

SIXTY YEARS OF RED CROSSING

BY

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Note: Occupants of buildings cited are as of May, 1977.

The Arlington Red Cross Chapter has lived a very interesting history for threescore years. We should pause and share some of it on this, our sixtieth anniversary. The beginning was very unostentatious and humble in a community which was composed of small villages separated by farm lands. We were a rather rural area.

In 1917, as now, we had some spunky women in our County who felt it was high time we had a Red Cross Chapter. They were not encouraged in their efforts. In fact, the antithesis ruled the day. They were advised that it was almost impossible to organize a chapter in such a community. But those who gave the sour note did not reckon with the hardy souls residing in our area.

Mrs. C. H. Greathouse of Ft. Myer Heights, quite a personage in her day, tried to get permission for a chapter. She was unsuccessful in two visits to the Washington Headquarters. But along came a small woman with flashing brown eyes, endless energy and pep by the name of Mrs. J. N. Steed. She was a woman who did not recognize the word "quit." She hounded the people in Washington until she got what she wanted — a commitment. She brought back the story that should the County persuade 200 people to "join up" as members, a charter for a chapter would be granted to Alexandria County. In those days, that was the name of our County. It was officially changed to Arlington County by an act of the State Legislature in 1920.

When one considers how difficult it is today to get 200 people to sign up for anything, it is small wonder that this goal was thought to be impossible of attainment by most in 1917. But here again, the doubters did not reckon with that energetic, little lady with the flashing brown eyes. With the assistance of Mrs. Richard Sutton, Mrs. C. M. Rogers, Mrs. Clara L. Nevin, Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Porter and a few others, they organized a drive, and met on May 25, 1917 with a total paid membership of 495! They came from all over: 91 from Ballston, 42 from Barcroft, 128 from Clarendon, 24 from Arlington Heights, 23 from Rosslyn, 28 from Ft. Myer Heights and 159 from Cherrydale. Mr. Frank Lyon was the first Chapter Chairman and Mrs. C. M. Rogers was elected Chapter Secretary.

One of our organizers, Mrs. Steed, collected a bit of fame during the war. After the Chapter was organized, she craved an overseas assignment but

was turned down because of her age. She was fifty-two. That was nothing more than a challenge to the doughty Mrs. Steed. She arranged to have herself specifically requested by an overseas commanding officer. So she went to Dijon, France, as a canteen worker and became known as "Mother" Steed by thousands of soldiers serving in France. And small wonder: she loved them, wrote for them, counseled them and fed them well. When the G.I. rations became mundane, "Mother" Steed secured steaks and chops for "her boys." She found a local butcher in Dijon who wanted those American doughnuts very much. She simply made arrangements to furnish him doughnuts in return for the steaks and chops. So "Mother" Steed became something of an angel as well as "Mother" to her boys.

She lost the sight of one eye while serving in France. It became infected as she went into battle areas setting up canteens.

After the war, she continued to work harder than ever for the soldiers. She was Service Chairman of the Woman's Overseas Service League, was instrumental in providing the War Veteran's Home at 2626 Pennsylvania Avenue in the District and, typically, operated "Mother Steed's Dugout" for a while at 11th Street and New York Avenue.

She received many decorations and citations including the meritorious service award from President Truman. Some of her awards can be seen at the National Red Cross Headquarters in Washington. Stories were written about her, poems written to her and thousands and thousands of letters came to her from "her boys" for many years after the war.

When World War II came along, "Mother" Steed went into her act. She founded and organized the area's most popular canteen — the Servicemen's Club No. 1 at Ninth Street and Pennsylvania Avenue — at the age of seventy-eight! There, she was hostess to many of the boys whose fathers she had served in France during the first World War.

"Mother" Steed lived with her husband, Joshua, in a simple two-story home perched on the crest of a hill in a grove of trees at what is now 5321 Fairfax Drive. It was in the vicinity of what was then Veitch Station. They had no children. She was born Emma Christian Baum of a family that settled in Georgetown in 1775.

She died on December 17, 1949 at the age of eighty-five. She was totally blind. County records show that Joshua conveyed the house and property on Fairfax Drive as "Joshua N. Steed, widower" on September 21, 1950.

Many a soldier took the memory and vision of the kindly "Mother" Steed to his grave.

In the year 1917, the Chapter met a few times at St. George's Parish Hall at Farlee. Members of a suffrage association opened their club rooms near the Court House for use by the new Red Cross Chapter for a few meetings. Then Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Porter, organizers and charter members of the Chapter, permitted the use of a room as headquarters in their home at 1050 N. Irving Street.

The Porters were something special. They came to Arlington in 1909 from Boston. He was a builder and owned a lumber yard somewhere in the County. She was very active in Red Cross and worked long hours helping the needy at Walter Reed Hospital and Ft. Myer. There were many tragic stories coming out of Ft. Myer. The Porters and the Red Cross, working together and separately, did much to help the boys. Very often the soldiers were crowded, ill, hungry and homesick. The Porters not only housed the tiny and growing organization, but also brought many a lonely soldier into their home. On many week-ends, Mrs. Porter would entertain as many as twenty-five to thirty soldiers for dinner! They remained actively interested in the Chapter for a number of years.

The Porter house at 1050 N. Irving Street is still standing. In those days it was known as 1 Clarendon Avenue. The old stucco house is in a rather dilapidated state and is used as storage for a similar building known as Collector's Corner Antiques at Wilson Boulevard and Irving Street.

Mr. Frank Lyon was elected the first Chapter Chairman in 1917. In 1918 Mrs. R. N. Sutton, mentioned above, became the Chapter Chairman and Mrs. C. M. Rogers, the first secretary, was elected Chapter Chairman in 1919. Mrs. Rogers served in that position from 1919 to 1933 — for longer than any other Chapter Chairman.

The war was in full swing in 1918, the Red Cross was needed, so the Chapter grew. Two rooms were rented somewhere in Clarendon — one for an office and one for preparing surgical dressings. By December, 1918 the Chapter was divided into three integral groups: Clarendon, Columbia and Washington-Cherrydale with a total of 1,019 members.

To earn money for material for hospital garments, some of the early enterprising Red Cross souls set up a refreshment stand at Ft. Myer at a railway station which was known as Hatfield. The railway agreed to furnish heat and light with the stipulation that at least two ladies be present all day for eighteen hours. There were requirements for the ladies including age, marriage and "plainness of features." The store was always crowded and averaged \$300 a month. That was a pretty tidy take in those days. In July, 1918, Uncle Sam stepped in and, since the store was on government property, turned it into a military post exchange.

In 1919 there were 1,500 Chapter members. The flu had hit the area rather badly and the Red Cross was organized to assist. It served whole families at hospitals or in individual homes. And Junior Red Cross had 100% membership in fifteen schools in the County.

Arlington Red Cross had its roots, its beginning and its history had begun.

The year 1937 found the Chapter headquartered at 2713 Wilson Boulevard. The first paid employee, a part-time Executive Director, Elizabeth Bray, was hired. She worked for the Chapter until 1941. She was

paid \$60 a month. The Wilson Boulevard address is now owned and occupied by the Square Deal Tuxedo Rentals.

The next year, 1938, the Chapter was housed in a one-story building at 2517 Wilson Boulevard. A visit to that address will bring one to Little Dell's Restaurant (off and on sales) where delicious Italian food is served and the proprietor is proud of it.

In 1939-1940 it was found necessary to acquire larger quarters and the Chapter moved to the upper floor of a small, box house at 1640 N. 16th Street. It was on the corner of 16th Street and Court House Road. The house has been demolished and the address has disappeared. On the spot today is Lum's Restaurant with a Court House Road address.

The Chapter Headquarters next moved to 1207 N. Highland Street in 1941. It was a small house just back of the old Yeatman's Hardware Store, which was the corner of N. Highland Street and Wilson Boulevard. The place where the house once stood has become a small parking space for office employees. In that year we hired our first full-time employee, Carolyn Moran, as our second Executive Director. She remained with the Chapter until 1947 and is presently with the American Red Cross National Headquarters in Washington. She wrote a beautiful account of her stewardship with the Arlington Chapter when she left.

In 1942 the Chapter moved into what was then thought to be spacious quarters at 4224 Wilson Boulevard. It was the home of a well-known Arlington citizen, Dr. Williamson Crothers Welburn. In 1912 Dr. Welburn bought an old farm at Glebe Road and Georgetown Road (now Wilson Boulevard) and built his home. At one time, he had an office, pharmacy, ice cream parlor, railway waiting station and post office in a store on the corner of Fairfax Drive and Ballston Avenue (now N. Stuart Street). His wife made ice cream and syrups for the ice cream parlor and served as Postmistress of Ballston. The homeplace on Wilson Boulevard was right in the middle of Ballston, which was first called Birch's Crossroads and later, Ball's Crossroads, and was the County's earliest hamlet. Mrs. Welburn was interested in our Red Cross Chapter and served on the Board of Directors from 1939 through 1941.

Dr. Welburn was the founder of the Arlington County Medical Society and its first president. The Society gives an annual "Welburn Award" for outstanding contributions in medicine or related fields. The good doctor was also a co-founder of the medical staff of Arlington Hospital. He served as Medical Examiner of Arlington County for 30 years. He called himself a "horse and buggy" doctor in the early years of his practice, but, he was one of the best known and most highly regarded physicians in the history of the County. He died in 1956 at the ripe age of eighty-nine "still practicing medicine."

When the Welburns moved to another home at 3408 N. Glebe Road,

they rented the old homestead to the Red Cross Chapter. It is now the site of the Hecht Co. and the Parkington Shopping Center.

The Chapter moved to two locations in 1944: across the street to 4213 Wilson Boulevard, now occupied by Cycles, Inc. (selling Honda, Yamaka and BMW), and to 927 N. Stuart Street, now part of a large, open space used as a work and storage area for the Metro subway operations.

In the same year, 1944, the Chapter moved to the Magruder Building at 2525 Wilson Boulevard, which was considered to be excellent office space. It is now occupied by insurance and real estate firms and is owned by the Cooper-Trent Company.

Then in 1947, the Chapter hired its third Executive Director, Louise Thornton, who remained in that position until her retirement nearly thirty years later. These were the transcendent years for the Chapter and, under the efficient management and effective direction of Miss Thornton, we grew, and grew and grew. If anyone stands tall in the history and growth of our Chapter since those tenuous times of the Steeds and the Porters of another day, it is Louise Thornton. Of course, the Chapter has been led by many outstanding men and women of our citizenry who served as volunteers, committee chairmen, board directors and chapter chairmen. But as many of us come and go, the strong continuity of the organization has been through Miss Thornton.

July 1, 1949 was a day to remember. On that day the Chapter moved into the present building — its very own. Our peripatetic organization had at last found a beautiful home. The half acre lot sold in 1948 for \$7,500 but the owner donated \$2,500 to the Red Cross, making our cost only \$5,000!

The first section of the building (3,200 sq. ft.) cost \$32,000 and the interest rate was only two percent! Six years later a second section (3,200 sq. ft.) was constructed at a doubled cost of \$64,000. Kenton Hamaker, our present treasurer, was the architect of both sections. Mr. W. W. McCollum was Chapter Chairman. To complete the homestead story, the Chapter bought another half acre lot in the back of the building in 1965 for \$20,000.

Norman E. (Bud) McKonly, Jr. came on board October 1, 1976 as the fourth Executive Director in the Chapter's history. He was previously Executive Director of the Prince William Chapter. To help him make the organization tick, there is a paid staff of eighteen (some are part-time) and a volunteer force of 1,195 (1976) working 102,000 hours serving 550,000 people in our community. (Obviously many of the "hours worked" represent repeat trips, i.e. transportation of the elderly for shopping purposes). Remember those 495 paid members "Mother" Steed and the Porters garnered for our beginning in May of 1917? Last year, 1976, we had an estimated paid membership of approximately 24,000.

For sixty years people such as these have worked at a rate of sixty minutes an hour to serve our servicemen, veterans and their dependents,

disaster victims, the mentally retarded, visually handicapped, hospital patients, those requiring blood, and the elderly in need of care. They have also given instructions in first aid, home nursing, mother and baby care, swimming, life saving and on and on.

Sixty years of service! What else could one possibly ask of an organization? Surely we must be thankful that the Red Cross is present, right now, in our community where we can reach out and actually touch it — or more aptly put — where it can reach out and touch us.

Thus, we all can be confident that looking back at sixty years confirms the future.