



Year of the Veteran

1917-1919

Amenia went above and beyond to rally behind cause

by Betsy Strauss

Editor's note: This is part of a year-long series of articles by town, village and city historians about the World War 1 era as Dutchess County recognizes "The Year of the Veteran" with the Dutchess County Historical Society. The articles will appear every other week. If you have information relating to the time around WWI in Dutchess County, call (845) 471-1630 or visit dchsny.org.

When America entered the Great War in April 1917, Amenia responded wholeheartedly to the call to arms.

On April 18, 1917, the Amenia Home Guard was organized at a meeting called with less than a 24-hour notice. William B. Smith of Wassaic and Joel E. Spingarn of Amenia initiated the meeting. Fifty-six men responded, enrolling as charter members of the Home Guard.

Mr. Spingarn was at that time already a member of the Home Defense Committee of Dutchess County, which had been holding daily meetings in Poughkeepsie. He explained to the Amenia men the plans of the Home Defense Committee, which involved the taking of the census, the increase and conservation of food supply, and the defense of life and property.

Joel Spingarn was Amenia's "mover and shaker" on many issues and was in the forefront of the preparedness movement. As a former professor at Columbia University and as the owner of the Harlem Valley Times, Mr. Spingarn had contact with county and national leaders, including men such as Teddy Roosevelt and Secretary of the Navy Franklin D. Roosevelt. He was well informed on the crisis of the hour.

Parenthetically, it is also important to note that Joel Spingarn was a man of ideas and ideals. His "Amenia Idea" was the Amenia Field Day, "an experiment in rural recreation," which he sponsored during the summer of 1910. At that time, he and his family were new residents at the historic



Troutbeck estate. Spingarn organized, with the help of others in the community, the field day each year for five years, through the summer of 1914, when the War broke out in Europe.

As for being a man of ideals, Mr. Spingarn has been credited as one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He and his brother Arthur Spingarn organized the first NAACP Conference at Troutbeck in 1916.

Of equal importance is the fact that Mrs. Amy Spingarn was a strong supporter of the Women's Suffrage Movement, a movement which was at its peak during the same decade as the War. She, too, was active as a speaker, a writer and a motivator.

It is not surprising that Joel Spingarn, though already 42 years old, would sign on for the first class of the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), at Madison Barracks, NY. By August 1917, Mr. Spingarn had received a commission as Major of Infantry and was ready for assignment.

Until he was sent overseas, and even after the Armistice, Maj. Joel Spingarn continued to give himself 100 percent toward The Cause, by rallying for the Liberty Loans, by encouraging Amenia residents to practice patriotism and thrift, by boasting of the accomplishments of the Red Cross and of the efforts made by school children, as well as by giving praise to our young men in uniform.

Another Amenia man who entered an early ROTC program, this one at Plattsburg, NY, was Roland S. Palmer, age 40. Mr. Palmer was a farmer and lawyer. He practiced law in both Amenia and New York City. In March 1917, Mr. Palmer auctioned off his cows and his farm equipment before heading north to Plattsburg. Upon the completion of his training, First Lt. Palmer was commissioned to the Ordnance Department and stationed in France.

In July 1917, 147 young men of Amenia were called by the federal draft board for examination for military service. By November

Above: Welcome Home is a close-up of one portion of a panoramic photo taken on Memorial Day 1919 in Amenia. Right: A photo of Joel E. Spingarn taken at the 1914 Amenia Field Day. Below: An American Red Cross poster encouraging those back home to help soldiers. *Courtesy of the Amenia Historical Society*

of that year, 23 men were listed in the "Roll of Honor." By the end of the War, a year later, 85 men were recorded as having served among the U.S. troops.

On the home front, Red Cross chapters were established during July 1917 in Amenia and in South Amenia (and later in Smithfield). The busy fingers of scores of women began knitting hundreds of socks and caps and began making yards and yards of bandaging material, among other items, for the boys "over there." These women surely did Knit their Bit!

Amenia was "over the top" in its contributions to the five Liberty Loan campaigns, collecting above and beyond the quota. The Yankee Trophy Train came through Amenia for the Fourth Liberty Loan campaign, exhibiting guns and other items captured from the Germans. A veteran Whippet tank was on display in Amenia for the Victory Liberty Loan campaign in May 1919, once more inspiring citizens to give. In total, for the War effort, Amenia subscribed to \$475,000 worth of bonds. Additional funds were contributed through the Red Cross, the YMCA and other community organizations.

The sad statistics at war's end, however, included seven fallen warriors.

Three were killed in action, Charles A.



Fowler, Russel G. Fulton, Walter Reynolds.

Four died of illness, Leon Fink, Arthur Merritt, Frederick Reynolds, Thomas Sheehy.

On Memorial Day 1919, a grand parade of children, dressed in white and carrying flowers and flags, processed with the townspeople to the cemeteries to honor the fallen. Afterward, all the citizens, including Red Cross nurses, Civil War veterans, returning soldiers and special speakers, gathered at Fountain Square to hear the words "Welcome Home!" as well as words of praise for those who served in the war, and for those who supported the war effort here at home. A panoramic photo was taken to commemorate the event. A close-up of one portion of the photo is shown here.



Betsy Strauss is a member of the Amenia Historical Society



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