

ALICE ORME SMITH (1889-1980) served as a nurse with the American, British, and French forces during World War I from May 1917 until February 1919. After the war she redirected her professional interests toward the study and practice of landscape architecture.¹ Her father and mother were very involved in community charity work. Her father was the founder and president of the Bureau of Associated Charities and her mother made regular monetary donations to local organizations including the Jessamine Withers Old Ladies' home. It comes as no surprise that Smith became very involved with charity work herself, serving as the first secretary of the Bloomington chapter of the Red Cross and her overseas service as a nurse during the First World War.²

Smith, born on February 26, 1889, was the third oldest of six daughters and one son born to prominent local philanthropists Dudley and Bernadine (Orme) Smith of Normal, IL.³ The family made their home at 501 South University Street in Normal, IL. Her father, born in Shelbyville, IL, and her mother, a native of Bloomington, were married in Normal on January 2, 1885.⁴ Smith's parents, as well as her maternal grandparents William W. and Nannie (McCullough) Orme, were prominent citizens within the community. Both Smith's grandfather and her father served in the Union Army during the American Civil War and became well acquainted with notable persons during their respective time of service. Her grandfather was on familiar terms with President Abraham Lincoln and her father served under General Ulysses S. Grant.

Smith graduated from University High School in Normal in 1907. In 1911 she received her Bachelor of Arts from Smith College in Northampton, MA.⁵ Following her graduation, Smith trained as a nurse in New York City.⁶ She then returned to Normal for about two years. While home, Smith joined the American Red Cross in the year prior to her mobilization and served as the first secretary of the Bloomington chapter. In addition to her Red Cross duties, Smith taught classes to women studying first aid and elementary work in surgical dressings at Brokaw Hospital (now Advocate BroMenn Medical Center).

The Bloomington chapter of the American Red Cross was founded in June of 1915. The idea for a Red Cross chapter in Bloomington was conceived of by Mrs. N.D. McKinney, president of the Bloomington Women's Club. She presented this idea to the officers of the Civic League. The Civic League was part of a national organization that worked to strengthen democracy through building healthy and prosperous communities. The ideals of the League paralleled that of the Red Cross which would provide the League with the fundamentals for community improvement. The creation of the chapter was less than a year after World War I began and it was probably founded out of the concern that local citizens would need to be prepared should the U.S. enter the war. It also was founded out of the desire to create a relief effort when local disasters occurred. In times of severe weather or other unfortunate tragedies, the Red Cross would be there to raise money and attend to medical needs. The idea for a local

¹ "Women of WWI: Alice Orme Smith," Milner Library Archives, www.mlb.ilstu.edu/women/archive/AliceS.htm (Date Accessed January 12, 2013).

² "Accepts Presidency; Col. Smith Heads Charities; Originator of Organization—Mrs. Dunkin Reports of Recent Meeting at Quincy," *The Pantagraph* (October 27, 1903); "Mrs. D.C. Smith Long a Leader in Community," *The Pantagraph* (April 8, 1931); "Miss Alice O. Smith Goes to France," *The Daily Bulletin* (May 7, 1917).

³ Judith Myers, "Biography of Alice Orme Smith."

⁴ "Col. D.C. Smith Taken by Death," *The Pantagraph* (May 24, 1920).

⁵ "Women of WWI: Alice Orme Smith"

⁶ "Miss Alice O. Smith Goes to France"

chapter was met with approval so a committee was named to take all the necessary steps to begin forming the organization. Members were recruited from all walks of life in the Bloomington-Normal community. Once enough members were secured, the first meeting was held at Withers Public Library later that year to finalize the charter for the organization.⁷

In May of 1917 Alice received word from the Presbyterian Base Unit Hospital that she was to report back to New York City in order to prepare to be mobilized for active service.⁸ Upon arriving in New York City, the unit, consisting of twenty-three doctors and sixty-five nurses, most of who were residents of New York, was sent overseas.⁹ One of the doctors, Willard Soper, was also a former resident of Bloomington-Normal.¹⁰

The Presbyterian Base Unit Hospital (also known as Base Hospital No. 2) was organized at the Presbyterian Hospital in New York City in February, 1917. Dr. George Emerson Brewer, (chief surgeon) and Anna C. Maxwell (founder and director of the nursing school) at Presbyterian Hospital were the directors of Base Hospital No. 2. Base hospitals were created in response to the likelihood that the United States would become involved in WWI. The American Red Cross, the Medical Department of the Army, and physicians and nurses came together to “create base hospital units at the county’s leading medical centers that would be ready with sufficient supplies and staff to assemble a 1,000-bed hospital on a few days’ notice.”¹¹

Alice’s unit sailed from New York City on the *St. Louis* on May 12, 1917. It arrived in England on May 23, 1917. Upon their arrival, the unit was attached to No. 1 General Hospital, British Expeditionary Force, at Etretat, France, and arrived in France on June 2, 1917. The hospital was based out of Etretat until January 1919. The hospital would then send out mobile hospitals to various battlefields throughout the course of the war.¹²

By July, Smith was on active duty in Paris with an American mobile hospital serving the French military forces.¹³ In Smith’s words, “These mobile hospitals stand in the line with field hospitals to give prompt, rather delicate treatment to cases that are non-transportable.” The hospitals were purchased from the French and were designed to be easily disassembled and reassembled should the need to transport the facility arise. That is not to suggest that the process of erecting a mobile hospital did not take time. According to Smith’s description, “it took ten to twelve hours to set up camp.” In the mean time, the medical staff attended to the wounded on operating tables before the hospital was fully prepped.¹⁴ The mobile hospitals housed approximately 250 beds under numerous tents and were equipped with self-powered trucks outfitted with sterilization and x-ray equipment.¹⁵ The hospitals were also “complete even to the apparatus for making distilled water and for generating their own electric current.”¹⁶ When it was time for the medical team to pack up, the entire tent (ward) was placed in one truck. Due to the

⁷ “Shows Power of United Efforts,” *Daily Pantagraph*, October 27, 1917

⁸ “Chapter XXIV: Base Hospitals,” *U.S. Army Medical Department, Office of Medical History*, <http://history.amedd.army.mil/booksdocs/wwi/adminamerexp/chapter24.html> (Date Accessed August 21, 2013)

⁹ “Miss Alice O. Smith Goes to France”

¹⁰ “Is Now at Work in Northern France; Miss Alice O. Smith is On Duty,” *The Pantagraph* (July 17, 1917).

¹¹ “Nurses who went to war: Graduates of School of Nursing played key roles in the world wars,” *INVIVO*, Vol. 12 No. 12, July 28, 2003, http://www.cumc.columbia.edu/publications/in-vivo/Vol2_Iss12_jul28_03/history.html (Date Accessed August 21, 2013)

¹² “Is Now at Work in Northern France; Miss Alice O. Smith is On Duty.”

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ “Miss Smith Tells of Nurse’s Work in War; Normal Woman Relates Simple But Thrilling Story of Battle Work,” *The Daily Pantagraph* (March 25, 1919).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ “Miss Alice Smith Tells of War Hospital Work,” *The Daily Pantagraph* (March 1, 1919).

close proximity of the mobile hospitals to the front lines, Smith's "experiences under fire and in air" have been said to "rival those of any man who was in the thick of the fight."¹⁷ One such example occurred on the night of July 14, 1918.

In a speech delivered in February, 1919 Smith recounted details of her service overseas including the Battle of Château Thierry that took place on the third and fourth days of June 1918. Speaking of her wartime experience, Smith stated that, "Wounded from Château Thierry were being sent to Paris with only their first aid dressings. Everybody was put to work, American Red Cross workers, even American civilians lent a hand. There were two or three air raids every night, and the screams of the sirens and the noise of the anti-aircraft guns added to the confusion."¹⁸

The medical teams were kept busy until the first week in July when they were ordered to join troops that were situated to meet another suspected offensive. Smith recalled that after they were sent east of Rheims, the nurses had "little to do in the hospital because there was no actual fighting."¹⁹ On July 14 however, the team was "awakened by a tremendous noise of explosions and the German shells were landing."²⁰

According to a *Pantagraph* report, "On the night of July 14 trouble broke loose for the hospital force. The American guns were working full force putting over a barrage in answer to that sent over by the German guns. The air was full of shells..." In the course of the attack, a number of shells hit the hospital killing multiple wounded soldiers. Nine hours after the camp was hit, the staff and patients were evacuated and joined with another hospital. After four days of "working in the face of severe fire," the hospital workers were forced to retreat.²¹ On July 19 however, the Germans changed course and the nurses were "rushed back to the troops at Château Thierry."²² The medical staff continued to follow the troop across the country assisting in any way they could. By August, they had set up hospitals four times. Access to clean water was always a significant factor in determining where to set up camp. Clean water was generally in short supply as the team only had one truck capable of carrying water from site to site. Alice recalled that for many weeks, one quart of water was their daily ration.²³

Following the drama that centered on the Battle of Château Thierry, the hospital experienced little action after being stationed at St. Mihiel—the location of the first all-American offensive.²⁴ Though the hospital was "warned this would be the greatest offensive [they] had ever witnessed," on the morning following the offensive there was "no traffic on the road, no ambulances, no word."²⁵ According to Smith, there were "a great many wounded, but not in as large proportion as usual. ... When you expect something, nothing comes and when you expect nothing, you are suddenly swamped with work."²⁶

¹⁷ "Miss Smith Tells of Nurse's Work in War; Normal Woman Relates Simple But Thrilling Story of Battle Work."

¹⁸ "Miss Smith Tells of Nurse's Work in War; Normal Woman Relates Simple But Thrilling Story of Battle Work."

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ "Miss Alice Smith Tells of War Hospital Work."

²² "Miss Smith Tells of Nurse's Work in War; Normal Woman Relates Simple But Thrilling Story of Battle Work."

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

After St. Mihiel, Smith's unit was sent to Verdun to assist those wounded in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, the costliest battle in terms of American lives lost. Forty percent of the total American lives lost during the war were lost in this campaign. This battle occurred in three phases and was commanded by General Pershing, as was the Battle of Château Thierry. The last day of fighting ended with the news of the armistice on November 11, 1918 when the allied forces accepted the surrender of the Germans. Smith recalled that, "With the armistice came new orders and we moved on, but not until we had performed the last rites for the 400 dead we left there."²⁷ Smith's unit received a commendation from General John J. "Black Jack" Pershing for their courage when coming under shellfire. In the letter of commendation sent to her unit, General Pershing wrote that "he is proud to have them in his command."²⁸ Smith also was one of only twenty-eight nurses to receive the Croix de Guerre, a French military decoration for bravery in the field of battle.²⁹

After returning from the war, Smith went on to continue her education and had a long and distinguished career in architecture and landscape design. Smith earned a master's degree from the Armour Institute (today known as the Illinois Institute of Technology)³⁰ in Chicago, IL and attended the Cambridge School of Architecture and Landscape Design, MA from 1923-1925.³¹

In 1932, Smith opened an office in New York City before eventually establishing a private practice in Fairfield, CT. Throughout the course of her post-war career, Smith won awards for her designs including an award from the *New York Times* for her designs of the Main Vista and the Garden of Religion at the 1939 World's Fair in New York.³² Smith's other designs include the grounds of the American Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford, CT and the Bridgeport Museum of Art, Science and Industry, as well as the estates of Joshua Logan, US Senator William Benton, and Lawrence Langer.³³ In 1973, Smith was awarded the Smith College medal for "bringing men and nature into harmony in landscape;" and in 1974, she was elected a Fellow of the American Society of Landscape Architecture.³⁴

Smith died in Fairfield, CT on April 4, 1980. She was 91. She is buried in the Orme-Smith family plot at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, IL.

By: Hannah Johnson, 2013

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ "Alice Smith Comes Under Shell Fire," unknown newspaper, August 14, 1918

²⁹ "Soldier Stories: Army Nurses of World War One- Service Beyond Expectations," Army Heritage Center Foundation, <http://armyheritage.org/education-and-programs/educational-resources/soldier-stories/130-army-nurses-of-world-war-one-service-beyond-expectations.html> (Date Accessed July 13, 2013).

³⁰ Founded in 1893 by Frank Wakely Gunsaulus and Philip Danforth Armour Sr., the Armour Institute opened as a place where students of "all backgrounds could prepare for meaningful roles in a changing industrial society." The Institute offered professional courses in engineering, chemistry, architecture, and library science. It was a school "where men and women secure an education to fit them for their life-work and to be a service to their community and a credit to their country." Illinois Institute of Technology- History <http://www.iit.edu/about/history/> (Date Accessed August 21, 2013)

³¹ "Designed Landscapes: A Smith College Alumnae Exhibit," *Botanic Garden of Smith College* (2005), www.smith.edu/garden/exhibits/designed-landscapes/display-case.html (Date Accessed January 12, 2013).

³² "Women of WWI: Alice Orme Smith."

³³ "Designed Landscapes: A Smith College Alumnae Exhibit," "Women of WWI: Alice Orme Smith."

³⁴ "Designed Landscapes: A Smith College Alumnae Exhibit."