

Roland Spencer Read (1895-1954)

Roland Read was a man determined to be part of the Great War. That determination led him to enlist with three different armies and adventures half way around the world. Along the way, he rose to the rank of First Lieutenant, was gassed, and caught “**Salonika Fever.**”

Roland Spencer Read was born in Bloomington, Illinois, on May 26, 1895. He was one of three sons born to G. Burt and Dottie Read. The family lived at 1203 E. Jefferson Street in Bloomington. His father owned and operated a hardware store in downtown Bloomington. It is not known whether or not Read attended Bloomington Public Schools. However in 1908, he participated in Shroder’s Spelling Bee and won a ten dollar gold coin for placing second in the bee. Three years later he left home to attend Mercersburg Academy, a boy’s **preparatory** school in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania. In 1915, he attended Yale University, but it is not known if he graduated.

When the United States entered the Great War (today known as World War I) on April 6, 1917, the conflict had already raged across Europe for nearly three years. Congress quickly passed the **Selective Service Act of 1917** which authorized a national **draft** to raise an army. Prior to the draft, according to Read’s own personal account of his military service, he had tried to volunteer for service three times but was rejected each time due to his poor eyesight. When Read registered for the draft in 1917, he was formally rejected for service after failing his physical due to his poor eyesight. The military deemed him “physically unfit.”

Disappointed but undeterred, Read joined the **American Field Service (AFS)**. This organization of American volunteers was founded in April 1915 to support the French Army on the fields of battle in Europe. Read left the United States on September 4, 1917, on the French liner *Rochambeau*. But during the ten days he was at sea, control of the AFS was transferred to the United States military. This meant that the stricter physical requirements of the American Army were now in effect, and Read was rejected again because of his eyesight. However, he demanded another physical exam, but failed again.

Still determined, Read joined the regular French Army and was assigned to hospital service in Neufchateau, near the German border. He soon earned the rank of First Lieutenant and moved on to serve at **the front** near Reims. Assigned to the “automobile department,” Read coordinated the movement of supplies to the front battle lines. Supply stations were placed about ten miles from the front. Read worked to move supplies to within two or three miles of the front, where donkeys, horses, and other soldiers carried them the rest of the way. When the Germans bombarded the Reims area with **gas**, Read was injured. When he failed to recover, he was **discharged** by the French. But before returning home to Bloomington, he received an offer to become a First Lieutenant in the Serbian Army. The Serbs were allies of the French and the United States. Read accepted and journeyed to Salonika, Greece for duty in the automobile service.

Read wrote letters to his parents describing his trip to Greece. These were published by *The Pantagraph*. In them, he described how he traveled with another American soldier. When they met an American author in Genoa, Italy, she commented on the strange sight of “two Americans traveling through Italy for the Serbian army in French uniforms.” Unfortunately, after a short time on duty in Greece, Reid contracted “Salonika Fever” (a cross between malaria and an intestinal disease) and returned to Paris to recover. Failing to heal, he was again discharged and returned to the United States in September, 1918, almost exactly one year from the time he began his service.

Following the war, Read moved to Geneva, Florida and worked as a farm manager. He married Emma Eichner on June 9, 1920. Their daughter, Virginia Joy Read, was born around 1926. In 1933, Read brought his family back to Bloomington and settled at 1308 East Washington Street. Sadly, his wife Emma died of a sudden illness on December 23, 1946. On May 29, 1948, Roland married Marjorie Donley of Peoria.

In 1935 Roland started work at the Portable Elevator Manufacturing Company, a firm founded by his father, G.B. Read, around 1904. **Portable elevators** were pieces of equipment used to move corn and other grains from wagons into barns, **silos**, or other storage bins. They were commonly used at farms in McLean County and throughout the Midwest. Shortly after joining the company, Roland was named to the Board of Directors, and the following year made vice president. The company enjoyed a number of years of good success and even branched into the manufacture of other products such soda-dispensing machines. But Roland did not have the executive skills of his father, and after taking control of the business following his father's death in 1945, Portable Elevator suffered financial difficulties and declined. It was sold in 1967 and finally closed in 1987.

Roland Read passed away at his home at 815 N. Prairie Street on November 2, 1954 from a coronary (heart) ailment. His ashes were buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in the Read family plot.

Discussion Question: Why do you think Read kept trying to “join the army?”