

INTRODUCTION

Victor Clark was a high school kid when the United States entered World War I. He was still in basic training at Camp Grant, Illinois when the war ended. Private Clark never stormed a beach, never fought in a European campaign. He never received a medal or commendation, but he was a part of one of the most deadly events of World War I. While there were about 15 million total deaths including 9.2 million combat deaths in World War I, deaths due to the Spanish Flu Epidemic have been estimated from 20 to 100 million people worldwide. At Camp Grant alone, there were 10,713 cases of influenza and 2,355 cases of flu related pneumonia in September and October of 1918, with 1,060 flu related deaths. Vic was first involved as a patient at Camp Grant, and later was assigned to help young victims of the flu in a children's ward in an emergency hospital in Rockford, Illinois.

This is the story of Vic Clark and the 1918 Spanish Flu Epidemic.



As printed in The Carrollton Patriot, November 21, 1918

Aren't Soldiers Handy, Tho?

Victor Teaches Babies to Eat from Spoon

Camp Grant, Ill., Nov 10 - Editor The Patriot: I have received a copy of your paper every week since arriving in camp, and as I have not noticed any account of the experience of a man in the army during the "flu" epidemic, will try to tell you in few words our experience here.

The epidemic became serious about the third week in September. Within a week the base hospital was full and they were putting beds in various adjoining buildings. As they were short of nurses, the women of Rockford came out to help. In all, there were about 1200 deaths from influenza and pneumonia.

I went to the hospital with the "flu" the 23rd of September, while the number of cases was greatest. The only place they could find to put my cot was out in the corridor, so I saw most everything that occurred. The people of Rockford certainly helped out to the limits of their resources by bringing relatives of the sick boys out to camp in cars and in feeding and caring for them in town.

The disease was checked in camp in about four weeks, but about that time the city of Rockford was placed under quarantine, and I was one of a number of men ordered to report at the emergency hospital in town. I was sent to Emergency Hospital No. 1 and placed in a children's ward, with orders to make myself useful. At first about all I could do was to sweep the floor and get water when anyone wanted a drink, but before I had been there a week I learned how to get a three-months-old infant to eat from a spoon and could make a bed as neatly and as fast as any woman in the ward.

The boys who go to a training camp never know one week what they will do the next, and even if they had no trade before, they are soon able to do everything from building a house to taking care of babies. We had 32 in our ward, ranging from 3 months to four years old, and my duty from 5 o'clock until 7 was walking the floor with one in my arms until it fell asleep and then repeating the operations with another one. However, the "flu" has been defeated entirely here, both in town and camp, and we have settled down to drill again.

VICTOR CLARK
7th Co., Inf. Replacement Camp

Victor Clark was born September 7, 1897 in Mattoon, Illinois, the first child and only son of Ulla Dio and Bertha Scott Clark. Because his father worked for the Illinois Central Railroad as Supervisor of Buildings and Bridges, the family moved frequently, following the construction of the railroad thru southern Illinois.

By 1912, the family had settled temporarily in Carrollton, Greene County, Illinois where Victor attended high school. Although he was a year behind other students his age due to the frequent moves, he was a popular and athletic student, active in several sports. During this time he met Violet Vivell, only child of O.H. and Anna Belle Davis Vivell. Violet graduated from Carrollton High School in 1916, Victor a year later in the spring of 1917

(Victor is center front, holding the ball)



On April 6, 1917, just as Vic was finishing high school, the United States declared war on Germany and entered World War I. Even in small town Carrollton, without the instant communication we take for granted today, the high school students were well aware of the war in Europe. They were sure the United States would eventually enter the war, now in it's 3rd year, and they knew that it would be young men who would be called to fight that war.

REGISTRATION CARD		REGISTRAR'S REPORT	
1 Name of registrant <i>Victor O. Clark</i>	Age <i>21</i>	1) Is he under 21? <i>No</i>	2) Is he a citizen? <i>Yes</i>
2 Name of father <i>Wolf Lake, Ill.</i>	3 Date of birth <i>Sept 7 1895</i>	3) Has he ever been in military service? <i>No</i>	
4 Name of mother <i>Mattoon, Ill. U.S.A.</i>	4) Is he a member of a church? <i>Methodist</i>	I certify that the answers are true, that the person registered has read the card and answers that I have returned his report, and that all of his answers of which I have knowledge are true, except as follows:	
5 Name of school <i>Mattoon, Ill. U.S.A.</i>	5) Is he a member of a labor union? <i>Yes</i>	<i>Charles H. Parsons</i> (Name of Registrar)	
6 Name of employer <i>W. D. Leach & Co.</i>	6) Is he a member of a fraternal organization? <i>Yes</i>	Federal Union # <i>2</i>	
7 Name of business <i>Wolf Lake, Ill.</i>	7) Is he a member of a political party? <i>None</i>	City or County <i>Union</i>	
8 Name of business <i>Wolf Lake, Ill.</i>	8) Is he a member of a political party? <i>None</i>	State <i>Ill.</i>	
9 Name of business <i>Wolf Lake, Ill.</i>	9) Is he a member of a political party? <i>None</i>	<i>June 6th 1917</i> (Date of Reporting)	
10 Name of business <i>Wolf Lake, Ill.</i>	10) Is he a member of a political party? <i>None</i>		
11 Name of business <i>Wolf Lake, Ill.</i>	11) Is he a member of a political party? <i>None</i>		
12 Name of business <i>Wolf Lake, Ill.</i>	12) Is he a member of a political party? <i>None</i>		

The Selective Service Act was passed May 18, 1917 to provide the troops needed for the war. June 5, 1917 was the first of 3 registrations and included all men 21 to 31 years of age. Although Vic was still short of his 20th birthday, he completed the registration card with a birth year of 1895 and age of 21. Shortly after completing his registration card, he and Violet eloped. They were married July 22, 1917 in Jonesboro, Union County, Illinois. At that time, Vic was in Wolf Lake, Union County working for L. D. Leach & Company, a lumber company started by relatives of his grandmother Ulissa Leach Clark.



Meanwhile, in northern Illinois, near the town of Rockford, construction started July 1, 1917 on Camp Grant, to be used as a training facility for the new troops. The first 2,000 draftees arrived in camp the beginning of September 1917. Within a year, the camp would contain over 40,000 troops.

During the spring of 1918, while Vic waited to be called for service, the first signs of a new influenza appeared. Although the flu affected many areas of Europe, it was commonly called the Spanish flu. The flu may have originated in Spain, but it is more likely that reports of the disease in other countries were censored due to concerns about war time security. In the United States, the first outbreak began March 11, 1918 at Fort Riley, Kansas with 107 cases.

The next wave of the influenza arrived in the United States in late August among sailors in Boston. By September 8, the flu had spread to nearby Camp Devens, Massachusetts.

“...hundreds of stalwart young men in the uniform of their country coming into the wards of the hospital in groups of ten or more. They are placed on the cots until every bed is full yet others crowd in. Their faces soon wear a bluish cast; a distressing cough brings up the blood stained sputum. In the morning the dead bodies are stacked about the morgue like cord wood. This picture was painted on my memory cells at the division hospital, Camp Devens, in the fall of 1918, when the deadly influenza virus demonstrated the inferiority of human inventions in the destruction of human life”

Colonel Victor C. Vaughn
Past president, American Medical Association

On September 6, 1918, Vic Clark was among the new soldiers arriving at Camp Grant, Illinois. With no sign of the Spanish Flu at Camp Grant, the new recruits were more concerned with putting on their new uniforms, finding their place in the barracks and beginning to learn the life of a soldier.



In mid-September, the flu was within 100 miles of Camp Grant at Great Lakes Naval Training Station. Although officers had been recently transferred from Camp Devens where the flu was so dangerous, Camp Grant commander Colonel Charles Hagadorn was more concerned about the coming cold weather than the potential of illness. On September 20, 1918, he moved more recruits from tents into the barracks, causing overcrowding, and possibly contributing to the rapid spread of the flu through the infantry school from the transferred Fort Devens officers.

September 21, 1918 the first 108 cases of flu were reported in men from the Infantry Central Officers Training School and adjoining units. Hospitalizing the patients and isolating the units failed to stop the rapid spread of the influenza.

On Sunday, September 22, there were 194 admissions with a total of 836 in the hospital.

September 23, there were 370 admissions, including Victor, with a total of 1,159 in the hospital. The hospital was fast reaching capacity. In his letter to the editor of the Carrollton Patriot, Vic tells of having a cot in the hallway because there was no room left in the wards. Being separated from the dying patients in an overcrowded open ward may be why Vic survived to write his letter home.

In 6 days, the capacity of the hospital had increased from 6 occupied beds to a capacity of 4,102 beds. Verandas were enclosed with roofing paper and muslim, store rooms were emptied, barracks were converted to use as convalescent wards.

During the height of the outbreak there was a shortage of medical personnel, with many sick with the flu. To supplement the nurses and enlisted men assigned to the base hospital, pupil nurses were each assigned a section of the hospital with 6 enlisted men as her assistants. The Red Cross provided 25 nurses from Chicago and surrounding areas. Permission to hire civilian nurses was received Oct 2, but many of these civilian nurses were overwhelmed and asked to go home, some before they finished their first day.

As Vic mentioned in his letter, many of the ladies of Rockford came to volunteer. They filled capsules, prepared paper cups, did clerical work in the wards and helped with the information bureau and the Red Cross Canteen. They probably also carried the flu back to Rockford.

By the beginning of October, the local undertaker was unable to care for all the bodies. On October 2, there were 25 untouched bodies at the undertaker, with an additional 47 left in the hospital morgue. On October 3, the undertakers of Rockford met to consolidate their efforts. Even after each establishment took as many bodies as they could, 30 remained in the hospital morgue. The president of the Western Casket Company of Chicago was asked to come to Camp Grant for assistance and consultation.

By the end of the outbreak in October, the Camp Grant Division Surgeon reported 10,713 cases of influenza, 2,355 cases of flu related pneumonia and 1,060 deaths.

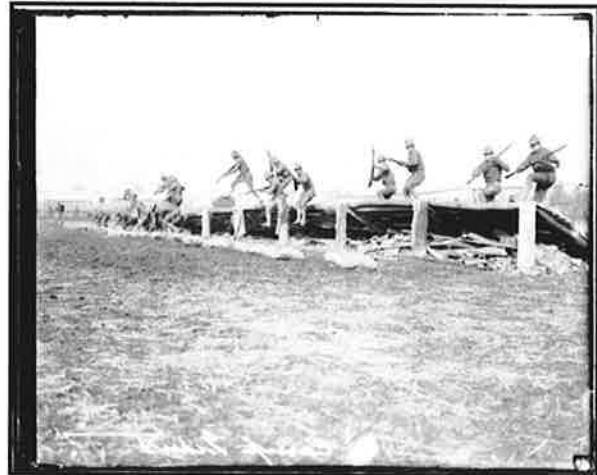
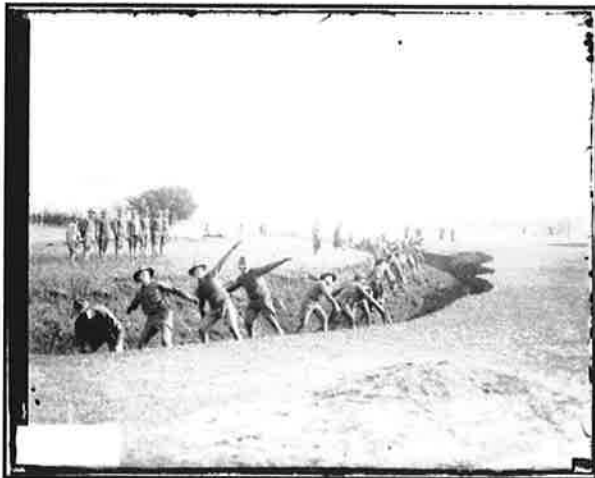
By mid October 1918, the flu was widespread, not only in the military camps but also throughout the civilian population.

“Chicago, Oct 15 - The results of a statewide survey by telegraph of every Illinois community of 1,000 population or over, given out here tonight by Dr. C. St. Clari Drake, director of the state department of public health, show that 227 cities and towns in Illinois have been hit by the epidemic of Spanish influenza. The number of cases reported in these communities is 55,725 of which 17,943 are in Chicago, and 7,782 down state. There have been 2,264 deaths from influenza and pneumonia in Chicago and 491 in the down state communities which have been reported.

Peoria reports 10,000 cases and Rockford 6000. In Peoria two emergency hospitals have been equipped, and in Rockford, medical help has been loaned from Camp Grant, where the epidemic is rapidly being brought under control.”

Henry News Republican, Henry, Illinois
October 17, 1918

After Vic recovered from the flu, he was assigned to the Rockford Emergency Hospital, where he was instructed to make himself useful. Vic was soon feeding babies and making beds “as neatly and as fast as any woman on the ward”.



By November 10, 1918 Vic was back in Camp Grant writing to the Patriot about his experiences, and the camp had resumed its primary function of training replacement troops for the war.

Just a day after Vic wrote his letter, the war ended. The Armistice was signed by Germany on November 11, 1918 with the end of fighting at 11 am. With no need to continue training replacement troops, Victor was allowed a holiday furlough in Carrollton in late December before being discharged from the army January 6, 1919.

Epilogue

After Victor's discharge from the Army, he returned home to married life. Vic and Violet raised a healthy family of 2 daughters and a son.

All of Pop and Vi's children and grandchildren experienced Grandma Vi's complete and total faith in the curative power of Vicks VapoRub. Grandson Alan Clark put it this way:

“Something all grandchildren and their friends quickly learned at Vi's house was not to sneeze or cough. At the first sign of any illness (real or imagined) she would bring out the biggest jar ever made of Vicks VapoRub. She believed if you used enough, it would kill every germ known to man. Just before bedtime....she would coat your chest and back. Then generous amounts up the nose and under the eyes to promote sleep. You had to close your eyes to keep the fumes from burning your eyes.”



Why did Vi have so much trust in Vick's VapoRub? And what does this have to do with the 1918 flu epidemic? Maybe this article published several times during the height of the flu epidemic in the fall of 1918 in the East St. Louis Journal can explain:

“In order to stimulate the lining of the air passages to throw off the grip germs, to aid in loosening the phlegm and keeping the air passages open, thus making the breathing easier, Vicks VapoRub will be found effective....VapoRub should be rubbed in over the parts until the skin is red, spread on thickly and covered with two thicknesses of hot flannel clothes. Leave the clothing loose around the neck as the heat of the body liberates the ingredients in the form of vapors. These vapors, inhaled with each breath, carry the medication directly to the parts affected..”

A simple salve embraced during a medical emergency, Vicks VapoRub never let Vi down. Even though there is no medical proof that VapoRub will cure a cold or prevent influenza, the shared experience of being “Vicksed” has become a part of our family history.

Sources:

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