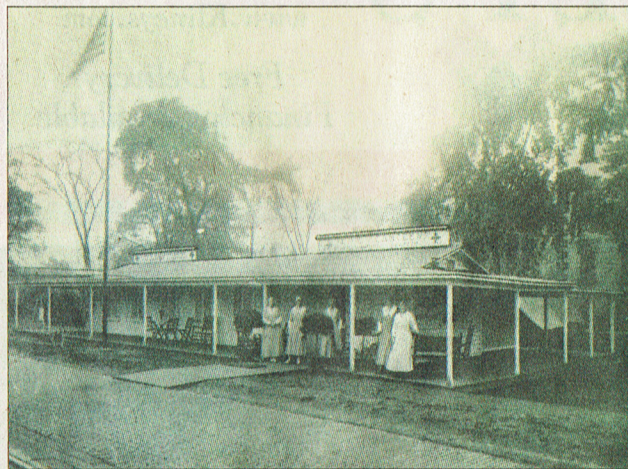


Influenza, World War I challenged city's Red Cross in its early days



PHOTOS PROVIDED

Images provided by the Lycoming County Historical Society show the interior, top, and exterior, above, of Williamsport's Red Cross canteen, founded in 1917.

By JANET McNEIL
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Special to the Sun-Gazette

Clara Barton was instrumental in establishing the Red Cross in the United States in 1881, but a local chapter did not come into existence until March 15, 1917. The next few years would challenge the chapter's leadership, as the women not only coped with troop support for the World War I effort but also aided a community hard hit by the influenza epidemic and other natural disasters. The society replaced the Pennsylvania Women's Division for National Preparedness in this area, and their first office was located at 327 Pine St., Williamsport.

A membership list included the names of prominent women in town — Cochran, McCormick, Stearns, Maynard, and Munson, to name a few. Newspaper articles in 1917 called for more women to volunteer to "do their bit" — to quote President Woodrow Wilson. These volunteers packed supplies for ship-

ments to aid the troops and solicited donations of linen and surgical dressing supplies. The chapter quickly outgrew its office, and space in the Armory was offered at no cost. When the county assumed responsibility for a donation of \$75,000 to the American Association of the Red Cross fund, volunteers requested contributions from city organizations and businesses and held socials at members' homes, as well as festivals selling homemade food and concerts featuring such groups as the Bugbee String Quartet. As early as May 14, 1917, the Sun-Gazette stated, "when local history ... incident to present war preparations is written, the work of the Williamsport Chapter of the American Red Cross Society will stand



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out prominently."

The Canteen Hut

In May 1918, a small hut — soon to be expanded in size — was established as a canteen on the grounds of the Park Hotel near the railroad station. It was funded with monetary donations from the Williamsport High School class of 1918. Troops coming through Williamsport day and night needed food and relaxation and sometimes emotional support. Many men were traveling to basic training camps or getting ready to be shipped overseas. Some were going home on sick leave or furlough or for family emergencies. Later, there would be soldiers returning from war — some shell shocked, gassed or maimed. For

those stranded between trains, there were rooms on permanent reserve at the Park Hotel, as well as space at Trinity House. One day, as many as 1,100 men came to the Canteen looking for food, gum, cigarettes, postcards, stamps, pencils or social interaction.

Volunteers were not content to provide a piece of ham between two slices of bread, but instead offered sandwiches of chopped ham mixed with cream cheese and olives or chicken salad that became "famous." The women spent many hours rolling out and cutting homemade noodles for the soups.

Newspaper articles boasted that servicemen spread the word all over the United States — and possibly Europe — that the Canteen, with its comfortable atmosphere, player piano, electric fixtures, soothing blue and white decor, living plants, and good food, was the best place to stop over. Merchants were on call to

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bring needed supplies at all hours, as were nurses, physicians, and dentists for health needs. Some of the 700 canteens in the United States had rules against talking with the soldiers, but not the Williamsport Canteen. With older women in charge to supervise, young ladies practiced proper decorum, and there was lots of conversation.

Being a volunteer was hard manual labor, as it meant not only cooking, but also cleaning, scrubbing, and otherwise leaving everything in perfect condition for the next shift. But the women believed that working at the Canteen was a privilege, no matter how hard it was.

A columnist for the Sun-Gazette decided to volunteer for an evening shift, which ran from 9 p.m. to 9 a.m., just to see what the experience was like. She had been worried that she would be bored and planned to knit socks so that she wouldn't fall asleep. Immediately upon arrival, however, she was placed in the sandwich line; then there was chicken to grind for salad. After that, a troop train arrived and there was much commotion involved serving food and meeting their needs. A party of young people came in for refreshments, and soon it was time for another troop train. When there was a lull the next morning, the women were too exhausted to do anything but rest a bit before cleaning up for the next shift.

The food and the setting at the Canteen were so impressive that it soon became a lunch spot for working women, a location for family Sunday dinners and a stop-off for many travelers. Young people attending parties at the Park Hotel would take a break at the Canteen to enjoy the player piano, as well as ice cream with a special chocolate sauce.

Food was free to soldiers, and everyone understood that when a troop train arrived their needs took priority. However, the money earned from locals and travelers plus donations, meant that the Williamsport operation was one of the few canteens in the country that was self-support-

ing.

Blanche Elizabeth Derr Bubb (1873-1947)

An undated newspaper clipping, probably from 1917 or 1918, states that little was known about Mrs. Blanche Derr Bubb before she became captain of the Canteen corps, with 18 lieutenants and 200 volunteers reporting to her. She had actually been mentioned previously in the Sun-Gazette as being in bridge and golf tournaments at the country club — and for the fact that her soprano voice had been heard at churches and in a production of the Mikado.

More research finds that she was born in Williamsport in 1873, the daughter of Isabella and James Derr. She married Clarence Bubb, who is listed in the 1920 census as a traveling salesman. They had three sons and lived at 1065 W. Fourth Street. Blanche Bubb died

in 1947 and is buried in Wildwood Cemetery.

Blanche Bubb was described as an indefatigable worker, seen at the Canteen day and night and never unprepared when the trains came through. Capable and organized, she was an excellent food manager and efficient planner. Even before the hut was built, she had started preparing meals for the troops in the Acacia Club kitchen.

When the canteen was closed by official government order in October 1919, the women had served 71,421 men in uniform and provided over 150,000 sandwiches, as well as thousands of gallons of coffee and 5950 meals. They had mended 5000 soldiers' coats and shirts. Volunteers had also provided assistance to families in Williamsport who struggled because fathers, brothers, and sons were away from home.

The Red Cross put

out a call for volunteers, and Williamsport women responded with management, healthcare, and organizational skills. They exhibited patriotism and active concern for their country. These women were real partners in the war effort, but they could not vote in the country they served — yet.