
NUGGETS OF HISTORY

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CAMP GRANT

By Mary Lou Liebich Yankaitis



ON THE ROAD TO CAMP GRANT
Source: Postcard – copyright 1917

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

This article was contributed by Mary Lou Liebich Yankaitis. It was inspired by the upcoming re-enactment of the musical "We're Tellin' You". This musical was first performed by the Army personnel from Camp Grant during World War II. The original script and musical score have been rediscovered and the show will be reenacted in October. See the notice below for more information.

The author of this article, Mary Lou Liebich Yankaitis is a native of Rockford. She is a member of the Board of Directors of the Rockford Historical Society, a veteran Board member of the Graham-Ginestra House and a member of the Rockford Writers' Guild. Her interest in history was stimulated by a course in Rockford history given by Jon Lundin and her friendship with Rockford Historian Lyle Baie. The Spanish Influenza epidemic has been of particular interest to her since her father's partner, Fritz Eckstedt (Liebich & Eckstedt Construction Co.) was one of the victims of this plague. Mary Lou has seen many changes in our community and admits she longs for the small-community, caring, sharing Rockford she once knew. The postcards are from Mary Lou's private collection.

WE NEED YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS!

If you have a subject that you have researched, or an idea for an article that you would like to pursue, give me a call. I would like to encourage original research into some aspects of local history that have not been adequately pursued. I can be reached at 968-5055.

Thomas Powers, Editor

WE'RE TELLIN' YOU!

This show is a re-enactment of a musical performed by Army personnel from Camp Grant during World War II. The original show was a fundraiser to sell war bonds, and was also a thank-you to the people of Rockford for the kindness shown them. The show will be performed at the Coronado on October 19th. There will be two shows at 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. (tentatively). Call the box office at 968-5222 for more information.

CAMP GRANT, ROCKFORD, ILLINOIS

CAMP GRANT, WORLD WAR I

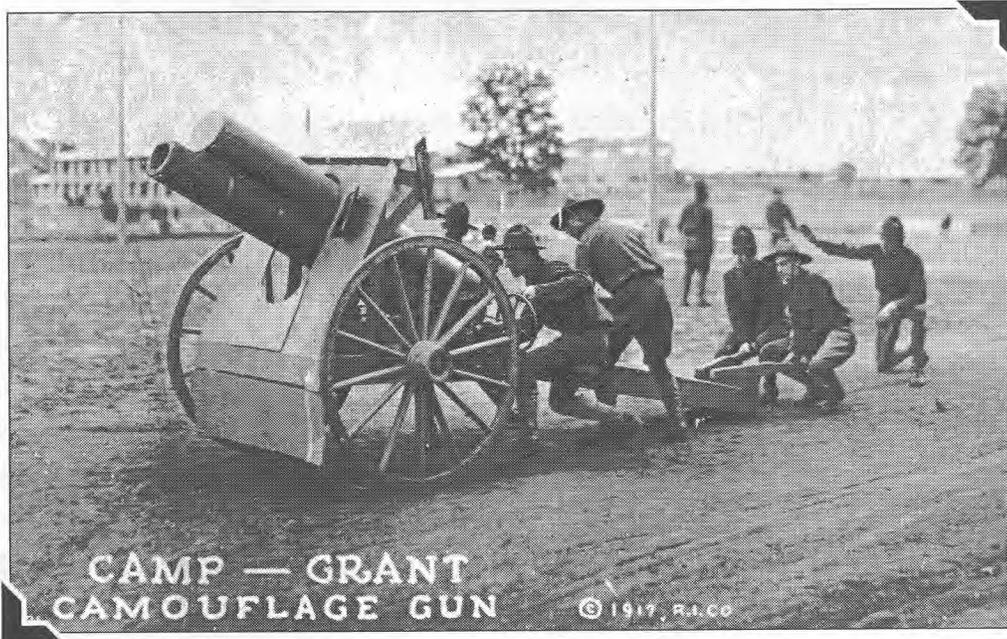
In June 1917 it was decided to locate a camp to train soldiers on 2,000 acres south of Rockford. The camp grew to over 1,500 buildings.

The 86th, or Blackhawk Division which trained at the camp, did not reach France until late fall, 1918. They did not enter combat as a Division but were used as much-needed replacement troops. Eventually, about a million men passed through Camp Grant. One noted visitor to the Camp was General John J. (Black Jack) Pershing, the Commander of the American Expeditionary Force in Europe. A Rockford postcard depicts him speaking to thousands of men at Camp Grant.

SPANISH INFLUENZA

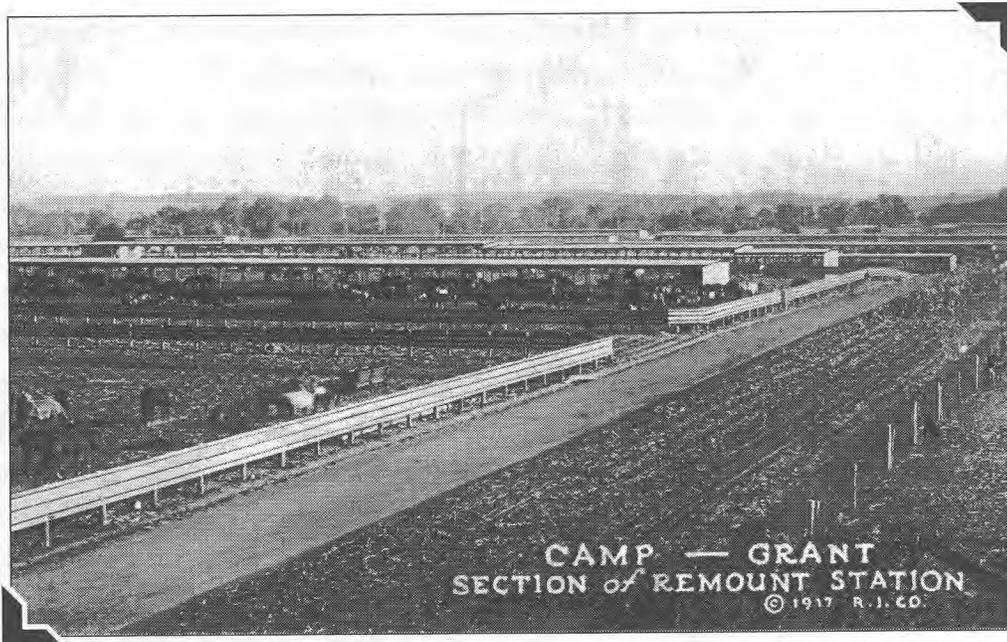
Probably the most devastating WW I event at Camp Grant did not involve enemy hostile action; the so-called Spanish Influenza claimed over 1,200 deaths at the camp with over 200 more in Rockford. Local funeral parlors were overwhelmed and sought help, including caskets, from neighboring communities. An additional casualty was Col. Hagadorn who, distraught over the mounting deaths, committed suicide. This epidemic, until recent years, was thought to have been brought from Europe by returning servicemen, thus its name. Research today tends to the theory that the disease originated in America and actually was carried TO Europe (including Spain) by American Expeditionary Force "doughboys."

With the end of WW I on November 11, 1918, the camp was no longer needed and in 1921 was slated for destruction but was, fortunately, saved and in 1923 began serving as a National Guard Camp. In 1940 with the threat of another war, a wartime draft was initiated with all men 21 to 36 years of age required to register.



CAMP — GRANT
CAMOUFLAGE GUN

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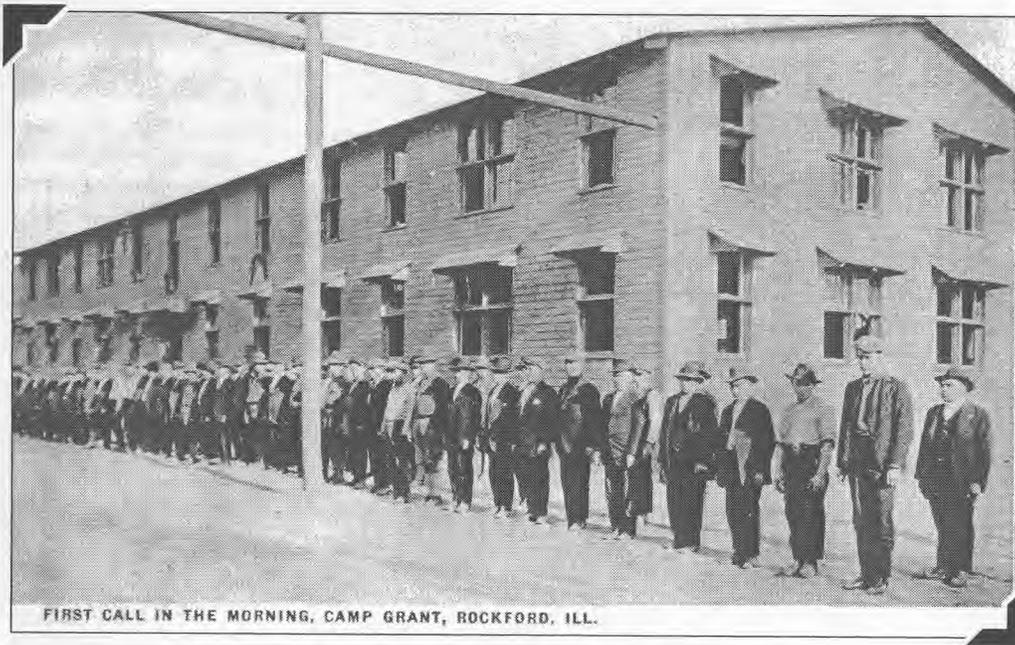


CAMP — GRANT
SECTION of REMOUNT STATION

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CAMP GRANT, WORLD WAR II

Camp Grant was reactivated, and rebuilt at a cost of almost ten million dollars (in 1917 the Camp had been built for seven million dollars). Much needed employment for Rockford was provided during this construction period. Camp Grant saw 10,000 trainees pass through every month, serving as a very important inductee and medical training center, one of the most important in the country. Draftees sent to the Induction Center spent only a few days at the camp; the Medical Training facility served mostly first-line medics who spent thirteen weeks at Camp Grant.



PRISONERS OF WAR

Camp Grant also served as a Prisoner of War Camp with German and Italian prisoners. The prisoners were housed in minimum-security barracks with their own companies and mess halls. There did not seem any great motivation for escapes and there were no escapes from Camp Grant during the war. A persistent rumor, however, claims a prisoner was shot while attempting to climb the water tower, supposedly in an attempt to poison the water. Is this rumor or fact? We do not know for sure.

Rockford, at that time, had large German and Italian populations; buses from the camp often brought Italian detainees to local Italian clubs for Sunday afternoon get-togethers. German prisoners, unaccustomed to American "white, doughy bread," encouraged guards to obtain the ingredients for them to make their dark, heavy German loaves--loaves shared by them with their guards. After the War, many prisoners elected to remain in America to become citizens, settling mainly in the Chicago area.



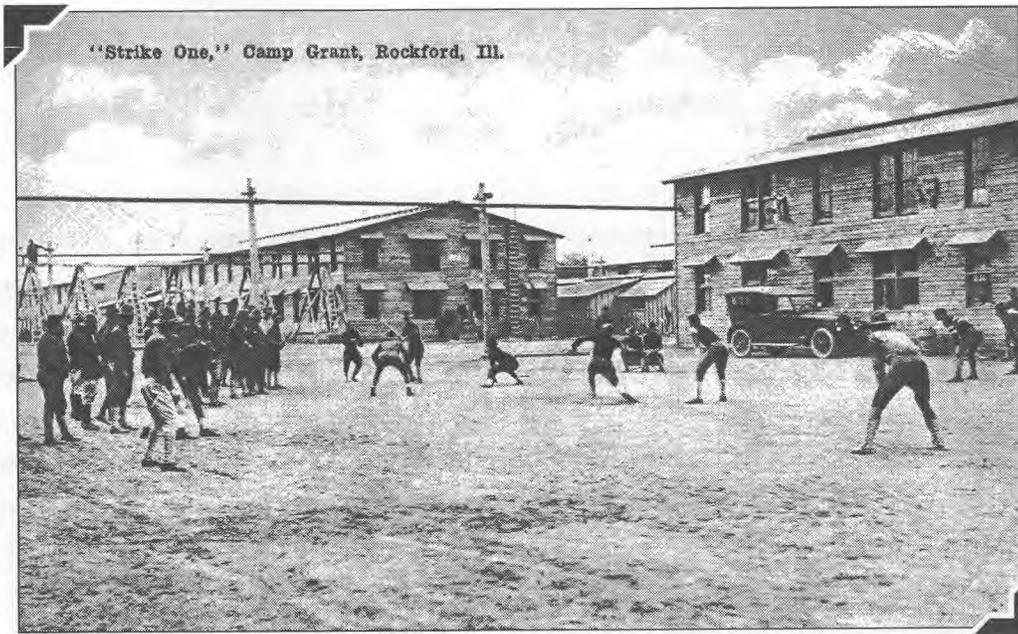
FRIENDSHIPS

Rockford welcomed and entertained the soldiers of Camp Grant. Army trucks brought Rockford girls to the camp where they served as hostesses. Young soldiers, some as young as 17 years of age, were away from home for the first time, facing a very uncertain future. Dancing with a pretty Rockford girl, playing cards, table tennis, or just talking, pushed war worries away for a time. Many Rockford families invited Camp Grant soldiers to join them at their churches for Sunday worship and shared their home-cooked Sunday dinners with them. Wartime V-Mail correspondence followed and, in some cases, lasting friendships. Indeed, some Camp Grant soldiers

married Rockford girls and are now welcome additions to our community.

Rockford was home to the Peaches, our representative in the American Girls Professional League. This league was a wartime substitute for major league baseball, which had been decimated by so many players being called to serve in our armed forces. Peaches games at Beyer Stadium, located on 15th Avenue, were favorite leisure-time activities of Camp Grant personnel and citizens of Rockford. A natural amphitheater at the Camp, Bell Bowl, featured varied fare, including concerts, boxing matches and other entertainment. Soldiers and citizens of Rockford sprawled on blankets, watching from the surrounding hills.

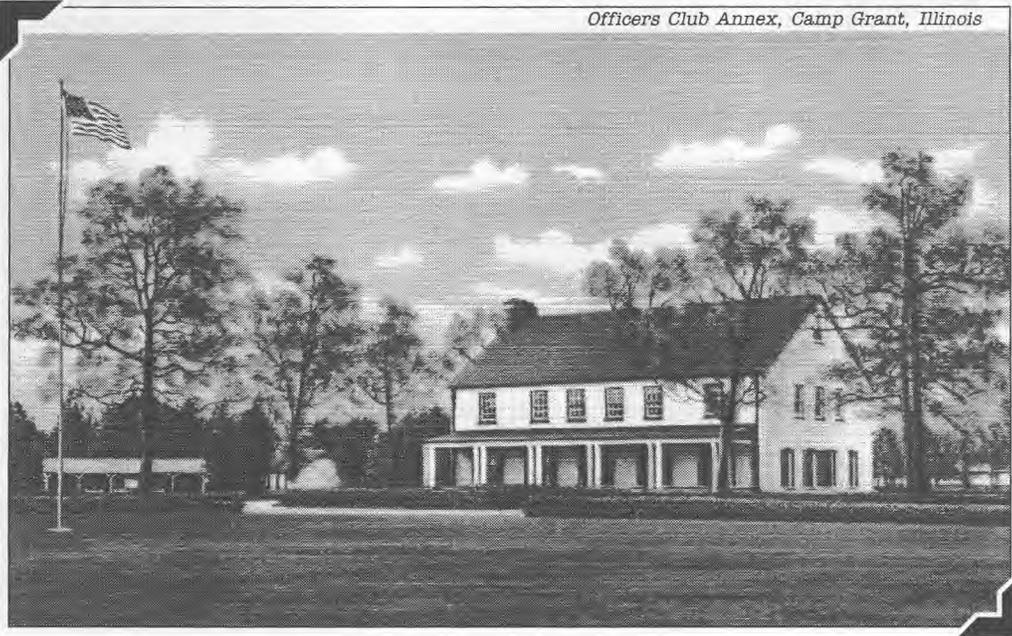




WE'RE TELLIN' YOU!

With the blessing of Brigadier General John M. Willis, commander of Camp Grant, a Bond Selling musical comedy, *WE'RE TELLIN' YOU!* was performed at Rockford's Coronado Theater on May 17, 1943. Brig. Gen. Willis, in the program, stated, *"...it is indeed a pleasure to combine forces with the good people of Rockford in the special bond drive being made this month. The officers and men of Camp Grant have always looked upon Rockford as a second home and deem it a pleasure to cooperate in the support of all mutual interests. The musical comedy being presented this evening is entirely a production of the camp and is extended as a token of good will to Rockford and community."*

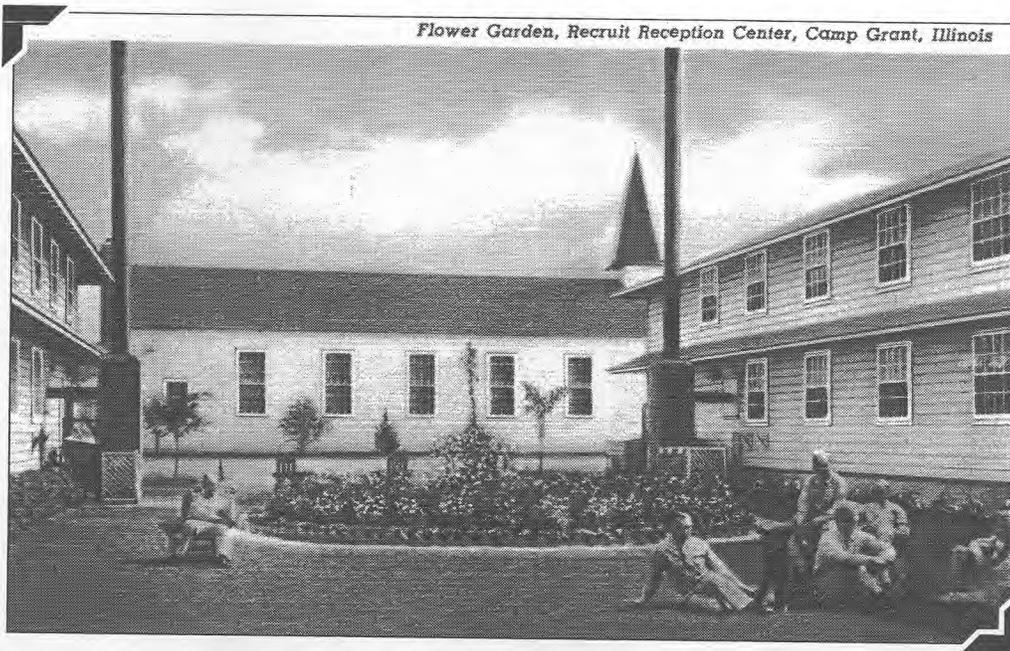
Officers Club Annex, Camp Grant, Illinois



WE'RE TELLIN' YOU! was performed only once but war bonds, the price of admission, totaled over \$175,000. The goal for that May was \$817,000 but that was far exceeded with over two million bonds sold in a 17-day period.

Diligent research, especially by Marty Mangas and her Committee, has discovered the original playbill, script, and musical scores. They have contacted some of the original performers who have shared their memories. The ingenue, Julie Smart (LaGrone) now of Texas, remembered she had the only costume change in the show. Hurriedly changing from a mechanic's overalls to a ball gown found her on stage before she could fasten the dress in back. Unaware, her dance partner kept presenting her exposed back to the audience. Which did not go unnoticed to the delight of those watching the show! Several performers went on to notable careers after the war, one winning a Tony for Costume Design and another enjoying fame as an Orchestra Leader and Violinist.

Flower Garden, Recruit Reception Center, Camp Grant, Illinois



A MUSICAL EXTRAVAGANZA

A special treat for Rockford will occur this October 19th and 20th when four performances of **WE'RE TELLIN' YOU!**, once again at the Coronado Theater, are being scheduled, with the possibility of a fifth performance being added. Tickets may be obtained from Starlight Theater, Rock Valley College, (815) 921-2160. Tickets are \$15 or \$14 for Senior Citizens and Students. The embarrassed ingenue will be in attendance at one of the performances.

TRANSITION TO ROCKFORD AIRPORT

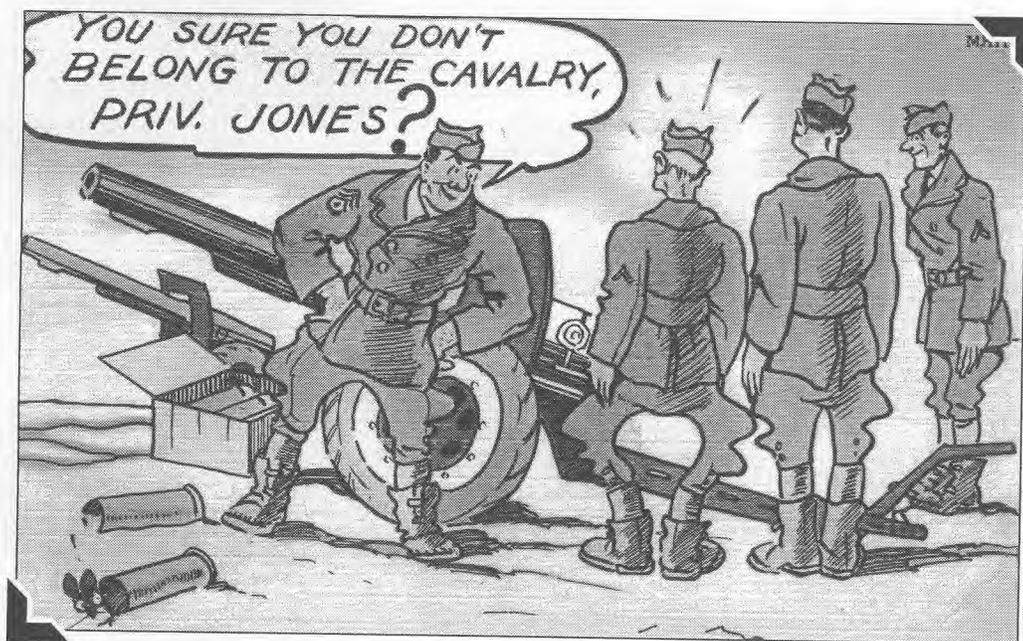
Camp Grant, which served so honorably during two World Wars, was decommissioned after WW II, and in 1947 more than 1,200 acres became part of the Greater Rockford Airport Authority. The Officers Club became the first terminal, housing the Skyroom restaurant. Lumber from old barracks was used in Rockford housing, with returning Rockford soldiers receiving priority. Still to be seen in Rockford is the old Camp Grant Water Tower (behind Colonial Village). Observant Rockford citizens can still find other artifacts of the Camp, including shell casings from the practice range and an old Camp Grant sign.

GOOD MEMORIES

Doughboys of WW I and GI's of WW II became acquainted with Rockford through their time at Camp Grant, a city before that unknown to them. "Where in heck is Rockford?" They remembered, though, their warm reception in Rockford, as Rockford remembers with nostalgia and fondness, the soldiers and officers of Camp Grant.

By Mary Lou Liebich Yankaitis

Special Thanks to Verlis Henert for research on the Spanish Influenza epidemic.



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Statement of Purpose: To enlighten and to educate people about their place of residence, to entertain with stories and fact, and to enrich lives regarding what is available to enjoy, to treasure and to honor.

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