

IOWA HISTORY



Photo Courtesy Library of Congress
Main Street, Camp Dodge, 1918

Wartime Rumors at Camp Dodge in 1917

No, the Red Cross would never solicit donations through chain letters. And the public should immediately destroy any of those bogus letters they received in the mail. Conditions at Camp Dodge near Des Moines, where thousands of boys from across the Midwest were training as soldiers were better than at many other military camps around the country, despite rumors. And that woman from southern Iowa who had helped spread juicy bits of scandal about the camp was headed for an appearance in front of a federal grand jury.

The country was at war in 1917, and military leaders were busy tamping down negative press. The Iowa camp had been selected to be a regional training center for the army. Soldiers would come from Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota and North Dakota to get their initial training as recruits. A massive construction project had been completed at the camp, and recruits were pouring in from around the Midwest.

Major H.H. Polk was a chief intelligence officer, and he took his job very seriously. In November two men at Camp Dodge had been arrested as German spies. John Conrad Ebert was working as a civilian waiter in the officers' mess. Kirk Jacobs was a barber at the camp barber shop. Both had been taken into custody after the U.S. Secret Service accused them of passing secrets to relatives in Europe.

That prompted the military to clamp down on information it shared with the public. New orders forbade the release of information about military equipment and details about the training the soldiers were receiving. No longer would troop movements be announced before the fact. When 8,000 soldiers were moved to Camp Pike in Arkansas, Camp Dodge kept it quiet until all the soldiers were safely established in their new base.

Still the rumors spread. There was the story about the hardworking mother who had sent her soldier boy off to Camp Dodge with a \$10 bill sewn inside the collar of a sweater she had knit for him. One day she was said to have seen an officer wearing her son's sweater on a street in downtown Des Moines. Walking up to the officer, the woman jerked a secret string she had attached to the sweater and out dropped the \$10 bill. The officer claimed he had gotten the sweater from the Red Cross.

Military officials at Camp Dodge quickly responded. Captain John Quigley, whose job it was to run down slanderous statements about the camp, said he had heard the same ridiculous story in Washington, D.C., Baltimore and Chicago. An officer would never wear a sweater on the outside of his uniform, he informed the public. The tall tale was obviously a propaganda ploy

from German agents, who were trying to spread distrust and suspicion among the men and officers at the camp.

And as for those rumors about the health of the new recruits, officials admitted some of the doctors on the local draft boards had been “none too careful” in judging a man’s fitness for service. But Camp Dodge had weeded out and sent home about 1,000 men who they felt could not withstand the rigors of a hard winter in the trenches of Europe.

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