

WILLIAMSPORT SUN-GAZETTE

From Jersey Shore to Siberia: The Remarkable Journey of Alice Eck



Illustration by Kate Anderson Illustration.





Nurses

have always been heroic. Their work during the current pandemic reminds us of that every day. A century ago, a young woman from Jersey Shore cared for patients in Philadelphia during the Spanish Flu epidemic and then joined the American Red Cross and travelled to Siberia to care for soldiers and civilians during the Russian Civil War.

Alice Anastasia Eck, one of eight children, was born on Aug. 5, 1892, in Nippeno, Lycoming County, to William and Lena Eck. She grew up on the family farm in “*Eck Town*,” an area near Jersey Shore in which many members of the Eck family resided. She attended St. Mary’s Parochial School and Bastress Grammar School.

At age 21, she moved to Norristown, where she worked as an attendant at the Hospital for the Insane. From 1915 to May 1918, she studied at the Training School of the Jewish Hospital (now Albert Einstein Medical Center) in Philadelphia. Her training included obstetrics, as well as care of men and children. She scored high marks for conduct, personality, initiative and ability. The school superintendent described her as one of the best nurses in her class and said that she would do excellent work wherever she was sent. She was offered a permanent position at the Jewish Hospital but declined in hopes of joining the American Red Cross.

Registered as a nurse

On July 31, 1918, she registered as a nurse in Pennsylvania, and on Sept. 2 submitted her application to the American Red Cross. She listed Camp Meade as her preference and indicated that she was available immediately and willing to serve as long as she was needed.

On Sept. 18, 1918, the city of Philadelphia held its Fourth Liberty Loan Drive Parade along 23 blocks of Broad Street. The next day, the first cases of Spanish Flu were reported at the Philadelphia Naval Yard. As the death toll mounted, hospitals sent out an Emergency Epidemic Call. Alice responded, joining the emergency nursing service on Oct. 12. Due to the number of health care professionals serving in World War I, nurses were in short supply, so Alice could not be released for Red Cross service.

Foreign service

On Nov. 10, 1918, one day before the Armistice ending the war was signed, Alice's brother Clarence Eck was killed at the Battle of Meuse-Argonne. By the time, a few months later, when Alice was free to begin her career in the foreign service, she was no longer needed for war duty, so she was attached to the Czecho-Slovak Unit, a part of the Red Cross Mission to Siberia. The American Red Cross presence in

Russia was necessary because, in the summer of 1918, the U.S. had joined England, France, Italy and Japan in the fight to prevent the Communist takeover of Russia.

Alice sailed from San Francisco on April 24, 1919, and arrived in Vladivostok, Russia on May 18. One of about 500 doctors and nurses deployed to the area, she arrived in the midst of the Russian Civil War, as the White Army was battling the Bolsheviks for control of Siberia. Poverty, starvation, and disease raged, and the Red Cross was hard pressed to provide care for thousands of people along the 4,100 miles of the Trans-Siberian Railway.

Conditions in the hospitals and clinics horrified American medical personnel, who struggled to impose order and to feed, clothe and educate both the military and civilians. Hunger, overcrowding and frequent troop movement brought a rampant increase in typhus, a virulent disease caused by lice. The Red Cross combatted typhus by using railroad cars as stations where people were deloused, disinfected, and given clean clothes and food, an initiative that came to be known as the Great White Train.

From mid-June to August, Alice worked mainly in the surgical ward of Omsk Hospital, also serving briefly in Irkutsk. On Nov. 14, she was sent to U.S. Army Field Hospital #4 at Verkhne-Udinsk to aid in dealing with the flu epidemic there.

Back in the U.S.

By January of 1920, it was clear that the Bolsheviks were winning the war. Alice was evacuated on Jan. 15 with the 27th U.S. Infantry. On Feb. 3, she arrived in Vladivostok, from where she sailed to the U.S. aboard the U.S.S. Great Northern.

Ill with septic fever when she arrived home, Alice spent February through April recovering. She then joined the Visiting Nurses Association. In 1924, Alice went to work as a community nurse for the United Pocahontas Coal Company in Crumpler, West Virginia. It is there that she met Robert Muir. They married in 1927 and had two children: Robert and Mary Alice. The family lived in Philadelphia and in Upper Darby. In 1945, a brain tumor caused Alice to be paralysed on her left side and left her with significant loss of sight and hearing. When Robert died in 1962, Alice moved to Williamsport to live with her sisters Margaret and Loretta. From 1975 until her death in January 1985, she lived at Maria Joseph Manor in Danville. Alice is buried with her husband in Langhorne.

Patricia A. Scott, a native of Williamsport, is a librarian and archivist. She worked at Penn State and Bucknell before retiring from Penn College in 2019. She volunteers at the Jersey Shore Historical Society and the Thomas Taber Museum. The article is

part of the Lycoming County Women's History Project series, at www.lycoming.edu/lcwhp.

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