

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

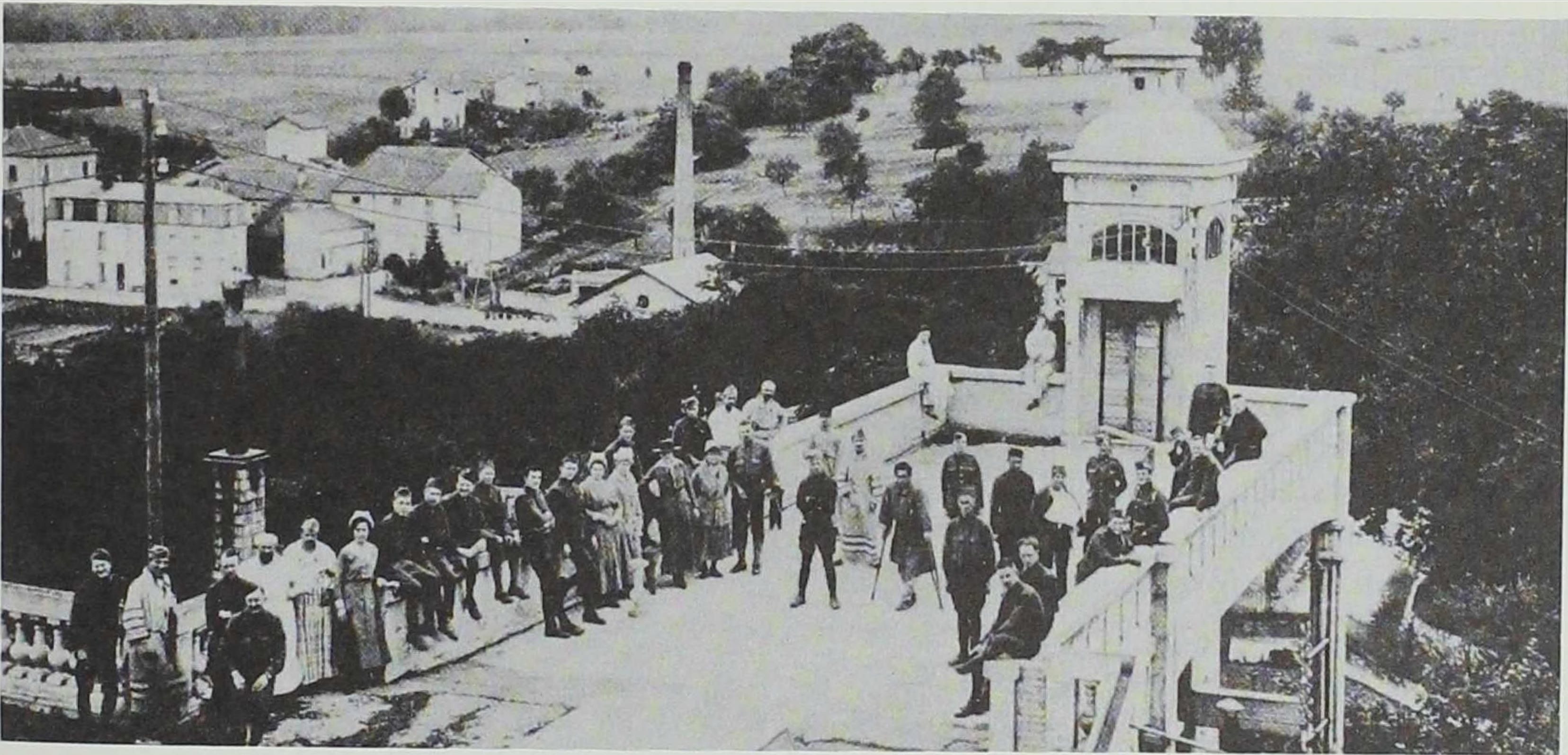
day we were supposed to be back in Contrexéville. We thought about it and agreed to stay over another day — thus enjoying a complete tour of the famed Versailles gardens, even though we were a day late getting back from our leave. Miss Beers didn't scold us very much. "I probably would have done the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