

## Roland Spencer Read (1895-1954)

Roland Spencer Read was born in Bloomington, Illinois, on May 26, 1895.<sup>1</sup> He was one of three sons born to Dora “Dottie” (Hodge) and George Burt (G.B.) Read.<sup>2</sup> During his youth, his family lived at 1203 E. Jefferson Street in Bloomington, and his father co-owned and operated the G.H.Read & Brother Hardware store, located on the corner of Main and Washington Streets in downtown Bloomington.<sup>3</sup> Not much is known about his early childhood or whether he attended Bloomington public schools. However, in 1908, he won second place in the Shroder’s Spelling Bee and received a ten dollar gold coin as his prize.<sup>4</sup>

Beginning in 1911—at the age of 15—Read attended Mercersburg Academy, an all-male college-preparatory boarding school in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania.<sup>5</sup> Read studied five subjects, including German and algebra; joined the school’s Y.M.C.A.; and quickly made friends. In a letter to his mother back home he wrote, “I’m getting so I like it here pretty well. [L]ast night after supper 10 of us went into one of the kids rooms at the end of the hall and whistled and sang and jumped around. [...] I like my room mate [sic] swell. [W]hen I can’t get my collar on good why he put it on for me and every night he asks me if I want any help in any studies.” Read also participated in dance and boxing classes. The school required all boxers to participate in dance class. After his first boxing session, Read bragged that “I guess I can box as good or a little better” than a boy four inches taller than him. He expressed his gratitude to his Bloomington boxing coach, Jack White, and insisted that his father retrieve his boxing gloves from White’s house.<sup>6</sup>

Read returned home during summer breaks, and in 1912 enrolled in summer classes at Illinois State Normal University (Illinois State University today).<sup>7</sup> However, according to the university archivist, there is no evidence of him in the university registrar’s records. It is possible that he registered but did not attend classes.<sup>8</sup> Sources later indicate that Read attended Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1915.<sup>9</sup> However, the Yale University archives has no record of his attendance there either.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it is unknown if Read attended college at all.

When the United States entered the Great War (known as World War I today) on April 6, 1917, the conflict had already raged across Europe for almost three years. The Selective Service Act of 1917 authorized the U.S. federal government to raise an army through the draft. This was a compulsory enrollment in the armed services, in preparation for America’s entry into the war. According to Read’s personal account of his military service, he attempted voluntary enlistment

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<sup>1</sup> “Roland S. Read, Elevator Firm Official, Dies,” *Pantagraph*, November 2, 1954, 3.

<sup>2</sup> *United States Census, 1900, FamilySearch*, accessed August 25, 2017, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HT-6QR7-FPJ?i=31&cc=1325221>; “Mrs. Dora Read,” *Pantagraph*, May 14, 1953, 17; “Roland S. Read, Elevator Firm Official, Dies.”

<sup>3</sup> *United States Census, 1900; 1902 Bloomington-Normal City Directory*, Date Accessed, September 3, 2017, [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com).

<sup>4</sup> “Shroder’s Spelling Bee Winners,” *Pantagraph*, April 10, 1908, 10.

<sup>5</sup> “Home from School,” *Pantagraph*, June 19, 1912, 7; “Overview,” Mercersburg Academy, accessed March 10, 2017, [www.mercersburg.edu/page/about-us/history--traditions](http://www.mercersburg.edu/page/about-us/history--traditions).

<sup>6</sup> Letter, Roland Read to Dora Read, February 1911, Hodge/Read Family Collection, McLean County Museum of History.

<sup>7</sup> April Anderson, email message to Candace Summers, July 11, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> “Away to School,” *Pantagraph*, September 29, 1915, 6; “Roland S. Read, Elevator Firm Official, Dies.”

<sup>10</sup> Michael Frost, email message to Anthony Bowman, November 10, 2017.

on three separate occasions, but was rejected each time.<sup>11</sup> However, there is only evidence that he registered for the draft on June 5, 1917.<sup>12</sup> Read registered like all men ages 21 through 30, noting that he had defective eyesight which was confirmed when he was called up for his physical two months later.<sup>13</sup> The local draft board “discharged [Read] from military service as physically unfit.”<sup>14</sup> Undeterred, Read joined the American Field Service, received permission from the U.S. government to leave the country, and obtained a passport for transport duty in France.<sup>15</sup>

The American Field Service (AFS) officially organized in April 1915. It was an all-volunteer service that supported the French Army on the battlefields of France, and later in the Balkans. Members of the AFS were U.S. citizens from all occupations who supported French troops through shuttling ammunition and other supplies to the front and driving ambulances, filled with wounded soldiers to field hospitals. Prior to the U.S. entrance into the war, the French military commanded the AFS. However, the U.S. government took command in the fall 1917. Cars, tents, and other equipment became the property of the French for the remainder of the war.<sup>16</sup>

Read left the United States on September 4, 1917 on the French liner *Rochambeau* and arrived at Bordeaux in the southwest of France around September 15.<sup>17</sup> After reporting for duty, he was informed that he could no longer serve because of his failed physical.<sup>18</sup> The transfer of the AFS to U.S. control had occurred during his transatlantic voyage, and Read was again subject to the U.S. military’s more stringent requirements.<sup>19</sup> He demanded another examination and again failed.<sup>20</sup>

Consequently, Read formally joined the French Army and was assigned to hospital service in Neufchateau, near the German border, where he remained through December.<sup>21</sup> Read soon earned the rank of First Lieutenant and even served on the front, looking after supplies at Les Petites-Loges near Reims in March 1918.<sup>22</sup> There, Read served in the “automobile department,” which managed the movement of supplies to the front<sup>23</sup> Supply stations sat roughly ten miles from the front, and work entailed moving supplies to within two or three miles of the front.<sup>24</sup> Then donkeys, horses, and the men themselves carried the material to their final

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<sup>11</sup> E.E. Pierson and J.L. Hasbrouck, e.d. *McLean County Illinois in the World War, 1917-1918* (Bloomington: McLean County War Publishing Company, 1921), 191.

<sup>12</sup> *United States World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918, Roland Spencer Read, FamilySearch*, accessed September 1, 2017, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33SQ-G14K-9ZZH?i=4842&cc=1968530>.

<sup>13</sup> Letter, C.O. Myers to Roland S. Read, August 2, 1917, Hodge/Read Family Collection, McLean County Museum of History.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Pierson and Hasbrouck, e.d., 191; *United States Passport Applications, 1795-1925, Roland Spencer Read, FamilySearch*, accessed September 1, 2017, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:QVJP-M141>.

<sup>16</sup> *History of the American Field Service in France*, ed. James William Davenport (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1920), <https://archive.org/details/historyofamericaff01seym>, 4-11.

<sup>17</sup> Pierson and Hasbrouck, e.d.; “Roland Read in France,” *Pantagraph*, September 17, 1917, 6.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*; Postcard, Roland Read to Dora Read, December 19, 1917, Hodge/Read Family Collection, McLean County Museum of History.

<sup>22</sup> Pierson and Hasbrouck, e.d., 191.

<sup>23</sup> “Roland Read Home from Service at Front,” *Pantagraph*, August 29, 1918, 5.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

destination.<sup>25</sup> When the Germans bombarded Reims with gas shells during Kaiserschlacht (“Kaiser’s Battle”), Read was injured by the gas and discharged when he failed to recover.<sup>26</sup> According to Read’s personal account of his military service, he received an offer of a first lieutenantcy in the Serbian Army before returning home.<sup>27</sup> He accepted it and journeyed to Salonika, Greece, for duty in the automobile service.<sup>28</sup>

*The Pantagraph* published excerpts of Read’s letters to his parents. They illustrate the journey that he and another American soldier experienced. From Nice, France, the companions traveled on the caboose of a coal train to Genoa, Italy. They stayed at the American Y.M.C.A., where Read found it “good to speak English again.” While there he met Virginia Lee Welch, an American writer with *Town and Country Magazine*.<sup>29</sup> According to Read, she planned to write a story about the strange sight of “two Americans traveling thru [sic] Italy for the Serbian army in French uniforms [emphasis added].”<sup>30</sup> Six days later, the two Americans arrived in the “awful” southern town of Gallipoli, Italy, where they joined two Englishmen, one Belgian, and twenty-one Serbian officers.<sup>31</sup> Remarkably, the men spoke six languages between them, with German being the most commonly understood language. Read himself spoke “English, French, and a little German, more than [he] realized [he] could.”<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, after a short time on duty in Greece, he contracted “Salonika Fever” (a cross between malaria and an intestinal disease) and returned to Paris to recuperate.<sup>33</sup> Failing to heal, he returned to the United States aboard the *Leviathan* in September 1918 after approximately one year of service in all.<sup>34</sup>

Illinois State Normal University Librarian, Angie Milner, catalogued the experiences of ISNU men and women during World War I. The university published the result of her work in the yearbook, *The Index*, in 1919. That issue included a long list of students who served the war effort, including Lieutenant Roland S. Read, who Milner listed as a member of the “Ambulance and Lantern Service under [the] French government.”<sup>35</sup>

On the home front, Read’s mother, Dottie, headed the local French-Belgian Allied Relief Association, which sent clothing to soldiers and civilians in France, Belgium, and Italy. She also helped launch a campaign to raise money to support French children, whose fathers had died in battle. In all, the campaign raised enough money to sponsor 465 children. Dottie received a medal of recognition from Princess Henriette of Belgium for her services.<sup>36</sup>

In the two years that followed the war, Read moved to Geneva, Florida, and worked as a farm manager.<sup>37</sup> He married Emma Eichner on June 9, 1920.<sup>38</sup> Their daughter, Virginia Joy

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Pierson and Hasbrouck, e.d., 191.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> “Roland Read in Italy,” *Pantagraph*, July 13, 1918, 3.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Pierson and Hasbrouck, e.d., 191.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> *The Index*, (Normal: Illinois State Normal University, 1919), 43.

<sup>36</sup> “Mrs. Dora Read.”

<sup>37</sup> Pierson and Hasbrouck, e.d., 191.

<sup>38</sup> “Mrs. R.S. Read Funeral Services to Be Saturday,” *Pantagraph*, December 26, 1946, 3.

Read, was born around 1926.<sup>39</sup> Four years later, Read worked as a realtor in Sanford, Florida.<sup>40</sup> In 1933, Roland brought his family to Bloomington and settled at 1308 East Washington Street.<sup>41</sup> Roland clerked in a business at that time.<sup>42</sup>

In 1935, Read started work at the Portable Elevator Manufacturing Company, a firm founded by his father, George Burt (G.B.) Read. For much of the twentieth century, portable elevators were common sights on farms throughout the Midwest. These pieces of equipment moved corn and other grain from wagons up into storage bins. Around 1900, G.B. had joined the White-Evans Company, a producer of scales and other farm equipment. Within four years, G.B. had bought out his partners, reorganized the business, and incorporated it as the Portable Elevator Manufacturing Company. Portable was located on the corner of Grove and McClun Streets just east of downtown Bloomington.<sup>43</sup>

Upon joining the company in 1935, Roland became a member of the board of directors.<sup>44</sup> One year later, he became vice president.<sup>45</sup> Read served in that position until 1943, when he succeeded his father as president and treasurer of the organization.<sup>46</sup> At the same meeting, G.B. Read became chairman of the board, a role he held until his death in March 1945.<sup>47</sup>

Because of the seasonal nature of farm equipment sales, the company later branched out into manufacturing beverage coolers, freezers, and vending machines.<sup>48</sup> In the hopes of maintaining year-round employment and looking towards expanding business after World War II, in February 1944 executives announced that Portable would expand its core business of farm machinery and resume manufacturing its Pelco-branded beverage cooler. The company also aimed to produce new products: an automatic, coin-operated soda machine, and an upright home freezer (sold under the Freeze-All brand).<sup>49</sup> “Without a doubt [...] this program will require a larger force of employees than we have ever had before,” Read asserted.<sup>50</sup> The next year, the company set aside \$20,000 in a building and rehabilitation fund “for the purposed of new building, building additions or rehabilitation of existing buildings” in preparation of this “expanded program of manufacture.”<sup>51</sup> By 1951, Portable constructed soda bottle coolers for Ideal Dispenser Company of Bloomington, with plans to manufacture a new orange juice

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<sup>39</sup> “Garden Party Held,” *The Orlando Sentinel*, June 15, 1931, 5.

<sup>40</sup> *United States Census, 1930, FamilySearch*, accessed September 1, 2017, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33SQ-GR4K-N36?i=12&cc=1810731>.

<sup>41</sup> “Mrs. R.S. Read Funeral Services to Be Saturday”

<sup>42</sup> *Bloomington-Normal City Directory 1935*, 320.

<sup>43</sup> Bill Kemp, “Farmers Turned to Local Manufacturer for Portable Elevators,” *Pages from the Past: Stories from the Sunday Pantagraph* (Bloomington: McLean County Historical Society, 2012), 78-79.

<sup>44</sup> Meeting minutes, March 26, 1935, Portable Elevator Manufacturing Company Collection, McLean County Museum of History.

<sup>45</sup> Meeting minutes, April 22, 1936, Portable Elevator Manufacturing Company Collection, McLean County Museum of History.

<sup>46</sup> Meeting minutes, November 9, 1943, Portable Elevator Manufacturing Company Collection, McLean County Museum of History.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*; Meeting minutes, April 16, 1945, Portable Elevator Manufacturing Company Collection, McLean County Museum of History Archives.

<sup>48</sup> Kemp, 79.

<sup>49</sup> “Portable Elevator Maps Four Point Expansion,” *Pantagraph*, February 6, 1944, 18.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Meeting minutes, November 21, 1945, Portable Elevator Manufacturing Company Collection, McLean County Museum of History.

dispenser.<sup>52</sup> Ultimately, however, the company's product line and financial condition deteriorated substantially during Roland's management.

After a period of financial malfeasance caused by "overcompensation" of company executives, the company neared bankruptcy.<sup>53</sup> Between June and November 1950, the board had authorized raises for Read and William Caudell, Portable's secretary and general manager, totaling \$45,000 each, which is the equivalent of nearly \$446,000 per person in 2017 dollars.<sup>54</sup> During that same period, both men had received raises that brought their salaries to \$30,000 per year, which is slightly more than \$297,000 today.<sup>55</sup> For context, Portable sales in 1953 totaled one million dollars or \$9.9 million today.<sup>56</sup> The board had also authorized Read and Caudell to begin receiving additional compensation, which it based on a percentage of sales revenue.<sup>57</sup> These expenditures necessitated securing bank loans to keep the company afloat.<sup>58</sup>

The situation became untenable, and in 1952, William A. Matheson (former president of Williams Oil-O-Matic) was hired as president and general manager to lead the company out of dire financial straits.<sup>59</sup> Read relinquished his position as president to become chairman of the board, secretary, and treasurer, with an annual salary of \$12,000—nearly \$111,000 today.<sup>60</sup> Through reorganization and recapitalization Matheson succeeded in making Portable profitable, and by 1959, the banks loans were paid off in full.<sup>61</sup> In 1967, Dynamics Corporation of America (DCA) purchased Portable.<sup>62</sup> Unfortunately, the farm downturn of the 1980s irrevocably damaged the company, and its last employees were let go in 1987.<sup>63</sup>

Emma Read passed away on December 23, 1946 after a sudden illness.<sup>64</sup> On May 29, 1948, Roland married Marjorie Shelton Donley in Peoria.<sup>65</sup> Marjorie quickly became involved in Portable's governance, starting in late 1948, when she joined the board of directors.<sup>66</sup> By 1952,

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<sup>52</sup> Meeting minutes, April 10, 1951, Portable Elevator Manufacturing Company Collection, McLean County Museum of History.

<sup>53</sup> Kemp, 79; Meeting minutes, August 23, 1954, Portable Elevator Manufacturing Company Collection, McLean County Museum of History.

<sup>54</sup> Meeting minutes, June 26, 1950, July 27, 1950, August 29, 1950, August 30, 1950, September 21, 1950, October 30, 1950, and November 1, 1950, Portable Elevator Manufacturing Company Collection, McLean County Museum of History; "CPI Inflation Calculator," U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed September 1, 2017, <https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl?cost1=45000&year1=195011&year2=201707>.

<sup>55</sup> Meeting minutes, November 17, 1950, Portable Elevator Manufacturing Company Collection, McLean County Museum of History; "CPI Inflation Calculator," <https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl?cost1=30000&year1=195011&year2=201707>.

<sup>56</sup> W.A. Matheson, Jr., "Portable Elevator Manufacturing Company, 1898-1986," 1994, Portable Elevator Manufacturing Company Collection, McLean County Museum of History, 3; "CPI Inflation Calculator," <https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl?cost1=1000000&year1=195011&year2=201707>.

<sup>57</sup> Meeting minutes, November 17, 1950.

<sup>58</sup> Matheson, 1.

<sup>59</sup> Bill Kemp, 79.

<sup>60</sup> Meeting minutes, June 3, 1952 and October 21, 1952, Portable Elevator Manufacturing Company Collection, McLean County Museum of History; "CPI Inflation Calculator," <https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl?cost1=12000&year1=195206&year2=201707>.

<sup>61</sup> Kemp, 79; Matheson, 3.

<sup>62</sup> Kemp, 79.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> "Mrs. R.S. Read Funeral Services to Be Saturday"

<sup>65</sup> "Roland S. Read, Elevator Firm Official, Dies"

<sup>66</sup> Meeting minutes, October 23, 1948, Portable Elevator Manufacturing Company Collection, McLean County Museum of History.

she served as secretary as well.<sup>67</sup> Following Roland's death, Marjorie continued on the Portable payroll, though the company eventually bought out her contract for \$5,000 in 1955.<sup>68</sup> A few years after Roland's death, she lived on a 160-acre farm in Tazewell County between San Jose and Green Valley, Illinois.<sup>69</sup>

Roland Spencer Read passed away at his home at 815 N. Prairie Street on Tuesday, November 2, 1954 from a "coronary ailment."<sup>70</sup> At the time of his death, Read still owned approximately \$250,000 in Portable stock, among other assets.<sup>71</sup> On November 9, 1954, his ashes were buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in the family plot.<sup>72</sup>

By: Anthony Bowman, 2017

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<sup>67</sup> Meeting minutes, June 3, 1952.

<sup>68</sup> Meeting minutes, January 31, 1955 and September 28, 1955, Portable Elevator Manufacturing Company Collection, McLean County Museum of History.

<sup>69</sup> "Land Bought for Route 29," *Pantagraph*, February 8, 1958, 2.

<sup>70</sup> "Roland S. Read, Elevator Firm Official, Dies"

<sup>71</sup> "Half Million in Portable Stock in Read Estate," *Pantagraph*, February 15, 1955, 5.

<sup>72</sup> "Roland S. Read, Elevator Firm Official, Dies"; "Read Rites Set," *Pantagraph*, November 8, 1954, 8.