

The American Yawp Reader

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Lutiant Van Wert describes the 1918 Flu Pandemic (1918)

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Lutiant Van Wert, a Native American woman, volunteered as a nurse in Washington D.C. during the 1918 influenza pandemic. Here, she writes to a former classmate still enrolled at the Haskell Institute, a government-run boarding school for Native American students in Kansas, and describes her work as a nurse.

Dear friend Louise:

So everybody has the “Flu” at Haskell? I wish to goodness Miss Keck and Mrs. McK. would get it and die with it. Really, it would be such a good riddance, and not much lost either! As many as 90 people die every day here with the “Flu.” Soldiers too, are dying by the dozens. So far, Felicity, C. Zane, and I are the only ones of the Indian girls who have not had it. We certainly consider ourselves lucky too, believe me. Katherine and I just returned last Sunday evening from Camp Humphreys “Somewhere in Virginia” where we volunteered to help nurse soldiers sick with the Influenza. ... All nurses were required to work twelve hours a day—we worked from seven in the morning until seven at night, with only a short time for luncheon and dinner.

Believe me, we were always glad when night came because we sure did get tired. We had the actual Practical nursing to do—just like the other nurses had, and were given a certain number of wards with three or four patients in each of them to look after. Our chief duties were to give medicines to the patients, take temperatures, fix ice packs, feed them at “eating time”, rub their back or chest with camphorated sweet oil, make egg-nogs, and a whole string of other things I can’t begin to name. I liked the work just fine, but it was too hard, not being used to it. When I was in the Officer’s barracks, four of the officers of whom I had charge, died. Two of them were married and called for their wife nearly all the time. It was sure pitiful to see them die. I was right in the wards alone with them each time, and Oh! The first one that died sure unnerved me—I had to go to the nurses’ quarters and cry it out. The other three were not so bad. Really, Louise, Orderlies carried the dead soldiers out on

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stretchers at the rate of two every three hours for the first two days were there. Two German spies, posing as doctors, were caught giving these Influenza germs to the soldiers and they were shot last Saturday at sunrise. It is such a horrible thing, it is hard to believe, and yet such things happen almost every day in Washington.

Repeated calls come from the Red Cross for nurses to do district work right here in D. C. I volunteered again, but as yet I have not been called and am waiting. Really, they are certainly “hard up” for nurses—even me can volunteer as a nurse in a camp or in Washington. There are about 800 soldiers stationed at Potomac Park right her in D. C. just a short distance from the Interior building where I work, and this morning’s paper said that the deaths at this Park were increasing, so if fortune favors me, I may find myself there before the week is ended. ...

... All the girls have soldiers—Indian girls also. Some of the girls have soldiers and sailors too. The boys are particularly crazy about the Indian girls. They tell us that the Indian girls are not so “easy” as the white girls, so I guess maybe that’s their reason.

Washington is certainly a beautiful place. There is so much to be said in favor of it, that if I started, I don’t believe I should ever get through. Odile and I have to pass by the Capitol, the Union Station, the War Department, the Pension Bldg., and through the noted Lincoln park every morning to our way to work. The Washington Monument (555ft. high) is within walking distance of the Interior Department (where we work) and we walked there last evening after work. It certainly is high and we are planning to go up in the elevator some time to look over the city. We were going last evening, but the place is closed temporarily, on account of this “Flu”.

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All the schools, churches, theaters, dancing halls, etc. are closed here also. There is a bill in the Senate today authorizing all the war-workers to be released from work for the duration of this epidemic. It has not passed the house yet, but I can’t help but hope it does. ...

Source: Lutiant Van Wert to “Louise” (10/17/1918). Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75. National Archives Identifier: 2641556. National Archives at Kansas City, Kansas City, MO. Available via National Archives (<https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/influenza-epidemic/records/volunteer-nurse-letter.pdf>).

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