

A Journey of Remembrance: Rockville's Gold Star Mothers

By Jean Luddy

As the first large scale international conflict of the 20th century, World War I presented many challenges to the United States government for managing the logistics of supply, expenses and personnel. The war began in Europe in 1914. The United States entered the conflict in April 1917. American forces were deployed in many significant battles and contributed greatly to the final victory of the Allied Powers in 1918. This success came at a cost as over 75,000 American lives were lost. (Budreau)

During the war the bodies of soldiers, known and unknown, were buried in temporary sites near the battlefields. Recognizing that the government had an obligation to care for the remains of those who had died overseas, the Grave Registration Service was established in August 1917. With the end of the conflict, the War Department had to determine how to respectfully handle military burials.

“At a loss, they sent surveys out to families of the fallen, questioning how they wished to see the body of their next of kin laid to rest. They offered four choices: burial at Arlington National Cemetery, return to a personal home address, burial in another US national cemetery or burial in a yet-to-be constructed permanent American cemetery in Europe. While the decision to offer this sort of choice to the families was rooted in the belief that repatriation offers a sense of solace for the families and denotes a respect for the dead, the ambition of the War Department's scheme to offer this choice to the families of all the fallen cannot be overstated. In the end many of the known dead were indeed returned to the United States at a cost of over \$30 million.” (Bowdoinpilgrimage)

The issue of the final resting places of the soldiers caused debate at home. Some government officials felt that large military cemeteries would remind people of the public sacrifice of soldiers' lives. Some soldiers, before they died, left requests to be buried near their comrades. Other families found comfort in having their soldiers laid to rest in a family plot back home. (Bowdoinpilgrimage)

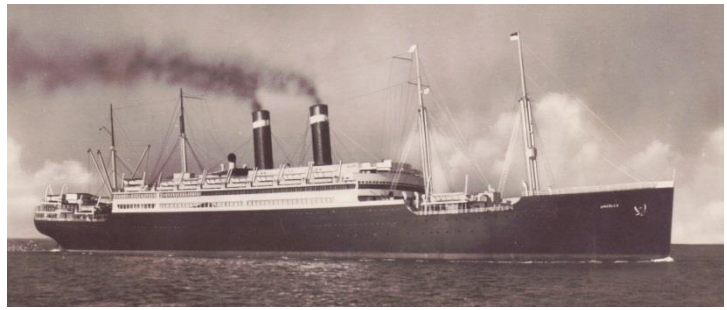
During World War I, family members with a relative in military service began to wear an armband with a blue star representing their soldier. In the event of the service person's death the blue star was replaced by a gold star. After the war, Grace D. Seibold, whose son George had died in action, started an organization for women who had lost a family member to the war. The purpose of her group was not only to comfort each other, but to volunteer in military hospitals and veterans homes helping soldiers wounded in body and mind. By 1928, the idea of such a group for mothers and widows had spread throughout the country and a national organization entitled “The American Gold Star Mothers” was officially recognized. As a result of subsequent conflicts the organization continued and grew. Today American Gold Star Mothers remains dedicated to their mission of “supporting families and assisting veterans and remembering the fallen.” (American Gold Star Mothers, Inc)

Throughout the 1920s, mothers' groups lobbied Congress for a government funded program to give mothers and widows the opportunity to visit the overseas grave sites of their sons and husbands. After several years of discussion about the cost, logistics, conditions of eligibility and the moral importance of the journeys, the government agreed to fund and organize a series of pilgrimages for eligible women. (Budreau)

Colonel Richard Ellis of the Army's Quartermaster Corps was placed in charge of the operation. Criteria were established to determine who would be invited: mothers (not fathers) and widows who had not remarried since the war. Adoptive mothers were less likely to be accepted. “Relatives of more than 30,000 were contacted, and just over 14,000 women were found eligible to make the two week trip abroad. Eventually, approximately 6,000 accepted the government's invitation with the majority preferring to join in the first year. This number was divided into small parties to compensate for the lack of satisfactory accommodation in the small towns where the American cemeteries were located. This proved advantageous in other ways since the average age of Pilgrims was between 61 and 65 years, but many were over 70.” (Budreau)

Sadly, a sign of the times was reflected in the treatment of African-American mothers and widows. American society was still segregated in 1930. African-American women “traveled as a separate group on commercial steamers, were accommodated in separate hotels, and rode separate trains upon arrival in France.” (Budreau) African-American political and social organizations protested. A number of eligible women decided not to take the trip. However, 168 African-American women did go on the Gold Star Pilgrimage (American Battlefields Monuments Commission)

The Gold Star Pilgrimages ran from 1930 to 1933 with 6,654 women participating. “Many of the women making the voyage were so poor that they were unable to buy even the suitcase they needed, but regardless of income or social level, all women were guests of the U S. Government. From the moment they left their homes, all reasonable expenses were paid. They were greeted by civic officials in New York at a city hall reception, boarded luxury liners, traveled cabin class, stayed at first-class hotels, and had an army officer, physician, and nurse accompany them abroad. Pilgrims were escorted to the graves of their sons and husbands, then each party spent a week in either Paris or London where they were honored by the French or British government.” (Boudreau)



The USS America

According to the program from the July 4, 1919 “Welcome Home Day,” 437 men and women from the City of Rockville and the Town of Vernon served in military. Nineteen men died. Five were listed as “Killed in Action”. (Eleven died from pneumonia as a result of the Influenza Pandemic of October-November 1918) Of the five who were killed in action, three men were interred in American military cemeteries in France: John Rosenski (Meuse-Argonne Military Cemetery), Carl Sibiski (Meuse-Argonne Military Cemetery) and William Orłowski (St. Mihiel American Cemetery).

In 1930 according to the local papers, three mothers residing in Rockville received invitations to participate in a Gold Star Mother Pilgrimage.



Regina Rosenski was a 60 year old widow living at 68 West Street. She had been born in Poland. She and her family had immigrated to the United States in 1904. Her 20 year old daughter, Irene worked in a silk mill. Her 17 year old son, Frank had a job in a woolen mill and 12 year old Casmir attended school.

Born in Poland, John Rosenski was 24 years old when he died in battle. He entered the army on September 17, 1917. He was a private in Company I, 326th Infantry 82th Division. He was

killed in action at the Battle of Chateau Thierry on October 15, 1918.



Mary Skibiski and her husband John lived at 4 Strong Street in Rockville. She was 62 years old. The family emigrated from Poland in 1891. John Skibiski worked in one of the mills as a fireman. Louis, 28 years old, had a job as a weaver while Emmanuel, 23 years old, worked as a spinner.

Carl H. Skibiski was born in Rockville on May 24, 1894. He was drafted into the army on September 18, 1918. He was a private, 326th Infantry, 82th Division. He was killed in action in the Battle of Chateau Thierry on October 14, 1918, less than a month after he left home.



In 1918, Katherine Ryan and her family were living in Broad Brook. Her son, John born in 1888, joined the army from the Thompsonville recruiting station. After training at a camp in Alabama, he arrived in France. His older brothers, Frank and Arthur had already been in battle. Both suffered the effects of chemical warfare when they were gassed. John was a private in the 114th Infantry, 29th Division. He was killed in action during the Battle of Chateau Thierry on October 12, 1918 at the age of thirty and laid to rest in the Meuse-Argonne Military Cemetery.



By 1930, the Ryan family had moved to 154 West Main Street. Mrs. Ryan, now a widow, lived with her children: Elsie 27 years old, Herbert, 23 years old, and Mildred 11 years old. Born in Scotland, Mrs. Ryan had come to the United States in 1881.

Two of the three eligible mothers decided to embark on the Gold Star Pilgrimage: Regina Rosenski and Katherine Ryan. Mary Sikbiski chose not to make the trip. Mrs. Rosenski and Mrs. Ryan received word that they would leave for France on August 27, 1930, sailing on the steamship *America*. The ocean crossing would take 8 days. At the end of their pilgrimage, they would leave France on September 18th, arriving in New York City on September 26th

An article from the August 14, 1930 edition of the *Rockville Journal* provided the community with information about the upcoming trip and reported on a going away party given to the women. A reception for all three mothers was held in the Grand Army of the Republic meeting hall in the Town Hall on Park Place. The event was sponsored by the American Legion Auxiliary and members of the Stanley Dobosz American Legion post. Attendees numbered about 75 with people coming from Rockville and Broad Brook. An original poem recognizing the mothers and their sacrifices was read to the crowd. Each mother given a purse and a \$5 gold coin. The mothers expressed their appreciation for the gifts and for the support from the veteran's organization.



As the Gold Star mothers went on their journey, they were photographed by official photographers to record significant parts of the trip. Regina Rosenski saved her photographs.

A group of mothers posed on the deck of the steamship *America*.

After a week at sea, each group of 25 mothers had a day of rest followed by a reception the next day with French war mothers. For the next week, each group

of Gold Star mothers visited the American military cemeteries so every mother could see her son's resting place.

"Cemetery staff decorated the graves with flags of the U.S. and the host country. They provided a chair for the pilgrim to sit next to the headstone and reflect. Each pilgrim received a photograph of herself at the tombstone, where she also laid a memorial wreath."(AMBC)

No more trips were authorized after 1933. Soon a new wave of burials would fill military cemeteries in Europe and in the Pacific. Whether our soldiers rest in the austere solemnity of military cemeteries or in hometown family plots, their gravestones bear silent witness to their sacrifices and those of their families.





John Rosenski



Carl H. Skibiski



John W. Ryan

“When you go home, tell them of us and say
For their tomorrow, we gave our today.”
John Maxwell Edmonds

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