

A TROUBLED NEUTRALITY

By Ellen Knight¹

After war broke out in Europe in 1914, the nation strove to stay out of combat as long as it could. Nevertheless, the country was impacted. Among those Winchester residents first affected by World War I were residents caught abroad when war was declared. Life also changed for the young men who signed up in Canada to go fight. As war approached and its issues continued to be debated, townspeople prepared for defense.

AMERICAN REFUGEES

When war broke out in Europe in 1914, America was officially a neutral country, but thousands of Americans in Europe were frightened, warned, or ordered out. Even if they were in no particular danger, all American tourists suddenly found life extremely difficult. Paper money of every description abruptly became of little value, as did notes which had been negotiable and even silver currency. Americans in hotels and pensions were compelled to leave them. Prices of food soared. Fleeing from the Continent to England, Americans often arrived penniless or with worthless securities.

In Munich: The Winchester newspaper carried news about residents known to be abroad. Mary Lawrence, daughter of the former pastor of the Unitarian Church, was in Munich and witnessed the mobilization of troops. After her return, the newspaper printed excerpts from her diary.

“We heard of war Monday morning. I suspected it the night previous, for I had heard several demonstrations outside on our street and I could hear all from our window. Even at night the crowd is before the barracks door and messengers pass our corner from the King’s palace to the barracks. They shout the news when it is important....” The next morning they heard that it was war.

“... a report was quickly circulated that the Munich water had been poisoned. This was emphatically denied before night in posters and in the papers. But it gave Americans a fright and there were nowhere a group of more long-faced people than those gathered in the bank for money.... There was almost a run on the bank by Americans, who prompted us to secure money also.... The atmosphere became even more unnatural. There came the news that galleries were closed....” A concert was canceled and the hall used to store hay. “A sentinel patrols the sidewalk. The schoolhouses have been turned into barracks and certain hotels have been appropriated for army headquarters.

“As we pass along the streets the people seem subdued—no smiles, all are thoughtfully walking or quietly talking in groups or eagerly reading the frequent bulletins which the police or government issues.”²

In Italy: Edward Baldwin of Lakeview Road was in Italy where, not able to read Italian, he was unaware of current events until he saw a posting for a meeting for Americans desiring to return home. Attending out of curiosity, his party found the meeting was packed and learned about Americans being without funds and about steamers being cancelled. Though he had had plans to stay in Sicily for two more weeks, “all Americans were advised to depart as soon as they could secure passage.” Fortunately he had some gold currency and persuaded the third bank he visited to honor a letter of credit and got passage on an emigrant steamship hastily converted to accommodate refugees.

Accommodations were reportedly rough and crowded. After a glimpse of two torpedo boats at Gibraltar, no vessels of any description were seen during the crossing. “The ship was accorded a rousing welcome upon its arrival in New York.”³

Julia Holland, was reportedly enjoying a remarkable trip in Europe, including an audience with the pope, while traveling with a group of teachers. But suddenly she had to cancel much of her trip. She was in Stresa, Italy, when warned to get into Switzerland at once. Her party got on a special train and watched as people anxiously waiting at other stations were passed by. There was great distress everywhere among people unable to get trains or ships. In Naples, her party fortunately secured passage, like Baldwin in a converted emigrant ship whose accommodations were taxed to the utmost.⁴

Fleeing to Paris: Unitarian minister Joel Metcalf, his wife, and seven other local people had sailed for Europe in June and expected to stay until September. They were in Switzerland when they heard about Archduke Ferdinand’s assassination and abandoned their plans to go into Germany. Instead they left for Paris.



The train station in Paris was mobbed with immense crowds seeking to leave the city while equally large numbers were arriving. With nearby hotels closed, they spent the first night in the street. Later Metcalf found a hotel willing to take the group, but since there was little staff due to men enlisting they had to attend to their own needs. When the hotel closed, they had to find other accommodations while waiting for the paperwork and a train to leave. The station where they first hoped to catch a train to the coast was closed.

The city, he reported, was paralyzed; there were no cabs or other conveyances. The streets were full of marching soldiers and cattle being taken to the front. Shops were closed. Rioting occurred overnight. It was almost impossible to get money.

He described the great difficulty people were having getting the necessary passports and permissions to leave. The American embassy was besieged. Thousands of people waited in line

to get a number for the order in which they would get attention, and it was said that thousands were unable to get numbers.

After a week in Paris, the Metcalf party managed to get to Boulogne, after a 12-hour trip which ordinarily took three hours. From Boulogne they got to England. There they got passage to sail home while many other Americans were still stuck in Paris and other places, desperate to leave.⁵

After the war, it was estimated that about 100,000 Americans were marooned in Europe at the beginning of the war. The American government sent a special shipment of \$7.5M in gold so its citizens stranded in Europe could have an acceptable form of money.

With all the fears and the difficulties for Americans in Europe in 1914, it was very good news indeed when Winchester residents read that the friends and neighbors who had been abroad and had “interesting adventures,” as *The Winchester Star* understated the events in one headline, arrived back safely.

Metcalf Party Had Many Interesting Adventures in Paris.

Probably the greatest interest of Winchester people in their fellow-countrymen who were caught in Europe when the war broke out was centered in the fortunes of the Metcalf Party of sixteen travelers. This party contained a number of well known residents of the town and was under the guidance of Rev. Joel H. Metcalf, minister of the Unitarian Church. For several years he has been spending his summers abroad, more recently taking with him parties desirous of viewing the beauties and seeing the sights of European countries.

The party which went with him to Europe this year included the following Winchester people in addition to Mr. Metcalf and his wife: Mr. and Mrs. George W. Blanchard, Miss Marjorie Cutting, Miss Jennie L. Wood, Miss Laura B. Tolman, Miss Grace Stone and Mrs. Herbert L. Larrabee. Through their wide acquaintance about town the fortunes of these travelers have been eagerly and interestedly followed from the declaration of war up to their return last week Thursday.

VOLUNTEERS

In 1915, the war was being waged in France and Belgium. Nevertheless, although the United States was not yet in it, young men who had lived in Winchester joined up.

The first “Winchester Boy Killed at Front,” as headlined in *The Winchester Star*, was Sidney John Edwards (1878-1915). His family, natives of England, settled in Winchester in the late 1880s. Leaving his parents in Winchester, Sidney moved to Canada about 1906. When the opportunity to enlist opened there, Sidney joined the British forces and was part of the first Canadian contingent to go to Europe. He served in France and Belgium. On May 20, he was killed by a bursting shell near Festubert and was buried at the Vimy Ridge Cemetery, leaving his bereaved parents to share the news with Winchester friends and former classmates.



The White Block, home of Fanny Bowser's Dry Goods store

Another former resident who joined up in Canada was George R. McCord who had arrived in Winchester about 1901 to be manager of the Western Union company and an assistant ticket agent for the railroad. Several family members also lived in Winchester, including his aunt Fanny Bowser who

kept a dry goods store in the White Block on Mt. Vernon Street. McCord, who studied at Harvard, left Winchester to practice law in New Brunswick, where he enlisted. Awarded the D.S.O., McCord was invalided out in 1917 and died suddenly early in 1919. He was reportedly “well remembered in Winchester.”

The most famous outfit of American men fighting for France before 1917 was the Lafayette Escadrille. They were aviators, part of a new kind of war who became a new sort of celebrity and romantic hero with their “air of reckless bravado.”

No one from Winchester belonged to the Lafayette Escadrille; however, one of the unit’s founders was Norman Prince, who was joined in the outfit by his brother Fred. These brothers were the sons of Frederick H. Prince, who was born in Winchester, was one of the original members of the Myopia Club for whom Myopia Hill is named, and was the son of Frederick O. Prince who master-minded the naming of the town for William Winchester, was the town’s first representative, and had a school named for him. When the Town learned that Norman Prince was killed while flying in 1916, the Superintendent of Schools sent a letter of sympathy to his father. In return, a year later, Frederick Prince sent the schools \$1,000 to create a fund in his son’s name. That fund still exists.



PREPAREDNESS



As the war progressed in Europe, Americans still preferred to be neutral. However, the concept of Preparedness, of being ready in case of war, swept over the country. Camps were organized which provided boys with training.

Hereabouts, many young men could train by joining the State Militia or National Guard. Winchester men were part of Company G of the 5th Massachusetts Regiment Company, headquartered in Woburn.

Twenty-seven Winchester men got their first war experience in 1916, during the Mexican Border War, joining about 100,000 state militia men sent to reinforce Army garrisons at the border. Most of the Winchester men were given guard and patrol duties in Texas, and it was all pretty quiet for the 4 months they were down there. But they were welcomed home with a parade, dinner, and ball in Woburn.

A year later, when the country was at war, the National Guardsmen were among the first called to action, and all but four from Winchester who went to Texas then went to France, where conditions were very much different.

Preparedness was an idea people in both the peace and war camps could get behind, since it was preparedness for maintaining peace as well as for defense and possible war. A group of W women formed a branch of the state Special Aid Society for American Preparedness, whose aim was to assist with those afflicted in crises. Winchester men formed two groups in 1916, a businessman's military training class and a rifle club.

Early in 1917, it became clearer that war was coming. In Jan., Germany sent a message to Wilson that warfare in the ocean would be unrestricted. In Feb, Wilson severed ties with Germany. In March the news broke about the Zimmerman telegram which proposed an alliance between Germany and Mexico.

In March also, Winchester Town Meeting did something extraordinary, because as a general rule TM only takes up articles on town business. But this time, it voted a resolution: commending the President for his uncompromising stand in severing diplomatic relations [w/G], relying on him to protect American citizens and ships, and concluding that, "while they desire peace, they desire peace only with honor and call upon the President to regain at this time the honor of the American people."

A later motion to send another resolve urging that "no provocation short of actual invasion of American territory be considered sufficient cause for a declaration or war, without a previous referendum to the citizens of the nation" was soundly defeated.

In April, the country was in the war.

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of earlier articles by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Dec. 29, 2014 and Dec. 30, 2015. This revision supersedes all previous articles. The author's grandmother was an American refugee in 1914, albeit from another community.

² *The Winchester Star*, Oct. 2, 1914.

³ *The Winchester Star*, Sept. 4, 1914.

⁴ *The Winchester Star*, Sept. 4, 1914.

⁵ *The Winchester Star*, Sept. 11, 1914.