

Carolyn Schertz Geneva (1892-1992)

Carolyn Schertz Geneva was born on October 13, 1892 in Hudson, Illinois. She was the daughter of David and Carrie (Kaufman) Schertz. By 1900, the family had moved to Normal, IL and their home was located at the corner of Franklin and Virginia Avenues.¹ Little is known about Carolyn's early years before entering school to become a nurse.

Around 1911 Carolyn entered the Brokaw School of Nursing at Brokaw Hospital located in Normal, Illinois across the street from her house. The Brokaw School of Nursing was established in January of 1902 by the directors of Brokaw Hospital. Girls who attended the school were required to have at least one year of high school education before applying for admission. Candidates for the school were allowed to apply throughout the year with the ideal age of the candidates being between 20 and 35 years old. Women who applied were also required to answer a questionnaire, take a physical to make sure they were healthy, and submit a letter of reference from the candidates' pastor or clergyman that had known her for at least five years and who could attest to the character of the applicant.²

The school was geared towards women who were interested in becoming professional nurses. Training was very hands on with both practical and theoretical courses offered. The practical courses involved students actually caring for patients under the supervision of the Superintendent and her assistants. The theoretical courses involved students attending lectures given by hospital staff followed up by clinical instruction. The curriculum was for a three year term and fully complied with the State Registration Board for Nurses.³

After a two month long probationary period, candidates were accepted as pupils and began their training. Carolyn and the other students would have been expected to wear the school's uniform during their training which consisted of "a blue and white seersucker dress, white apron, cuffs, collar, and cap."⁴ The school provided Carolyn and her fellow nurses the materials for the uniforms. Students also received a monthly allowance of between \$4 and \$8 which increased as they progressed further in their training. If for some reason any of the girls dropped out of the school before finishing her training (aside from illness), "she must refund to the school such amount of money as may have been expended for her."⁵ Upon completion of all assignments, training and coursework, the women received their diploma and were able to begin a career as a nurse. Carolyn received her diploma in 1914.

After graduation Carolyn was made the head nurse for the surgical department at Brokaw Hospital. Her duties as a head nurse would have entailed overseeing the preparations before, during, and after surgery. This was going on at the same time when World War I began in Europe. The United States eventually joined the Allied Forces of Russia, Great Britain, France, and Italy, on April 6, 1917. However, prior to the official declaration of war by the U.S., people began to prepare for this inevitability and began training for war. In order to organize relief efforts, the newly founded Bloomington chapter of the American Red Cross sought to offer instruction classes to address the need for aid workers.

¹ 1900 U.S. Census, www.ancestry.com

² Lucinda McCray Beier. *A Matter of Life and Death*. (Bloomington, IL: The McLean County Historical Society, 1996)p.115-117

³ Beier, p.115-117

⁴ Beier, p.115-117

⁵ Beier, p.115-117

The Bloomington chapter of the Red Cross was founded in June of 1915. The idea for a Red Cross chapter in Bloomington was conceived of by Mrs. N.D. McKinney, president of the Bloomington Women's Club. She presented this idea to the officers of the Civic League. The Civic League was part of a national organization that worked to strengthen democracy through building healthy and prosperous communities. The ideals of the League paralleled that of the American Red Cross which would provide the League with the fundamentals for community improvement. The creation of the chapter was less than a year after World War I began and it was probably founded out of the concern that local citizens would need to be prepared should the U.S. enter war. It also was founded out of the desire to create a relief effort when local disasters occurred. In times of severe weather or other unfortunate tragedies, the Red Cross would be there to raise money and attend to medical needs. The idea for a local chapter was met with approval so a committee was named to take all the necessary steps to begin forming the organization. Members were recruited from all walks of life in the Bloomington-Normal community and once enough members were secured, the first meeting was held at Withers Public Library later that year to finalize the charter for the organization.⁶

On February 19, 1917 the Hospital Department of the Red Cross was founded to help address the need for aid workers. Carolyn was one of the supervisors of the new department and would be in charge of training new aid workers.⁷ One of the classes she taught for the Red Cross was in surgical dressing. The Red Cross sent her to Chicago, Illinois in March of that year to receive training on the subject. When she returned, she held her first class with 20 women enrolled to learn how to prepare surgical dressings. The class was a success and there was so much interest from other local women to take the class that more classes were offered on the subject. Carolyn taught four classes total in the summer of 1917 and several other classes were taught by other qualified instructors. In all, a total of eleven classes were taught and 185 women finished the course and were "qualified as supervisors to teach" other volunteer workers how to make surgical dressings.⁸

Carolyn not only helped with the Red Cross's war relief effort, but she also assisted in local disaster relief too. In May of 1917 the Bloomington chapter was called upon for the first time since it was organized to respond to a local emergency. On Saturday, May 26, a tornado swept through the towns of Mattoon and Charleston, Illinois. The Bloomington Red Cross sent three nurses to help injured residents of the area. One of the three was Carolyn. Carolyn and the other nurses took the necessary funds and supplies to complete their first task. Carolyn and another nurse, Miss Yarp, remained in the devastated towns for three weeks while other nurses were recruited to replace them.⁹

In August of 1917, Carolyn answered the call of duty and entered an Army Medical Unit during World War I. She and two other nurses from Brokaw Hospital joined up and went to Springfield, Illinois to begin training. In an interview by *The Pantagraph* later in her life Carolyn recalled her early days as an Army nurse. She stated that her unit was organized as "Unit W, a small field unit with about 12 doctors, 25 nurses, and 50 enlisted men."¹⁰ After training in Springfield, she and her unit were sent to New York and then to Halifax, Nova Scotia,

⁶ "Shows Power of United Efforts," *Daily Pantagraph*, October 27, 1917

⁷ "Shows Power of United Efforts"

⁸ E.E. Pierson and J. L. Hasbrouk *McLean County, Illinois, in the World War 1917-1918* (Bloomington, IL: McLean County War Publishing Co., abt. 1920) p. 134-135

⁹ Pierson and Hasbrouk, p. 142

¹⁰ Jackie Detweiler, "WWI Nurse still Serving Vets," *The Pantagraph*, September 20, 1981

Canada to form a convoy with Canadian ships. She recalled “there were 12 ships in all and an escort. We never knew where we were headed. We got in to submarine trouble two days before we landed in Liverpool, England.”¹¹ Upon safely making it to shore, they boarded a train to London. While on route, her train was stopped because of an air raid. Carolyn remembered that “the windows on the train were broken and people got shattered glass in their hair.”¹² Later, Carolyn was put in charge of surgery in tents at Knotty Ash on England’s West Coast. Her unit was stationed there for nearly six months before moving into buildings. She remembered that her time working in the tents was at times interesting. “Things happened,” she recalled. “It was the rainy season and you had to have an umbrella at all times. Sometimes the lights weren’t on and things like that. Otherwise, life went on the same as in any other camp.”¹³

When the United States entered World War I there were 403 nurses on active duty, with 170 in reserve on army bases. By 1918 there were 12,186 nurses on active duty serving at 98 stations worldwide. Army nurses were not commissioned officers but appointed to serve in Army field hospitals. This sometimes caused nurses difficulties in that their lack of officer’s status caused Army medics to refuse to accept the nurse’s authority. However, after the War Congress showed their appreciation to those nurses who served by giving them officer’s status by offering “Relative Rank,” which meant that while they now could hold the ranks of Lieutenant, Captain, Major, etc... they would receive less pay and have less authority as their male counterparts with the same rank.¹⁴ Another honor bestowed upon some nurses who served during the War was that many were awarded numerous medals including the Distinguished Service Cross. It is not known whether Carolyn received any medals for her service.

While no nurses died in combat because of enemy actions, two hundred died because they contracted influenza or pneumonia. Most contracted these deadly diseases while caring for soldiers stricken by these illnesses in crowded army posts and hospitals. Carolyn was one of those nurses who were afflicted with the flu which then turned into pneumonia. After suffering from both these illnesses, she was left with a heart condition which forced the Army to relieve her of active duty. In April of 1919 she was transferred to the United States Embassy Hospital in New York City where she received treatments for her condition. She was then transferred to the U.S. General Hospital at Ft. Sheridan, near Chicago, Illinois where she remained until June of that year when she was allowed to return to Bloomington until her official discharge from the military on August 4, 1919.¹⁵

Back in Bloomington, Carolyn joined the local American Legion Post on September 19, 1919. Carolyn, along with other war nurses, were among the first to join. Also, Carolyn’s future husband, William B. Geneva, was the first historian elected to the Post. As many men and women returned from War, posts were organized throughout McLean County.

The idea of the American legion came together by a group of United States Army officers in February 1919 in Paris, France. They met to discuss the return of soldiers and their reclamation to civilian life. After the three day meeting of representatives from large Army units, both officers and enlisted men, the American Legion was created. Locally, the State of Illinois held a convention in Peoria in October of that year where delegates for the Legion were appointed. The Illinois delegates attended the first national meeting of the American Legion in

¹¹ Detweiler, “WWI Nurse still Serving Vets.”

¹² Detweiler, “WWI Nurse still Serving Vets.”

¹³ Detweiler, “WWI Nurse still Serving Vets.”

¹⁴ “The Army Nurse Corps,” Army.com 2010, <http://www.army.mil/women/nurses.html> (13 September 2010)

¹⁵ Geneva-Schertz Collection, MCHS archives

Minnesota on November 10, 1919. At this conference, policies were outlined, officers elected, and Indianapolis was nominated to become the national headquarters. The Legion also wrote its own constitution with preamble which included promises such as helping the community, preserving war memories, and serving God and country.¹⁶

The Bloomington chapter was organized by Mr. Thomas Fitch Harwood who was selected as a delegate to the first Legion caucus (a meeting held to decide policies, actions, etc..) held in St. Louis, MO. He called on other service men from McLean County to accompany him to the meeting. In St. Louis, they outlined a temporary constitution for the local post. Upon returning to Bloomington, a meeting was called of former service people on June 23, 1919 at the McLean County court house. An application for a charter was signed and the post was named the "Louis E. Davis" Post. Davis, who was the first man of his class to become a reserve military aviator, died on May 10, 1918 while completing a bombing course in preparation for overseas service. By 1920 the membership had grown to 700 members and included every nurse of the county who had served during World War I. Meetings were first held in the McLean County Courthouse and then moved to the new club rooms at 309 North Main Street by 1920.¹⁷ The Post still exists today.

On April 7 1921 Carolyn married William B. Geneva of Bloomington. In what was described by *The Pantagraph* as a "war romance," the wedding was held at the American Legion Post they both belonged to, located on North Main Street. They were married by Rev. W.B. Hindman, the chaplain of the Post. William was a graduate of Illinois Wesleyan University in 1911 and of the Law School at IWU in 1917. He then received a B.E. degree from Illinois State Normal University two years later. After graduation, he was commissioned as an officer in the U.S. Army and served overseas for one year. At the time of their marriage, he was the principal of the Community High School in McLean, Illinois. The couple moved to McLean after their wedding trip where William would serve as superintendent of schools.¹⁸

Six years later, while Carolyn, William, and their oldest daughter were living in Stockton, IL (where he served as principal of the high school there), William died after a tragic boating accident. On May 17, 1927 William was attending the annual senior picnic for Stockton High School. He was on a boat with two senior girls when they lost control of the boat they were in. The boat drifted towards the dam. "Geneva shouted to the girls to jump, but a moment later, the boat went over the dam, carrying the trio with it."¹⁹ While William and one girl swam to safety, the other girl was still in the water struggling for her life. William jumped back in and swam towards her in an attempt to rescue her. Unfortunately, the two drifted into the whirlpool below the dam where they both drowned.²⁰ William and the pupil he attempted to rescue were remembered at a ceremony in Stockton months later where a clock was dedicated and placed in the school where he had taught.²¹ He passed away before he and Carolyn's second daughter was born. Carolyn and her daughters, Helen and Bette Lou, then moved to Normal, IL and she never remarried.

At the outbreak of World War II she went back to work as a nurse at Brokaw Hospital where she continued to work on and off for twenty years as house supervisor, overseeing the

¹⁶ Pierson and Hasbrouk, p. 273-281

¹⁷ Pierson and Hasbrouk, p. 273-281

¹⁸ "Miss Schertz is Bride of Today," *The Pantagraph*, September 7, 1921

¹⁹ "William Geneva Drowned Tuesday," *The Daily Pantagraph*, May 18, 1927

²⁰ "William Geneva Drowned Tuesday."

²¹ "Man Who Died Trying to Save Girl is Honored by People of Stockton," *The Pantagraph*, January 22, 1928

operations and nurses of the Brokaw Nursing Home. She was also the overwhelming choice to receive the first Employee of the Year award for Brokaw Hospital on August 24, 1964.²² She retired from her long nursing career in the late 1960s.

Carolyn Schertz Geneva died at the age of 99 on January 19, 1992. She had lived the last eight years of her life at Heritage Manor Nursing Home in Normal, IL. Carolyn led an exciting and honorable life. She was the embodiment of strength and determination. Over her lifetime she was a member of Wesley United Methodist Church; Bloomington Chapter No. 50 of the Order of Eastern Star; American Legion and Women's Auxiliary at Louis E. Davis Post 56; and of the Bloomington chapter of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Carolyn Geneva is buried next to her husband, William Geneva, at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, IL.²³

By : Emily Swartz, 2011

²² "Mrs Geneva Wins Top Brokaw Award," *The Pantagraph*, August 24, 1964

²³ "Carolyn Geneva," *The Pantagraph*, January 23, 1992