

#1 Remembering the War Years

The years 1914 to 1919 commemorate the centennial of World War I, known at the time as the Great War and called "The war to end all wars". It had been raging in Europe for over 2½ years before the United States entered the war on April 6, 1917.

We'll be marking the 100th anniversary of the United States involvement by highlighting how the first global war in history touched the lives of those who lived in Edwards County. Many sacrifices were made both at home and by the local men who left as soldiers to fight in Europe."

To begin with some historical context, the November 7, 1916 presidential election took place while Europe was engulfed in this war, Mexico was having a revolution, and women still could not vote.

The incumbent Democratic President Woodrow Wilson won the election over the Republican candidate, Supreme Court Justice Charles Evans Hughes. Like last November's election, it was a hard-fought contest. Wilson defeated Hughes by nearly 600,000 votes in the popular vote and a narrow majority in the Electoral College where he won several swing states with razor-thin margins.

Although officially neutral in the European conflict, public opinion in the United States leaned towards the Allied forces headed by Great Britain and France against the German Empire and Austria-Hungary, due in large measure to the harsh treatment of civilians by the German Army in Belgium and northern France and the militaristic character of the German and Austrian monarchies.

In the February 2, 1917 issue of the *Kinsley Mercury*, the Kinsley Woman's Club made an impassioned plea for people to give to the relief of the starving Belgium children.

"After two years beneath the upper and nether millstones of war, the Belgian people find themselves facing a new peril –the slow starvation of more than one million children."

According to this article, it took \$12 a year to supply an extra ration of food for a growing child and avoid starvation. The extra ration consisted of a biscuit with lard and a cup of cocoa.

"Think of it, you Americans who read this, you fathers and mothers of growing children! . . . Cannot we prosperous Kansans, who eat three bountiful meals a day, give liberally to those who are starving."

But in spite of America's sympathy with the plight of Europe and the Allied forces, most American voters, when they went to the polls in 1916, wanted to avoid involvement in the war. They preferred to continue a policy of neutrality. Wilson's campaign slogans "He kept us out of war" and "America First" helped to reelect him.

From now until the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 2017, I want to continue to follow the local papers of 100 years ago in order to get a glimpse of the people in Edwards County and how they viewed and were affected by the war.