some time during her ordeal, she seriously contemplated a shower bath, but for some reason it



*A family portrait on a cooler summer day in the 1920s: Mr. and Mrs. B. L. Long, Irma, Harold, and Helen. (courtesy the author)*



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## It is rather a terrible thing to see one's hopes for the entire year slowly yet surely disappear into nothingness.

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never materialized. Finally in desperation she came downstairs to the porch. But again fortune turned against her, for the flies (which are more numerous this year than they have been for years) insisted that she remove her carcass again. Without any further argument she started back for her oven, but I insisted that she come in and share mine, as she would probably bake in her own and would probably just become nicely scorched in mine. I got her situated so she could catch the breeze when the breeze suddenly breathed its last, and so we sweltered together.

When Dad got up I went downstairs for a few minutes' rest on the porch, but I, too, was attacked by the flies. As a result a good share of our house got cleaned before breakfast. When we asked Dad how he got through the night he acted as if everything had been all right, but Helen reports that she heard many and sundry sighs issuing from his room throughout the time she was upstairs. One time she thought he was having a nightmare, but decided that it was only the climax of his sighs.

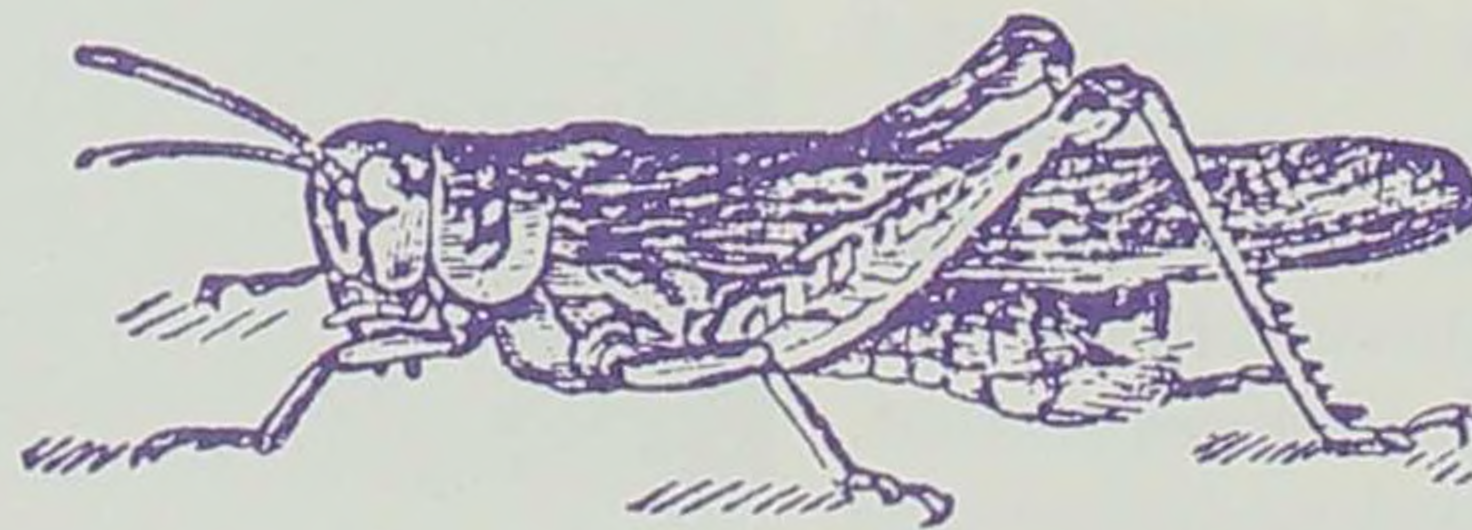
This morning we did have a great change in the program when a shower or two came, and it was cloudy for a few hours. We haven't had such a happening for many, many days. But

now the sun is shining again and the temperature has already reached 108.

Last, but not least, I must report the grasshopper situation. The grasshoppers are so bad that they are taking whole fields along with the drouth. The two seem to be racing to see which can put in the most effective work. People go miles and miles to get grasshopper poison when some is shipped in. Harold at last got several sacks. He reports that the sweet clover stems actually look rather yellow from the numerous grasshoppers on them. One of the popular stories which typically portray our situation at the present time goes as follows:

A farmer was walking along his cornfield when he suddenly heard a terrible noise. He went to seek the cause and found a big grasshopper "beating the soup" out of a little grasshopper. When questioned by the farmer, the big grasshopper explained that the little grasshopper was supposed to take two rows and was only taking one.

Well, conditions seem to be about as bad as they can be, but we still can be thankful for fly swatters and the ability to laugh. □





### CONTRIBUTORS

MERLE WRIGHT CARTER was born in Wright, Iowa, a village bearing her family name. After serving in Unit R, she received training in public health nursing in Chicago in 1919. She then returned to Fairfield and the Jefferson County Hospital, where she was superintendent of nursing from 1946 to 1949. She moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1949 and continued her nursing career until she moved to California in 1974. Her home today is in Sylmar, California.

DEAN GABBERT was also a long-time resident of Fairfield. He retired as editor and publisher of the *Fairfield Ledger* in 1985, and now makes his home in Nauvoo, Illinois. His article on Parsons College ("The Death of an American College: A Retrospective Look," *Palimpsest*, November/

December 1984) won the 1985 Trustees' Award at the annual banquet of the State Historical Society.

IRMA J. LONG was born on a farm near Oto, Iowa. She attended grade school in Grant Township District School Number 4, a few miles from her home. She graduated from Oto High School and, in 1929, from Iowa State Teachers College. She was a teacher in the Iowa communities of Cushing, Oto, Fairfield, and Council Bluffs. Most of her teaching years were in Council Bluffs, from where she retired "about 1970." (She writes, "I could be more accurate if I had kept a diary every day as my Grandfather Long did.") Today she lives in Lincoln, Nebraska.



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