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Not all wore helmets

Preserving the work of women in the 'Great War'

By April Karlene Anderson-Zorn

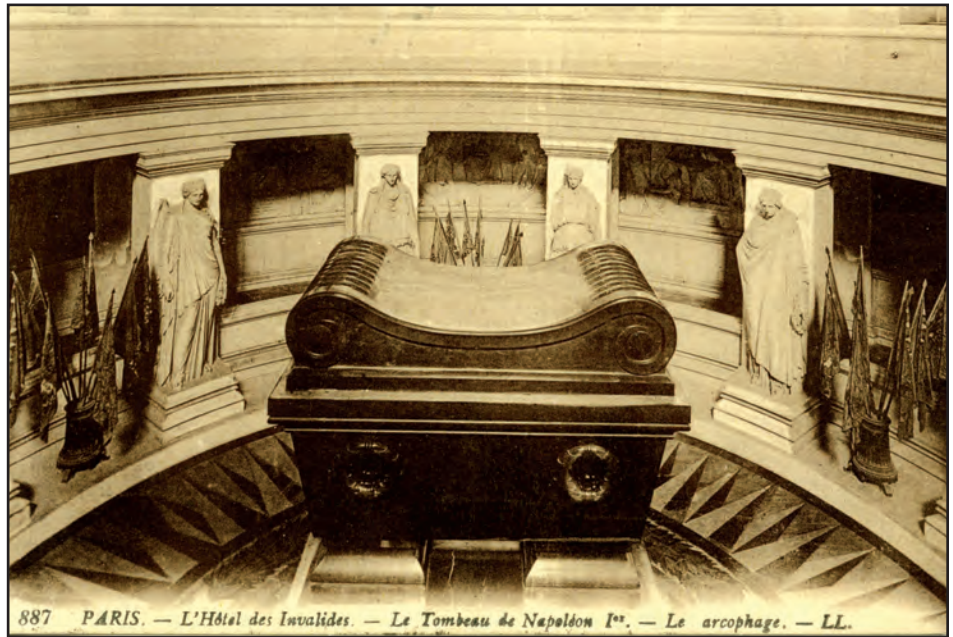
The First World War asked a lot of American universities.

Supplies, goods, and services were all created, collected, and contributed by community groups who came together to help support the many men and women who left their college studies to fight in the war. Some institutions created rosters of their students, faculty, and alumni who joined a military branch or welfare organization.

In the central Illinois community of Normal, Illinois State Normal University (ISNU), this documentation went much further and included records unlike any created by American universities during the war. Curated by the university's first librarian, Angeline Vernon Milner, the World War I Service Collection documented the service of the students, faculty, and alumni who served during the Great War. Once identified and contacted by Milner, service members were asked to fill out surveys that detailed their military travel, service, engagements, and injuries. Milner corresponded with deployed students and alumni, sent copies of the university's yearbook and newspaper and, in return, received detailed letters of life in service. Of the approximately 806 files created by Milner of ISNU's military alumni, only 685 of those files remain. However, these service files—containing newspaper clippings, correspondence, photographs, postcards, and other wartime ephemera—are not only a precious resource of history for genealogists and historians, but the entire Illinois State University community.

Documenting history

During America's involvement in the Great War, members of the (ISNU) community signed up for war service. The community included students who were enrolled at the university, current and former faculty members, alumni, and former students who had only taken classes but did not graduate



Illinois State University's World War I Service Collection includes all sorts of gems, including this postcard of Napoleon's tomb received by ISNU Librarian Angeline Vernon Milner from former student Elizabeth Taylor Cleveland, who served as a nurse in Europe.

All images courtesy of the Dr. Jo Ann Rayfield Archives at Illinois State University.

from ISNU. Men generally served either in the Army or Navy and learned new skills such as flying, avionics, communications, weather reporting, and even fire suppression. Women also participated in war service by serving in the Army Nurse Corps, the American Red Cross, or as volunteers at YMCA and YWCA canteens (relief centers).

As participation in the war increased, ISNU president David Felmley called upon seven faculty members to create the War Services Committee. The committee's charge had five goals that included communicating news to ISNU service members and their families through the student newspaper, *The Vidette*, documenting the war service of ISNU's men and women, and obtaining and maintaining a service flag. First used in World War I, a service flag is a vertically hung rectangular banner with a red border and white field. A blue star on a banner signified one person serving in the military while one gold star signified a person who died during military opera-

tions. Used primarily by families at their private homes, organizations also adopted service flags to indicate their institutional member's service. In addition to the primary service flag for the university, there were four other service flags created and maintained at ISNU. Those flags represented members of University High School, the Wrightonian Society (a university literary society), the Commercial department (Manual Arts), and the Library.

Among the committee members was Angeline Vernon Milner, the university's first librarian. Milner's primary task was "Arranging the War Roster and articles connected with it, in a permanent file for consultation and preservation." Milner's task was enormous; it was her responsibility to identify and document all past and present ISNU men and women who were serving in the war. The self-trained librarian who got her start in the university's museum cataloging specimens saw this task as an opportunity not to simply create a list of war students, but

to document every aspect of their service. With the help of her student, Kenneth Pringle, Milner began the years-long task of identifying students and their point of contact, clipping news articles from local papers and writing to ask for their service information. In that request, Milner sent her survey and asked the student to include a photograph of themselves in uniform, “for documentary purposes.”

The surveys Milner sent to service members were typically two pages in length and included over a dozen informational fields. Though the format changed during Milner’s three years of work, the premise of the survey was simple: trace the service member’s movement during their service, identify service awards (then called chevrons), and document their encampments, engagements, and subsequent war injuries. In the sections asking for injury information, the respondent would fill out when the injury happened, approximately where it took place, what the injury was, and the hospital where they were treated. Many surveys include embarkation and debarkation ports, the ships the service member traveled on, and sometimes included approximate travel dates. Surveys also asked the respondent to identify their current residence, dates of attendance at ISNU, and their next of kin. The latter information proved helpful to Milner and Pringle who, on many occasions, corresponded with the families of the service member when they were in an area where it was difficult to send and receive mail. In all, over 80 percent of the current war roster collection contains a completed survey.

As Milner worked to build the collection, she offered to send those in service copies of the university yearbook, *The Index*, and the student newspaper. Many took her up on the offer and in return began a kind of “pen pal” relationship with the librarian. Already known around campus as “Aunt Ange” for her quick wit and helpful demeanor, Milner was more than happy to continue her correspondence. Given the size of the roster and her willingness to write, Milner corresponded with dozens of recipients at any given time. With candor and open-

ness, many wrote to Milner about the horrors they witnessed in the world’s first mechanized war. Often, writers would express their loneliness and describe, unknown to them, bouts of depression. For many, a letter from Milner meant a break from the war and news from home. Milner also corresponded with family and friends of those serving, often receiving news of the service member first before sending this information to local papers. In these letters, family members often expressed their worry over the safety of their loved ones. They also often thanked Milner for her commitment to their service member and her work in keeping them connected to the home front.

By the time she finished her collection, Milner had sent out over 1,000 information requests and created 806 individual files on ISNU students who participated in the Great War. While some files were sparse—only a few news clippings and an index card in some—many files contained pages of correspondence, a completed survey, and a photograph of the student in uniform. In the following decades, a number of these files were lost to environmental hazards or misfiling. However, many of the files were saved, and the collection currently contains 685 roster files from Milner’s original work.

At the announcement of the armistice on November 11, 1918, the university burst with excitement as faculty, staff, and students “celebrated by the ringing of the great bell” from the bell tower of the campus’s first building, Old Main. Faculty held special exercises in Capen Auditorium, and the university marched in celebration with other organizations in what was called the Victory March of Bloomington. Though the war had ended, the work of bringing thousands of service members home had only just begun.

At ISNU, the university held several memorial services including a 1919 commencement week celebration dubbed “Home Coming.” Milner completed her war service work by tabulating statistics using the data collected from her surveys. There were an estimated 705 Army, Navy, and Marine

servicemen—not counting the university president who was “automatically commissioned Colonel in Illinois National Guards.” There were 101 volunteers and medical workers bringing the total university service members in the war to 806. There were 380 officers, 150 commissioned and 230 non-commissioned, or petty, officers. Milner also counted women who served, including seven nurses embedded with the American Expeditionary Force in France, seven nurses who served in military hospitals in the United States, two women who served as yeomen, and one nurse who had the unfortunate luck to be stationed in Siberia. In all, Milner reported 27 women who were in service during World War I.

Milner’s work to document the ISNU men and women of World War I is unique in its collection of data and stories from all aspects of the war front. The surviving collection is a rare and valuable resource for genealogists and historians alike. It should be of no surprise that a woman known for her attention to detail would create a collection that has not only withstood the test of time but continues to offer a wealth of information to students well into the twenty-first century. Thanks to Milner, the war service stories of three ISNU women can be told to a new audience.

Ellen C. Babbitt

Ellen C. Babbitt was a student at Illinois State Normal University from 1890 to 1892, and again from 1895 to 1896. Like many of her peers, Babbitt likely could not afford full tuition and took classes as finances allowed. This may explain the gap in her education and why she appears to have never graduated from the university. Despite this, Babbitt’s education at ISNU proved invaluable during her war service and played a significant role in her later career.

In 1918, Babbitt joined the Red Cross and traveled overseas to a war-torn France. While there, Babbitt participated in health seminars geared toward teaching at-risk communities affected by the war. In a dictated letter by Babbitt to Milner, she described



Ellen C. Babbitt attended Illinois State Normal University from 1890 to 1892, and again from 1895 to 1896. She served in the Red Cross in Europe during the "Great War."

how the Red Cross became involved in the war effort. The Red Cross discovered early in the war that due to the lack of male physicians who were already serving in the war, many communities were without medical care. There was a need of not only doctors and nurses, but in teaching refugees how to care for themselves in areas that were destroyed by warfare. In her war work, Babbitt taught refugees how to bathe properly, be sanitary, and prepare safe meals. Babbitt mainly focused on the well-being of children affected by the war and how mothers could care for their children in war-torn areas. One of Babbitt's first exhibitions took place in Lyons, France and was one of the most extensive exhibits put on by the Red Cross. In a letter to Milner, Babbitt wrote to her former librarian, "170,000 people saw the exhibition in a fortnight in Lyons. Then the exhibition went to Marseilles where I had charge of it." Babbitt loved her work and explained to Milner that teaching "mothers how to keep their children well" was something she was proud to do.

Babbitt also witnessed the coming end of the Great War. From her hotel

in Paris, France, Babbitt wrote: "This is the greatest day—if they are really sincere! But what a strange thing it is to be writing to you from here—even though it be but to rejoice in the hope that this is the beginning of the end of the business which brought even me."

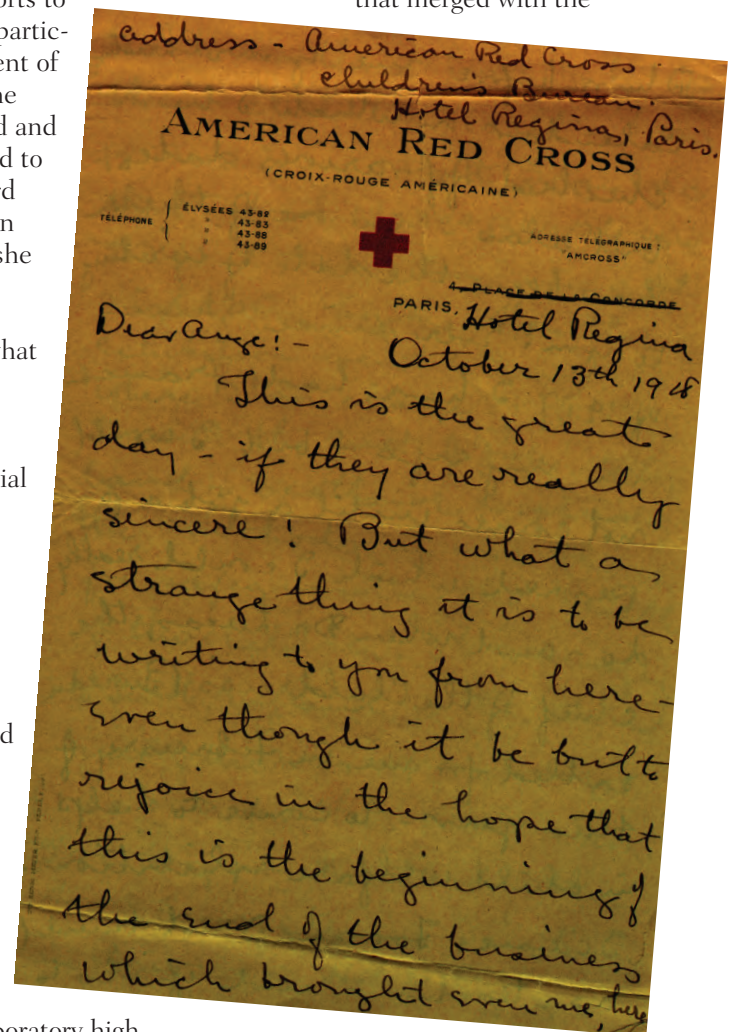
When the end of the war came, Babbitt devoted her efforts to child welfare. She also participated in the development of child health plans for the governments of England and France. Babbitt returned to the United States aboard the steamer *Northwest* in May 1919, noting that she was one of "six women among 1000 soldiers." Though it is not clear what organization Babbitt worked for in her later years, Milner wrote in Babbitt's file, "Her special interest of late years is welfare work for children." Babbitt died on February 23, 1950, at the age of 78 at the Philadelphia Home for the Incurables. Though she never married or had children of her own, Babbitt changed the lives of thousands around the world.

Elizabeth Taylor Cleveland

Elizabeth was a student of the ISNU laboratory high school, now known as University High School, and graduated in 1898. After graduation, Cleveland trained as a nurse and later took a position as superintendent of the Chicago Contagious Hospital. Not long after the war began, Cleveland volunteered for service and was attached to Base Hospital No. 12, which originated at Northwestern University Medical Department. When the unit mobilized on May 1, 1917, Cleveland traveled to New York and crossed the Atlantic aboard *The Mongolia* to England. However, two days into the journey, two nurses were killed by shell fragments from a deck gun. The *Mongolia* returned to New

York to deliver the nurses' bodies before heading back to Europe.

Once in England, Cleveland traveled to Dannes-Camiers, France to work in the British Expeditionary Force base hospital. Many nurses in her unit were from the Illinois Training School for Nurses, the Chicago area school that merged with the



Here's the first page of an Ellen Babbitt letter, October 13, 1918, addressed to ISNU Librarian Angeline Vernon Milner.

University of Chicago in 1929. Once at the hospital, Cleveland and her fellow nurses received thousands of soldiers, many with bullet and artillery shrapnel wounds as well as gas poisoning. Placed near the front lines, doctors and nurses could often hear the battle raging as the wounded filled their wards. In the twenty-two months Base Hospital No. 12 was open, the camp treated upwards of 60,000 people.

Despite being witness to the brutal-

ities of World War I, Cleveland kept an upbeat demeanor when writing home. In a postcard dated February 12, 1918, and addressed to Milner, Cleveland thanked the librarian for sending her a personal letter and a copy of *The Vidette*. With the image of Napoleon's tomb on the front of the postcard, Cleveland wrote, "we are spending our vacation in Paris, and it is wonderful." She also had fun with readers of *The Vidette* describing life with British nurses, and the fun in determining what part of the "States" the American soldiers were from based on their accent. Cleveland also talked about the hospital staff's admiration for tea:

It is nearly time for tea.
Everything English stops
for tea, the men declare,
and it is their favorite story,
that if they were going 'over
the top,' and it was time for
tea, they waited for it.
Some of us however have a
shocking bad habit of
making coffee in our rooms.

American evacuation hospitals formed in occupied Germany as the war closed. Cleveland transferred to Evacuation Hospital #26 in Neuenahr, Germany where instead of tents, she was now in a 1,000-bed hotel. The hospital primarily served the 42nd Division and had a convalescent section to help those still recovering from the war.

After the war, Cleveland traveled back to Chicago and lived with her sister, Mary. She later became a nurse at the Chicago City Health Department and married Walter M. Morf. When she died on April 15, 1931 at the age of 51, friends, family, and her fellow American Legion post members mourned her and her tireless work as a nurse on the battlefield.

Ada Adcock

Originally from Stockton, California, Ada Adcock was a student in the laboratory high school before completing a term of coursework at ISNU. Adcock returned home to Stockton until she enlisted in war service in January 1918. After seven



Ada Adcock was one of several former ISNU laboratory high school students who served overseas during the war.

months at Camp Cody in New Mexico, Adcock was placed into Unit 51 and sent overseas to the front lines.

Unit 51 served at an American Expeditionary Force hospital in Toul, France. These hospitals were placed near the front lines so that soldiers who were injured could be immediately brought in for treatment. Adcock and her unit treated men from the Battle of Saint Mihiel, September 12-15, 1918, a precursor to the Meuse-Argonne Offensive that began just a few days later. Adcock served at the hospital for approximately six months before sailing for New York on the SS *Caronia*.

This is the first page of a questionnaire ISNU Librarian Angeline Vernon Milner sent to Ada Adcock. These completed forms offer a wealth of information on former ISNU students and their many and varied experiences during World War I.

After Adcock was discharged from demobilization headquarters in April 1919, she began her journey back to Stockton, California. During her travels, Adcock stopped in her old college town of Normal, Illinois and visited the homes of friends. Those who had the chance to chat with Adcock during her visit noted, "Those who have met Miss Adcock during this time have enjoyed the bits of experience which she has related, and have a new appreciation of the service rendered overseas by our women." Adcock, who earned one silver chevron (denoting six months of stateside service) and one gold chevron (denoting six months of service in an active war zone), was later asked about her thoughts on the men who served in the Great War. In the 1919 ISNU yearbook, *The Index*, Adcock said:

The American soldier has demonstrated that he can stand any sort of discomfort and suffering and still be game. The one desire of every wounded man was to get back to his company and into the fray. His patience and courage were unflinching. Only when he was idle did he grumble. The only compensation

Service Questionnaire
The Illinois State Normal University is making a record of all men and women students who were in Service during the World War. Will you please fill out this questionnaire and return to us soon so that our file may be complete.

Military Yes Record Naval

Name Adcock Ada
Surname 18538 Serial No. Ada Middle Name Ada First Name

County Spackman
Post Office Spackman

Name of Father or next of kin Mr. Allen Linn. Jerry. Mont.
Date of first entrance I. S. N. U. 1898
Date of last entrance I. S. N. U. 1900

Enlisted Nov 1917 Drafted Jan 1918
Accepted for Enlistment Spackman, Ill. Place Spackman, Ill. Date Jan 1918

Unit assigned to Camp Cody Place Camp Cody Date Jan 1918


Organization	Rank	Date	Location
Army Nurse Corps	Reserve Nurse	Jan 1918	Camp Cody, Deming, N. Mex.
Base Hospital Unit # 51		Apr 4 - 1918	Deming, N. Mex.
A.E.F. Evacuation Hosp.		Apr 24 - 1918	New York
Demobilization Hdqrs.		Sept 24 - 1918	Toul, France
	Arrived	Mar 6 - 1919	New York

for the terrible suffering war entails is for the soldier to know that his country is worth the sacrifice.

After she returned to California, it is unclear what became of Adcock. However, if she was like her ISNU

brethren, it is entirely possible Adcock continued her nursing work.

For many women serving in World War I, the experience was life-changing. For Babbitt, her war service enabled her to continue working in health education for women and children. Cleveland returned home and

found her calling at the county health department. All three women changed the lives of thousands during the war. Were it not for the work of Illinois State Normal University's first librarian, Angeline Vernon Milner, the stories of Ellen C. Babbitt, Elizabeth Taylor Cleveland, and Ada Adcock would never have been told. 

For further reading

A University Goes to War, World War I Women: <http://www.idaillinois.org/ui/custom/default/collection/default/resources/custompages/bin/edi.php?collection=isu&startrec=1>

The Vidette Digital Archive: <https://videttearchive.ilstu.edu/>

Finding Aid for the World War I Illinois State Normal University Military and Community Service Records, 1917-1919: <https://archivefindings.library.illinoisstate.edu/?p=collections/findingaid&id=73&q=>

Northwestern Remembers the First World War: <https://sites.northwestern.edu/ww1/hospital/>

April Karlene Anderson-Zorn is the university archivist for Illinois State University. Anderson-Zorn earned master's degrees in library and information science from Florida State University and history from the University of Central Florida. She is a certified archivist through the Academy of Certified Archivists and holds a Digital Archives Specialist Certificate through the Society of American Archivists.

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