



Memories of the Great War: An Analysis of Jackson Purchase Veterans' Oral Histories of WWI

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ABSTRACT

The First World War affected the lives of millions, creating collective memories of hardships, uncertainty, political tension, and animosity toward foreign enemies. In the United States, World War I was a turning point in the nation's growth and development, but on a smaller scale it was a critical historical moment in the individual lives of the veterans who served. This research project will showcase the experiences of the Jackson Purchase's WWI veterans with an emphasis on their perceptions during the war, their reasons for enlisting, the countless once-in-a-lifetime experiences they had along the way, the hardships they faced, and the remarkable clarity of their memory years after the fact. Regardless of their race, religious beliefs, or hometowns, the Purchase's WWI veterans were linked through their strong sense of duty, love for their families, and attachment to their homes. The project is primarily based on the oral history collections of Murray State's Pogue Special Collections Library, notably the Jackson Purchase Oral History Project's interviews, conducted in the late 1970s and 1980s, of octogenarian WWI veterans. Their memories of the war and accounts of life in the Purchase Area in the early 20th century are strikingly clear and well-delivered considering the interviewees' advanced age. The remarkable uniqueness of Pogue Library's WWI oral history collection served as the inspiration for this project.

WHY THEY FOUGHT

Attitudes on the war varied among veterans, but many of those interviewed expressed the popular sentiment of the day: they were driven to fight by a sense of duty and love for their country. Soldiers like Dewey Williams, from Hazel, KY, felt obligated not just to their country, but to their families as well. Williams joined the war effort at 17.

Fritz Metzger: "I felt all right. I thought it was my duty to fight for my country."

Dewey Williams: "I was 17 years old... I volunteered, enlisted, but I lacked a little bit of being 18 years old. I didn't know I had to be 18 to get in the service... I went to the recruiting office... and talked to the boss man there... He said, "If you really want to go to service, and your dad is willing now for you to go, I'll drop him a card and we'll get it back tomorrow. If he signs the card that he is willing, then I can take you right in."
Interviewer: "What made you decide you wanted to go in?"
Mr. Williams: "They were just calling in for volunteers to fight because of the war... I've got two brothers a year older than I am, and they were both married, living with their wives, and then I had a younger brother, under me, but wouldn't be old enough for the draft for a long time. I decided I was the only one that will kindly fit the picture... I got every month of that war but one."

Others were drafted or felt pressured to join, like Clell Cecil Olds, from Paris, TN, and Carl Milam, from South Fulton, TN. In Milam's case, he served only because he was drafted and, being 37 years old at the time, was already settled into his career.

Clell Cecil Olds: "Well, you know that there wasn't anybody who had enjoyed going to the army, but it was a proposition you had to or else..."

Carl Milam: "Well, I was drafted... My mother died early, 47 and I stayed with my daddy on the farm and he had 153 acres of land at that time... I said my daddy's by himself, I'm going to stay with him as long as I can."
Interviewer: "Well, when you heard about the war, what was your impressions about the war... did you think that it was your duty to go and fight even though you didn't want to, or you couldn't?"
Mr. Milam: "No. I didn't want to go. I had a career at that time and my daddy was waiting on me pretty well. Getting me medicine and everything that I needed."

People like Harry Hammond, from Paducah, KY, were driven by their sense of wanderlust. They saw the war effort as a chance to see the world.

Harry Hammond: "So I told him... I said, 'Chief listen, that's the only chance I will ever have of seeing the other side if I can get over there.' He said, 'Well, by God I'm going to see that you get over there.' He said, 'It's up to you.' I said, 'Well, I want to go to the other side.' I went on and I went to Hampton Road, Virginia."
Interviewer: "I know what you thought about the war in Europe. You didn't want to fight but did you feel real patriotic? Did you feel like it was your duty to—?"
Mr. Hammond: "Well, I think it's everybody did... I wanted to go someplace, I didn't want to kill nobody. That's another [reason] I took to the Navy."

TRAINING DAYS

Troops from the Jackson Purchase were trained in various camps stateside before crossing over, but the majority were sent to Camp Zachary Taylor in Louisville alongside soldiers from across the Midwest. Of the veterans interviewed for the project, most were either trained or discharged at the camp. Camp life brought rigorous training and, later, exposure to the Influenza Pandemic of 1918.

Hugh Melugin: "[Camp Taylor] housed the 159th Depot Brigade which inducted men into the service, and men from all over Kentucky and part of Illinois and Ohio. They prepared and gave them the shots and prepared them for any kind of future service, overseas and what have you. They were transferred out usually within three weeks from the time they got in. A few, of course, were left there to carry on the work at Camp Taylor."

Harry Hammond: "[Great Lakes, Illinois,] is where I done my trainings... I went to school every other day while I was up there you see... For about four months, then I went from that to Hampton Roads, VA. Then from Hampton Roads, I went on their old battleship Iowa... Then this old battleship is a big old thing. 1600 sailors on it besides the officers. Boy, that's a town."
Interviewer: "That's the Iowa?"
Mr. Hammond: "Yes. One battleship had 1600 sailors on it besides that because they was training them besides officers."



Fig 1. Harry Hammond trained aboard the USS Iowa at Hampton Roads, Virginia, before crossing the Atlantic. The Iowa saw combat in 1897 during the Spanish-American war, but after the ship became obsolete it served as a Naval Academy training vessel. First from 1908 to 1910, and again from 1917 to 1919.



Fig 2. Clell Cecil Olds, who served as a Pioneer with the 6th Infantry Division, Headquarters Company, was wounded by shrapnel in the Argonne Forest (depicted below). He was awarded the Purple Heart in 1981 or '82.

LIFE IN THE "GREAT WAR"

The Purchase Region's veterans of the "Great War" experienced a great deal in a very short time. Most troops sent from the region were farmers who had likely never seen the ocean, let alone gone to another country. Of the around 84,000 Kentuckians who served, over 2,400 didn't return home. One of the most harrowing parts of a soldier's overseas tour was "crossing over" the Atlantic on a transport ship. Transport convoys were constantly under threat of attack from German U-boats. The evasive maneuvers undertaken to protect convoys from submarines prolonged and intensified an already-difficult journey.

Dewey Williams: "We was 15 days and nights going across. We landed at Liverpool, England. So we went to Liverpool, England from Halifax, Canada. We were a couple of days on the water long because we detoured in that ocean around a certain place. You're not aware of the German submarine. See they were bad, they sunk your ship, and they get everything they could get. But we had them smaller ship, and he would circle all the way around over the territory. One round after another all the time. If there was a submarine, and the distance to where they'd pick it up. They'd pick up its noise, something like that."

Interviewer: "What would you do if there was a submarine close?"

Mr. Williams: "Of course, I was on that transport ship, couldn't do anything myself. None of the boys couldn't do nothing there. We had men with them big cannons and things that was on top of that ship, and they seen after that."

One of the low points of service in World War I was the rationing of food; None of the veterans who spent time on the front said they enjoyed what they were "served" on the front: hardtack, canned tomatoes, and corn beef hash were the norm. Camp food stateside, by contrast, was seen as much better to eat.

Clell Cecil Olds: "The [camp] food was always good, but the best place I ever ate in the Army was down at Chickamauga Park. We had a kitchen that fed 350 people and we had the best eating I've ever had at home or any other place."

Interviewer: "That sounds good."

Mr. Olds: "That was really good, but overseas, you didn't fair like that-"

Fritz Metzger: "Our [camp] meals were good. 'Course I was in the army a whole lot on the front. We had canned tomatoes and hardtack."

Connie Mills: "Oh, my goodness. I can tell you a lot of stuff that you wouldn't want... old hard tack biscuits, corned beef hash was in boxes, in great big cans, paper cans. We cut that open, had no coffee."

In his interview in 1985, the 91-year-old Clell Olds gave a vivid account of his service with the Pioneer platoon of the 6th Infantry Division. Though he, like all the project's interviewees, had reached an advanced age, his account of the bulk of his military service was just as clear as it would have been in 1919. Olds' friend, Shepherd, was gassed at the same time Olds was struck with artillery shrapnel in the Argonne Forest. They recovered together in the field hospital.

Mr. Olds: "All at once, there was a big shell. It was a pretty good size. It fell right back behind us. A piece of that shell knocked me up off the ground and out in the road. I was sitting on my pack and I went clean out in the road. While we were setting up, now you talk about gas. Men were coming back from the front lines... Some of those fellas had been in that gas and it was pitiful to see that sight. The men were vomiting and it would be just the blackest stuff you have ever looked at in your life. They were just stumbling along, a lot of them. When I got hit, the shells was falling all over this place... I said, 'Shep, what do I look like?' He said, 'Oh, that's not much...' I saw Shepherd years later over at Knoxville. He said, 'You know when you asked me about that place on your shoulder?' He said, 'That was the worst thing I ever looked at!'"

As the war wore on, many of the veterans interviewed had positive interactions with French troops and civilians, remembering them fondly. A few even kept the French language skills they had picked up decades earlier at the front. Interactions with Germans were rare, but showed the veterans had a great deal of empathy and compassion, especially for German Prisoners of War: Harry Hammond, as a fireman first class on the USS Cacique, reflected on his experience watching German POWs unload bombs, ammunition, and mines that would later be used to kill their own countrymen. After the war ended, Fritz Metzger lived with German townspeople as part of an occupying force. His account showed the humanity and kindness of those he had considered enemies.

Carl Milam: "French people, I liked them. They seemed very nice. Because they said we were there to help them and they would help us. That's right. Otherwise, the nicer you are, they'll soon learn. The nicer you are, the nicer they'll be to you."

Mr. Olds: "Some way, some of the boys captured a German soldier... They came back with that fellow. I felt sorry for him. They took everything in the world he had on him, away from him. Except his clothes..."

Harry Hammond: "[The German POWs] unloaded that same thing that was taken around to kill them, they don't know. That's pretty bad... that's pretty tough you know it? That's pretty tough for you to unload something that [they're] going to kill your own people with."

Mr. Metzger: "After the war was over, I stayed in Germany. Of course, we had our own place where the meals were served, American, but we slept in the German houses. They're real nice too... The German lady would come in every night and see if we was covered up."

THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

When African-American veterans from the Jackson Purchase served in World War I, the U.S. Military was segregated. It would remain segregated until after the Second World War had ended. Racism within the military also led to "race riots" and other violence against African-Americans, as Reverend William Davis describes. Regardless, African-American soldiers had the same willingness to fight and die for their country as their white counterparts. Many Kentuckians served in all-black units like the "Harlem Hellfighters," while others, like Rev. Davis, were embedded into French units that didn't have the same racial exclusion policies as American ones. In Europe, African-American soldiers experienced a non-segregated society willing to include them. When they came home to Kentucky, they returned to a state scarred by lynching, the Jim Crow laws, and institutional racism.

Rev. William Davis: "The United States didn't want [black soldiers] to fight, they wanted us to be stevedores. The French, I want to make this clear. I hope I can because we were treated wrongly. The French Army, the French commanders, and the French parliament, their self, said, 'They come over here to fight, and they're going to fight.' They didn't let us be a stevedores. They signed us with the French Army. I had all French equipment. I had a French map. I didn't have a United States Map. I had a French rifle. All my equipment was French. We had to stay over there until we returned back to the United States before we can come back here. That is true, and I want everybody to know that because that little misery that they done to us."

Interviewer: "Now, can you tell us any kind of incident that happened at Camp Merritt in New Jersey?"

Rev. Davis: "New Jersey, I was ordered down to the officer's office. The race riots started because the black boys went into the canteen that was there, which everyone told you was supposed to go... But the white boys didn't want me in there."

Interviewer: "What happened?"

Rev. Davis: "And they started to fight. They began to fight with rocks, sticks and everything. They called out to stop the fight, the national guards, which was all white. White all of them, national guards. Then when they called us out, instead of waiting for the command to fire, there was one-- I remember his hair. His hair was red. I called him a red-headed man, and he fired. Made one shot, and he killed a boy in the barracks. Innocent boy that didn't know anything about the fight. Killed a boy in the barracks. Then they got together and sent off a call and kept some of them there to answer trial about this. But they sent me on over."

Leslie White: "I wanted to get into the Navy, like I said, sail to China and Germany, everywhere I could get... but they didn't have colored folk in the Navy."

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