

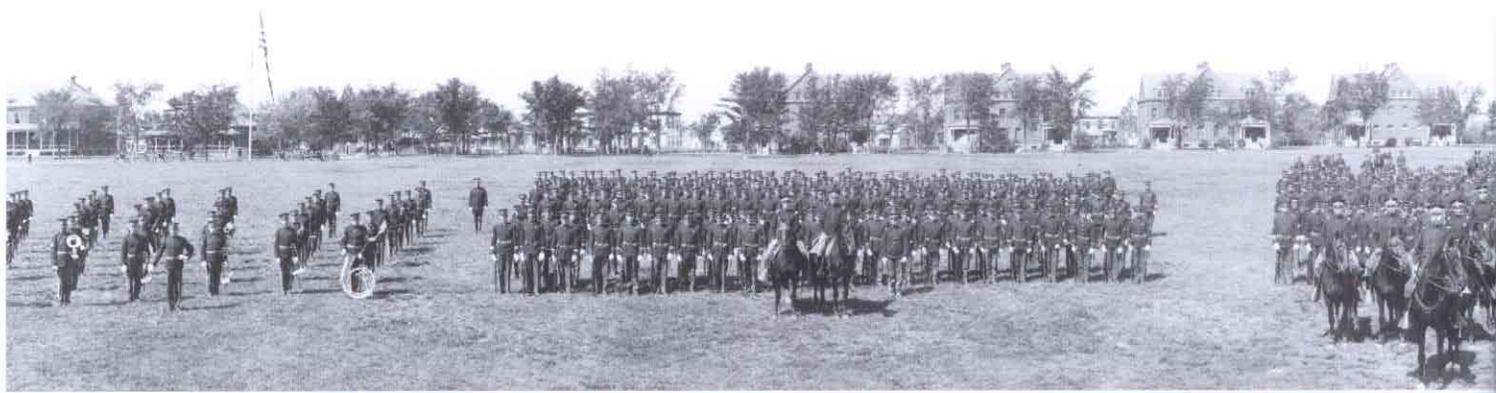
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THE PLATTSBURG IDEA

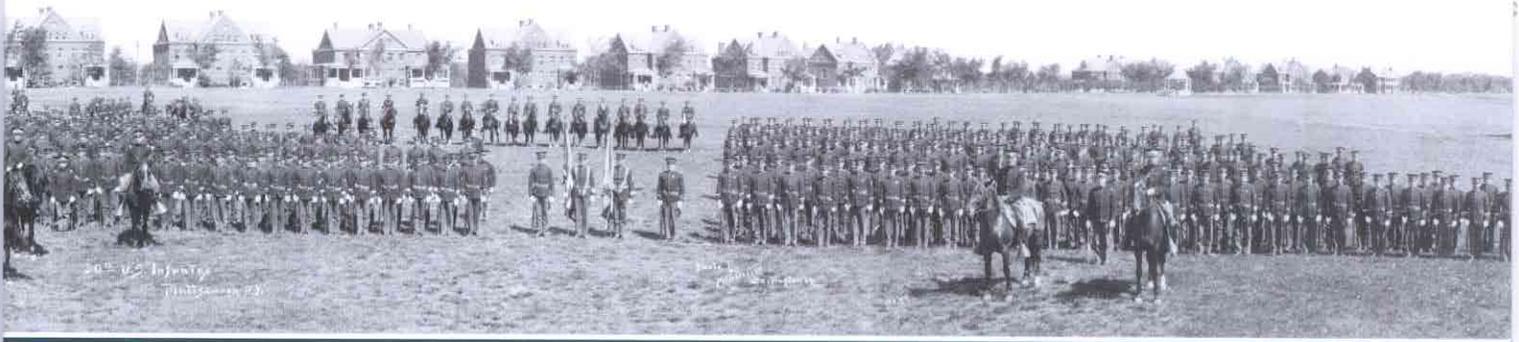
BY PENELOPE D. CLUTE

A rigorous summer program in northern New York, begun as a civilian military training camp for students and businessmen, took on vital importance in World War I.

During the uneasy summers of 1915 and 1916, thousands of young men volunteered for six weeks of military training and maneuvers at northeastern New York's Plattsburg Barracks and other camps around the country. Called Civilian Military Training Camps, their existence embodied the Plattsburg Idea—a national preparedness philosophy which held that, in a democracy, it was a citizen's duty to prepare himself to defend his country.

As Army Chief of Staff, General Leonard Wood established the volunteer camps over strong opposition from the Army and the top echelons of government. Wood, a career soldier and a graduate

of Harvard Medical School, had been the first commander of the Rough Riders under Teddy Roosevelt. He strongly believed in Universal Military Training (UMT) and publicly promoted it, arguing that, with six months of UMT, the "service would have a large reserve and society would have an uplifting institution." According to historian Michael Pearlman, Wood also claimed that military training would promote the work ethic, lower the crime rate, Americanize the immigrant, teach "responsibility" to the young, and "bind together all classes of society into one common purpose."



These historic panoramic photographs of the Plattsburg training camps have been recently restored and are on display at Plattsburgh City Court, which is now housed in a former camp barracks. This photo is actually six feet long. | CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Convincing the People

But professional soldiers of the time generally opposed amateur volunteers, and President Woodrow Wilson, himself an isolationist, did not want America drawn into what he considered a European war. With no support from West Point-trained soldiers and no money from Congress, General Wood brought his case for UMT directly to the people. His numerous speeches around the country convinced many doctors, college presidents, and academics; one was Dr. Charles W. Burr, a professor of mental diseases at the University of Pennsylvania, who wrote, "Unless the American boy is taught obedience, unless he learns to submit to authority, unless he learns that the highest manhood is to obey, unless he learns that work is a blessing, not a curse, this country is doomed...Universal military training will do much to stiffen up, to make firm-fibered and manly the boys of



Theodore Roosevelt (left) confers with General Leonard Wood, originator of the Plattsburg Idea. TR was a strong advocate of training civilians for military service.

America." The idea of UMT also appealed to many wealthy, college-educated young men of New York and New England who realized that physical hardship and demanding discipline would

be an antidote to their lives of luxury and privilege.

Wood established the first small summer training camps in 1913, attracting college students in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania and Monterey,

"Universal military training will do much to stiffen up, to make firm-fibered and manly the boys of America."

CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION



THE PLATTSBURGER

The statistics for this portrait of a Plattsburger were obtained by averaging the measurements of the members of the 1917 camp.

HOW PLATTSBURGH LOST ITS "H"

During the time period covered by this story, the City of Plattsburgh was spelled without an "h." According to Plattsburgh City Clerk Keith Herkalo, the Town of Plattsburgh (with an "h") was established in 1785. Between 1892 and 1894, local officials—misunderstanding new guidelines about naming post offices—changed the name of the post office to Plattsburg (no "h"). In 1950, a query by the editor of the *New York State Legislative Manual* prompted postal authorities to delve into their records to resolve the discrepancy, and the spelling was changed back to Plattsburgh.

THE PLATTSBURGER



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California. These student camps expanded in 1914 to Ludington, Michigan; Asheville, North Carolina; and Fort Ethan Allen outside Burlington, Vermont. By 1915, the camps were no longer limited to college students. The June 30, 1915 *New York Times* reported that a summer camp for business and professional men would be held at Plattsburg in northern New

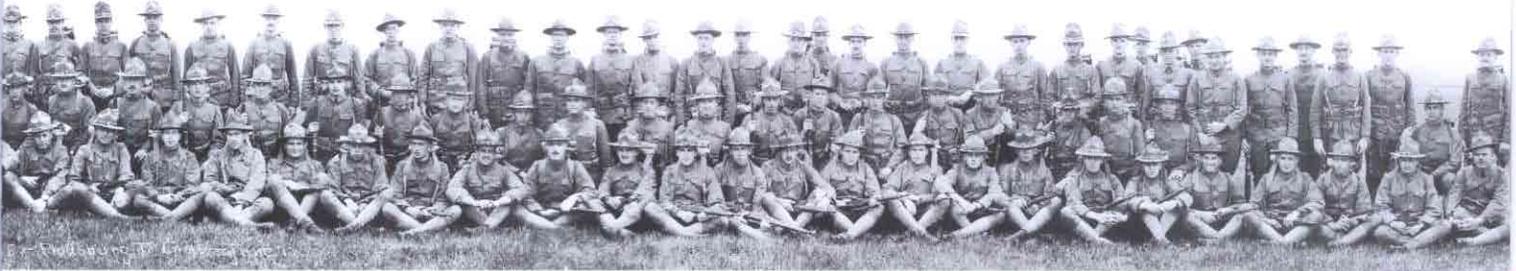
York, and referred to it as a "movement started by the Harvard Club."

Summer Camp for Businessmen

Many prominent New York City officials, including thirty-six-year-old Mayor John Purroy Mitchel, enrolled in Plattsburg's first Businessmen's Training Camp. The police chief and forty police officers also attended, as

well as an alderman and the collector of the Port of New York. More than ninety percent of the first "Plattsburgers" were college graduates, some from aristocratic families; others were nationally known political figures, including former Secretary of State Robert Bacon.

A 1915 article in the *New Republic* entitled "The Plattsburgh Idea" stated that "[t]he associates of this camp do not propose to militarize the American nation. They seek rather to civilize the American military system. They do not propose to turn civilians into mere automata. They seek rather to attach soldiering to citizenship; and they seek to do it in such a way as to make the soldier really a civilian." Historian John Garry Clifford believes the "article spoke of the 'real danger of national disintegration,' how democracy in America was identified too much 'with having one's own way' and not enough with the responsibilities of citizenship. The ideal of 'national service' put forth at Plattsburg might serve as a 'social hygiene' if applied judiciously."



The *New York Times* ran daily articles on the Plattsburg camp from August 9 through September 28, giving detailed descriptions of the training and philosophy. Former President Teddy Roosevelt came to Plattsburg on August 25 wearing his Rough Riders campaign hat and military leggings. He spoke to an audience of 4,000 and praised the camp for “fulfilling the prime duty of free men.” He urged the creation of more such camps, open to all men, even those who could not pay their own way.

The Idea Catches On

General Wood made the businessmen’s training camp so demanding that its discipline and work would silence the skeptics. The six weeks of intense training concluded with a nine-day hike, each man carrying a forty-two-pound pack. The participants performed well beyond Wood’s expectations: out of 6,300 trainees, only two failed to finish. In another encampment, all but three of 6,500 completed it.

The 1915 camp at Plattsburg became Wood’s model, and in 1916 the

Posters and national advertisements in magazines and travel brochures urged prospective attendees to “Give your vacation to your country and still have the best vacation you ever had.”

Plattsburg Idea took hold throughout the country. The City of New York gave employees extra vacation days to attend the camp, as did many private businesses. Posters and national advertisements in magazines and travel brochures urged prospective attendees to “Give your vacation to your country and still have the best vacation you ever had.” Recruits paid their own travel and camp expenses; only uniforms and equipment were provided, although scholarships were offered to

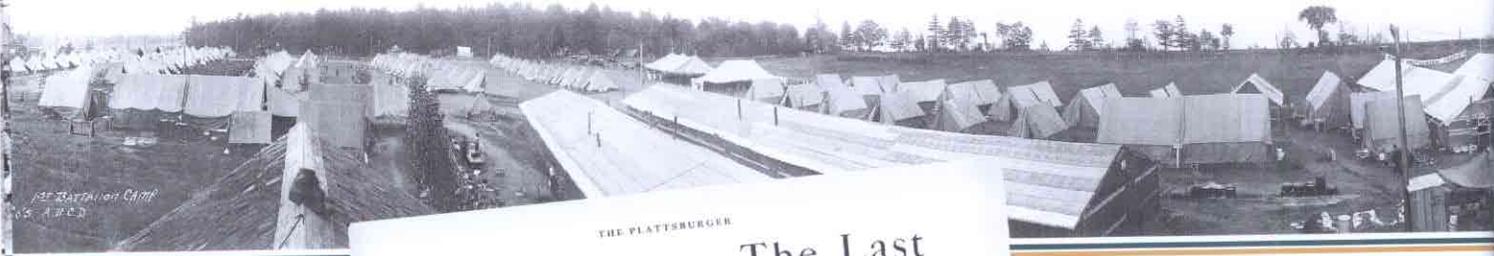
those who could not afford to attend.

The camps were expanded in 1916 to include air and naval training at other locations in New York State. By June of that year, a civilian flying school, or “Air Plattsburg,” was being operated on the military post at Governor’s Island in New York Harbor. “Naval Plattsburgs” were established with the encouragement of then-Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin D. Roosevelt; during August and September, eleven ships accepted civilian volunteers for four-week training cruises. A course in military medicine for physicians and third-year medical students was offered, as well as a special instruction camp for the New York Police Department and a camp for high school students at Fort Terry on Plum Island off the northeastern tip of Long Island. Twelve hundred boys under eighteen years of age spent five weeks in military training.

General Wood was pleased with the performance of the volunteers and the prospects for universal military service legislation. He wrote in his

Company 11, N.E. Most of the graduates of this June, 1917 camp headed to the trenches of Europe.

CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION



Tents of the 1st Battalion camp, August, 1915.
CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

An estimated ninety percent [of Plattsburgers] subsequently saw military service during World War I, most of them as line officers.

THE PLATTSBURGER

The Last Long Mile

By
E. BREITENFELD

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Oh, they put me in the army and they handed me a pack,
They took away my nice new clothes and dolled me up in kack,
They marched me twenty miles a day to fit me for the war,
I didn't mind the first nineteen, but the last one made me sore.

[Chorus:]

Oh, it's not the pack that you carry on your back,
Nor the Springfield on your shoulder,
Nor the five-inch crust of Clinton County dust,
That makes you feel your limbs are growing older—
And it's not the hike on the hard turnpike
That wipes away your smile,
Nor the socks of sister's
That raise the blooming blisters:
It's the last long mile.



[Chorus:]

Some day they'll send us over and they'll put us in a trench
Taking pot shots at the Fritzes with the Tommies and the French,
And some day we'll be marching through a town across the Rhine
And then you bet we'll all forget these mournful words of mine.

[Chorus:] Oh, it's not the pack, etc.

Members of the 1917 camp compiled *The Plattsburger*, a book of their camp experiences.

diary that "the men came from all over the union and are an able, efficient, progressive lot. Their teaching is bound to bear fruit...These camps have laid the foundation for good material for training officers and men in case of war, which everyday seems more and more inevitable."

America at War

That fall and winter, planners actively advertised and recruited for the 1917 camps. However, on April 2, 1917, Congress declared war on Germany after the Imperial German government resumed submarine warfare in the Atlantic Ocean. President Woodrow Wilson called for "the immediate addition to the armed forces of the United States...of at least five hundred thousand men, who

should...be chosen upon the principle of universal liability of service." This was the same principle embodied in the Plattsburg Idea, and it became law in the Selective Service Act of May 18.

With the United States at war, the Plattsburg Idea quickly focused on the training of officers. Thousands of men who had attended the 1915 and 1916 camps volunteered for new ninety-day officer camps; an estimated ninety percent subsequently saw military service during World War I, most of them as line officers. New York City officials were swamped with applications, and the city exceeded its previous camp enrollment. Special trains ran from New York to Plattsburg, and volunteers began arriving in early May. On May 15, sixteen additional camps started around the country, training 27,341 officers.

The men who attended the summer, 1917 camp at Plattsburg dedicated *The Plattsburger*, a book that recorded their training, to Colonel Paul A. Wolf, Infantry, United States Army, Commandant of the Plattsburg Training Camp,

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“officer and maker of officers.” *The Plattsburger* begins with this statement: “The historian of the future who undertakes accurately and adequately to set forth the achievements of the army of the United States in the world-war must give to Plattsburg an important and unique place in his compilation.

To-day the world pronounces Plattsburg, as a training camp for officers, a success.” To them, “if the world is to be made safe for democracy, it is the Plattsburg idea that a democratic army must do it. Likewise it is the Plattsburg spirit that a democratic army WILL do it.” ■

The *Plattsburger* included diagrams, maps, artwork, and personal recollections of the men who attended the camp.

THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

When Plattsburgh City Court moved to a remodeled former barracks built in 1896, the author, who is also Plattsburgh’s City Court Judge, found old photographs of something she had never heard of: “civilian training camps.” Thus began her research on the Plattsburg Idea.

The Clinton County Historical Association has numerous photographs of camp life, many left behind by the Air Force when Plattsburgh Air Base closed in the mid-1990s. Plattsburgh State University’s Feinberg Library’s special collections has materials on local history that involve the camps. These include photographs,

newspapers, and a July, 1915 “Camp of Instruction News” published by the attendees themselves, as well as 1915 and 1916 booklets from the Military Training Camps Association and a 1917 D&H Railroad pamphlet that recruited men for the camps by describing the scenery and sights on the train ride north from New York City. Accounts of the Plattsburg camp were also found in the *New York Times*, and the hopes and views of the men themselves were revealed in *The Plattsburger 1917*.

John Garry Clifford’s *The Citizen Soldiers: The Plattsburg Training Camp Movement, 1913–1920*, published in 1972, is an invaluable and detailed record of the movement from its beginnings through post-war policy that utilizes General Leonard Wood’s diary and the papers of other key players. It also names significant sources of information about the Plattsburg Idea that are far from Plattsburgh—in the Grenville Clark Manuscript Collection at Baker Library, Dartmouth College, and in the Leonard Wood Manuscript Collection at the Library of Congress. Michael Pearlman’s book *To Make Democracy Safe for America—Patricians and Preparedness in the Progressive Era* (1984) provides analysis of the values and motives of the Plattsburg Idea’s proponents.

