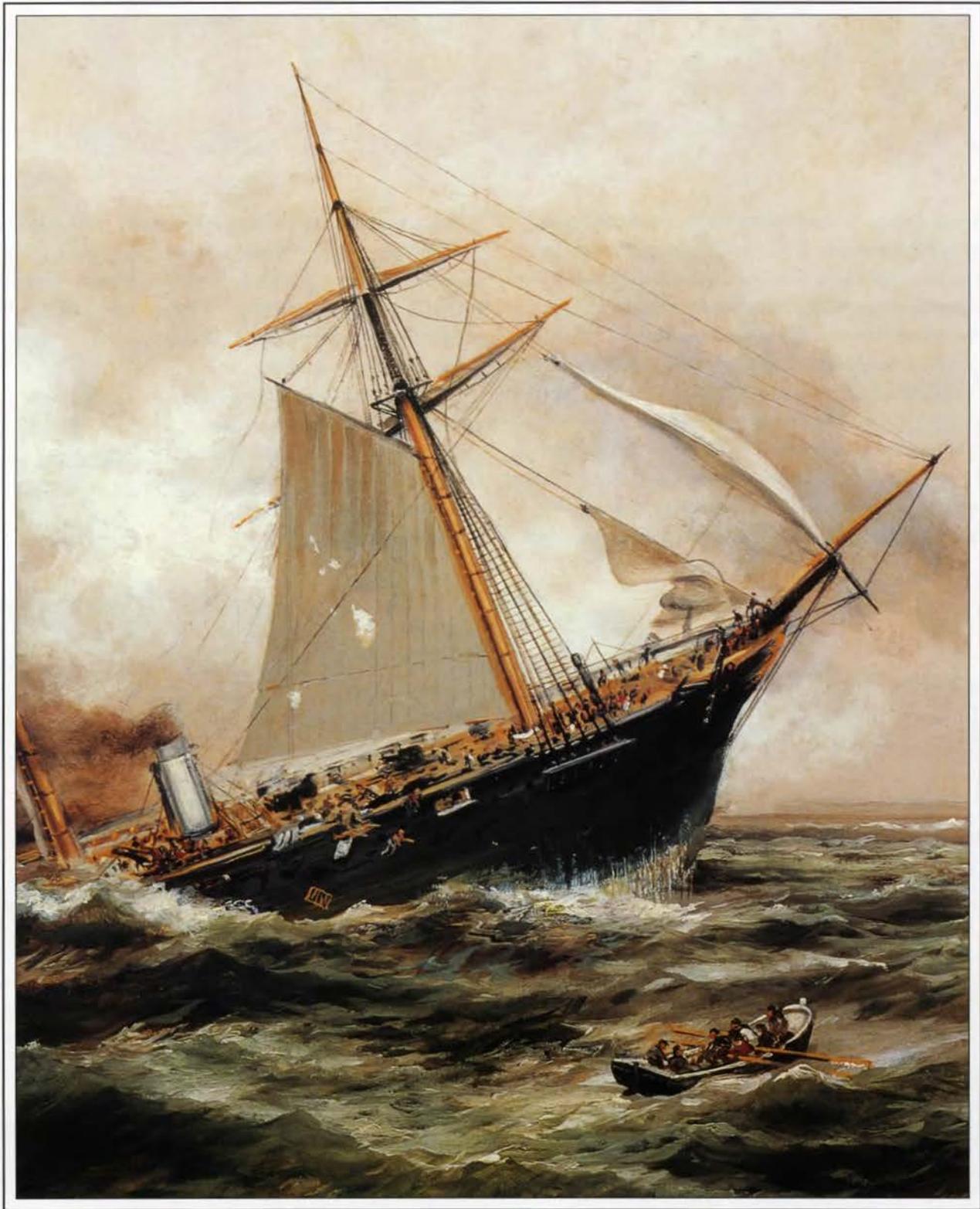


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THE GOLD STAR BOOK: PERSONAL MEMORIES OF ALABAMIANS WHO DIED IN THE GREAT WAR

By Joan S. Clemens

ON JUNE 11, 1918, a warm summer afternoon in Anniston, Alabama, Assistant Postmaster Frank Hamilton Snow walked from his home on Christine Avenue to the post office to mail a long letter he had written to his eighteen-year-old son, Frank, Jr. Young Frank had eagerly enlisted in the United States Marine Corps after Congress, at President Woodrow Wilson's request, declared war on Germany in April 1917. By the end of that year, Frank Snow was stationed in France, and in March 1918 his regiment—the Eighty-third Company, Sixth Regiment—was sent to the front. Deployed north of Paris, the company had responded to an urgent call to stop the advancing German army from reaching the French capital.

Mr. Snow had no way of knowing that his son would never receive the letter he mailed that afternoon. Frank, Jr., had died from shell fire on the afternoon of June 2 in the Belleau Woods. The elder Snow learned this fact when he returned home. His son, he was told, was buried in the American Cemetery at Belleau in the province of Aisne, Grave #32, Section U, Plot 1.

The death of Frank Hamilton Snow, Jr., and that of many other Alabamians who died during World War I might have been recorded by the state in nothing more personal than a statistical report had it not been for Marie Bankhead Owen. In 1920 Mrs. Owen succeeded her late husband, Thomas M. Owen, as the director of the Alabama Department of Archives and History. In 1921 “Miss Marie,” as she was widely known, determined to fulfill one of her husband's many unfinished projects: to publish a Gold Star book honoring all Alabamians who

gave their lives during the World War. The book would contain a photograph and biographical sketch of each serviceman, nurse, and worker from the Red Cross and other patriotic organizations who lost their lives.

Using casualty lists issued by the federal government, Miss Marie contacted family members of the deceased. When she discovered that the lists were not complete, she undertook the massive task of documenting every

Alabamian who died in the war. Her letters to the editor requesting assistance from readers were published in almost every newspaper in the state. She also corresponded with individuals and organizations, asking for help in filling in the gaps.

Sadly, Marie Bankhead Owen never completed the Gold Star Book. After the war, Americans turned their attention inward and did not want to be reminded of the European conflict. Neither did the Alabama legislature, which did not provide the necessary funding to support the project. The results of Mrs. Owen's extensive research, however, are with us still, buried in the midst of a records series at the Alabama Department of Archives and History called the *Public Information Subject Files—Alabamians at War*: In two acid-free cartons, researchers will find responses to the four-page form Owen mailed to hundreds of Alabama families.

The form requested the veteran's full name, date of birth, genealogical information, education, profession, political and religious affiliation, name of wife and children, and military record. Responses, which came from people of differing levels of education and sophistication, range from explicit to sketchy at best.

Some of the forms are accompanied by photographs—studio portraits, family snapshots, group portraits with comrades—poignant reminders that these individuals were vibrant human beings. Often the family member who sent the photograph of a lost son, brother, or husband included a request for the return of the image. Repeatedly one reads the plaintive statement, “this is the only picture I have.” In some cases, Miss Marie received a separate letter several



Frank Hamilton Snow, Jr., Anniston, Alabama, died on June 2, 1918, in France. His mother, Mary S. Snow, sent Mrs. Owen this photograph of her son “taken with his pets.”

months after the form had been submitted requesting the return of the image. She responded to these requests by explaining the problems that were holding up the publication. Owen offered to return the photo but stressed that the serviceman's picture would not be included in the book if she did so. It is impossible not to sympathize with the family member's request, but if the photographs had been returned these wonderful images would not be preserved for, and accessible to, future historians and genealogists.

What do we learn from these records? To be honest, the information is congruent with what historians have already published about this era. The influenza epidemic that swept the nation in 1918 claimed the lives of many of the men in U.S. training camps. The descriptions of the military encounters in which the men engaged or lost their lives reveal little about the war that is not already known. Some of the files have genealogical value, but most of these men died single and left no direct descendants. So why are these records important?

They are important because they transform these individuals from numbers in a statistical report and names on a list into the living, breathing human beings that they were. When you gaze at the photo of Frank Snow with his pets, Abraham Beacham with his wife Eddie Lou, Irving Davis surrounded by women, William Dumas and five generations of his family, and Henry Onderdonk with his sister, you connect with a living past. When you read the letters from mothers, fathers, sisters, and wives that accompany the forms, you discover the full range of human emotions: grief, sorrow, pride, joy, even laughter. You identify with them, and in so doing you connect with humankind.



Top: Irving Ambros Davis, Cullman County, was killed in France on October 13, 1918. The photograph of Davis "with some girls" was sent to Mrs. Owen by his sister, Estelle Davis Strickland. Above: Abraham Beacham, age 21, and Eddie Lou Ellison, age 16, were married in Fitzpatrick, Alabama, on March 31, 1918. Beacham died at Fort McClellan soon afterward. (All photographs courtesy Alabama Department of Archives and History)

You meet Myra Linly Graham Heflin, wife of Birmingham judge Harrington P. Heflin, who died in January 1919 from influenza. Mrs. Heflin, the only woman for whom a biographical sketch was submitted, formed the second Red Cross unit in Birmingham during the war and was active in Liberty Loan drives.

You meet Bernard H. Bolt of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, the son of German immigrants who came to America in 1904. Bolt joined Company K of the Twenty-eighth Infantry in Birmingham. Why he enlisted in Alabama, rather than Pennsylvania, the form does not tell us, but we do learn that he received the French *croix de guerre* with gilt star for his heroic military service.

Then there is John Deaver, a native of Blount County. He was a Presbyterian minister, serving as the president of the Pastor's Union in Jackson, Tennessee, when he entered the service. On his maternal side, Deaver was a descendant of John Barnwell, a Scottish immigrant who fought in the Revolutionary War. His mother took great delight in writing a detailed account of Barnwell's escape from his Tory captors.

These touching, personal remembrances remind us that history is the collective story of individuals. In this world of rapidly changing technology, human stories often become faceless facts and figures that can be manipulated in an impersonal database. The Gold Star records serve as a poignant reminder that information about the individuals behind the lists of names, facts, or figures must be preserved to ensure a fuller, richer history of the present for future generations.

Joan Clemens is a state government records archivist at the Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery.

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