



# The Wintonbury Drummer

Newsletter of the Wintonbury Historical Society

Bloomfield, Connecticut

June 2020

## PANDEMIC REWRITES CALENDAR

May program at Prosser held online

WHS Annual Meeting postponed until fall

### Bloomfield History in the Making

Here's a chance to help write history. The Wintonbury Historical Society is soliciting materials to help document what it was like living in Bloomfield during the coronavirus pandemic of 2020. Writings, photos, signage, drawings, paintings, and short videos can be sent to the Society to be preserved for future generations. Please help. Society volunteers want your input. Local information is scarce for the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic (see pages 5-8), but we can do much better in 2020. The WHS phone number and addresses are found on page 2 of this issue.

"...the vast majority of deaths were packed into three cruel months in the fall of 1918." —[www.history.com](http://www.history.com)



Nurses at work during the 1918 pandemic

Photo from [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

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**BOARD OF DIRECTORS HIGHLIGHTS**

The Board held a virtual meeting at 11:00 AM on April 29. Fourteen people logged on. Despite restrictions on public gatherings to combat the current coronavirus pandemic, Board members, using Zoom technology, were able to visit and keep on top of Society concerns.

Under Program Committee business, Ruthanne noted that the May 13 program at Prosser with Dr. Traci West will take place online. The June annual meeting and program have been postponed until the fall. Columnist Susan Campbell is still booked for October if public gatherings are permitted by that time.

Plans for a new ramp for the Gabriel History Center are moving forward slowly. Town Manager Robert Smith sent a town check for \$500, which was used to place our job on the contractor's schedule. When the town budget for 2020-2021 is approved—perhaps by the end of May—we will know whether we have a \$15,000 grant to complete the new construction.

The Society nominated Ralph and Louise Schmol for an Award of Merit from the Connecticut League of History Organizations for their production of a video history of Bloomfield Center (shown at Prosser on November 6). In a letter dated March 3, Amrys Williams, CLHO executive director, applauded "the skill and effort that went into creating this documentary," but said the video was not selected for an Award of Merit. Meanwhile, Ralph has produced a new video on Schools of Early Wintonbury/Bloomfield, soon to be available on DVD at the History Center.

***ATTENTION!***

*The Wintonbury Drummer* invites readers to contribute articles, personal reminiscences, book reviews, photographs, etc. Materials for publication in the September issue should be received by August 10, 2020. (Or better yet—do it now!) Send directly to the editor at 14 Julie Lane in Bloomfield or attach to an email. Thank you.

**OUR BUSINESS MEMBERS***(renewals currently on hold)*

Bloomfield Garage, 986 Park Avenue

Bloomfield Village Pizza, 34 Tunxis Avenue

Executive Financial Services, 19 Cherry Hills Circle

Geissler's Supermarket, 40 Tunxis Avenue

Ginza Japanese Cuisine, 14 Wintonbury Mall

Isaac's Bagel Café, 16-B Mountain Avenue

Pasticceria Italia, 10 Wintonbury Mall

Thai Palace, 18 Wintonbury Mall

Romano and Fetterman, P. C., 55 Woodland Avenue

Sir Speedy Printing, 21 Old Windsor Road

Wade's Farms, 498 Simsbury Road

Windsor Federal Savings, 54 Jerome Avenue

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# I Remember Decoration Day

By *Lucy Ann (Woodford) Wirsul*



NEVER WAS SO MUCH OINED BY SO MANY... - GIBSON

Picture from google images

When I was growing up, Decoration Day (now called Memorial Day), was a reflective, patriotic day for my family. During the 1930s, it was filled with town celebrations for most all families in Bloomfield. It was a time to decorate the graves and honor the soldiers of World War I, as well as the Civil War (the military personnel honored on the first Decoration Days).

In my family, Edna A. Woodford, my aunt, had been a nurse in the Army during the war and she told stories about her adventures while nursing the wounded soldiers. My dad, Harold Woodford, too young to go overseas, had joined the Army ROTC and trained along with the other college men at Connecticut Agricultural College (now the University of Connecticut). Both were active American Legion members, and served in many offices, including Commander. My mother, Gertrude M. Woodford, was very actively involved in the Auxiliary, made up of wives of the servicemen.

As Decoration Day neared, work stopped on the farms except for necessary milking chores; and preparations were made for the town parade, sponsored by the American Legion. There was food to be prepared and taken to the Legion Hall (now the Old Farm School) to feed the visiting marching bands and soldiers after the parade. (It wasn't hard to recruit active servicemen to march in Bloomfield because news of the splendid refreshments and delicious meals had spread.) Flowers had to be picked and placed in the baskets children carried to decorate the graves. Wreaths for decorating the memorials on the Green had to be packed for traveling there. Uniforms had been neatly pressed. Auxiliary members wore blue skirts and white blouses, while the male Legionnaires wore dark pants, white shirts, and dark ties. The rectangular blue Legion hat, made of felt, sat jauntily on the top of the head, tilted to one side. It was worn proudly by men and women. Hats had various pins denoting officers and tours of duty attached to them.



Ten-year old Lucy Woodford sells a poppy to town clerk John Milvae

Photo courtesy of Lucy Wirsul

The Poppy had been obtained (continued—>)





Memorial Day Parade. Harold Woodford is at center, looking away from camera. Gertrude Woodford is behind him in line. Undated photo courtesy of Lucy Wirsul

newspaper articles about the holiday and parade information. Lucy's picture appeared in the Hartford Courant and town paper to begin the advertising about the Memorial Day activities and sale of Poppies.

The most solemn and important part of the day was the parade up the road to Whirlwind Cemetery (now called Mountain View Cemetery).



Gertrude Woodford and Nellie Breining, 1986

Photo courtesy of Lucy Wirsul

and was in the uniform's button-hole. Poppies are small paper flowers with red blossoms and a green stem and leaf. They were sold by volunteers to benefit disabled veterans. Volunteers carried the poppies along with a cardboard carton, looking somewhat like a half-pint round ice-cream container. It had a slit in the top to gather and hold the



A typical poppy

Google images

coins given by the buyer of a poppy. Poppies were advertised and sold by many people in many places. They were the focal point of

newspaper articles about the holiday and parade information. Lucy's picture appeared in the Hartford Courant and town paper to begin the advertising about the Memorial Day activities and sale of Poppies.

Legionnaires marched up the road to the beat of a drum followed by groups of little children carrying bunches of flowers either in their arms or in baskets. At the cemetery, one man called out the name of the buried military man as the group marched near it. When children heard the name, they ran to find the grave and place a flower or two on it. This continued until all the soldiers' names had been called and all military graves decorated. As the children ran to the grave sites, there was some competition to find the name first. Many little ones ran for the fun of running, and others decorated different graves. Those who could read helped find the right stone. When children ran out of flowers, they simply marched with the adults. A brief Legion service was conducted at the top of the cemetery, and then everyone marched down again to the beginning point. (continued on next page)

The big town-wide parade, consisting of the afore-mentioned, plus firemen, fire trucks, soldiers and musicians, boy and girl scouts, the high school band, official dignitaries, politicians, and a few floats made by the various organizations in town marched around the Center and ended on the town Green.

There were speeches, bands playing, reciting of the pledge to the flag, singing the National Anthem, and introduction of dignitaries. Two American Legion Auxiliary members, to the beat of the drums, placed a wreath on the stone memorial for the World War I veterans.

Gertrude Woodford and Nellie Breining marched and placed the wreath for as long as I can remember. In 1986, when Gertrude was 86-years old, she retired.

*Thanks to Janis Langston for her help with this article.*



## THE INFLUENZA PANDEMIC OF 1918-1920

One of the earliest outbreaks of what came to be called the Spanish Flu took place at a military base in Fort Riley, Kansas, in March 1918. Over the next six months, with thousands of soldiers crossing the Atlantic each month, the flu spread throughout the U. S. and to Europe and Asia. In September of that year a second wave of the flu emerged at Camp Devens in northeastern Massachusetts and at the Boston Naval Station. By the end of the month, a surprising 14,000 cases and 757 deaths were reported at Camp Devens. In those days, malnourishment, overcrowded medical camps and hospitals, and poor hygiene promoted bacterial superinfection; and October saw 195,000 Americans across the country perish from the flu and its resulting infection. In November, Armistice Day brought large numbers of people together to celebrate the end of the War, and a third wave of the flu arrived in January 1919, subsiding by summer of that year. Within a year, it had spread throughout America. Children were jumping rope to this rhyme: "I had a little bird;/Its name was Enza. /I opened the window/And in-flu-enza."

In 1918 two soldiers from Camp Devens were reassigned to a new tank training center in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania and brought the flu with them. Among those who had to deal with the flu outbreak was a 27-year-old Army captain named Dwight Eisenhower. The disease eventually killed more than 160 men and numerous citizens of Gettysburg.

The U. S. had belatedly entered World War I in April 1917, and many nurses were sent to Europe along with the soldiers. As a result, when the pandemic arose the following year, there was a shortage of available nurses. Appeals for help were made. In Hartford, more than twenty graduate nurses from the Hartford and St. Francis hospitals volunteered (continued >)

in September 1918 to help care for sick sailors at the American Red Cross Hospital in Boston.

In Bloomfield, Edna Almeda Woodford of School Street (1893-1963) joined the Army Nurse Corps. Edna had graduated from Hartford Public High School and done her nurse's training at Hartford Hospital, graduating in 1916. She joined the Red Cross organization and, when the call for nurses came, she offered her services as an Army nurse "to go wherever most needed." She was sent to Camp Travis, San Antonio, Texas. On June 6, 1918, Edna left Penn Station, NY, on her journey of 2,200 miles alone without family or friends.

Edna was on duty in Texas throughout the terrible influenza epidemic. She was chosen as special nurse by the head physician on her ward when the doctor himself came down with the illness after a bout with the flu. (He recovered.) Edna told family that the memory of that epidemic seemed like a black dream. The physicians and nurses worked day and night, as long as they could stand. According to her niece, Nancy Wirsul Kramer, she wrote letters home telling about working in large tents to keep the infection from spreading. Official commendation was given to Fort Travis for the low percentage of deaths there from pneumonia.



Edna Woodford

In her Army nurse's uniform, 1918

Photo courtesy of Lucy Wirsul



Camp Sheridan, Montgomery, Alabama

Photo from [www.fortwiki.com/Camp\\_Sheridan](http://www.fortwiki.com/Camp_Sheridan)

After spending six or seven months at Fort Travis, Edna and other nurses were sent to Augusta, Georgia, and two months later she was sent to Camp Sheridan in Alabama. She served in a flu care camp in Illinois, was for a short time in New

Jersey, and also worked on Staten Island. In all she was in service for twenty-two months, being discharged in April 1920.

In the fall of 1918, the *Hartford Courant* was reporting more and more cases of the flu. In September, two local men, volunteering as chaplains at Camp Devens, were infected. The Rev. William B. Cornish, recently pastor of the Methodist Church in Windsor, and the Rev. C. Jarvis Harriman, also of Windsor both were sick but survived. Attorney William J. Hamersley of Hartford, a Trinity and Harvard grad who "had failed in several attempts to get into active service," visited Camp Devens as a volunteer with the Red Cross, contracted the flu, and perished at age 31. Private Harry A. Burroughs of Hartford was married shortly before going to France, where he succumbed to the flu in October. Seaman Ernest E. (continued >)



Lawrence, also of Hartford, was planning to be married soon, but died at Pelham Bay Naval Station in the Bronx. And so it went. Leafing through the papers of that fall, one sees many such stories.

There was no shortage of advice. One writer claimed that “There are two ways for disease to spread. One is by the agency of the germs. . . , and the other is by means of printer’s ink and conversation. [. . .] The way to start it is to get everybody to thinking about it and wondering if he or she hasn’t a touch of it.” Hartford’s Common Council passed a resolution “suggesting to the board of health to close all schools, theaters, churches, and other public gathering places until the epidemic is no longer a menace to public health.” In the next day’s paper, however, the Board of Health declared “that the closing of schools, theaters, and public places would be ineffective to stamp out the influenza.” The Board did, though, order the Connecticut Company “to air and ventilate its cars” and it banned the playing of poker and all card activities in saloons, “because cards are likely to be wet by saliva by way of the thumb and the germs transmitted.”

One of the chief reasons that the Spanish flu claimed so many lives in 1918 was that science simply didn’t have the tools to develop a vaccine for the virus. Microscopes couldn’t even see something as incredibly small as a virus until the 1930s. Instead, top medical professionals in 1918 were convinced that the flu was caused by bacteria. Dr. John Black, state health commissioner, said, “Keep away from moving picture shows and other places where crowds gather; watch your neighbors on the train and move away from them if they cough or sneeze; get plenty of fresh air and don’t worry. That’s about all the advice I have to give.”



A photo taken in Detroit typifies the mobilization of nurses in 1918.  
Photo from [www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918](http://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918)

Like many other cities, Hartford saw a rapid rise in case numbers in late 1918. The number of sick people increased from 152 on September 24 to 247 two days later and 413 in two more days. By the time another month had passed, there were 5,821 cases, and in November 23,082 were reported. An emergency hospital was set up at the Hartford Golf Club, and by October its beds were full. As one source puts it, “The vast majority of deaths were packed into three cruel months in the fall of 1918.”

In early 1920, Bloomfield Methodists were worried when their (continued >)

pastor, Rev. Richard T. Elliott, fell sick in February and was unable to conduct Sunday services. It was probably a less virulent form of influenza, but it brought back alarming recent memories. Parishioners mobilized. Frederic H. Bidwell and Frank Stuhlman were designated to provide pastoral help as needed. With the shortage of nurses, Mr. and Mrs. Charles E. Rathbun closed their home so that Mrs. Rathbun might take care of Mr. Elliott until a nurse could be found. Others in Bloomfield undergoing sickness included the families of Robert S. Capen of Brown Street and of Wilbur F. Granger of Jerome Avenue. Mr. and Mrs. George Humphrey of Maple Avenue were both under a doctor's care. There was so much sickness in town that the Father and Son banquet which was to be held on February 18 was canceled.

The 1918-1919 flu pandemic killed more people than World War I. At that time, it was the most devastating pandemic in recorded history and was responsible for more deaths in one year than occurred in the four years of the Black Death Bubonic Plague in 1347-1351. One-third of the world's population had been infected, and deaths in the United States reached 675,000.

*Lucy Wirsul and her daughter, Nancy Kramer, contributed to the writing of this article. Janis Langston facilitated the acquisition of materials. The history of the pandemic is drawn from ProQuest Historical Newspapers, Hartford Courant files. Other sources were [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov), [www.virus.stanford.edu](http://www.virus.stanford.edu), [www.history.com/news/Spanish-flu-second-wave-resurgence](http://www.history.com/news/Spanish-flu-second-wave-resurgence), and [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org).*



## Society Program Uses Zoom Technology



As of March 12, the current coronavirus COVID19 pandemic has temporarily put a halt to public gatherings in Connecticut. People have turned to electronic means of conferencing to carry on a semblance of what life used to be like. Hence, on Wednesday, May 13, the Society, together with Bloomfield Public Library, used Zoom software to disseminate its regularly scheduled program to the public. Adult Services Librarian Sara Ray, speaking from her home, welcomed twenty-one “participants” to the Zoom platform, about half of whom were couples, bringing the audience size to about thirty. At a second home, in Bloomfield, Vice-president and Program Chair Ruthanne Marchetti introduced the speaker; and from yet a third home, in Massachusetts, Dr. Traci Parker spoke about “Department Stores and the Black Freedom Movement.” The program ended as Dr. Parker responded to several questions raised by members of the audience (from their homes). Each participant had logged into Zoom using a computer or smart phone, and—amazingly enough—everything seemed to work well.

Dr. Parker, an Assistant Professor at UMass and a W.E.B. DuBois Fellow at Harvard, has done extensive research on America's large downtown department stores during the twentieth century. These were elegant stores; women put on a good dress and hat and spent the day in a store, including having a good lunch. A woman of modest circumstances could temporarily escape her humdrum life and feel like she was somebody important by going shopping in such a place. Because employees of such stores were highly trained, felt valued, could advance in their careers, the stores became instruments of social mobility. Nowhere else in the nation was this as true as in G. Fox and Company in Hartford, where President Beatrice Fox Auerbach hired African Americans for responsible positions. Such employees prospered.

Dr. Parker's book, *Department Stores and the Black Freedom Movement: Workers, Consumers, and Civil Rights from the 1930s to the 1980s*, is available on Amazon and from Bloomfield Public Library.