

The Great War in Westfield, Illinois

Ryan M. D’Arcy

The sleepy town of Westfield, situated in Clark County in central Illinois, was not a town one would expect to be touched by war; however the inhabitants of Westfield participated in World War I. Some of the inhabitants served as soldiers in the war, with two giving their lives, while many others, often forgotten, served on the home front trying to ensure that the soldiers received everything they needed to win the war.

It will be easiest to understand the actions of the people of not only Westfield, but of all of Clark County if we look at what happened to the 130th Infantry, made up of soldiers from central Illinois. While the 130th was not the only regiment that soldiers from central Illinois, or even Clark County, served in, it is the one I found most greatly represented in Westfield. However, at the beginning of World War I, the 130th did not exist.

The United States declared war on Germany on April 4, 1917. In May 1917, the 4th Infantry of the Illinois National Guard assisted tornado victims in Mattoon, Illinois and shortly after that was sent to aid in riot control in East St. Louis. On July 25th, the 4th Infantry was mobilized at its home station in Casey, Illinois, the home station for Company A, the only home station in Clark County. In October, the regiment was ordered to Camp Logan where it became a part of the 33rd Division. The Fourth Infantry became the 130th Infantry, a part of the Sixty-fifth Infantry Brigade. After a couple more brief moves, the 130th boarded the steamship Agamemnon for Brest on May 16, 1918. They disembarked on May 26th and spent a short time back from the front before moving up to the British front. They arrived at Maigneville on June 1st and 2nd. They continued to train until July 17th when they first served within the reach of the German artillery.¹

The first real combat the 130th met as an independent fighting force was in the Meuse Argonne offensive, which began on September 26, 1918. On September 28th, the 130th moved to the front lines and remained there for over two weeks. When this period at the front was over, “Twenty-seven men were killed and nine officers and 135 men were wounded”. They were relieved on October 15th and relocated to another trench where they served until October 21st. At this location they “lost twenty-three men killed and three officers and sixty-six men wounded”. After a brief respite, the 130th was back in action again on October 25th at Rupt-en-Woevre. While in this position, Companies A (Clark County) and C attacked Chateau d’Aulnois which was being used as a headquarters by the Germans.²

Illinois in the World War provides an example of what going over the top was like for Companies A and C, though it seems to have been cleaned up and romanticized. It definitely does not provide an adequate picture of the gore and hardships these soldier endured:

The American artillery followed the prearranged schedule, and at 5:45 o’clock the infantry went over. Company C moved forward rapidly on the left, where obstacles were not numerous, but Company A, on the right, had to flounder through mud and wire. Not withstanding these difficulties, Company A reached the chateau on time

¹Eric Dorn Brose, *A History of the Great War: World War One and the International Crisis of the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 249; *Illinois in the World War: An Illustrated History of the Thirty-Third Division*, vol. 2, (Chicago: States Publication Society, 1921), 444-454.

² "1918 Timeline." *WorldWar-1.net*. Available from <http://www.worldwar-1.net/world-war-1-timelines/world-war-1-1918/world-war-1-1918-index.htm>. Internet; accessed 3 December 2009. and *Illinois*, 454-456.

and charged beside Company C against the many machine gun emplacements. The gunners were bombed or bayoneted until all resistance had been stamped out and the garrison overwhelmed. Prisoners were quickly lined up; arms, ammunition, and supplies were destroyed, and in fifteen minutes the attacking force was on its way back. One German officer and twenty-two men were delivered behind the American lines. They were forced to carry the eight Illinois men who had been wounded and the bodies of two who had been killed in the fight.³

The last major offense of the war for the 130th Infantry was an attack on Marcheville on November 10th, 1918, the day before the armistice was signed. The attack was successful early on thanks to the cover of fog, but quickly devolved into a bloodbath. The Americans took Marcheville, but were not able to hold it long because the Germans quickly counterattacked. The Americans, however, managed to maintain their position and, with the assistance of artillery, drove the Germans back. The late hour of this attack made it one of the last engagements of the war. *Illinois in the World War* does not, however, make it clear how many casualties the 130th suffered hours before the armistice, only vaguely stating, “American losses had been severe.” In consideration of what some of the fighting had been, the 130th Infantry ended the war remarkably intact. Their list of casualties numbered 25 officers and 640 soldiers from July 12th to November 11th.^{4,5}

The 130th finally returned to the United States on May 20th, 1919, where they visited Chicago and participated in a great parade and celebration before going to Camp Grant in Rockford. All of the men were discharged by May 31, 1919. The men served approximately two years from the first drafts to the end of the war.⁶

The official history represented in *Illinois in the Great War* does not present a good view of how individual soldiers felt about the war. For that, it is necessary to turn to letters from Herbert Huey, who served in Company A of the 125th Infantry. Huey, though somewhat linguistically challenged, presents a great insight into the hopes, fears, and realities of a soldier’s life. For instance, Huey stated, in a letter dated July 7, 1918, that he missed his family but that he was having a great time in the army. In his own words, he said “I am sure getting [sic] plenty to eat down here and I am having a good time we go to the show every night and prize fight.” However, this optimistic sounding letter was quickly followed by another, the first in a stream of letters asking his wife to write him. On July 15th he wrote, telling his wife Bess, “I have not got only one letter sence I bin down here I would like to get a letter or two you right and tell me all the news in town.” He also showed the wonder of a man coming from Marshall, Illinois, a sundown town, at seeing large numbers of blacks. He noted that “this is some town down here there is a lot of nigers down here.”⁷

It sounds as though Huey had a rough start to his term of service. In a letter on July 7th he stated that he was going to the doctor so he could “lucke at my lungs they are bad.” This was followed by an undated letter from Camp Taylor, Kentucky in which he repeated that his “lungs is [sic] bad” and added that “next Saturday we get out of corntine [quarantine].” Although it is difficult to tell from his bare description, it seems that Huey caught the “Spanish

³ *Illinois*, 457.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 158-161.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 463.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 466.

⁷ Herbert Huey, Unknown, to Bess Huey, Marshall, IL, 7 July 1918, transcript in the hand of unknown, Clark County Genealogical Library, Marshall, Illinois. and Herbert Huey, Unknown, to Bess Huey, Marshall, IL, 15 July 1918, transcript in the hand of unknown, Clark County Genealogical Library, Marshall, Illinois

Influenza”, the great pandemic that was in its early stages of ravaging the world. John Barry, throughout his book *The Great Influenza*, made the case that the highly overcrowded army camps were places where the influenza virus could spread and do the most harm.⁸

Huey’s mood seemed to grow bleaker the longer he was away from his family. He noted the great July heat at Camp Beauregard, Louisiana. He also asked that his wife write again soon because he was “some lomcen [lonely].” He also noted his wonderment at strange sights like “a creak that was about five miles long” in New Orleans, presumably the Mississippi River, further presenting his estrangement from his situation.⁹

Huey’s first description of combat was in a letter dated only “1918” and continued with his usual lack of punctuation. He described his situation:

I just got back from the lines and it [is] bad but the dutch [presumably Germans] are sure going back we went over the top several time and the dutch do run when they see us coming over but we got some of them I have got the bad feet so I can’t hardly walk on them but I go just the same.... I wish I was back home so I could get a good nigh sleep[.]¹⁰

His description of combat, and even more, trench life, creates a bleak picture. However, Huey ended this letter with a request for candy from home to help raise his spirits. As will be noted later, this is one of the many roles performed by the people back home. His description of life on the front apparently was enough that he did not want to mention his injuries until later. In a letter dated December 29, 1918 he said that two bullets struck him, one in his finger and the other in his foot.¹¹

Huey had another letter dated Thursday November 28, 1918, Thanksgiving Day. In this letter to his mother, he noted that he was separated from his company, but not how. This is another example of how the “official” version of the war glosses over some facts, including that some soldiers got separated from their companies. This separation, however, makes it curious that Huey should question why he had not been receiving mail from his wife. For example, he complained in his letter to his mother dated January 22, 1919 that “I got a letter from Bess it was mailed Dec 21 and I did get the 18 of Jan and that is all I have got since I have been over here.” This lack of mail was obviously having a negative effect on him. He noted his suspicions when he asked that his mother write him and tell him if Bess, his wife, and his children “are living at the same place or not she dont tell me noting [...] I dont think Bess thinks any thing of me any more but I would like to see them all any way.”¹²

Huey also described some of the difficulties he faced after the armistice. A letter he wrote in January 1919 stated that he was sleeping in a bed for the first time since he was in Europe.

⁸ Huey, 7 July 1918. and Herbert Huey, Camp Taylor, to Bess Huey, Marshall, IL, unknown date, transcript in the hand of unknown, Clark County Genealogical Library, Marshall, Illinois. and John M. Barry, *The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Deadliest Plague in History* (New York: Viking, 2004).

⁹ Herbert Huey, Camp Beauregard, to Bess Huey, Marshall, IL, 20 July 1918, transcript in the hand of unknown, Clark County Genealogical Library, Marshall, Illinois. and Herbert Huey, Unknown, to Bess Huey, Marshall, IL, July 1918, transcript in the hand of unknown, Clark County Genealogical Library, Marshall, Illinois.

¹⁰ Herbert Huey, Unknown, to Bess Huey, Marshall, IL, 1918, transcript in the hand of unknown, Clark County Genealogical Library, Marshall, Illinois. and Herbert Huey, Unknown, to Paul Huey, Lucile Huey, Very Huey, and Bess Huey, Marshall, IL, 29 December 1918, transcript in the hand of unknown, Clark County Genealogical Library, Marshall, Illinois.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Herbert Huey, Gullurt Farm, to mother Huey, Marshall, IL, 22 January 1919, transcript in the hand of unknown, Clark County Genealogical Library, Marshall, Illinois.

He also noted that he was having a hard time understanding “this frog talk”, which generally meant French, but probably meant German in this instance considering his location in Gullerhein (Gullesheim?), Germany. He also noted that he had “lots of cudies,” or lice. In essence, this letter described a bad situation, but one that was improving.¹³

Huey mailed a letter from Gulliem (still probably Gullesheim), Germany dated March 10, 1919; well after the war was over. Apparently the mail system was working better as he received three letters in one day. He noted that “I got one [letter] from my mother and she gave me hell to the same as you” which I understand to mean they both responded to his accusations that his wife did not care for him anymore simply because he did not receive mail. He also made a casual remark about the censorship on the mail, noting that “I cant right what I want to for you know that It would not come home but I can tell it when I get there.”¹⁴

Although Huey spent so much time abroad in Europe, it apparently did not change him, as a small town person. He noted in a letter dated May 14, 1919, his first back in the United States, that he had gone to New York City the night before, but that “the town is to [sic] big for me but we had a good time.” It is clear looking at this letter that the joviality of his first letters during his service is long gone and that his attitude is one of much greater reserve. His final post card of May 17, 1919 noted that he was on his way to Camp Grant in Rockford to be discharged and that he would be on his way home soon, which would allow him to return home well before the 130th Infantry.¹⁵

As noted earlier in Huey’s letters, an important aspect of the war was the activity that occurred on the home front. This activity is exceedingly difficult to document. Westfield has no surviving newspapers from the World War I period and I only found copies of the *Clark County Democrat*, a newspaper focused on Marshall, Clark County’s seat. This newspaper is problematic because it is very politically biased toward the Democratic Party. It does not present an unbiased view of the political atmosphere during WWI, nor does was I able to find a corresponding newspaper to balance out the biases present within.

I quickly realized while studying the *Clark County Democrat* that the major focus was on the activities of the Red Cross. For instance, an ad on December 19, 1917 stated, “The Man Who is Not For The Red Cross is Against Humanity.” This language shows the strong attitudes towards about the supporting the Red Cross and the war effort in general. Another ad on April 24, 1918, *Clark County Democrat* wrote, “Blood or Bread. Others are giving their blood. You will shorten the war – save life if you eat only what you need and waste nothing.” Unlike the other ad, this one requested that Americans conserve food so that as much as possible may go to the soldiers, a trend often noted during World War I. It also became readily apparent that there was a competition within the community to see which could provide the most aid to the soldiers. An example of this occurred in the January 2, 1918 edition of the *Clark County Democrat*. The first sentence of an article entitled “Post Office News” stated that “Westfield is running Marshall a close race in the sale of War saving and Thrift stamps.” First, it shows evolution in the times, that any news about happenings at the post office should become front page news. Second, this statement shows inherent competition. However, the competition here should hardly be considered to be such if rendered on a per capita basis. Marshall is now, and was in 1918, a significantly larger community than Westfield, therefore making this

¹³ Herbert Huey, Gullerhein, to mother and father Huey, Marshall, IL, January 1919, transcript in the hand of unknown, Clark County Genealogical Library, Marshall, Illinois.

¹⁴ Herbert Huey, Gulliem, to Bess Huey, Marshall, IL, 10 March 1919, transcript in the hand of unknown, Clark County Genealogical Library, Marshall, Illinois.

¹⁵ Herbert Huey, Camp Mills, to Bess Huey, Marshall, IL, 14 May 1919, transcript in the hand of unknown, Clark County Genealogical Library, Marshall, Illinois.

competition unsound, but productive nonetheless. This same article made note of the efforts of the post office to collect magazines for the soldiers, yet another home front effort. Another interesting note from the *Clark County Democrat* was that they found the “German-Americans in this county very patriotic.” This should not have been difficult to do as most of the families in Clark County can trace their ancestry to Germany.¹⁶

The competition in Clark County began to separate as the war proceeded. Westfield, the fourth largest town in Clark County, was clearly in the lead selling war savings and thrift stamps on January 16, 1918. However, it is also apparent that the effort was collaborative county-wide. The Liberty Loan drives and the Red Cross activities were conducted by the joint efforts of the communities in Clark County as evidenced by the commendations given to the various workers from the multiple communities. Also, as expected, the small village of Westfield could not keep up with its competitors for long. Marshall, Casey, and Martinsville each outsold Westfield in the 3rd Liberty Loan Drive. Each of these towns is larger than Westfield and is listed in order of dollars sold, which, coincidentally parallels the population size of each community. The county continually raised money above its quotas for the Liberty Loans or the Red Cross.¹⁷

The front page of the *Clark County Democrat* was increasingly consumed by two major items or topics. First, the paper tried to get people to conserve or cut their use of everything from oil to sugar and to donate things they already have, such as metals or peach pits (used to make carbon for gas masks). Second, the paper increasingly published letters from soldiers. This undoubtedly caused people to see a purpose for what they were sacrificing. If they could imagine that their sacrifices were saving the lives of people they know, then one could assume they would be that much more likely to conserve. It is possible that this effect was achieved by the newspaper staffs’ design rather than by coincidence.¹⁸

Not everyone was enthusiastic about sacrificing for the good of the soldiers. The January 9, 1918 edition of the *Clark County Democrat* noted an amusing story about Christmas treats at Richwoods School, a one-room school outside of Westfield. The teacher and the school board decided to spend the money, usually spent on Christmas treats for the students, by donating to the Red Cross. This upset the students and they accordingly locked the teacher out of the school from Monday through Friday. “On Friday, she was seized, bound with rope, placed in a buggy and driven about the community.” One of the students was injured when the teacher hit him/her over the head with a club trying to defend herself. However, the situation was calmed by “a sharp lecture by the State’s Attorney and County Superintendent, administered to the directors, pupils and teacher”.¹⁹

Another concern during World War I, as noted earlier by Herbert Huey, was the Great Influenza. The first wave of the influenza pandemic crashed across the United States in the late spring and summer of 1918. In the 2008 edition of *Historia*, Krystal Rose, a graduate student in History, said, “Newspapers hinted at a problem with influenza overseas, but for the most part it was ignored by the general public. However, what the general public overlooked, local authorities did not fail to recognize.”²¹ This was the case with Clark County as well. The newspaper did not report on influenza in Clark County until after the authorities had already taken preemptive measures. Clark County was not the only county in the area to aggressively

¹⁶ *Marshall (Illinois) Clark County Democrat*, 19 December 1917, 2 January 1918, 13 March 1918, and 24 April 1918.

¹⁷ *Marshall (Illinois) Clark County Democrat*, 16 January 1918, 27 March 1918, 1 May 1918, 29 May 1918.

¹⁸ *Marshall (Illinois) Clark County Democrat*, 4 September 1918, 14 August 1918, and 25 September 1918.

¹⁹ *Marshall (Illinois) Clark County Democrat*, 9 January 1918.

²¹ Krystal Rose, “Called to Death: A Case Study on the 1918 Influenza Pandemic in Coles County, Illinois.” *Historia* 17 (2008), 3-4.

try to prevent the spread of the flu. For example, “Hiring a school nurse and increasing expenditures on things such as health supplies were actions implemented to prevent the spread of the disease throughout Coles County”, Clark County’s neighbor.²²

The second wave was more lethal. According to Rose, in Coles County, “By October, the height of public disruption occurred with the closings for Coles County rapidly accumulating; schools, beauty shops, churches, movie theaters, and Red Cross meetings were not spared.”²³ Much as Rose noted in her study on Coles County, the *Clark County Democrat* showed a definite increase in the number of obituaries, especially for people who died of influenza. An article in the *Clark County Democrat* entitled “The Influenza Situation Here” had this to say in October 1918:

Many cases of influenza have developed here in the past week, but the situation is not alarming. Generally the cases are of a mild nature but there are a few developing pneumonia, which is very serious. So far only one death has been caused by the epidemic here. However, it behooves our people to take every precaution to avoid the disease. The Board of Health at a meeting Sunday, decided that all schools, churches and theatres should be closed during the week.

John Barry noted that often fundraising for the war was considered more important than avoiding other people in order to prevent the spread of the flu. Rose’s nearby comparison may offer a model by which we can understand the last days of World War I in Clark County. According to her, the number of influenza deaths in Coles County nearly equaled deaths from all other causes during the month of October. An examination of the *Clark County Democrat* presents the same results.²⁴

According to Rose, Coles County suffered from a third wave of the influenza in which “influenza-related deaths did outnumber the ‘other’ causes of death.”²⁵ Likely, the same occurred in Clark County, its neighbor, and especially in Westfield, which is situated right on the county line. There is evidence that there was a third wave of influenza in Clark County besides that in the local newspapers. In this instance, Herbert Huey received a letter while in Europe that stated, “Howard and the kid had the flu” back in Marshall in January 1919.²⁶

Doubtless, influenza affected the ability of the citizens of Clark County to assist its soldiers during the last month and a half of combat and on into the occupation that followed. However, this again falls into the category of problems on the home front which is no more present in the collective memories of the people of Clark County than are recollections of the intercommunity competitions to sell the most war bonds for the Liberty Loan drives or to raise the most money for the Red Cross. The communities’ collective memories seem focused on the sacrifices of the soldiers of World War I to a much greater, and arguably justified, extent than they do on the sacrifices and lived realities of people on the home front.

I have examined the realities of war for the soldiers as well as the efforts and obstructions to those efforts, of people on the home front to assist in the war effort. Herbert Huey presented a good case study of how it affected the soldier, but what were the affects at home?

The village of Westfield had 95 men serving out of a population that numbered a little over 900 in 1920, so about 10 percent. Many of these men were brothers or cousins, related by

²² Barry, 208-209.

²³ Rose, “Called to Death”, 3-4.

²⁴ *Marshall (Illinois) Clark County Democrat*, 2 October 1918 and 16 October 1918. and Rose, “Called to Death”, 10.

²⁵ Rose, “Called to Death”, 11.

²⁶ Huey, 22 January 1919

marriage or blood. Of the 95 soldiers, 60 served overseas and the other 35 never made it out of camp. The vast majority of the soldiers who served overseas were in the army. Three served in the navy and only one in the marines. Of the few soldiers for whom I have been able to locate information, they served in Company A of the 130th Regiment of the 33rd Division. This was determined by walking around the local cemetery, Maple Hill Cemetery, and noting what was marked on the headstones.²⁷

Two soldiers died in Europe, making the combat deaths for Westfield residents just over two percent. Corporal Ralph Weeden died on October 8, 1918 (Image 1) and John H. Zellers's stone placed his death at a vaguer 1918 (Image 2). Therefore, Weeden most likely would have died in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive and Zellers most likely would have also. Thus, the people of Westfield had a great shock. They lost two soldiers shortly after their regiment entered combat. There is no doubt that these wounds were still fresh when their comrades returned home in May, especially considering that there were no more combat deaths after them.



Image 1: Ralph Weeden headstone



Image 2: John Zellers headstone

After returning home, the soldiers, as noted earlier, were treated to parades and celebrations in big cities. Not to be outdone, the soldiers of Westfield returned home to the same. A photograph in *The History of Westfield, Illinois* shows the returned soldiers marching in full uniform through downtown Westfield. They would arrive at the village park where a fundraiser was being held in their honor to raise money to start an American Legion Post in Westfield (Image 3), which is today the Weeden-Zellers Post.

Little can be concluded from this study of World War I in Clark County, and more specifically Westfield, Illinois. The topics covered are broad and far reaching. The material at hand is also scarce. Much more extensive research, especially archival research is necessary to come to meaningful conclusions about the history of Clark County in World War I. However, there are generalities that can be made from the sources presented in this work. The first generality is that Clark County largely fit into the national model. A significant number of men responded to their nation's call and served in the war. Second, while the soldiers fought in the war they sometimes became disillusioned about the war as evidenced in Herbert Huey's letters home. Third, the home front was very active in competitively trying to provide for all of the needs of the soldiers and not permitting "slackers." Fourth, the influenza pandemic of 1918 created major problems both for soldiers overseas and for workers on the home front. Neither

²⁷ Hurst Kesler, ed., *History of Westfield, Illinois and Northwest Clark County 1981* (Shawnee Mission, Kansas: Inter-Collegiate Press, 1981), 24.

group could effectively perform their jobs. Fifth, there was a negative political response to the United States' involvement in the war resulting in Republican victories over Wilson's Democratic Party. And finally, the soldiers returned home to an appreciative country, too much pomp and circumstance. The most that can be concluded from this effort is that the citizens of Clark County took up responsibility when it was thrust upon them and performed to the best of their abilities and their actions during wartime perpetuated the existing master narrative.