

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

# Annie Spori Kerr-Experiences of WWI

By Annie Spori Kerr

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## Box 2 Folder 6

Oral Interview conducted by Christine Marin

Transcribed by Heather Matson      November 2004

Brigham Young University- Idaho

This is an oral history report. My name is Christine Marin. Today is December the 11<sup>th</sup>, 1973. I am going to be interviewing Mrs. Anne Kerr, and the general topic will be World War I.

CM: Mrs. Kerr, could you please state your full name.

AK: Annie Spori Kerr.

CM: Where were you born?

AK: In Rexburg, here.

CM: How long have you lived in Idaho?

AK: All my life.

CM: where were your parents born?

AK: In Switzerland.

CM: Both of them?

AK: Yes.

CM: What was your occupation here?

AK: Before I was married, I was a teacher in the Rexburg schools and in the Ricks Academy; and after I was married, I was housewife.

CM: When you were a teacher, was that before it became a college?

AK: Yes, it was an Academy at that time, comparable to the high school.

CM: Since we're going to be talking about World War I (World War II), Woodrow Wilson was the President at this time. What did you think of him as a President?

AK: I hoped he would be able to keep his word to keep us out of war, and so as a result it's the only democratic President for whom I ever voted.

CM: What did you think of his policies leading up to the war?

AK: Well, I approve of them. He was a man of peace, and I felt that he could possibly maintain that position in spite of what other countries were doing.

CM: When the Lusitania was sunk, in 1915, do you remember that?

AK: Oh yes, very well. We were all ready to pick up arms, then; because we felt, not only should we punish them for what they had done to us, but protect future rights.

CM: In understand that when the Germans instigated the unrestricted warfare in submarines. Did you hear anything about this? What led us into the war?

AK: Well, yes. It would be in the papers and on public forum. We were all just outraged to think that in a civilized nation and world that anything like that could happen.

CM: On the home front, what were some of the efforts that you, as a woman, would do to support the war?

AK: Well, we wrapped bandaged, yards and yards of bandaged. We knit, and there was a great movement of food preservation and preparation; and it was during World War I that the L.D.S. storage program really became worthwhile, because we sent thousands of bushels of wheat to Europe that the women had gathered for fifty years.

CM: Now, you were on a farm right? (when yu were married during the war)

AK: Yes, I was on a farm.

CM: I recall, talking to you earlier, that you said that one of your hired hands went to war.

AK: We had two of the hired hands. One was named Guy Hunt, and he returned from the war; and later my husband went with him when he had an appendicitis operation. The doctor felt that he should have been told that this boy was gassed during the war, because it complicated the surgery considerably. The other boy was Lefoy Brower. How was also a neighbor, and had been a hired man at the ranch. He lost his life in France.

CM: Mr. Hunt, did he die as a result of his operation?

AK: No. No, but he was ill for a long time and needed special care and treatment because of having been gassed in the war. This Lefoy Brower had worked for us at the ranch for a number of years, and we though a great deal of him. One peculiar incident that I could tell about this—I had a baby born just during World War I, and the third day after that baby was born, that third night, I dreamed that I saw him comin, running towards me in a place that had broken walls, and wrecked building. And he said to me, “Don’t tough me, Annie, I’m dead.” In the morning I told my husband about this and he mentioned it to several people, and three days after that his parents came to visit me. It was still in bed. In those days they stay in bed a long time. I was still bed, and the father and mother had just that day received word of his death in France.

CM: With being on a farm, what was the food situation like? Did they ration a lot?

AK: Well, there was a good deal of rationing. I remember particularly sugar. We used to make homemade candy, and we were restricted in the amount of sugar we could use. For flour and wheat and feed for the animals, and also our fruit, we raised in a good deal of that and were able to preserve it for winter. So we didn't suffer at all.

CM: How big of a farm was it?

AK: It was 360 acres, and it was all run by horses, and we had no tractors and things of that kind then. In fact, we didn't even own an automobile in World War I.

CM: When the Armistice finally came in November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1918, what was your reaction to the end of it?

AK: Oh, great joy. My sister-in-law lived in St. Anthony. She phoned and suggested that I step outside the door on this farm. It was 20 miles from St. Anthony. She says, "I think you can hear the racket," and I could. I could hear drums beating, and people shouting, and bells ringing very distinctly 20 miles away. It was such a racket and such a joy.

CM: You didn't have a radio at this time, did you?

AK: No.

CM: Then most of the news you got for the war front was through the newspapers then?

AK: Newspaper and by telephone. People who got the news before our papers would come (they would always be a day late, especially the Salt Lake papers) then our friends whose papers came sooner or who heard it in the other ways would telephone us. We had a private line, and we generally got the news quickly.

CM: Did you hear of many of the offensives that they had, the major ones, when they went on the Black Forest—things like that? Or, did you keep up on that?

AK: Well, we didn't follow the battle fronts too closely. We didn't have a daily paper then; and, of course, I hated war so badly that I didn't want to read the terrible things that happened.

CM: What was your reaction when you found out that the Germans were using gases as a weapon against the allies?

AK: We felt that that was criminal. We felt that ought not to be allowed and of course, we assured each other that now that we were in the war, we'd put a stop to anything like that, ever dreaming we might resort to it ourselves.

CM: Now, they had Liberty Bonds drives. Were they called (that):

AK: Yes, we had Liberty Bond Drives, not only the citizens and elder people that bought Liberty Bonds to provide finances for the war effort, but even the school children were encouraged to buy 25 cents stamps and then when they had enough of those, they could be converted into dollars for Liberty Bonds.

CM: How much did these Liberty Bonds cost?

AK: They were in different valuations. Just like certificates and notes are nowadays. You could get a dollar Liberty Bond, but most of them were five and ten, and occasionally as much as \$100. Course we received interest on those Liberty Bonds. I believe we paid about 75% of the bond and then the rest (the other 25%) would be added as interest. And when you cashed it in, it would be for the full amount; if you held it long enough, didn't draw it out sooner.

CM: With the end of the war, there was a major flu epidemic that hit the United States. How did this effect this area?

AK: Well, the flu was bad, here in Rexburg, (of course this ranch in which I lived was not in Rexburg, it was up on Fremont County) but people were very ill, and a great many people died as a result of the flu. My only brother was a flu casualty. This was in 1919, after the Armistice was in November of the previous year.

CM: I was told that they had almost like a hearse that would go around from town to town and community because the deaths were so common around the countryside, that they couldn't get them to funeral services. So they'd come around and pick up the bodies of those who had died.

AK: I had no experience with that. This brother of mine had dies as a result of the flu. He was brough from his ranch up above Canyon Creek, where the Webster ranches are now. He was brought very ill in a sleigh to the upstairs, above the Idamont Hotel, and they had a temporary hospital there, where the flu victims were brought. He had been there three days when he died. But I didn't ever see this ambulance that collected the dead people. They didn't have that up where I lived.

CM: How big was Rexburg during World War I?

AK: Well, this would just be a guess. I would say, maybe, two or three thousand.

CM: So it was relatively small?

AK: Yes.

CM: But was it large in this area?

AK: Well, it was the largest town north of Idaho Falls.

CM: The governor of the state, Governor Alexander, called for increase in farm production so that you can ship grain and supplies to the war front, and those people, to keep the war effort going. Did you hear anything about this?

AK: Yes. Yes, we did hear of that, and the draft was started at this time, when men were drafted into the service, and I am aware of several farmers who were exempt because their production was necessary for the war effort.

CM: With the draft, did it take away a lot of the men in the area to go fight in the war, or did they stay on the farms to keep the production going?

AK: Well, the farmers stayed on the farms, but single fellows who just held jobs with different positions of work, they were drafted, and called into the service.

CM: Were there any Socialist movements that you heard of?

AK: No, nothing (that). We'd occasionally read in the paper of Socialism, but non of our acquaintances were affiliated with anything of kind.

CM: At this time, did you understand what Socialists wanted or thought of or anything?

AK: Well, we didn't call them Communists in those days, but we felt that they were certainly against the government. I really don't know much about their movements or what they accomplished or tried to accomplish.

CM: Kind of as a closing note, do you think that World War I was maybe indirectly or directly a cause of World War II, because it was an Armistice (a cease fire, not a victory), so the unrest in Europe lead to war?

AK: Well, I think that what started World War I was not cured by World War I, that it was still an underlying cause and eventually produced a Hitler, to dominate the world. Part of that maybe from other reading I have done since, but at the time we'd call them Huns, and my people having come from Switzerland we were very anxious that we shouldn't be counted as Germans, though we spoke the German language. But we were distinct from them.

CM: We'd like to thank you very much for having this interview with us, and this tape will be placed in the library at Ricks College for use by future researches.

This is an oral history report, and my name is Christine Marin.