Carolyn Schertz Geneva (1892-1992)

The twentieth century has sometimes been called the bloodiest century. It saw many great scientific advances—some in the field of weaponry and warfare, others in medicine and the art of healing. Carolyn Schertz Geneva experienced both as a nurse in the United States Army during the Great War, which we know as World War I today.

She was born Carolyn Schertz in Hudson, Illinois on October 13, 1892. She grew up while living on Franklin and Virginia Avenues in Normal. About 1911, Geneva entered the Brokaw School of Nursing at Brokaw Hospital located just across the street from her home. Brokaw Hospital established its school of nursing just nine years earlier in 1902.

To be admitted to the school, a girl had to have at least one year of high school, be physically and mentally fit, and be recommended by a church pastor who had known her for at least five years. Training began after a two-month probationary period and continued for three years of full time work and study. A student's uniform consisted of a blue and white dress with white apron, cuffs, collar, and cap. The hospital provided the material for the uniforms, and paid the students a monthly allowance of $4 to $8 dollars (which today would be the equivalent of $100 to $200 dollars) on their experience. Upon graduation, students were certified by the State Board for Nurses and were ready to begin their careers. Geneva graduated in 1914 and after graduation she was made head nurse for the surgical department at Brokaw Hospital. Her duties in this job were overseeing the preparations for before, during, and after surgery of patients.

The year she graduated was the same year World War I began in Europe. Although the United States did not enter the war until April 6, 1917, the Federal Government began to prepare relief efforts for those affected by the war, and for the United States' eventual involvement. A local chapter of the Red Cross was founded in Bloomington in 1915. In 1917, the National Red Cross decided that one way it could help relief efforts was to offer instruction classes to train more **aid workers**. To do this, the Red Cross developed the Hospital Department. Geneva became one of the supervisors in charge of training new aid workers. After receiving additional training in Chicago, she returned to Bloomington to teach classes in the preparation of **surgical dressings**. Surgical dressings differ from bandages in that dressings are applied directly to the wound to promote healing and to prevent further harm. A bandage is often times applied over a dressing to hold the dressing in place. The classes were a big success and Geneva taught four of them the summer of 1917.

In May of 1917, the Bloomington chapter of the Red Cross responded to its first local emergency when a tornado struck the towns of Mattoon and Charleston in eastern Illinois. Geneva and two other nurses went to help. They took with them the necessary funds and supplies to aid the victims of the **devastation**. Geneva and another nurse stayed there for three weeks caring for the injured.

Perhaps this experience affected her decision to answer the call of duty and join the Army Medical Unit in August of that year. Geneva and two other Brokaw nurses enlisted and were sent to Springfield, Illinois for training. From there they were sent to New York City, then on to Halifax, Nova Scotia in Canada, and finally by Canadian ship **convoy**, to England. Geneva later reported that their ship ran into "submarine" trouble in the German **U-boat** infested waters around Great Britain. They did land safely in Liverpool where they boarded a train for London. While on route, the train experienced an **air raid**. Geneva remembered that "the windows on the train were broken and people got shattered glass in their hair."

Geneva was part of Unit W, a small field unit with about 12 doctors, 25 nurses, and 50 enlisted men. The unit was stationed at Knotty Ash on England's west coast. For the first six months Unit W was there, the hospital functioned in tents. Geneva was put in charge of the surgery tents. Later she remembered, "It was the rainy season. You had to have an umbrella at all times. Sometimes the lights weren't on and things like that."

When the United States entered WWI, there were 403 **active duty** Army nurses. At the end of the war, there were over 12,000 serving worldwide. No nurses died in combat during the war, but 200 did die of influenza or pneumonia. Geneva did get the flu, probably from working with patients at the hospital. It led to pneumonia, which developed into heart disease and her eventual **discharge** from the army in August 1919. It was during this time the entire world was stricken by the **Influenza Pandemic of 1918-19**, which eventually killed an estimated 20 to 40 million people worldwide.

Back in Bloomington, Geneva and other army nurses were among the first to join the newly established **Louis E. Davis** American Legion Post #56 in Bloomington. Her future husband, William Geneva, was post historian. On April 7, 1921, Carolyn and William were married after what *The Pantagraph* described as a "war romance." They were married at Post #56 the Post Chaplain. A graduate of both Illinois Wesleyan and Illinois State Normal Universities, William served as superintendent of schools while the couple was living in McLean after they got married.

The couple later moved to Stockton, Illinois, where Geneva's husband became principal of the high school. Six years later, William died in a tragic boating accident at the annual senior picnic. William was canoeing with two girls when they lost control of the boat and went over a dam. Although he and one student swam to shore safely, William went back to help the other girl who was struggling. Both were caught in a whirlpool and drowned.

William and Carolyn had two daughters, the second born shortly after William's death. Carolyn returned to Normal to raise her children and she never remarried.

After the United States entered World War II in December 1941, Geneva returned to nursing at Brokaw Hospital. She continued to work there off-and-on for 20 years. She was the overwhelming choice to receive the first "Employee of the Year" award from Brokaw Hospital in 1964. She retired in the 1960s but remained active in the community. She was a member of Wesley United Methodist Church in Bloomington, the Eastern Star, the American Legion, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Carolyn Schertz Geneva died at the age of 99 on January 19, 1992. She lived the last 8 years of her life at Heritage Manor Nursing Home in Normal. She is buried next to her husband in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

Discussion Question: Which time as a nurse do you believe brought Geneva the most satisfaction? Which made the most difference?