

ALOOKBACK

Albany Law in the Great War

By Robert Emery

It's good practice to exercise one's historical imagination as a matter of historical relativism to place oneself in the climate of opinion of a past time. In April 1917, when requesting that Congress declare war on Germany, President Wilson stated:

...right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts, for democracy, ... for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right....

Place yourself in a time when the vast majority of Americans wholeheartedly agreed with President Wilson, when the slogan "the world must be made safe for democracy" really meant something. One must do this if the attitude of the Albany Law School community toward World War I is to be understood.

Four-hundred-and-fifty-two Albany Law students and alumni served in the Army or Navy during the Great War; of these 40 were wounded, 11 died. One-hundred-and-thirty-six Albany Law enlistees attained commissioned rank. These numbers alone are enough to suggest the enthusiastic response Albany Law made to the President's declaration.

President Wilson had been reelected in November 1916 on the slogan "he kept us out



Graduation June 1917, at Madison Barracks, N.Y. It is likely that this photo includes Union College students too.

of war," and in early 1917 the United States was still a neutral nation. Some 250 students attended classes in the old Albany Law School building (located on State Street). The LL.B. course was three years long (undergraduate degree not required for admission); tuition \$130 a year. Almost all the 15 faculty members were active practitioners, who taught only part-time; but given that Albany Law ranked first among New York law schools in bar passage, they must have

been pretty effective instructors. The most popular student hangouts were Garrity's Corner saloon on Hudson Avenue (beer, 50 cents per large pitcher) and Keeler's on Broadway (the latter also being a principle watering place for the local bar, where law students and part-time law professors intermingled).

Congress declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917. Shortly thereafter, the state Court of Appeals adopted a rule to the effect that all

students in their senior law school year who entered military service could after their return be admitted to the bar on motion, and without examination. Much of the senior class flocked to the Recruiting Office. By fall 1918, the student body totaled only 80. Although some undergraduates (first- and second-year students) remained in school, most enrolled in the Students' Army Training Course (SATC), a forerunner of ROTC that allowed students

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to combine continued study with military training until called up for service. Albany Law's SATC unit was incorporated with that of the State Teachers College—now University at Albany.

Albany Law students and alumni were scattered throughout the United States for purposes of training; some went overseas early through service in the Ambulance Corps; a substantial number saw combat in France as members of the American Expeditionary Force. To take a few names at random, John D. Saunders (class of 1922), U.S. Marine Corps, was wounded three times on the front; Elmer M. Rossman (1921), Field Artillery, was cited three times for service at Belleau Woods; Burrell Hoyt (1921), 27th Infantry Division, was gassed during the October 1918 assault on the Hindenburg Line; Donald H. Grant (1921), 1st Infantry Division, wounded in the Meuse-Argonne offensive in October 1918, received the Conspicuous Service Medal and divisional citations.

When the war came to an abrupt end with the Armistice

of Nov. 11, 1918, some 263 Albany Law students and alumni were on active service, at home and abroad.

Immediately after the Armistice, the Law School administration adopted the policy that any student who enrolled by December 1918 would be given credit for an entire year's attendance. Students on service abroad did not get home until late 1919 (and hence some did not receive their degrees until 1921 or 1922); but many students on home service took advantage of the Law School's policy: spring 1918 enrollment was up to 240.

Today, we tend to see the Great War through the lenses of post-war disillusionment, through, for example, Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms* or Dos Passos' *1919*. If, however, we are to understand the effect of World War I on Albany Law School, we must place ourselves in the wartime climate of opinion, and think as people thought during the war crisis of 1917–1918.

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