Over Here:
The Yet-to-be Told Stories of Dutchess County’s Men, Women & Children During the World War 1917 to 1919

A Guide to the Exhibition

www.DCHSNY.org
Welcome to “Over Here!”

What struck us as so distinct about the three-year period we are looking at, on the 100th anniversary of the end of fighting in WWI, was the pervasiveness of the war, how it touched all people, young and old in the county. In reviewing the hundreds of glass plate negatives for the anniversary, we were also struck by how illustrative Reuben Van Vlack’s photographs are to this point. They focus entirely on the home front. Reuben Van Vlack served between July 14, 1918 and February 24, 1919 but was otherwise in Poughkeepsie, capturing these extraordinary images.

The inclusive “all” in the concluding words of President Wilson’s April 16, 1917 National Address and Declaration of War was not a rhetorical flourish. Success required the unprecedented engagement of every capable man, woman and child in the country, and therefore Dutchess County. But what do we know of this colossal struggle of a century ago?

New York State Historian James Sullivan failed to publish the book “New York’s Part in the World War” as directed by the 1919 State Legislature. He formally abandoned the project in 1924 due to the unevenness of localities’ response. The state had simultaneously passed a law in 1919 requiring the state-wide appointment of local city, town and village historians, a law that remains in effect today. Their first task was to gather and provide information for this publication. Sullivan’s 1923 letter to the Milan Town Supervisor reflects the challenge he faced four years into the project.

WWI veteran, professional photographer and historian Reuben Van Vlack had, by 1926, been lauded by no less than General Pershing for his plan to publish biographies and photographs of all of Poughkeepsie’s war dead. Although its actual publication seems not to have materialized, Van Vlack served as American Legion historian at a local and state level. He helped found the Poughkeepsie American Legion Post, the “Lafayette Post.”

Another Poughkeepsie veteran and instrumental founder of that Post was C. Fred Close. Close had left for France early in America’s involvement in the war, later receiving the Purple Heart for his injuries. Among many roles in public service, Fred Close was Dutchess County Sheriff for 25 years. He frequently used Van Vlack as a crime scene photographer. Close was active in giving voice to veterans’ issues publicly, and offering assistance and counsel in times of need privately. The word “humanitarian” was frequently used to describe him.

Van Vlack died in 1940, entrusting over 300 of his photographs from 1917 to 1919 (in the form of glass plate negatives) to Close. Close died in 1981 and left the glass plates in the care of the Dutchess County Historical Society. The photographs, digitally restored on the 100th anniversary of the end of fighting, and in support of the program “2018: The Year of the Veteran,” form the backbone of the stories told here, supplemented by DCHS Collections, and those of local historians and historical organizations, and Close family members.

Melodye Moore, Chair, DCHS Program “2018: Year of the Veteran”
Bill Jeffway, DCHS Executive Director & “Over Here” Exhibition Curator, traveling and online versions
Suddenly a World Warrior: Everything Changes in Five months in 1917

April 6 — US declares war on Germany and enters the European war that had started over two and a half years earlier

May 18 — President Wilson signs the Selective Service Act, the national draft

June & July — Dutchess County creates local Draft Boards that evaluate physical fitness and exemption claims of all county men age 21 to 30

August — names of those who were officially drafted are published and the age range for recruitment is expanded to include those 18 to 45

September — names are assigned to specific departure dates and the first group “entains” September 10 to Camp Upton, Yaphank, Long Island, to begin life as “Sammies”

September to December — between Sept. 10 and Dec. 5, over 200 men among six contingents “entain,” getting four days’ to a week’s notice

Women Engage: the traditional & the unthinkable

When asked how Hyde Park had been so successful in raising money, Col. Archibald Rogers, Chairman of the Dutchess County Defense Council, replied “the women did it.” Many, like Ruth Morgan of Staatsburg, Director of the Nurses Bureau of the Red Cross in France (see photo), worked at jobs familiar to women. Others took jobs previously closed to them in factories and on farms. The American Red Cross trained women to serve as mechanics and ambulance drivers. Rhinebeck, Red Hook and Hyde Park women joined the Women’s Ambulance Corps and carried mail and messages between Camp Whitman in Beekman and the Poughkeepsie Armory.

Equal Opportunity?

Among those referred to at the time as the “colored men” who left from Poughkeepsie in 1917 to serve were George Gould, Wilson C. Johnson, Edgar Schoonmaker and Samuel Williams. Like other African Americans in service, they were eager to show their patriotism, but also hoped they would call attention to the unfulfilled promise of equal treatment in the United States. They were fighting for their country, but they were also fighting for respect. The American military, segregated until 1948, often assigned these men to labor battalions rather than combat units. Despite the heroic achievements of units such as the “Harlem Hellfighters,” racial tensions continued after the war. The gap between the “war to make the world safe for democracy” and the reality for African Americans at the time, helped spark the “New Negro Movement” of the 1920’s, which in some ways helped usher in the later Civil Rights movement.
Children: Various, Vital Roles

The broad reach of the “World War” included children. Through pageants they helped shape public opinion on issues such as immigration, assimilation, loyalty and “American” identity. Through the “Farm Cadet” program high school students kept farming productive while freeing up adult laborers to fight in France, the girls being referred to as “farmerettes.” They helped raise funds. This is evident in the report from Red Hook High School student James Kisselback who raised $4,000 in War Savings Stamps. He did this while serving as Assistant Postmaster, in a role that allowed the Postmaster to serve in France. School children “did their bit” by buying Thrift Stamps. Living in homes that were often dramatically altered by the war, young boys and girls were indoctrinated to value patriotism and nationalism, qualities which would serve them well as they came of age in WWII.

Give More Use Less

Dutchess County raised $18 million (about $292 million in today’s dollars) across five loan drives 1917 to 1919. This includes contributions, published in the newspaper, from the Astors and Vanderbilts to the most rural farmer and schoolchild. Dutchess County’s large agricultural economy was under great stress as farms needed to produce more at the same time farm labor was being drawn into the military or manufacturing to support the military. Residents were asked to eat potatoes instead of wheat, saving the latter for the troops (see cartoon). Canning clubs helped ensure that food had the longest shelf life possible. Coal shortages meant limiting how long stores could be open, and how warm your house could be in the winter. Obviously with a sense of relief and release, the Welcome Home Victory Parade in 1919 featured an extraordinary display of electric lights captured by Van Vlack. The Defense Council was the central, operational hub in Hyde Park.

Being 100% American

When the United States entered the “World War,” the country had a population of 100 million, many of whom were recent immigrants. German-Americans, who were among the largest ethnic groups in the Hudson Valley, became the target of widespread hysteria. “Real Americans” responded by refusing to drink German beer, by burning German-language books, by changing the names of German sounding food on menus, and by removing the works of Mozart, Bach and Beethoven from orchestra programs. The Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918 prohibited many forms of speech perceived of as disloyal. While American propaganda, infused with patriotism was stifling freedom of speech, our men and women were overseas fighting for democracy. One of the posters Van Vlack chose to photograph asked, “Are you 100% American?” Although difficult to read due to movement, Van Vlack captured parade signs reflecting diverse groups staking out their absolute Americanness, patriotism, and loyalty.
Welcome “Home”

While the end of fighting on November 11, 1918 brought joy and relief, negotiations continued until the Treaty of Versailles was signed in the summer of 1919. The process of coming home required many adjustments in terms of jobs, homes, and integrating back into a shifting peacetime environment. There was a large “Welcome Home” parade in September of 1919 in Poughkeepsie, and other smaller parades in the city of Beacon and towns and villages. Every man in the county who served was awarded a service medal and Beacon offered one for their “boys.” The 2 million men and women returning to US soil were stepping onto shifting sands. Two constitutional amendments were coming to fruition. One expanded rights, bringing the long fight for women’s suffrage to a successful conclusion. The other restricted Americans’ rights to intoxicating liquor, a process kicked off by the Senate in December 1919, but rooted in the 19th century. The Prohibition Amendment was approved in January 1919 and would go into effect January 1920.

The Supreme Sacrifice

It is estimated that over 125 Dutchess County men and women died during the war period in some form of service. Regarding the profound issue of where remains were to be interred, some, like Pershing, or former President Theodore Roosevelt, who lost a son in France, believed those lost should be buried where they fell. Ultimately the War Department surveyed the families of those who died and the bereaved made their choice. The remains of over two dozen Dutchess County soldiers are interred in cemeteries in France. One is interred in Arlington National Cemetery. Others locally. Among those buried abroad is Edward J. Wolff, Jr. His ambition to serve was rewarded with a highly competitive place at West Point. He graduated early to command a Battery in France. It took the army an agonizing six weeks to confirm his death after his parents received a letter from a comrade who offered his sympathy, having seen Wolff killed. His mother made a government-sponsored trip, a “Gold Star Mother Pilgrimage,” to see her son’s grave at the Oise-Aisne American Cemetery in France in 1931. A local VFW carries his name. A descendant of German immigrants, like so many in the Hudson Valley, Wolff rests 300 miles west of the birthplace of his paternal grandfather who had emigrated to Poughkeepsie. Wolff is, by coincidence, buried next to a fellow Dutchess County veteran, Austin T. Robinson of Beacon.

A Brief Shining Moment

Could anyone lining Main Street in Poughkeepsie for the jubilant “Welcome Home” parade on September 24, 1919, imagine that the promised “War to End All War” was instead the prelude to another war, a war so closely tied they would be named World War “One” and “Two?” The mood for global engagement was quite the opposite. The following year, the nation, and Dutchess County by a margin of two-to-one, rejected the continuation of Democratic US Presidential leadership, including the Vice-Presidential candidate Franklin D. Roosevelt. Instead they elected Republican Presidential leadership that offered a return to “normalcy,” saying “tranquility at home is more precious than peace abroad.” They rejected the “entanglement” of a League of Nations. Time would show this more isolationist stance could not be maintained. The striding Ass’t Sec’y of the Navy would lose the use of his legs to polio in 1921. He would go on to lead the country out of a global economic depression as President. Then he would lead the as US Commander-in-Chief in the next declaration of war on Germany in December 1941.
Honoring
Veterans of WWI & Veterans of All Generations, Past, Present & Future

2018: Year of the Veteran

Local history tells us the stories of those who would have been our neighbors, colleagues, friends or even family had we lived in Dutchess County some time in the past. Their stories, especially the stories of veterans, but all their stories, help us understand how we got to where we are today, what the future may hold, and how actions of an earlier generation can affect another.

Dutchess County Historical Society
Melodye Moore, Program Chair; 2018: Year of the Veteran
Bill Jeffrey, DCHS Executive Director; “Over Here” Exhibition Research & Design
www.DCHSNY.org

This Exhibition Made Possible By

Individuals Sponsors:
Christine Crawford-Oppenheimer and James Oppenheimer
Lou Lewis, Esq. and Sandy Lewis
Melodye Moore and Lenny Miller
The Hon. Albert & Dr. Julia Rosenblatt

Funds and Foundations:
Anonymous
The Feldman-Koestin-State Fund of the Community Foundations of the Hudson Valley
The Wollin/Troccia Family Fund of the Community Foundations of the Hudson Valley

Contributors: Tom & Enza Lawrence ~ Julian & Betsy Strauss ~ Elizabeth M. Wolf, Esq.