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# College Life During World War I

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College life during World War I

Grace Hevron

World at War/8:30 – 9:45

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World War I stands out in our nation's history as a war that was fought with honor and with dignity. When we read literature or study the events that surrounded the First World War we are swept away to a time that is very different from our own. This time period of honorable warfare and black – and – white ideology is no longer here but we as Americans still have a lot in common with those that fought in World War I. A college education is still a necessary commodity in 2014 and college students today face the same sorts of victories and dilemmas that those in the 1910s faced. However, in the years that led up to World War I, College students had important worldviews to discover. The average college student in 1917 had to make a decision. They had to decide whether to support the war and in turn had to decide what their role in the war effort would be. This “Great War” shaped these college students' lives and helped to foster in them a different viewpoint than the one held by their fathers or grandfathers. College educated students and namely, Ouachitians, held a unique outlook on the war than their predecessors and they demonstrated this through the publication of the Signal as their school newspaper.

In April 1917 the United States entered World War I. Up until this time, Woodrow Wilson had been pushing a doctrine of isolationism and was trying to keep the United States out of this violent war for as long as possible. Up until this time, the United States had been trading with the Entente solely and this could have been argued as a deviation from US neutrality. However, the United States also had many qualms with Britain that prevented them from completely supporting the Entente viewpoint. “In April, meanwhile, the United States had entered the war. In August 1914, President Woodrow Wilson had firmly proclaimed US neutrality, calling on Americans to be neutral in ‘thought’ as well as action.”<sup>1</sup> When the United

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<sup>1</sup> Tucker, Spencer. *The Great War, 1914-18*. London: UCL Press, 1998.

States entered the war in 1918 they ended a long isolationist tradition that had successfully kept them out of harm's way for the majority of the war. This idea of isolationism had been successfully engrained in the brains of Americans for many years prior to the start of the war. When they finally entered into the war it was with reluctance. "President Woodrow Wilson tried to avoid belligerency, instead attempting to mediate the conflict, itself a striking departure from the historic policy of isolation. When finally he joined the allies he did so, so that he could dictate the post – war settlement to all the other warring nations."<sup>2</sup> The Declaration of war occurred on April 6, 1917. This Declaration was a culmination of foreign policy movements that aligned the United States with the side of the Entente Powers.

One of the reasons behind the United States' entry into World War I on the side of the Triple Entente was the warfare that the Germans were engaging in against our undersea noncombatant and commercial submarines. When unrestricted submarine warfare became the norm for the Central Powers, American public opinion drastically flocked to the side of the Entente Powers. Woodrow Wilson tried to keep the public calm and to attempt a mediation of sorts, but the choice of intervention was the only plausible one after the violence against the United States and the new world order that was being established. Woodrow Wilson's decision to enter the United States into this Great War had a lasting impact on the future of warfare in the country and on every conflict that the United States has engaged in since.

College students made up a significant percentage of the male population that was eligible to go to war. For this reason, the college students' story is worth telling during this tense time in United States History. The Americans that have entered into a war while in University

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<sup>2</sup> Strachan, Hew. *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*. Oxford University Press Paperback ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

have always had to form an opinion on the world that they are entering. This world could be a violent one and it is up to the college student to prepare themselves for the possible consequences for their decision to support the conflict or fight against it.

In World War I the United States put into practice conscription of eligible males for military service. “The Selective Service Act of 1917 was the centerpiece of wartime citizenship and its defining obligation. America’s first mass draft reflected the state’s power at its most extreme – it demanded that its citizens die for it. The United States had always asserted the authority to coerce men into offering their lives for the nation-state. During the war, this basic premise – that political obligations implied military ones – went almost completely unchallenged, but Americans constantly tested its terms. Twenty – four million men and their families experienced a direct exercise of state power as they filled out their forms; they created new places for the federal government in their lives they sought to enlist, to be exempted, to obtain their military paychecks, or to enforce the draft against recalcitrant neighbors. At the same time, conscription created new categories of citizens: conscientious objectors, draft dodgers, veterans. As drafted men and their families interacted with military administrators – whether far off in Washington or closer to home, in the person of local selective service boards or volunteer draft police – they reworked the meanings of political obligation and the institutions where it was practiced.”<sup>3</sup> College students had to decide for themselves whether to back up their government or to fight against the forced conscription of Americans. They had to form their own opinions on the role of the government in their lives and had to decide whether to agree with the government’s decisions.

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<sup>3</sup> Capozzola, Christopher Joseph Nicodemus. *Uncle Sam Wants You: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

The Ouachita Signal was founded in 1917 and was transformed from the Ouachita Ripples publication into a full blown school paper. The name "Signal" was adopted to represent a signal that leads ships and vehicles out of peril. "The Ouachita Signal was suggested as being a[n] peculiarly appropriate name during the period of the World War. With the signal given battles are fought and victories are won. The signal of Napoleon's drummer boy snatched victory out of defeat. The signal toward which every loyal American today looks is the flag of the United States. It is a signal in our own land and in the lands of distant peoples, for democracy, justice and equal rights to all and of civil and religious liberty. So important is the signal that even the heathen natives of the earth have adopted them, some of them beautiful, some of them ugly; but the natives everywhere respect the signal. It is the embodiment of the sentiment of the whole people crystallized into a definite form. And after the war is over the world will have a new experience in every sort of activity. Then as never before will the signal be needed."<sup>4</sup> This is a powerful image during a very tumultuous time in Ouachita's history. Many different signals have been used to lead the United States out of times of turmoil, such as the American flag and the drummer boy in the time of battle, and the Ouachita Signal strove to be a sign for the students to look to during this time of great tension in the nation's history. "The Ouachita Ripples does not lose its personality but gains in strength and influence. It has the light of the Signal turned upon it and like a diamond (which has been taken from comparative obscurity and placed in a setting of the latest model the Signal's light will reveal a thousand beauties never known before.)"<sup>5</sup>

The Signal's outlook on the war was remarkable and immensely representative of the sentiment of the nation. It was a well-known fact that the general feeling of the United States

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<sup>4</sup> "The First Issue." Ouachita Signal, September 22, 1917, First ed., 6

<sup>5</sup> "The First Issue." Ouachita Signal, September 22, 1917, First ed., 6

was one of isolationism, but the utter disregard of the school paper on the subject of the war was somewhat unexpected. The war was mentioned as a passing subject and was not addressed in any real way until the United States had been established as part of the Entente powers for a while. Woodrow Wilson is lauded as the man of the hour in many of the articles written in the Signal. A lot of trust was being placed in this President, that he would lead us in a direction that would equal success for the United States. “Woodrow Wilson-that striking genius of the world-possessing as he does the patriotic vision of a Washington, the economic genius of an Alexander Hamilton, the constructive democracy of a Thomas Jefferson, the patient determination of an Abraham Lincoln...”<sup>6</sup> An interesting addition to the earlier issues of the paper during the war period was Rudyard Kipling’s poem, *If*. The idea of this poem is that while other citizens or nations are running amok and are abandoning logic, we can stand strong as the voice of reason and follow the right path that has been lined up for us. “If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you; if you can trust yourself when all men doubt you but make allowance for their doubting too; if you can wait and not be tired of waiting or being lied about don’t deal in lies or, being bated don’t give way to hating. And yet don’t look too good or talk too wise.”<sup>7</sup>The path that was being alluded to was one of isolationism and one of expected peace. This was an ideal that could not be held out for long, and eventually as the war progressed the paper was forced to write more and more about the effect that the war had on the Ouachita campus.

Early on in the war, the United States was pretty detached from the rest of the world’s conflict and the coverage of the War over in Europe was scarce. One of the ways that Ouachita Baptist University and other colleges around the country showed that they supported the war

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<sup>6</sup> “President Dicken Makes Address.” Ouachita Signal, September 29, 1917, First ed., 7

<sup>7</sup> “Rudyard Kipling’s *If*.” Ouachita Signal, October 6, 1917, First ed., 1

effort in a miniscule way was through the sacrifice of various materials. Book drives were held and various other items were collected.<sup>8</sup> This was a way of showing to the world that they understood what items the soldiers needed and were willing to provide them with these materials.

As the war progressed and the United States felt the need to enter into it, women started to form Red Cross units that helped to provide medical care to the soldiers returning home. Women were an important asset to the war effort and to the University in general. Women also organized ways for people to donate to the war effort such as with “War Library Funds.” In an article in the Signal, it is stated that the “War Library Fund [is] oversubscribed.”<sup>9</sup> The article uses specific statements that are meant to spur people into action. “What does twenty – five cents mean to each of you? To the girls it means five ice cream cones, to the boys two dozen hot tamalies, these boys who have given themselves for their country would like to remain in school and get their degrees as well as you, but they have put their degrees aside for two or three years and maybe forever and have given themselves to nerves, deaf, arms or limbs cut off or crippled for life. Just count how many boys Ouachita has furnished.” This was a statement made by a Mrs. Crawford who obviously holds strong opinions about the war and is not afraid to voice them. Those who attended Ouachita most certainly felt that they had had a duty to their country and were willing to give to the cause of liberty on their own campuses.

The duties that women carried out during war time helped the outcome of the war and allowed women to do their part in helping the Entente Powers gain victory over the enemy. Ouachita Baptist University has held a very progressive view towards women since its founding

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<sup>8</sup> “Books for Soldiers.” Ouachita Signal, October 20,1917, First ed., 5

<sup>9</sup> “War Library Fund Over Subscribed.” Ouachita Signal, October 27,1917. First ed., 5



in 1886. Ouachita Baptist University was opened in 1886 with 235 students. Three graduated that year and out of those three, two were women. From the very start, Ouachita accepted women into their academic program and set the standard for equality in other parts of Arkansas. Women were very much a part of Ouachita life, and therefore were very influential in the creation of the Literary Societies that dominated the campus until the mid-20th century. The Literary Societies were one of the main organizations on campus that formed the Ouachita Signal and turned it into the influential school paper that it was from the very start. From reading the Ouachita Signal it is plain to see that women played a large part in its success and helped to make it what it is today.

The Ouachita Signal also tells stories meant to be from the point of view of those college students that are fighting in the war. These narratives show a unique perspective and help the students of the college understand the sacrifice that these students are making. In an article entitled, “The American Spirit” two boys named Neil and Denny talk about their experiences in the war and the friendship that survived the hard times of the war. They discuss the hardships of being apart, but the story has a happy ending. The article ends with the statement: “But providence is always kind, Just at the moment when despair and grief were the greatest the mourned for one rode grandly up. Cries were turned into Joyful shouts”<sup>10</sup>

The trend of propaganda was one of extreme importance. Propaganda was seen everywhere and it pervaded everyday life in a very real and tangible way. Even in small town papers, newspapers produced images meant to spur people onto action. In the Gurdon Times, there is a very large image of the Kaiser with the phrase “Paste the Kaiser with W.S.S. on June 28th. Paste him in the eye with a war savings stamp – then paste him again and again. Don’t

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<sup>10</sup> “The American Spirit.” Ouachita Signal, November 3, 1917, First ed., 2

think that you have already done your duty. Pershing's men "over there" don't go after their first battle – they go after the Huns again – they [keep] on pasting the Kaiser. Your government has officially set – Friday, June 28th National War Savings Day. On that day every American is summoned to 'sign the pledge to save and invest in a definite amount of War Saving Stamps each month. Every real American will prove his patriotism by agreeing to regularly paste the Kaiser."

A prevalent theme in American propaganda is the theme of masculinity. Men were urged to go to war to be real men, and even in small town papers we see this trend. A poem entitled "Challenge" by Hermann Hagedorn that was published in the *Gurdon Times* pushed men to action beginning with these words: "America, America, where is your manhood gone? Who taught your sons to brag and run, who taught your sons to fawn? Who taught your sons to whine of peace with quaking coward knew, and fling her panic to the wolves your hard – won liberties."<sup>11</sup> This is obviously a far cry from the isolationist sentiment that took over the nation at the start of the war. The nation was shifting from a period of desperate peace to a call to arms that was issued to every male citizen. This included the calling up of intellectuals and of university students. College students were urged to lay aside their educations and go and fight for their masculinity. The pursuit of knowledge was put onto the backburners as university males went off to fight for the cause of liberty.

Another interesting aspect to College life during World War I was the instatement of the Reserve Army Officers Training Corps, which at the outset of the war turned into the SATC, or the Student Army Training Corps. These students were called upon to train in the university setting and then go on to serve in the Armed Forces. Many different Universities set up training

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<sup>11</sup> The *Gurdon Times*, June 22, 1918, sec. 54.

programs. “The University of Illinois at Urbana was one of approximately 530 universities and colleges that participated in the Students' Army Training Corps program of 1918. The War Department had devised the SATC as a means of providing the armed forces with trained officers, experts, and enlisted men.”<sup>12</sup> Ernest Dicken was the President of Ouachita College in 1916 and he rushed to secure a group of students to form the Student Army Training Corps for the fall of 1918. This instatement of the military science department at this school and at Henderson – Brown College across the ravine helped to bring the war into the immediate vicinity of the two institutions.

Henderson State University was founded in 1890 as Arkadelphia Methodist College. In 1904, the name was changed to Henderson College to honor Charles Christopher Henderson, and then in 1911, the name was changed to Henderson – Brown College to honor Walter William Brown. This is the context that our story takes place. The Oracle, Henderson’s school paper, was founded in 1908 is still being printed today. Through looking at various articles in this newspaper I notice the emphasis that Henderson – Brown placed on the religious aspect of the war. Henderson – Brown believed that it was in the right and it had God’s support in all of its endeavors. It discusses the morality of the war and the way that Christians should view the conflict. Ouachita College seems to place less of an emphasis on this and tends to lean more towards the ideas of democracy and the American way. In an article entitled Wars: Their Causes and Results, the Oracle states, “This is the World’s stupendous hour – The supreme moment for the race to see the emptiness of power, the worthliness of wealth and place, to see the purpose

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<sup>12</sup> Shearer, Benjamin F. "An Experiment in Military and Civilian Education: The Students' Army Training Corps at the University of Illinois." *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (1908 - 1984) 72, no. 3 (1979). Accessed December 17, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40191276>.

and the plan conceived by God for growing man. And they who see and comprehend that ultimate and lofty aim, will wait in patience for the end, knowing injustice cannot claim.”<sup>13</sup>

Another interesting aspect to the war sentiment in America, and essentially, in the college environment, is the anger and frustration at the opposing powers, and the unwillingness to compromise in even the most miniscule way. In the article “A Rightful Peace,” the discussion of peace following anything but complete and utter victory seemed implausible. “The only end to the war is a complete victory for the nations representing democratic ideas over the nations adhering to the German doctrine of force. A German success would mean not only the prevention of the spirit of democracy but possibly might include the suppression of that already existing.”<sup>14</sup> With articles like these being published, we can only assume that Americans viewed this as a war of ideology. There was good in the world and there was evil. It was believed that Americans were on the side of the good and the Central Powers were representative of the evil. The protection of democracy had a cost and Americans were willing to pay it.

In articles such as “America’s Place Among the Nations” and “In the Spotlight of Democracy” the viewpoint and the American cause are lauded as very important and seem to show that the American College Student believes that the cause of the war is important and worth fighting for. In the book *Mars and Minerva* it talks about the issues that intellectuals faced during the war. “Pro – Ally Sentiment on the American campus, as among the population at large, did not necessarily imply interventionism during the neutrality years, but, when the decision to intervene in the war was made by the president and Congress, it had the widespread support of college professors. This is not surprising. In time of war, loyalty to the nation

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<sup>13</sup> Martel, G.G. "Wars: Their Causes and Results." The Oracle, December 1, 1917, No. 3 ed., Vol. X sec.

<sup>14</sup> “A Rightful Peace.” The Ouachita Signal. November 3, 1917. First ed.

commonly assumes precedence over other loyalties, even to the cause of peace, and only the exceptional individual sets himself against the national effort.”<sup>15</sup>When the United States had endured the war, people started to question the national sentiment that swept the nation during wartime. Intellectuals were chastised for giving to the war effort, because many Americans and other intellectuals believed that the cause of war was never noble and was never logical. This seems close – minded. In order to achieve great things, Americans have to put their best and brightest on the job. American intellectuals and university students were needed in the war effort and their contributions helped to secure a victory for the United States. The American college student holds a unique viewpoint that adds to the American portrait of the First World War, and Ouachita Baptist University helps to hone that unique point of view.

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<sup>15</sup> Gruber, Carol S. *Mars and Minerva: World War I and the Uses of the Higher Learning in America*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975.

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