

Washburn In The Great War—Part III

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With the United States finally in the war, the people of Washburn were called upon to make good on their enthusiastic expressions of patriotism by contributing men to the gigantic death struggle on the western front in France. After the Germans had been driven back from the frontiers of Paris in the fall of 1914, great battles were fought in which hundreds of thousands of men lost their lives in attempts by one side or the other to break the trench stalemate. The French and British manpower pools were almost exhausted, the spirit of their armies nearly broken. Now that the United States was in the war the Allies expected that it would send soldiers to restore the depleted ranks of their armies.

President Wilson was committed early, if reluctantly, to conscription, stating in his war address of April 2nd his preference that men to fill the ranks of the army "be chosen upon the principle of universal liability to service." A conscription bill was introduced in Congress on April 17th, where it met impassioned opposition from across the political spectrum but was finally approved as the Selective Service Act of May 17 1917. The act applied only to American citizens, thereby creating an automatic and much resented exemption for

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several million aliens. While conscription was now law, widespread resistance to implementing the law was anticipated. The War Department devised a simple approach that undermined opposition: The army would not take men from among their neighbors, their neighbors would send them to the army. Local draft boards staffed by volunteers, not uniformed officers, would do the selecting and grant the exemptions. The system had its defects, most notably the danger that the local boards would allow political and social favoritism to affect their selection decisions, but on the whole it was successful in providing the large numbers of men needed by the army.

Registration of all men between the ages of 21 and 31 years, married and unmarried, was held on June 11th, failure to do so being punishable by imprisonment. In Washburn 530 men registered, while 910 registered in the remainder of Bayfield County. A drive to find so-called slackers—those

who should have registered but did not—netted "three Greeks." The ever-vigilant Times solemnly warned that "The State and County and town council of defense are also going to be on the alert for persons who have been wont to saying what they pleased against the Government and such persons will be reported to the U.S. Marshall and will be dealt with by the United States authorities. Some people have been altogether too free in denouncing the government and these persons have better 'mend their ways' or they are liable to prosecution."

The first of 27 selectees from Bayfield County, including eight from Washburn, departed for a training camp on September 19th. On the previous evening these "honor men," as the Times referred to them, were feted at an elaborate banquet after which they were escorted in a big parade on Bayfield Street to the Gem Theatre, where a ceremony in their honor was held. As they marched down the aisles of the theater, "they were greeted with tremendous applause which did not subside until long after they had taken their seats." They were then subjected to a lengthy program beginning with a prayer and music by a "combined chorus," followed by no less than five speeches, filled with pro-

found expressions of patriotism and loyalty, laced with warnings to beware of "traitors" and "disloyal persons." The next day "a monster crowd gathered at the depot to say good-bye and to offer best wishes for a triumphant victory and an early return. . . . The sight was an impressive one." As the demand for men to fill the ranks of the expanding American army increased, contingents of drafted men departed for training camps with increasing frequency. Departing ceremonies were confined to patriotic rallies at the courthouse (where the men were ordered to report) with a parade escorting the "selectees" from there to the depot, where much informal speechifying and many tearful goodbyes took place. Reporting the departure of a contingent in early May 1918, the Times described them "as a fine lot of boys as have left to join the colors, and all were willingly offering their services to their government." "The scene at the depot," the Times continued, "was a very touching one. The stronger men were there to offer cheers for the boys while mothers and sweethearts and relatives, who are always touched more deeply by scenes of this kind, silently wept as they said goodbye."