

Young Louise Evans caught in “Great War’s” maelstrom

Back in the spring and early summer of 1914, Louise Evans, the daughter of a well-to-do Bloomington family, was having the time of her life on the “grand tour” through Europe. And then, without warning, her idyllic travels were disrupted by the outbreak of World War I.

On June 28, Bosnian nationalist Gavrilo Princip assassinated the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, and in a matter of weeks seemingly all of Europe rushed headlong into the “Great War.”

Caught in the middle of these world-shaking events was the 20-year-old Evans, who unwittingly spent several nerve-racking yet terribly exciting weeks as a wartime evacuee. “Everyone who reads the newspapers knows the events of this terrible war,” she observed at the time. “But it is hard to realize how much suffering it all means unless you yourself can see it!”

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it was not uncommon for Bloomington’s upper crust, such as the Funk and Stevenson families, to send their college-age children on the grand tour of Europe. Clara Louise (she went by Louise) Evans was the only daughter of J. Fremont “Mont” Evans, a successful Bloomington contractor. Accompanying the young Louise to Europe was Dora Graham, the wife of a McLean County Coal Co. executive.

Their trans-Atlantic passenger liner “New Amsterdam” left New York on March 31, 1914. It’s hard for today’s readers to appreciate the first-class luxuriousness of such travel in the early decades of the 20th century. For instance, Evans’ dinner of April 7 included braised nut of veal aux Racines and stuffed pigeons Montmorency. Evans kept this menu in her scrapbook, commenting at the top: “Fond remembrances of the grand ‘eats’ on shipboard.”

After a stay in London, Evans settled into a girls’ boarding school in Lausanne, Switzerland. With Evans were Illinois Wesleyan University Prof. Wilbert Ferguson, wife Mary and daughter Constance. There were picnics, day trips, visits to picturesque old churches and mountain hikes. Her notes at this time remind one of Henry James’ 1878 novella *Daisy Miller*, absent the naive flirtatiousness and tragic death of the eponymous character.

While in Switzerland, the coming war broke over the continent like a black wave, as news of secret treaties and declarations of war ping-ponged from one European capital to another. “In the little Swiss mountain village where I was staying all was confusion,” Evans wrote. Although the country remained neutral throughout the ever-widening conflict, Swiss men and boys were dispatched to the borderlands, ready to stubbornly defend their country’s sovereignty.

The U.S. government decided to evacuate its citizens from Switzerland by organizing special trains to carry American nationals through France, onto awaiting ocean liners and far away from the Old World and its ancient blood feuds. Evans' train left Geneva on Aug. 29, and once aboard she took notes. "We passed many train loads of young boys 15 and 16 crowded into freight cars like so many cattle," she wrote of French troops. "Then there were long provision trains going to the frontier, and many train loads of wounded being brought home."

Evans then spent Sept. 2 and 3 in Paris as the U.S. government finalized plans to return its citizens stateside via steerage on chartered ships. Again, Evans' took notes during her brief stay in the City of Light. "Dinner 5 francs so we decided to have a party in our room," she recorded in an undated entry written on Palais d'Orsay Hotel stationery. "Lots of fun. Mrs. G. had a little stove & we heated water in our gourd made fine tea ... Heard loud shouting & learned that it was guns being fired from the Eifel Tower at a German aeroplane!"

Evans' returned home on "La Touraine," which steamed out of the French port of Havre around the time of the week-long Battle of the Marne, which ended with the Allies halting the German advance on Paris. The "La Touraine" reached New York City on Sept. 13, and Mont Evans replied with a Western Union "night letter" to his daughter. "I am the happiest man in the country," he said.

In January 1918, Louise married Lloyd "Jackie" Daniel of Bloomington, who was in the U.S. Army aviator corps. They lived their married years in Texas, and it was in that state that Clara Louise Evans Daniel passed away in 1970.