

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*

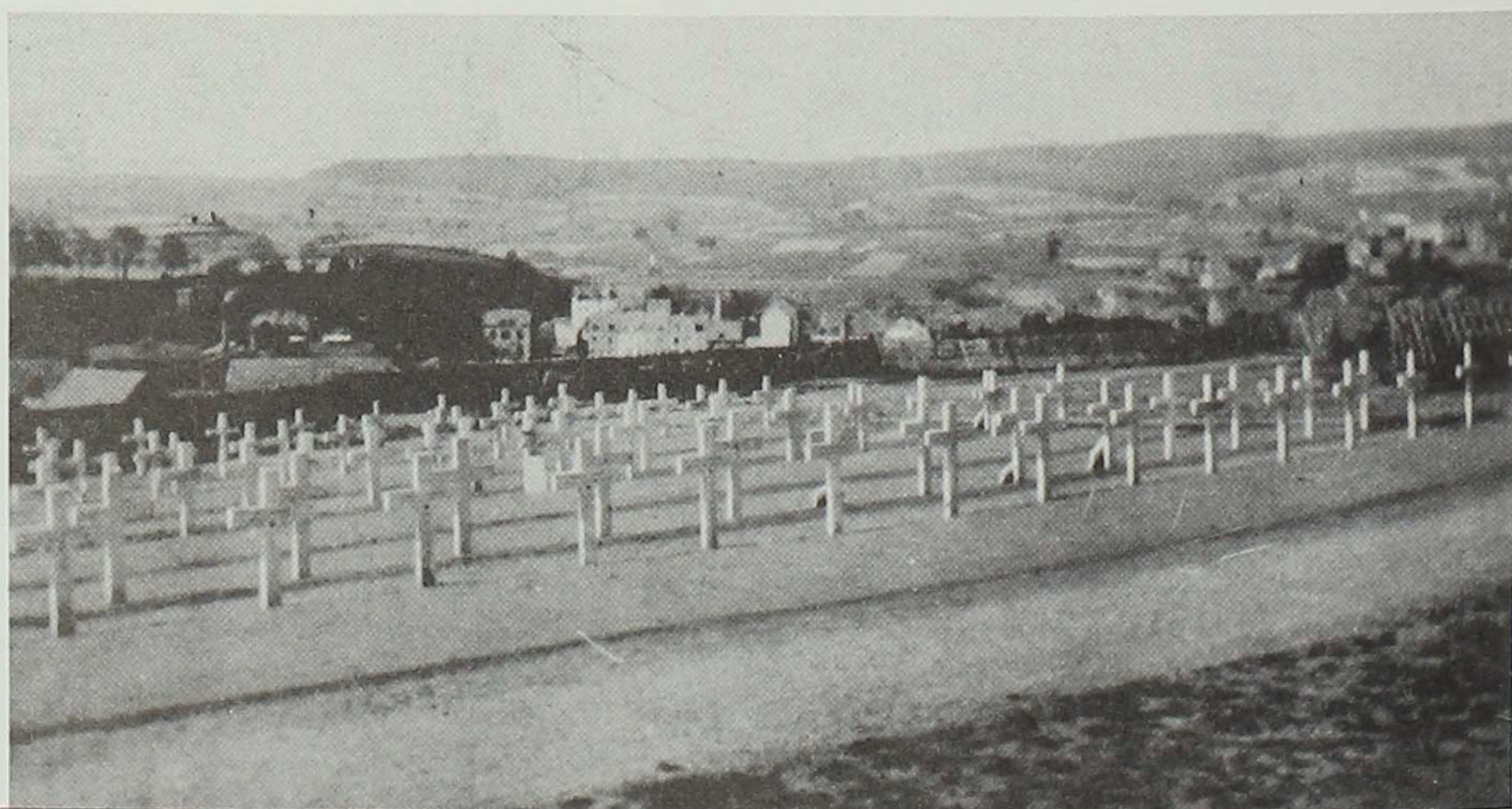
Kathryn Olive Graber. March 24, 1918. Worked all day at the Cosmopolitan Hospital. Assisted Capt. Martin and Dr. Walker with dressing for burns and wounds. The boys are badly burned with mustard gas. Eyes and body all over. Our 1st American funeral, one boy from Ohio died. . . .

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.