

The Great ALLENTOWN FAIR

Lehigh County Agricultural Society

100th Anniversary of Camp Crane

On May 24, 1917, the officers of the Lehigh County Agricultural Society signed a lease with the United States government that initiated an amazing transformation of the Allentown Fairgrounds from its dedicated use for the operation of the annual Great Allentown Fair.

As the nation joined its allies to fight in the First World War that already had been raging in Europe for three years, its leaders eyed the Fairgrounds for a patriotic purpose.

Only six weeks into the campaign, the Allentown Fairgrounds was converted into a major mobilization and training camp for recruits into the United States Army Ambulance Service, an American response to France's request for that specific assistance.

News spread quickly that units in this unique military effort would be the first deployed to Europe, and young recruits nationwide poured in excited to sign up.

And so began an extraordinary two-year period not only for the Fairgrounds, but an entire community supporting the impact of 20,000-plus army and other medical personnel preparing to head "over there."

Fascinating transformation

The base on the Fairgrounds took its name in honor of Charles H. Crane, 1825-1883, a Harvard and Yale educated doctor that served in the Army and rose in the ranks to brigadier general before being appointed Surgeon-General in 1882, but died suddenly only a year later.

Camp Crane made use of what attracted the military to the Allentown Fairgrounds as fascinatingly described by the U.S. Army Medical Department Office of Medical History.

The 1917 Fairgrounds had "stables and sheds that had been used for fancy stock" that were augmented by tarps for sheltering recruits.

The six-year-old Grandstand received extensive praise as "modern in every particular, constructed of brick over heavy steel frame." The "preferred assignments" of the corps' troops were lodged in cots that replaced the greater part of the Grandstand seating that was torn out to accommodate them.

The interior of the Grandstand building that's now home to the Fairgrounds' famous Farmers Market boasted "spacious offices, an express office, telegraph office and a small jail room."

Its "restaurant facilities" were especially commended for offering "a dining room which seated over 2,500 people with

large kitchens at either end" and cooking amenities "such as usually found in hotels."

To top it off, there were "large lavatories in which there were over 100 modern flush closets."

The grounds' 46 acres afforded building opportunity and use for field training.

Reportedly, 12 two-story barrack buildings, an infirmary and two officers' quarters were erected. Evidencing community group involvement, the YMCA built a small "hut," the YWCA a "hostess house" and the Knights of Columbus a recreational building.



AMBULANCES READY FOR A HIKE, CAMP CRANE, ALLENTOWN, PA.

A central steam heating plant that cost \$125,000 to install, \$25,000 more than the cost to build the Grandstand in 1911, heated all of the occupied buildings except the officers' quarters which contained its own "heating plant." All of the larger buildings had running water and electric lights.

The Fairgrounds half-mile race track, that only months before felt the pounds of the sulkies circling the oval during the 1916 Fair, served as practice space for ambulance drivers and its infield held parked service vehicles.

The old Fair exhibit buildings that stood along Chew Street prior to their demise in the late 1950s were also put to purpose.

One was "fitted up as a machine shop and garage" and another "was turned over to the entertainment committee for amusement purposes." Yes, that's right, entertaining the recruits was a forethought at Camp Crane.

Training at Camp Crane

To set the scene, World War I differed from past conflicts with the proliferation of chemical weaponry and motorized ground and air equipment revolutionizing battle and consequential medical treatment.

For recruits anxious to help the cause, Camp Crane became somewhat of a purgatory of endless marching drills and digging trenches mixed with lessons on aiding medics and driving and repairing ambulances being deployed overseas.

The writers of letters and postcards—the postcards still in existence often showing scenes of downtown Allentown and other local attractions—lament marching exercises that took them back and forth across the grounds and hikes to places such as Tobyhanna in the Poconos and the muddy fields of Guth's Station in South Whitehall Township for field training.

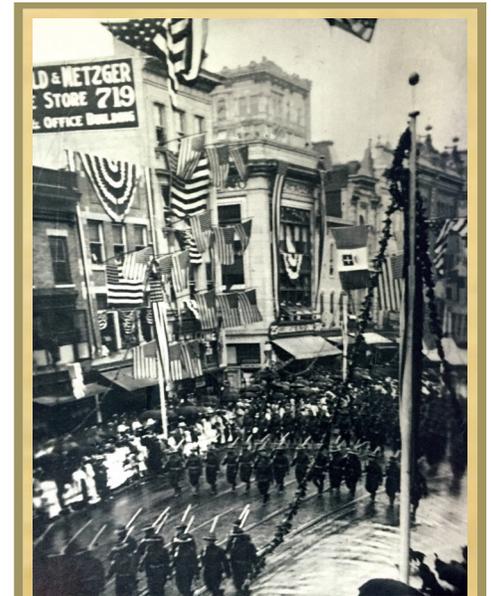
In response to a war that was taking lives in large toll due to illness, educational emphasis was placed on hygiene and sanitary procedures.

Camp inhabitants became known as the "USAACs" an acronym that replaced the word "Corps" for "Service" in the title of the Army division. The USSACs marching drills outside the Fairgrounds became a familiar site and because of their backgrounds and talents, their presence was soon to become even more renowned in the larger community.

Extracurricular activities

Units that started arriving at the Fairgrounds in early June 1917 came from coast to coast and included recruits from the nation's top colleges and universities. Among them, gifted athletes and musicians organized teams and performing troupes that were quite remarkable.

As early as the summer of 1917, a baseball team formed and collegiate track stars participated in a meet. In late September an astounding 120 men



"...AND THE 'USSACs' go 'marching' along" Allentown's Hamilton Street. Camp Crane drill units and its marching band were often celebrated by the community as evident in this downtown parade.

tried out for Camp Crane's football team. The squad was whittled down to 45 players that represented 40 colleges and universities and included 15 All-American players from the years 1914-1916.

The Camp Crane team went on to post a 7-3 record against other service teams. The three college teams on the schedule—Penn State, Fordham and Georgetown—handed the USAACs losses but not with lopsided scores by any means.

On November 10, 1917 the USAACs beat the Marine Corps undefeated squad at Philadelphia's Franklin Field. That year's second game between the two service teams replaced the annual Army/Navy game postponed because of the war.

Throughout the camp's two-year existence, community efforts were consistently made to provide entertainment, dinners and dances for the recruits.

Civically-minded citizens were convened at a July 1917 meeting in Zion Reformed Church by Allentown Mayor Alfred L. Reichenbach and addressed by Chamber of Commerce President Attorney Reuben J. Butz regarding a Big Brother Movement to "adopt" a Camp Crane unit to keep morale high. There were typically 120 units of 48 members occupying the camp at any given time.

Soon the musically talented USAACs joined in entertaining their fellow soldiers. Richard Short author of "Soldiers All" recounted humorously, "One of the units at the camp attracted a lot of attention on the streets as they hauled a piano, secured



BEAUTIFUL HORTICULTURAL HALL along the Fairgrounds' Chew Street border serves as a backdrop to a USAAC campground set up where the Fair's carnival flourished before and after Camp Crane years 1917 and 1918.

downtown, to the camp on an Army truck with one of the men tickling the ivories on the way up Hamilton Street.”

Most notably, the USAACs formed their own band that played as an orchestra and often paraded around the grounds and down Hamilton Street. John Phillip Sousa was invited to visit the camp to hear the Camp Crane band, but it's not entirely clear in accounts if he actually came or heard some of its members perform a concert in Atlantic City.



THE “MODERN IN EVERY PARTICULAR” GRANDSTAND doubles as Camp Crane’s mess hall, offices and convocation space. Its spacious grass front yard that normally held Fair amusements provides area for training units and recreation.

Famous inhabitants of Camp Crane

There definitely were notable persons that served in the medical corps overseas that could have certainly spent time at Camp Crane and many can be authenticated.

Actor Adolfe Menjou, who earned an Academy Award nomination for “The Front Page” in a career that spanned silent films and talkies, is recognizable in a photo of a large assemblage of USSACs currently hanging in the Allentown Fair Office.

The same photo includes Nicola Iacocca, father of Allentown native Lee Iacocca that achieved prominent status and fame in the automotive industry.

There were reportedly more than a dozen college presidents among the enlistees and many recruits went on to become congressmen, judges and other prominent position holders.

Among the literary elite, American novelist and artist John Roderigo Dos Passos not only trained at Camp Crane prior to serving in the Ambulance Corps in both Paris and Italy, one of his earliest works, “Three Soldiers,” is considered a quintessential book on World War I.

Chapter One is devoted to Dos Passos’ fictional characters spending time at an ambulance corps training center that reveals obvious reference to his own experiences.

Pulitzer Prize winning author, conservationist and developer of innovative farming concepts Louis Bromfield also spent time at Camp Crane.

In the lore of famous Camp Crane inhabitants, the most elusive to pin down is none other than Ernest Hemingway who did serve as an ambulance driver in the WWI campaign in Italy by volunteering for the Red Cross.

Camp Crane did process and train other medical units including those from the Red Cross but there is currently no definitive corroboration of Hemingway having been at the Fairgrounds site. He had a tumultuous relationship with Dos

Passos throughout their literary careers and it is thought they met while serving in WWI, but there is no validation that they met in Allentown.

Return to the Allentown Fair

The Great Allentown Fair had only been suspended one time in its history prior to the Camp Crane years.

A Fair was not held in 1862 when the “Old Fairgrounds” north of Liberty Street and between 5th and 6th streets in Allentown was occupied by seven companies of the 176th Regiment of the Pennsylvania Militia before being mustered for the Army in the American Civil War.

During Camp Crane’s existence, a miniature “fair” was held at Allentown Center Square in 1918. The purpose was to sell War Bonds and more than \$100,000 was raised for the war effort. The First World War ended when the armistice with Germany was signed on November 11, 1918. Allentown residents rushed to the streets to celebrate and the joyous festivities overflowed onto the grounds of Camp Crane.

The last of the USAACs left the Allentown Fairgrounds on April 10, 1919, the official date that Camp Crane closed. Fair officials began immediately planning the 1919 Fair that commenced on September 22.

Glories of Camp Crane

During its existence, 2,085 officers and 18,310 enlisted men trained at Camp Crane to enter service in France and Italy. At any one time, the camp had between 4,000 and 5,000 personnel stationed on the grounds.

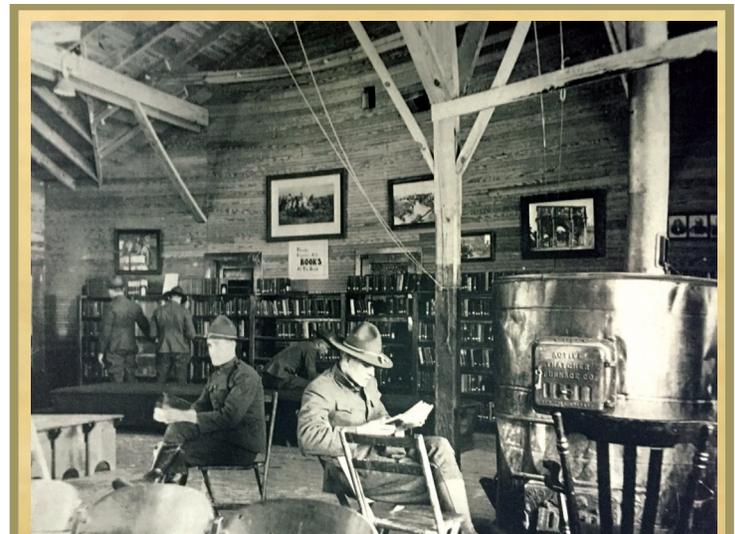
The ambulance corps had the highest percentage of casualties and was the most decorated outfit of the American Expeditionary Forces.

Among the difficult statistics, 106 were killed in action, 76 died from wounds, 242 died from disease, 22 died from accidents, 16 died from other causes, 5 committed suicide, 228 were severely wounded, 5 were gassed and 40 became prisoners of war.

Among the returnees, 7 earned military medals, 1 was decorated by the French Government with a Bronze Medal of Honor, 55 received Distinguished Service Crosses and 1,118 received the Crois de Guerres.

For years a memorial plaque was encased on a stone resting in the Grove area on the east end of the Fairgrounds. Several years ago, it was transferred to the eastern end of West Park.

A new plaque marking Camp Crane was dedicated in 1972. It is located on the east end of the Grandstand building.



CAMP CRANE OFFICERS WORK inside the Grandstand building that was well-heated and equipped to store resources necessary to the USSAC training efforts.