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## **Prelude to the Great War** ***No Slackers in Madison County***

### **Part 1**

**Jacquelyn Procter Reeves**

On June 28, 1914, Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, Sophie, were assassinated in Sarajevo. Their murders established a chain of events that would change the world. Six assassins – members of the Bosnian Mlada Bosna nationalist group – planned the attack, but nearly failed when a grenade tossed at the car Ferdinand and Sophie were riding in, missed the mark. The grenade exploded, leaving the archduke unharmed. Others were injured, however, and taken to the nearest hospital. Ferdinand and his wife went to the hospital to express their concerns to the wounded. As they left the hospital, a wrong turn put their car back into the path of an assassin and this time, Gavrilo Princip did not hesitate. He shot Ferdinand in the neck and Sophie in the abdomen. They died soon after. In retaliation, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia one month later and began an invasion. As other countries chose sides, a domino-effect ensued. Other countries were invaded, leading to other declarations of war, and the end result became known as the Great War, the World War, and still later, World War I.

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On May 7, 1915, a German U-boat sank the *RMS Lusitania*, a British passenger ship with 128 Americans on board. On behalf of the United States, President Woodrow Wilson promoted a non-intervention policy, but demanded that Germany not attack or interfere with passenger ships. Germany, however, did not heed the international law regarding restricted submarine warfare, even though it meant the U.S. could make good on the threat to declare war.

A message was sent from the German Foreign Minister to Mexico. On behalf of Germany, the foreign minister promised that if Mexico would ally with Germany and take up arms against the United States, Germany would provide financial backing to help Mexico recover the Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona territories. The message was intercepted, however, and President Wilson ordered that it be released to the public. The effect was exactly as the president had intended. American citizens were outraged. There was yet a final straw, German submarines sank seven U.S. merchant ships and the message was clear – Germany would not heed the president’s many warnings.

On April 2, 1917, President Wilson petitioned Congress for a declaration of war. On April 6, the U.S. Congress declared war on Germany. The front page of the *Huntsville Mercury* ran a story entitled “Lane Tells Why We Are in the War Now.” Secretary of War Franklin Lane was asked by reporters why America was obligated to fight the war in Europe.<sup>1</sup>

“She is at war to save herself with the rest of the world from the nation that has linked itself with the Turks and adopted the method of Mahomet.”<sup>2</sup> While the quotation was intended to rally the citizens of the United States, the newspaper article is somewhat confusing. The Secretary of War under President Woodrow Wilson was Newton D. Baker, while Franklin Lane was Secretary of the Interior.

America, and therefore Alabama, was about to go to war. The lucky men of conscription age were those between the ages of 21 and 31. A local newspaper ran a story that boasted, “North Alabama Boys are not Slackers, according to reports.” The story went on to explain that many patriotic Alabamians had enlisted early. They would not wait for a mandatory draft.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Huntsville Mercury*, Tuesday, June 17, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Huntsville Mercury*, Monday, May 7, 1917, p. 1.

The Selective Service Act was passed on May 18, 1917. It allowed the President to temporarily increase the size of the military for the duration of the war. The Selective Service System was tasked with choosing the men who would be inducted and ensure they would be transported to the appropriate training camps.<sup>4</sup>

One problem that had not been anticipated was that American manufacturers did not yet have enough khaki cloth to create the uniforms that were needed. "The first ten thousand may have to drill as in the days of '76," the newspaper reported.<sup>5</sup> Dye used for transforming white cloth had almost universally come from Germany before the war. American soldiers had worn khaki uniforms in the Spanish-American War and decided to continue to do so. British soldiers learned that khaki colored uniforms made them less conspicuous (in contrast with their red uniforms worn in the American Revolution) and smokeless gunpowder was less messy on their uniforms. More importantly, smokeless powder did not immediately give their location away to the enemy.

The war would affect more than the obvious. A prediction was made by a woman from Denver. She said that the long war would allow women to "rid themselves of dangerous troublesome skirts." Women, she said, would soon be wearing pants!<sup>6</sup> While her prediction didn't come to pass immediately, the style of women's dresses was greatly influenced by military uniforms.

National Registration Day was set for June 5, 1917. All men of conscription age, including those in prisons, were required to register. Patriotic speeches and the singing of "America The Beautiful" at the Madison County courthouse would inspire young men who could register at the courthouse or at their voting precinct. Two local brothers, Stanley McKee and Gus McKee had

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/ww1/draft-registration/>

<sup>5</sup> *Huntsville Mercury*, Monday, May 7, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

already enlisted.<sup>7</sup> Gus was reported to be on his way to France after he had qualified as an “aeroplane” machinist.<sup>8</sup>

The McKee brothers weren’t the only Huntsville men anxious to get into the fray. The *Huntsville Mercury* printed the names of the first to enlist as reserve officers. Among them were W. H. Blanton, Homer T. Baker, Edward Betts,<sup>9</sup> Harry and Charles Landman, Walter Wellman, and Reavis O’Neal.<sup>10</sup> These men would receive \$100 per month and be sent to Chattanooga to train. It was expected that 1/3 of those men who enlisted would be rejected during the first examination based on mental or physical disabilities.

Those who intentionally refused to register for the draft could face prison time – six to twelve months in prison. In addition, their names would appear in the newspaper, identified as slackers.<sup>11</sup>

There was no shortage of encouragement for young men to remember to register on June 5. As the day grew closer, other events were lined up to generate enthusiasm among the local citizens. It was also dubbed Red Cross Day and local housekeepers were reminded to donate jars of home-grown fruits and vegetables to be sold for the war cause. Tents were to be set up at the Madison

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<sup>7</sup> *Huntsville Mercury*, Tuesday, May 29, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Gus McKee is listed in the 1910 census as a wallpaper hanger, living with his parents, James and Vennie McKee on Meridian Street. He is listed in the 1920 census as a garage mechanic (Ancestry.com). No information can be found on Stanley McKee. It is not known if he survived the war.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Chambers Betts wrote one of our most important history books while he was only 18 years old: “Early History of Huntsville, Alabama, 1804 to 1870.” In WWII, he served as Judge Advocate General, reporting to General Dwight D. Eisenhower. He organized the war trials at Nuremburg, but died unexpectedly in Frankfurt, Germany of a heart attack on May 6, 1946, before the trials were concluded. He was inducted into the Alabama Men’s Hall of Fame in 1997.

<sup>10</sup> *Huntsville Mercury*, Friday, May 11, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Huntsville Mercury*, Tuesday, May 29, 1917, p. 1.

County courthouse and there was a promise that “attractive young girls” would serve lemonade and sandwiches.<sup>12</sup>

On Tuesday, June 5, young men from all over the country took their place in line. Registration Day came and went and it was pronounced a success. It was reported that more than 10,000,000 men registered, and in American cities where there were large foreign populations, the turnout was especially heavy for those who were foreign-born or first generation Americans.<sup>13</sup> In Madison County alone, there were 4,275 registrants; 1,545 were Negro, 2,730 were white.

On a Navajo reservation in Arizona, American patriotism was nowhere to be found. The officials sent to oversee the registration process were forcibly removed from the reservation.<sup>14</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, a large number of men and boys, too young or too old, tried to sign up in other cities by lying about their ages.

As the American Doughboys (“Sammies” as they were called by Europeans as a nod to our symbol of patriotism, Uncle Sam), prepared to fight for the cause, Germany’s leaders were beginning to worry. On the one hand, they felt our men couldn’t possibly be ready to fight in any reasonable amount of time, however they hoped to wrap up the war before American ships began to arrive, just in case.

Seemingly small details were having a huge impact in the strangest places. Captain Balhurst, the assistant to the British food controller was quoted as saying, “Bread, not bullets may decide conflict. War bread is almost a complete human food and when combined with butter or margarine, it is a complete human food. That cannot be said of anaemic loaf with which we were all too familiar in the pre-war days.” He went on to ask that all ingredients used to produce beer go to make bread for our soldiers.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> *Huntsville Mercury*, Wednesday, June 6, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Huntsville Mercury*, Sunday, June 17, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Huntsville Mercury*, Monday, May 21, 1917, p. 1.

The cost of food soared in Germany as more food was needed to feed the army.<sup>16</sup> Americans felt the pinch too. The price of bread doubled as wheat became scarce and U.S. citizens were asked to have one “wheatless” meal per day.<sup>17</sup> While the article encouraged housewives to use a substitute for wheat, no suggestions were made.

The *Huntsville Mercury* listed names of financial donors – individuals and companies who supported the Doughboys. It served the war effort well. Other companies boasted that they also had workers who had enlisted to fight, and public bragging served as excellent advertising for those companies. Lists of donors and volunteers soon filled the papers. Other lists would be printed as well, according to the *Mercury*. “Slackers” who had not registered as required, would have their names published on “roll of infamy.”<sup>18</sup>

Also listed were the national draft numbers as they were drawn.<sup>19</sup> Madison County was required to send 410 men in the first round of draftees. The first five Madison County men whose numbers were drawn were: Henry McGee, Eddie Suggs, Charlie Bible, Milton Herd, and Shelly Alexander.

Still, there were items for the society page in addition to world and local news in the newspaper. One story suggested a resolution to the problem of speeders. If the speedometer on a racing automobile reached 15 miles per hour, a white bulb would light up on the radiator. If the car reached 25 miles per hour, a green bulb would light up. At 40 miles per hour, a red bulb would light, but if

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<sup>16</sup> *Huntsville Mercury*, Monday, July 30, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Pruitt, Rancee', *Eden of the South A Chronology of Huntsville, Alabama 1805-2005*, Huntsville, Alabama: Huntsville-Madison County Public Library, 2005, p. 135.

<sup>19</sup> *Huntsville Mercury*, Monday, July 30, 1917, p. 1.

it went to 50 miles per hour, a music box underneath the driver's seat would begin to play, "Nearer My God to Thee."<sup>20</sup>

An advertisement that frequently appeared read, "Wanted Old False Teeth don't matter if broken, I pay 2 - \$15 per full set. Single and partial plates in proportion. Send by parcel post and receive check by return mail. F. Terl, 403 N. Wolfe Street, Baltimore, Maryland." Apparently, punctuation was casual and typographical errors were not uncommon.<sup>21</sup>

One prominent and important American from this period had spent some time in Huntsville. John "Black Jack" Pershing was a captain with the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, known as the Buffalo Soldiers, during the Spanish-American War. After the war, fought in Cuba in 1898, thousands of American soldiers came to Huntsville to recover from the effects of malaria. Major John Pershing – his rank at the time – temporarily resided in a house in the Twickenham Historic District while he was here.

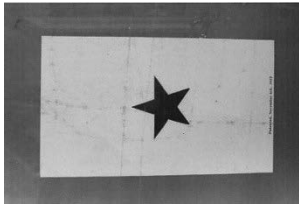
Pershing's military career continued after leaving Huntsville. He was sent to Ft. Bliss, Texas after an assignment at the Presidio in San Francisco. His wife and four children were in the process of leaving San Francisco to join him at Ft. Bliss when a fire in their home claimed the lives of his wife and three daughters. Only his son survived.

In 1916, only a few months after the tragedy, he led forces (which included men from Alabama) into Mexico in pursuit of Pancho Villa and his army after Villa's attack on Columbus, New Mexico. Villa had successfully escaped, only to be assassinated a few years later. Major General John Pershing and his men were called back into the U.S. to prepare for the U.S. involvement in World War I. Pershing was promoted to full general and President Woodrow Wilson named him Commander of the American Expeditionary Force.

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<sup>20</sup> *Huntsville Mercury*, Monday, May 7, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Huntsville Mercury*, Sunday, May 27, 1917, p. 1.



The flag with one star represents one family member in the service. This particular flag, presented to Nannie Hundley on behalf of her son, was discovered folded and wrapped around a handful of Confederate money inside a trunk in the Hundley home in Greenbrier, Alabama (Private collection of Jacquelyn P. Reeves.)

Nationally, over 4,000,000 men became soldiers and over 2,000,000 were sent to France for combat. In Alabama, about 74,000 men were inducted. The 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry of the Alabama National Guard was swallowed up into the 167<sup>th</sup> United States Infantry which became part of the 42<sup>nd</sup> “Rainbow Division.” Major Douglas MacArthur suggested that a division be formed from units taken from several states, which included 26 states and the District of Columbia, and that the group would “stretch over the whole country like a rainbow.”<sup>22</sup>

Camp Sheridan was established three miles north of Montgomery. It served as the temporary home of the 37<sup>th</sup> Division from Ohio, as well as the troops of the 4<sup>th</sup> Alabama Infantry. While a young lieutenant by the name of F. Scott Fitzgerald was stationed at Camp Sheridan, he met the daughter of an Alabama Supreme Court Justice, Zelda Sayre, who would eventually become his wife.<sup>23</sup>

From Camp Sheridan, the young men of Alabama were sent to Camp Mills, New Jersey to join the rest of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Division.

<sup>22</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/42nd\\_Infantry\\_Division\\_\(United\\_States\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/42nd_Infantry_Division_(United_States))

<sup>23</sup> Rogers, William Warren; Ward, Robert David; Atkins, Leah Rawls; Flynt, Wayne, *Alabama The History of a deep South State*, Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1994, p. 404, 405.

William Hundley, a resident of North Alabama, wrote a letter to his mother, Nannie Donnell Hundley before he shipped out.

"I will keep sober in all of my journey, and in the end, I will be a better man in every respect."<sup>24</sup> From there, the next stop was France. **HHS**



**William M. Hundley,  
Jr. private collection  
Jacquelyn P. Reeves**

### **Next issue, Part II – The Enemies: Germany and La Grippa**

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*short stories and nine book and has served as contributing writer to many others. Jacque lives in Huntsville.*

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<sup>24</sup> Gray, Jacquelyn Procter, *A Dry Dusty Wind*, United States: 1<sup>st</sup> Books Library, 2003, p. 188-189.