HARRY: FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH
BY CHRISTOPHER LYLE McILWAIN SR.
A slave’s fateful service during a time of crisis reflects the nation’s smoldering tensions on the eve of the Civil War.

“SUCH A LOVELY GIFT”: HUGH MARTIN’S MUSICAL LEGACY
BY MARIDITH WALKER GEUDER
Born and raised in the Five Points South neighborhood of Birmingham, Hugh Martin went on to an illustrious career as a composer of the American musical, on both stage and screen.

A PORTRAIT IN THE PANE: LIGHTNING PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE CARROLLTON COURTHOUSE WINDOW LEGEND
BY WILL McCARRY
During the nineteenth century, the reported phenomenon of lightning portraiture captured the minds and fears of communities throughout the country.
Now that the last veteran of World War I (WWI) has died, it is more important than ever to record the battlefield deeds of those American men who fought in France in that war nearly a century ago. Nimrod T. Frazer (a decorated combat veteran of the Korean War) has done just that in his recently published Send the Alabamians: World War I Fighters in the Rainbow Division (University of Alabama Press, 2014). Drawn to this subject by the experiences of his father, Frazer has written what is likely to be the standard history of this 167th infantry division for many years to come.

One of the first American units to join the battle with the German enemy, these brave Alabamians, led by Col. William P. Screws, fought valiantly for most of 1918 (from February to November), first on the defensive and then taking the offensive to ultimate victory. Then for a time they served as occupational troops in Germany. Earlier, while still the 4th Alabama and serving on the Mexican border in 1916, these young men earned a reputation for fierceness and boisterousness, with one general, Edward H. Plummer, declaring, “In time of war, send me all the Alabamians you can get, but in time of peace, for Lord’s sake, send them to somebody else!”

The most heroic battle fought by the 167th was that of Croix Rouge Farm. A photograph (number seventeen in the text) shows a stout stone building surrounded by open fields. The 167th attacked this stronghold without the aid of artillery and, after suffering terrible losses, captured the farmhouse. Douglas MacArthur was quoted (a bit hyperbolically perhaps) as saying that “the 167th Alabama...had stormed and captured the Croix Rouge Farm in a manner which for its gallantry I do not believe has been surpassed in military history.”

Nearly a century after the battle and with the generosity of Frazer, Croix Rouge Farm was purchased by the Croix Rouge Farm Memorial Foundation, and a memorial by the British sculptor James Butler was erected in memory of those American soldiers who fought and died there. An image of this sculpture, a soldier in WWI battle gear carrying a fallen comrade, graces the dustcover of Frazer’s book.

But not all the wartime actions consisted of heroics. The most feared weapon was poison gas, which had its first use in combat in WWI. As Frazer explains, three kinds of gas were used: chlorine gas that smelled like pineapple; phosgene, which had a stench of decomposing fish; and the most-feared mustard gas, which “had a rich, sweet, almost soapy smell” and “caused blindness that could last for months or even become permanent.” As one soldier commented, “The smell of death is almost as disturbing as the sight of it.”

When not actually in combat, soldiers spent long stretches in trenches, where conditions were deplorable: “The place was full of rats addicted to creeping across faces or chewing up shoes.”...Men were required to wash their feet and change socks daily to avoid foot rot...[which] causes skin to waste away and soft decay sets in. Cooties [i.e. lice] flourished in such filthy conditions, aided by the soldiers’ louse-infested straw bedding and their inability to bathe.”

The fighters of the Rainbow Division were well-respected by the German enemy. One German officer described some recently captured American prisoners: “The nerves of the Americans are still unbroken..... The individual soldiers are very good. They are healthy, vigorous and physically able-bodied men, well-developed..... The troops are fresh and
full of strength-forward confidence. A remark of one of the prisoners...is indicative of their spirit “We kill or get killed.”

Frazer is careful to point out that while the American soldier might be a superior physical specimen, back in Alabama literally thousands of men were rejected for service for numerous reasons, mostly connected to their physical condition, a sad reflection of the state of public health in Alabama. In addition to being underweight and having bad teeth, young male Alabamians frequently suffered from diseases such as tuberculosis, typhoid, hepatitis, malaria, smallpox, pellagra, and hookworm, as well as venereal disease (gonorrhea and syphilis). The latter turned out to be an ongoing problem for those men who were inducted.

In addition, in order to be inducted into the armed service, draftees had to possess “basic literacy skills”; however, 21.5 percent of whites were illiterate, another sad reflection of Alabama in the early twentieth century. In all, of the 438,657 Alabama males who registered for the draft in 1917–1918, 380,289 (86.6 percent) were rejected for not meeting either the physical or mental requirements for soldiering. (Though plenty bad, this is not quite as bad as it seems, as those registered could be as old as forty-nine, which was too old for the battlefield, and deferments were given for such things as family hardship.)


Saunders goes on to demonstrate that the sorry state of the health of young male Alabamians led to reforms, which historians associate with the Progressive movement. Whereas most Progressive reforms on both the national level and in most states took place in the decade before WWI, in Alabama they took place afterwards. Aided by two critical reports commissioned by the state, Gov. Thomas E. Kilby was able to enact some much-needed reforms.

In 1918 the state of Alabama spent $58,000 on the health of hogs and cattle (“$28,000 for the prevention of hog choler, $25,000 for the eradication of cattle ticks, and $5,000 for the Live Stock Sanitary Board”), and only $25,000 for the Alabama State Board of Health. This changed with legislature appropriations that increased to $150,000 per year by the fiscal year 1921–1922 for the new department of health.

But the Progressive movement was for whites only. African American leadership had hoped that the Great War would lead to racial progress, as had the Civil War, but it was not to be. Instead of a lessening of Jim Crow, WWI was followed by some of the worst race riots in American history. It would be World War II that jump-started the civil rights movement a generation in the future.

The one lasting result of the Great War was an acceleration of the Great Migration, the relocation of Blacks from the South to the North. An estimated 100,000 African Americans from Alabama made the journey during the war years. This sad story of the African American and the Great War is dealt with in two chapters of The Great War in the Heart of Dixie.

Other chapters deal with the economic boom in the northwest part of Alabama, brought about by the building of Wilson Dam and an associated nitrate plant at Muscle Shoals, and the even larger boom in Mobile, which transformed this sleepy port into a center for shipbuilding and repair. And there is an interesting chapter on the ladies of Montgomery, who undertook the task of canning surplus food to stabilize local food prices and make food available not only for the troops but for the desperately hungry European civilians as well. As a whole, this book gives the reader a feel of what life was like on the home front in Alabama during the Great War.

Taken together, these books offer a wide-ranging perspective of the war’s effects on Alabamians at home and directly involved in the conflict. As the centennial of America’s involvement draws nearer, these books remind readers of the costs of that involvement—and the valiant ways that many Alabamians contributed to the war effort.

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