

Personal Memories

American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1940

February 16, 1939.

5 J. D. Washburn (white)

11 Southside Ave.,

Asheville, N. C.

Owner of tire shop

Douglas Carter, writer

10 EX-SOLDIER

"We didn't like being sent to a war that was already over, but there was nothing we could do about it - we had to go. Some of the boys talked recklessly about deserting, but nobody tried it. We were really mad, though, when we learned that what they called fighting units had been
15 taken off the ships and mustered out while we were on our way to France.

"Our outfit had been sent to Camp Mills, Long Island, to wait for sailing orders, and we were there when the false alarm came about the end of the war. No one was allowed any leave, and suddenly on the night of November 10, 1918, we were ordered to Hoboken, N. J., and we embarked
20 immediately on the Adriatic. Before daylight we heard a rumor that the sailing had been postponed, or cancelled, and then we heard about the Armistice. We didn't pay much attention at first, because it had only been a few days since the 'false armistice', and we weren't going to be sucked in again. You can bet we were tickled, though, when it finally seemed that
25 this one was the real thing! We could just see ourselves going home! But after a day at the dock - what do you suppose? - they sent us to France! We were a disgusted bunch, going over. Took us 14 days to reach Liverpool - we had a full convoy."

Don Washburn is talking. He operates a tire shop here, and is an ardent
30 American Legionnaire. He was born in an adjoining mountain county on June 29, 1893, the first of four children. [...] He attended the country school, and later a denominational junior college in the mountains. He left schools however, and went to Colorado "to seek his fortune." He had an aunt there, and an uncle, and lived for a time with the former. He tried
35 everything possible, including mining, ranching, and clerking. He was

never long in one place. "For 10 years, from 1912 to 1921, I was in a different State on New Year's Day, except 1919, when I was in France." He was about to decide on mining as a career when he was drafted. It was July 5, 1918, when he entered the Army, and he was first sent to Fort
40 Oglethorpe, Ga. Having been placed in a medical unit, he was transferred to the hospital at Camp McClellan, Anniston, Ala.

"It was called a 1,200-bed hospital, but during the flu epidemic we had more than 4,000 patients, on an average. We worked like dogs from about seven in the morning until the last patient of the day had been checked in
45 or out - usually about 10 o'clock that night. The men died like flies, and several times we ran out of boxes to bury them in, and had to put their bodies in cold storage until more boxes were shipped in. It was horrible."

"Did you get the flu?"

"No. They sprayed us two or three times a day with something, and very
50 few of us in the hospital unit got sick."

After about three months in Alabama, the unit was sent to New York, en route to France. Having arrived in Liverpool, the company went to an overnight camp near Birmingham.

"We were already sore at the whole world, and when we reached the tents
55 assigned us, there weren't even any cots to sleep on. We had to roll up in our blankets on the ground."

"Don, the boys in the trenches had a tough time, too," I said.

He replied, emphatically, "But the blasted war was over, and had been for two weeks. We should have been in the States! The next night, at Le
60 Havre, France, it was the same thing: no beds, no cots. And the next four days and nights we spent in those half-pint freight cars that are supposed to be big enough for eight horses or 40 men. At the end of four days we were only about 200 miles from Le Havre. Finally, though, we got off of the train, and my squad was quartered in a barn loft, full of hay. We were
65 fairly comfortable there, although we had no stove. There was no coal or wood to burn, anyhow; but the Army furnished us with plenty of clean straw and hay, and when we got too cold we could crowd into one of the small cafes in the town, which was close by.

"Each house there had a pile of manure in the front yard, and a man's
70 standing in the community depended on how big his pile was. The mayor had the largest pile.

"For many weeks we had nothing to do but play cards and try to keep warm. They had us drill a few times, though. By that time my outfit was known as Evacuation Hospital Company No. 32. Then one day we were
75 ordered out in full equipment, and all sorts of rumors flew around: we were going home; we were going to Germany; we were going to Paris; we were going here, and there, and everywhere. Actually, however, we marched about half a mile to Base Hospital No. 13, to relieve an outfit that had been ordered back to the States! We had real beds and better food,
80 then, and could keep warm without half trying. Best of all, we had work to do, and time began to pass faster - or so it seemed.

"Spring came, and then summer, and in no time at all we were back in New York. Still a private, I got my honorable discharge at Camp Lee, Va., on July 26, 1919, and went straight home. I hadn't seen my folks for years
85 - I was in the West when I went in the Army, and hadn't been home since I left for Colorado. It was sure good to be back in these mountains again. My father had done well, too, and had money in the bank.

[...]

For recreation, Don bowls in the winter, and fishes in the summer.
90 Whenever possible, he goes to the coast for salt-water fishing, and has become very adept. He *belongs to the* Chamber of Commerce, and is a deacon in the Presbyterian church, but the American Legion is really his extra-marital love: he never misses a meeting or a parade, is prompt with his dues, serves on nearly all committees, does Herculean work, and
95 always has a spotless uniform. He is very nearly the Perfect Member.

"What do you think about war, Don?"

"There ought not to be any. Well, unless somebody invades your country. Then you've got to fight."

"What about China, and Spain, and Ethiopia?"

100 "They're just darn fools in Spain. Whichever side wins, they all lose. They're fools for letting Hitler and Mussolini and the Russians ruin their country. I'll bet most of them have forgotten what they started fighting for. China and Ethiopia are different, and there ought to be some way to keep strong nations from invading weak nations, but not by war, except I don't
105 blame the weak nation for fighting. The League of Nations was supposed to handle things like that, I thought, but it turned out to be a flop. Let 'em fight, though, if they have to, so long as we can keep out of it. I didn't even

get to the World War until after it was over, but there wasn't anything about it I enjoyed, except getting back home."

110 [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/wpa:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(wpa226120310\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/wpa:@field(DOCID+@lit(wpa226120310)))