

Museum Notes

by Kristen Parrott, curator
for the week of January 21-27, 2018

What do spruce trees have to do with World War I? When the U.S. entered the war, the army needed a large number of combat airplanes manufactured in a hurry for its new aviation division. Wing spars and other airplane parts were made of spruce. Soldiers helped with the logging and milling of this timber, alongside civilians. Last week we looked at soldiers who flew airplanes, and this week we'll look at soldiers who made airplanes.

The *Vernon County Censor* of February 20, 1918, notes that "The following registrants have been inducted into the service by the local board this week, leaving here Wednesday for Vancouver Barracks, Washington, to enter the spruce production division of the aviation section." The men listed are Earl H. Witcraft, Town of Genoa; Elmer E. Anderson and Edmond L. Woodcock, Town of Liberty; Charles O. Lewis, Ernest Le Page, and Olaf Hanson, Town of Viroqua; Owen J. Snodgrass, Town of Webster; and Otto J. Sletten, Town of Whitestown.

A month later, a letter from Owen Snodgrass was printed in the newspaper. He wrote from Vancouver Barracks that "This camp is full. Woodcock, who came when I did, is at a saw mill, Elmer Anderson is in the woods, Earl Witcraft, I think is driving a truck somewhere, Le Page, Lewis, Hanson, and Otto Sletten and myself are still here. I am in the First Regiment Provost Supply office, which issues equipment."

Soldiers who worked in the Spruce Production Division in Washington and Oregon were organized into "Spruce Squadrons". The term "squadron" usually describes a military flying unit, but here it was also used for units that produced the raw materials for building the airplanes. Some of these soldiers had not passed the physical exam for combat, but they were able to do other kinds of work. Other soldiers came to the army with previous experience in logging or milling.

The Spruce Squadrons worked in the forests and lumber mills of the Pacific Northwest, and in a wood production plant at Vancouver Barracks, cutting wood to the specifications of the airplane manufacturers. They built roads and railroads into the woods, and operated the trains and drove the trucks that hauled supplies and timber. And, they served as "an armed force necessary to maintain peace in the volatile labor environment of the logging industry", according to Spruce Squadron researcher Robert Swanson.

Studying World War I has been a real eye-opener for me. In the past when I thought of the war, I pictured soldiers in trenches, and soldiers going "over the top". Many of the men in the Spruce Squadrons probably once thought they too would go overseas, but their work in the woods was also vital to the whole war effort.