



ALICE ORME SMITH (1889-1980)

From the high drama of battlefield nursing to the creativity of landscape design, Alice Orme Smith's life spanned 91 years of courage, determination and accomplishments. Was it the bullets or madness of World War I (WWI) that persuaded young Alice Smith to turn from a first love of medicine to the beauty and art of landscape design? Whatever the reason, Smith made a difference in both careers.

Alice Orme Smith was born in Normal on February 26, 1889. Her mother and father, Dudley and Bernadine (Orme) Smith, were prominent citizens. Both her father and maternal grandfather were veterans of the U.S. Civil War. Her father was a friend of Abraham Lincoln and her grandfather served under General Ulysses S. Grant. She graduated from University High School in 1907 and from Smith College in Massachusetts in 1911. Then she trained as a nurse in New York City.

Returning to her family home in Normal, she joined the American Red Cross and served as the first secretary of the local chapter. WWI began in Europe in 1914, and many feared that the U.S. would eventually become involved. To make sure local citizens were prepared for war if it came, and to help in local disasters, local Red Cross chapters were being founded in many areas. Besides her Red Cross duties, Alice Smith also taught first aid and elementary surgical dressing classes at Brokaw hospital (now Advocate BroMenn Medical Center.)

On April 6, 1917, the United States entered WWI. Alice received word she was to report to New York to be mobilized for active duty. On May 23, her unit, known as Base Hospital No. 2, sailed from New York for France. The unit included 23 doctors and 65 nurses. One of the

doctors, Williard Soper, was also a former citizen of Bloomington. As Smith later described them, these base hospitals were mobile units that could easily be put together and taken apart as the medical teams stayed as close as possible to the actual fields of battle. These hospitals housed about 250 beds under numerous tents. They had their own sterilization and x-ray equipment. They even had the ability to distill water and generate their own electricity.

Alice Smith was involved in at least two major battles of WWI. Following the allied troops as they won or lost battles, the hospital was forced to relocate many times. Recalling her work during the Battle of Chateau Thierry in June of 1918, Smith remembered there were two or three air raids every night, and “the screams of the sirens and the noise of anti-aircraft guns added to the confusion.” During the battle, shells hit the hospital, killing multiple wounded soldiers as well as medical staff.

Later, Smith and her unit were sent to Verdun to assist those wounded in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, the costliest battle in terms of American lives lost. Forty percent of American lives lost in WWI were lost in this campaign. The last day of bitter fighting ended with the signing of the armistice on November 11, 1918. Smith’s unit received a commendation from General John Pershing, leader of the American troops, for the bravery under fire. Smith was also one of only 28 nurses to receive the Croix de Guerre, a French military decoration for bravery in the field of battle.

After the war, Alice Smith decided to change the direction of her life. She returned to Illinois and earned a master’s degree from the Armour Institute. This school today is known as Illinois Institute of Technology. It was founded to help men and women prepare for career in a changing industrial society by offering courses in engineering, chemistry and architecture. She then returned to Massachusetts to attend the Cambridge School of Architecture and Landscape Design from 1923-1925.

In 1932, Smith opened her own office in New York City before eventually establishing a practice in Fairfield, Connecticut. Her specialty was the creation and design of outdoor landscape and gardens. Her work included the designs for the Main Vista and the Garden of Religion at the 1939 World’s Fair in New York. She designed the landscaping at the American Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford, CT and the gardens at the Bridgeport Museum of Art, Science and Industry.

In 1973, Smith was awarded the Smith College Medal for “bringing men and nature into harmony in landscape.” The following year, she was elected a Fellow of the American Society of Landscape Architecture. It is interesting to think of the contrast between the battlefields of France in WWI and the harmony of landscape design in which she chose to spend the greatest part of her life.

Alice Smith died in Fairfield, CT, on April 4, 1980. She was returned to Bloomington, and buried in the Orme-Smith family plot at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

Discussion Question: Which of Alice Orme Smith’s two careers do you believe brought her the most satisfaction? Which made the most difference?