

RECRUITING ENGINEERS FOR THE WORLD WAR IN MINNESOTA¹

On May 21, 1917, Mr. George T. Slade, vice president of the Northern Pacific Railroad Company called me in to assist Captain Samuel S. Magoffin of St. Paul, who had received a commission and was delegated to organize as many men as he could procure for the Sixteenth United States Engineers, which was and is a construction regiment. Captain Magoffin is a bright young fellow, who is now lieutenant colonel of his regiment. He had had large contracts for railroad building in Canada and was well qualified to "carry on" the work given to him. The headquarters of the Sixteenth Engineers was in Detroit, Michigan and we made our reports to Colonel Harry Burgess. The work was difficult at first because no one seemed to know exactly what was wanted. Captain Magoffin thought that the only men we required were men who were accustomed to use a "number-two" shovel; but most of the young red-blooded fellows who came to the office at first were lawyers, teachers, or university students who had never handled a shovel, but were lively up-on-their-toes good American young men willing and able to learn how to overcome the intricacies of a spike maul, a cross cut saw, a spike bar, and a good "number-two." We soon commenced to accept men of

¹ This narrative of personal experiences was written by Mr. George W. McCree shortly after the armistice brought the World War to a close, for the purpose of supplying his children with a record of the part which he played in that conflict. When, somewhat later, his files of war papers, consisting principally of official correspondence and sample induction blanks, were turned over to the Minnesota War Records Commission, a copy of the article was included. This resulted in its being brought to the attention of the superintendent of the Minnesota Historical Society, and at his request the author read the paper at the stated meeting of the executive council of the society on October 13, 1919.

Mr. McCree was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, February 10, 1858. He received his elementary education in the day schools and his secondary

this type. In this regiment we required a certain number of locomotive engineers and firemen for train work, conductors and trainmen for the same work, machinists, boiler makers, car repairers, and men accustomed to running repairs on locomotives and cars. Bridge builders, concrete mixers, form builders, blacksmiths, stenographers, timekeepers, material clerks, surveyors, draftsmen, instrument men, and all other classes of men needed to build and maintain a railroad were also required.

The procedure we followed was this: we asked the applicant what he was accustomed to do and if he was a tradesman we accepted him at once. If the young fellow was an engineering student we told him what the work would be; what a great asset it would be for him to have a part in the lightning moves that would take place in France where the very best minds in the engineering world would be centered; and that, if he would not lose sight of the fact that he should finish his educational course when he returned, then this was the department of the army where he could perform most closely to one hundred per cent of efficient work.

education in the night schools of his native city, and later, while in northern England, attended extension courses conducted by Cambridge University. He came to America in 1886, and, after spending a year in various parts of Canada, settled in St. Paul, where he has since made his home. During the first nine years of his residence in St. Paul he was employed by the Great Northern Railroad Company as a machinist; afterwards he served as state boiler inspector under Governor David M. Clough; and, in 1900, when the government lock and dam was constructed in the Mississippi River above the Marshall Avenue Bridge, under the direction of Major Frederic V. Abbot and Captain Archibald O. Powell (see *post*, p. 358), Mr. McCree was placed in charge of the steam machinery used in the enterprise. He has since been employed by the Northern Pacific Railroad Company, first as machinist, then as foreman, and finally as mechanical inspector. To Mr. McCree belongs the credit for the first establishment in St. Paul of night schools similar to those he attended in Scotland, for upon his suggestion George N. Carman, principal of the St. Paul High School in the early nineties, opened evening classes in that school. The present article is a sufficient account of his service in the World War, a service for which he was peculiarly adapted by long years of engineering experience.—*Ed.*

When we were satisfied that a man could be used, he was sent to Lieutenant Colonel Edward H. Schultz, the head of the United States Corps of Engineers in Minnesota, whose office was in the Federal Building, St. Paul. Then the applicant was put through a thorough physical examination according to government regulations. If he passed, his joy knew no bounds; if rejected, he was disconsolate. It was truly pathetic to see the anxiety displayed by some of the young fellows who were turned down because of some physical defect. I know of a great number who went into hospitals and underwent operations for hernia, hammertoes, and other ailments which would have kept them out of the army.

Before Captain Magoffin got the regiment completed I received word from Major General William M. Black, the chief of engineers, to proceed to help to enlist another construction regiment, the Seventeenth Engineers, mobilizing at Atlanta, Georgia. Shortly after this time the captain went to join his regiment and I was left to my own resources. Very soon I got word from Washington to recruit for the Twentieth Engineers, a forestry regiment, which included all classes of men accustomed to work in the woods—men with sawmill experience, blacksmiths, machinists, gas engine men, narrow gauge railroad builders, et cetera. This regiment is supposed to have been the largest regiment ever formed in any country. Its members were to go into the forests in southern France and get out bridge timbers, ties, poles, and lumber of all sizes and grades for building purposes. I got a splendid lot of fellows for this unit—young men from Stillwater, Thief River Falls, International Falls, Bemidji, and Crookston in Minnesota, and from Eau Claire, River Falls, and other lumbering centers in Wisconsin. Whenever I saw a long, sinewy, bashful fellow come into the office, I knew he had swung an axe and that he was for the Twentieth Engineers. This regiment was mobilized at American University, in the city of Washington. During one of my visits to the capital, a young pri-

vate accosted me on the street and asked me if I was McCree from St. Paul. He was one of the men from Thief River Falls. The following day I rode out to the camp and saw quite a number of the boys who had gone through the office.

Before August 12, when the men between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-one had to register for the selective draft, I could enlist all men from eighteen to forty-five years of age, and even to December 20, 1917, I could pass vocationally upon men between the minimum and maximum ages and send them to a United States Army recruiting station either in the Baltimore Block in St. Paul or in the Federal Building in Minneapolis, where they received their preliminary physical examination. If they passed this they were then sent on to Fort Snelling for their final physical examination. The quartermaster department at the fort would then swear the successful applicants into the army and give them transportation to the camps where the regiments, previously designated by me as the ones into which they should be admitted, were stationed.

The chief recruiting officer for Minnesota was Major John D. Yost. His headquarters were in Minneapolis, and I received all the assistance from him that it was possible for him to give. Lieutenant S. Stephen Da Costa, his assistant, was a very live wire and consumed with a desire to get to France, but because of a physical defect, contracted while in active service in the Philippines, he was unable to get his wish. My association with these gentlemen was of the happiest kind, and it is one of the pleasures of my life to have met them in this work.

Sometime in November, 1917, General Crowder's office issued an order that after twelve o'clock, December 20, no man of draft age, twenty-one to thirty-one, could get into the army except by induction. Then my busy time began, because so many men had the erroneous idea that being drafted cast a reflection upon their patriotism and were determined to

enlist voluntarily. The government even encouraged the idea that it was more honorable to enlist voluntarily than to be inducted, for those who enlisted were allowed to wear buttons on their coat collars with the letters "U. S.," while the buttons worn by drafted men had two additional letters, "N. A.," meaning National Army. Ultimately, however, the United States had only one army, the United States Army, while before there had been the United States Regular Army, the United States National Army, and the National Guard. After I was in the game for a short while I found that all such distinctions were unfair. Indeed thousands of men were just as patriotic winning the war on this side of the Atlantic as in France. At no time was the war three thousand miles away; it was right at our own door. Many men with tears in their eyes have pleaded with me to get them into the army only to be refused because the operating branch of the army in France had more men to perform its work than the railroads in this country had to do the necessary work here. It was not everyone who understood conditions properly. After the war industries board had said which firms could receive raw and finished material for their work, after the fuel administration had decided who could get fuel, and in fact every man, woman, and child had been put under government control in some form, then the men who were performing transportation duties at home, from the call boys, engine wipers, and the men knocking the fires, upwards through the mechanics and the men operating the trains to the federal managers, were doing work as patriotic as that of any man in France. I tried every means in my power to get a distinctive badge for all railroad men to wear, showing that they were performing "Win the War" work right here and were not slackers. I have known many engineers, firemen, and trainmen who were cut to the quick by being called slackers when they were on the street between runs. I know one young railroad official in St. Paul occupying a very onerous

position, who pleaded with his managers that he might be released so that he could go into the service, because he said he was ashamed and humiliated when he entered his clubs and heard his elderly friends naturally telling with great pride about the valorous deeds of their sons. Yet this man was personally responsible for the proper handling of thousands of soldiers.

On December 18 I reached my high-water mark up to that time: that day I passed upon eighty-two men. I became so nervous at that time I could hardly sleep at night. Some of the men were easily placed, because I have been associated with railway men so long that I can tell one almost as soon as I see him. I would merely ask to see such a man's brotherhood card and then tell the stenographer what regiment to put him into. Some of the men coming before me at that time were very amusing. I remember one man came in who evidently was a farmer. I said, "Well young man what are you?" He said he was an engineer. I asked him what kind of an engineer and he replied, "Well I'm an engineer." I then asked him, "Are you a civil?" He said "What?" Again I asked him if he was a civil and then he replied, "Oh! Yes I'm civil." So then I asked him if he was a civil engineer, a mining engineer, a hydraulic engineer, an electrical engineer, a consulting engineer, a stationary engineer, a locomotive engineer or if the fact of the matter was that the only engineering that he had done was to handle a thirty horse power threshing engine. When he got over his surprise at the many kinds of engineers I mentioned he said that a twenty-five horse power traction engine was the heaviest he had handled. I put him into the Twenty-third Regiment, a road-building unit, because nearly all farm boys know something about road building and again experience of this kind makes them better citizens when they leave the army.

The following telegram from Major E. N. Sanctuary in Washington gives an idea of the diversified types of men required.

Have urgent call for following: fifty blacksmiths, sixteen men experienced with small boats, forty radio operators, one hundred telegraph operators, twenty cable splicers, two hundred competent truck or auto chauffeurs, twenty map makers, ten topographical draftsmen, one hundred electricians of all kinds, thirty-five marine enginemen, twenty-five high voltage linemen, thirty longshoremen, fifty band musicians, ten stationary engine oilers, twenty structural steel workers, ten switchboard erectors, two telephone wire chiefs, five telephone wiremen. These are in addition to list already sent you. All men for induction or enlistment as privates. Designate whether in or out of draft when sending names. Detailed list of all needs following by letter.

At this point I want to pay the highest tribute I can to the newspapers of St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Duluth. They gave me all the space that was necessary to bring the government's needs before their readers. The Associated Press also did valiant work and sent my stuff everywhere, with the result that I had induction papers sent to all the western states from the Canadian line to Mexico. I know it is on the point of the reader's tongue to ask how I could examine a man in Arizona to put him in the army. Well I had a little form mimeographed asking what branch of railway service a man was in, how long he had been in such service, what roads he had worked on, and so forth; and from his answers I figured where he should go. Of course, no doubt, lots of times I was fooled; but the fellows found that they had fooled themselves, not me, when they went to the regiments to which I sent them on the strength of their statements and could not perform the necessary work. In such cases they were assigned to "K. P." duty or were transferred to infantry regiments, so the laugh was finally on them and not on me.

That puts me in mind of a big strapping fellow who came into the office one morning about seven o'clock—at that time I used to get to the office about five o'clock, never later than six. I asked him to come back at nine, as I was busy with my mail. I asked his trade and he said he was a railway black-

smith, and just as he was going out of the door he added, "I am also a machinist." Now in all my experience at the machinist trade I have never seen a man who has these two trades. When he came in about ten o'clock I said, "Well! you're the blacksmith. Have you been accustomed to a big fire or a small one?" He said he was familiar with all classes of work. I asked him if he could shorten an eccentric blade by shrinking. I saw he did not know what I was talking about. I then asked him if he could weld a bar, and quite blithely he said he could. I asked him if he could weld a drawbar and he answered me again, "Yes," but in such a way that I knew he had never done so. I then asked him the size of a drawbar and he had no idea about it. I then said, "You also said you are a machinist," and he answered that he was a first class locomotive machinist, having worked for the "Soo" Railway Company. I asked him to tell me in a few words how he would set the valves on a locomotive. He answered that he would first set up the balls of the governor. I then asked him if he had ever seen governor balls on a locomotive and he answered, "Oh! damn it; there's no use trying to fool you," and out he went.

While the object of the government was to get men into the different units who were familiar with the work that the regiment had to perform, a great number of fellows thought the army a fine place to learn to be locomotive engineers, blacksmiths, or machinists. Instead of going into the army and performing one hundred per cent service at what they could do properly, they wanted the government to teach them trades. In time of the stress of war men have to do what they are fit to do, not what they want to do.

Very many high class men who were authorities in their lines went into the service as privates. I had one man who gave up a position which paid him upwards of three hundred dollars a month to go into the Twenty-eighth Engineers, a quarry regiment, for the munificent sum of thirty dollars a month. He was thirty-five years of age and at the time there

was not the least idea of extending the draft to include that age. But he had to go; it was in his blood, so he went. I also enlisted a building contractor from Minneapolis who had been a building superintendent on the university buildings. He was married and had five or six children, so I advised him to stay on this side. He had made up his mind to enlist, however, and he is now in France.

Here I am going to sandwich in a story of the yellowest cur in Minnesota. He received through me induction papers to enter the Twentieth Engineers, a forestry unit. Soon thereafter the *Tuscania* was torpedoed off the coast of Ireland. The reader will remember that a large number of members of the Twentieth were aboard that vessel and it was reported that quite a number of St. Paul boys were drowned. On the Saturday morning when the news came here, at about nine o'clock this cowardly fellow came in to ask me if the papers which he had were binding on him. At once I thought that this fellow wished to back out, and sure enough that was his object. He said he had no objection to fighting, but he was not going to be drowned like a rat while going across. Then I opened up on him. I called him everything that I could think of, and even at that his cowardly action wasn't properly labeled. The thing that nettled me was that only he and I were in my office and I wanted all St. Paul to know that here was the only cowardly man in the whole state. When he went out to go to the street through our main office, I followed him and there I got a gallery and I started in on him again and gave him all I had. He came back threateningly asking me if I was talking about him. I told him the greatest satisfaction I had was the fact that there was not another man in the city of St. Paul to whom my language would apply except himself. When I called him a "yellow cowardly cur" I told him I insulted the dog in making the comparison. I also told him that instead of withdrawing from the regiment because of that accident, the red-blooded fellows would crowd in to enlist. Now here is the other part of the sandwich. Within ten

minutes after the coward left, a young man came in asking if he could join the Twentieth Engineers. I asked him why he wanted to join. He answered that someone had to replace the poor fellows who had gone down. I told him about the action of the previous fellow and assured him that he was a tonic to my soul. That Saturday I got upwards of twenty men for this regiment.

About that time—I believe it was the same Saturday afternoon—a lady with four children (I think she borrowed some of them) came into my office and handed me a comfort kit. She said her husband had enlisted through my office but she would not allow him to go so I could keep my comfort kit.

Speaking of comfort kits, I gave away many thousands of them and the boys were delighted with them. The continuous requests I made at Red Cross headquarters, where the comfort kits were made up, brought immediate action. Mrs. Archibald MacLaren and Mrs. Ernest Leighton were continually looking out that I had the proper supply. Quite a number of ladies followed the example of Mrs. William Dean and knitted socks for "Mr. McCree's boys." I told the boys when they got their kits that the Red Cross women worked without any remuneration except the thought that the load might be lightened a little in France and that the boys would know that the women on this side were thinking, working, and praying for them "over there." A great many of the boys wrote to me from the different camps expressing their appreciation of the good and necessary things contained in the kit. I sent most of the notes to Mrs. MacLaren.

I wonder if it is necessary here for me to pay a tribute to the Red Cross. I have not the ability, for to praise it properly would call for an epic poem written by no less a master than Tennyson. Everyone who had anything to do with the Red Cross women admired them; the women who sewed, the women who planned, the women who knitted, and the women who worked on surgical dressings. Some of them sometimes

had sore hearts and many a mother wondered if the very bandage she folded with such care might not perhaps bind up the wound of her own son. Frequently I have taken visitors up to the second floor of the Railroad Building to see the department presided over by Miss Helen Bunn. It was here that the dressings were received, pressed into bundles, packed, and made ready for shipment. It appeared to me that this was work more fit for some two hundred pound man; nevertheless Miss Bunn and her slips of girls were doing it. I know that this has nothing to do with enlisting, but I was brought into very close contact with the work of the women, and I am sure that their work will never be sufficiently understood or appreciated. Night work was performed in our building by the men and women of our offices, from the Mississippi Street round house and car yards, from the Como shops, and from all our freight offices. The most democratic feeling prevailed; Mrs. Hannaford, Mrs. Slade, and Mrs. Woodworth, the wives of our executive officers, fraternized with women who were patriotically wiping engines and working as helpers in our stores department during the day.

The part played by woman during the war will never be measured; the cruel uncertainty was most heart-rending for her. When reports of great victories came to us and our boys had been in the fray, we men clapped each other on the back and hurrahed, but the mothers and wives of the boys could only wonder, and wonder, and wonder. A very distressing case came up in the office. A young man well-fitted to go into the Thirty-sixth Engineers came to me to enlist; among other questions I asked him whom he supported. He told me his mother and invalid father. I advised him to stay at home, telling him that the pool halls were filled with young fellows who could be much more easily spared than he could, that he had a duty to perform to the good old U. S. A. by supporting his father and mother; but he would not listen to me, so I gave him the necessary papers to go and be examined.

After a time he came back saying that he had been rejected. I was really glad, and he was glad that he had made the effort. I gave him a letter stating the facts, so that no one could charge him with being a slacker. After a few months the local draft board sent for him, and because of the laxity of the draft physical requirements compared with the rigidity of the regular army requirements, he was accepted and sent into an infantry regiment, whereas he would have been a great asset to the engineering unit into which I desired to put him. On November 13, 1918, his mother came to see me, happy in the prospect of soon seeing her boy and of being able to give up her outside work in a laundry, with which she helped to provide for her sick husband. I was so pleased for her sake that the armistice was signed. Two days later she came into the office, dressed in partial mourning, to inform me that she had just got word that her son had been killed in action on October 22. Her son has gone to his everlasting reward as one of those who did not consider his life too precious to be sacrificed on the altar for our freedom and security, but his poor mother works every day supporting her husband, while everything she sees at home reminds her of her dead son.

One day a man about forty years of age came in and very vociferously said, "I want to enlist." At once I said to myself, "Here's some family trouble." I asked him why he was so anxious to enlist; he said he had some trouble at home about religious matters, that his wife was a member of the Salvation Army, that when he came home his wife was out on the street beating a drum, his supper was not made, and his children were out among the neighbors. I advised him to see his wife and talk things over with her, but he was obdurate, and nothing would do but he would enlist. He had been in the service before, and I told him it was necessary for him to have his discharge papers. This stumped him because the papers were at home and he had said he would never darken the door again. So I told him that he had better climb

through the window because it was absolutely necessary for him to get his papers. Well he got them and joined his regiment. About two weeks afterwards a Salvation Army lassie came into the office and asked if I had enlisted a man of a certain name. At the time I did not trace the connection but thought that she was seeking the information for some one who was asking the assistance of an organization which required this world catastrophe to prove its most estimable worth. In a little while she told me that her husband had enlisted, and that as she had four children whom she could not keep on thirty dollars per month she wanted me to secure her husband's discharge. I told her this was impossible, but that she would get much more than thirty dollars per month. I explained that her husband would have to give her fifteen dollars per month, that the government would add fifteen dollars for her plus ten for their oldest child, seven fifty for the next child, and five dollars each for the other two children; therefore she would get at least fifty-seven fifty per month. Furthermore I knew that her husband was a noncommissioned officer; thus he could increase his allotment to perhaps thirty dollars, and she would likely get about seventy dollars per month. Then she said, "If I get seventy dollars per month I do not care if he never comes back." I am glad to say that I wrote to him and arranged a reconciliation between them, and when he comes back I know this will be a very happy family. One of the most distressing things to me was the continued evidence of the apparent lightness in which the marriage vow was held. I do not exaggerate when I say that over fifty per cent of the married men whom I enlisted informed me that they were not living with their wives; in fact it was odd and noticeable when a man answered that his wife would live with his or her parents or that he had some other arrangement made for her protection.

Some of the correspondence I have had with Washington concerning the assignments and allotments were also full of

interest. When I was in Washington I called upon Mr. Charles F. Nesbit, commissioner of war risk insurance in the treasury department. I found the main office of that department housed in the new National Museum. The exhibits had been crated away, and a large part of the eleven thousand clerks were located in this building; the others were scattered all over Washington. I was informed that they were receiving upwards of forty thousand pieces of mail per day. It was very hard to get anywhere near perfect results from so many girls who were drawn from all parts of the country and were doing work that not one of them had had any experience with and which was new even to the director and his chief assistants. It is no wonder that errors crept in.

It was rather displeasing to a person who was buying liberty bonds to find out how anxious some parents were that the government should send them the monthly allowance for their sons who were in the army, when the husband was working every day and really the family was in no way dependent on the soldier's money. When I got back from Washington I informed these individuals that the government was sending out inspectors to investigate every case, and that those who were receiving money, as it were, under false pretenses, would be forced to refund it and would be exposed and possibly prosecuted. From that time forward, there were no more inquiries made.

I have had a very large correspondence with Mr. Nesbit's office and many women are even yet applying to me for aid when their allotment does not come upon the exact day when they expect it. Other complaints are founded upon a more reasonable basis. A little while ago a young woman appeared before me and showed me a letter from the bureau of war risk insurance wherein it was stated that her husband was reported as having deserted November 27, 1918, and that, therefore, she must at once return the check issued to her for \$52.25. It so happened the young woman had not cashed

the check but was holding it to help pay for her liberty bonds. The check was made out for only \$47.50. I at once wrote to the adjutant general's office, explaining the error and the injustice that had been done to this soldier, for while he had been certified as a deserter on November 27, 1918, his wife was still receiving letters from him each week and these letters bore the name of the officer who censored them. I enclosed an envelope properly censored, dated April 12, 1919. I have since had a letter from my sheet anchor in Washington, Brigadier General James T. Kerr, saying that he has had a cablegram from General Pershing stating that this soldier was present for duty with his organization on March 31.

A man just bordering on the age limit came to the office. I sent him to be examined and he was rejected; he came back to the office very downcast and casually remarked to me, "I would give \$5,000 if I could get in." There happened to be a newspaper man in the office who overheard the remark and got into conversation with the man. Consequently one of the evening papers had on its front page an item headed, "McCree is offered \$5,000 to get a man into the Army." Then followed the news item, which one of the press associations sent out broadcast, giving the man's name, where he came from, and all about him. When I afterwards met him on the street he told me he felt like suing me for libel.

One peculiar case was that of a man who came into the office stating that he was a railroad switchman. At that time the railroads were so short of men to transport the crops and do other necessary work that I was refusing to take any more railroad workers, and I told him that he would be performing a more patriotic duty by staying in this country and doing the essential work here. Then a friend of his spoke up and said this was a very peculiar case; that this man's wife was very anxious that he should enlist because he had fallen into bad company here and it was impossible for him to break the connection otherwise. I called his wife to me and she confirmed

this statement. Of course I agreed at once to help him and sent him to the recruiting station for his physical examination. In a short time he returned with a letter from the recruiting officer saying he could not be accepted because his arm was full of needle marks, where he had been injecting drugs. I at once wrote to Major Yost at Minneapolis stating how anxious I was that this man should be saved from himself for his own and his wife's sakes. Major Yost in his usual kind manner acceded to my request and passed him. Two days afterwards, when I telephoned to Fort Snelling concerning the recruit, I found Major Yost had forwarded my letter to the authorities there, that on the strength of it they also had passed the man, and that he was then on the way to his regiment.

The case of a young man from White Bear was very interesting. This came up after the order was issued that men over twenty-one years of age could get into the army only by induction. A young fellow appeared before me and before I spoke to him I thought that he was about twenty-two and there would be some difficulty in taking him in. I was rather astonished when he told me he was between eighteen and nineteen. When a young man under twenty-one years came to me to enlist I was especially careful to ask him whether he had spoken to his parents about his anticipated move; some of them brought letters from their parents but I did not demand that. I usually put the young fellow on his honor to tell me the truth, and he usually did. I put the question to this young man and he assured me that he had consulted his parents. I put him through as usual and he passed his preliminary. Two days afterwards an elderly gentleman came in asking if I had enlisted a boy of a certain name. I told him I had; then the gentleman astounded me by informing me that the boy was only seventeen years of age. I at once offered to telephone to Fort Snelling and hinder the young man from getting his final examination, but the father was afraid that his son would

enlist under another name, and then he would not be able to keep track of him. I told the father to think it over and I would do as he wanted. In a little while my stenographer told me that the father and son were talking to each other in another part of the office. When they had conversed for about ten minutes I went across and said, "Well, what are you fellows going to do about it?" The father said they had agreed to put it up to me and that I should decide whether the boy should go. Of course I refused the responsibility but added that if it was my son, under the circumstances I would allow him to go. When I said that I thought the young fellow would jump out of his skin he was so pleased. He said, "Now dad, Mr. McCree says I can go." I cautioned the son that in the future he should absolutely tell the truth. I told him that some lies were told to do harm to others and that they, like their authors, were despicable, but that there might be patriotic untruths sometimes told, which I thought would be easily forgiven. At least I hope this is the case, for I have often certified that men were forty-four years of age when they were actually forty-six and thus over the age limit, which was forty-five. The father told me that this boy represented the fifth generation in his family of men who had fought in American wars and that one of his forebears had signed the Declaration of Independence. I advised him to exhume his great-grandfather and blame him for his son's action, if any blame had to be imposed. In two months from that date the young man stepped onto French soil.

A lady came into the office one day saying that I had sent her son home to get her permission to enlist and that she had given it lightly thinking that nothing would come of it, but that now her son had enlisted and she was afraid of the class of men with whom he would associate. Just at that time some Northern Pacific employees came in from a surveying party, every one of them filled with the exuberance of the anticipation of going into the army. I excused myself to the mother

and spoke to the young fellows in such a way that she could hear both sides of the conversation. They were such whole-hearted fellows, so full of youthful vigor and ambition, that after I had enlisted them all into the regiment her son was going into the mother told me, "Mr. McCree, I came into your office in tears; now I am going out with joy in my heart that my son can go with such fine young men to take some part for our dear country."

Another similar case was that of an Irish woman who came in demanding to know why I had taken her son away from her and insisting that I get him back to her at once. Of course I told her that this was impossible, that she could not get him out, and that since he was over twenty-one years of age I was justified in taking him. She sat at one end of my table and listened to my conversation with the men who were going into the army. Then in her rich Irish brogue she said to a young man with an Irish name, "Go to it my boy, I hope you will meet my Patsy and you will make a good pair." She left the office in a very different frame of mind from when she came in.

Many fellows came into the office to ask me how far they would be from the front. I told them it all depended on what regiment they got into; that the forestry regiment would be working in southern France, that the construction regiments would be working between the points of debarkation and the front, but that the shop regiments would be working a long way from the front line. This was necessary because we had sent millions of dollars worth of machinery across there and if we had some serious reverse we did not want to lose the machinery which was required for the absolutely necessary repair work on our locomotives, motor trucks, ordinance, et cetera. Some applicants would impatiently ask if I didn't have some regiments that would be right up at the front, and I would put these into the road-building or the search-light regiments. One young man was very cocky; he had all the

assurance in the world. I told him that it would not be a very safe thing to put him into the army because the American people had great confidence in General Pershing and I would not like to see the General "bumped" and I was afraid he would try to do that. He said, "Give me a chance, even at Pershing's job, and I'll make good."

Some of the men knew little or nothing of the new life they were entering. Some of the limited service men who were assigned to work with the draft boards did not get a fair chance; I know of one young man who did not even know the difference in seniority of officers and was totally ignorant as to the distinctive emblems of different ranks. The conundrum of whether he would rather be a colonel with an eagle on his shoulder or a private with a chicken on his knee was completely lost on him. One evening on a train going to Chicago, I saw a soldier whose face seemed familiar. I spoke to him and found I had enlisted him three days before and that he was on his way to Camp Grant, Illinois. The poor fellow was like a fish out of water riding in that Pullman car. First of all he was in the wrong seat; I knew that because an old dowager duchess kind of lady was hovering around, but she did not like to ask the man to get out, I suppose because of his uniform. I asked to see his ticket and found he had upper two, so I took him to his proper seat. He told me that he would like to smoke but hated to walk way ahead to the smoking car, so I took him into the smoking compartment and he said with a sigh, "Gosh! if I had known this place was here I would have been here all the time." He asked me whether he had his gaiters on right and I was amused to see that he had one laced down the front and the other down the right side of his left leg. When we came near Winona he asked where we were; when I told him he said, "The last time I came over this road I was traveling in a box car." I will wager that when he got into his upper berth he had the same pajamas on that he wore in the box car, namely, his whole suit of clothes.

One day a man came into the office very excited. He was an artist, a scene painter in one of our theatres, and he was very anxious to get into Company C of the Twenty-fifth Engineers. This was a company made up of camouflage artists. This fellow was a dandy man for that organization but he was an inveterate cigarette smoker and had one hundred per cent of artistic temperament. Before he went up for his preliminary physical examination, I spoke to him quietly because I knew his heart was beating about a thousand times a minute and that he would never pass in that condition. When I thought he was all right I let him go and then telephoned to the noncommissioned officer in charge at the recruiting station, telling him what kind of a man was coming to see him and that if there was nothing organically wrong to let him pass because he was a very desirable man for the camouflage unit. About three minutes after the man left he came back and said, "Oh! Mr. McCree pray that I may be passed." He was passed and he was so elated that it was about four days before he could get his feet back to earth so that he could go to Snelling for his final examination. After his elation he became tremendously depressed; every little while he would come in to ask me if I thought he would pass and each time I was requested to pray for him. At last I got him off to Snelling and sent him on his way assuring him that I would pray for him. When he was changing cars at Seven Corners he went to a telephone and called me up to remind me that I should continue to pray for him. Believing that in this case work was more efficacious than faith, I telephoned to Snelling and told the authorities how anxious I was to have this man accepted. Soon thereafter he left for American University to join his regiment.

The man referred to above was tremendously anxious to enter the service; now for a fellow who said he was but was not. This young man would often come into the office and make inquiries about different regiments and the necessary

qualifications for entering them. I soon divined that he had a streak of yellow. He was employed at the munitions plant at Stillwater and was registered at Anoka. He told my stenographer that he had been put in deferred classification by his board after telling them that he was supporting his nephew and niece, but that his father was actually supporting them and he merely gave them a dollar occasionally. This displeased me very much so I telephoned to the Anoka draft board and suggested that he be sent away with the next contingent. They sent for him to appear and during the conversation said that I had written to them and told them of his false statements. He came in and charged me with doing so and I told him he was in complete error; that I did not write to his board, but, fearing that a letter might be misunderstood and wishing them to have the information at once, I had telephoned to them. I am glad to say he was put into the army.

Very often men "dressed in a little brief authority" abused their privileges. I sent some locomotive engineers to Fort Snelling, and in about an hour they came back saying they would not go into the army for any price, that, if the treatment they might expect in France from the higher officers was to be more harsh than that dealt out to them by some of the noncommissioned fellows at Snelling, they would just go back onto their engines and let the army go hang. I called up the major at Fort Snelling and told him that the class of mechanics that I was sending to him were conferring quite as great a favor on the army as the army was conferring on them. I told him these men had something that the army required and they were willing to give it but that there was no reason why some young fellow with three stripes on his arm should try to lord it over them. Of course the engineers heard my side of the conversation so I added, "I have two men listening to me who say they won't go into the army because of the treatment received at the fort, but I know better—I know they

will go in and they will be at Snelling in thirty minutes." They were and they left St. Paul that evening for Camp Upton.

A very amusing thing happened when I was making a drive for the Motor Transport Corps. When I examined the boys I asked them what class of cars they had driven, whether they were accustomed to driving in busy streets, and what experience they had had in driving trucks. One of the items to be filled out on the enlistment form was labeled "color." When one boy answered "green," I said, "You are not green," and he replied, "Oh! I thought that meant the color of the car I had driven." A short time afterwards another man made the same answer and when I asked him why, he said, "I thought that meant the color of the card I got from the draft board."

When I was recruiting in Duluth a young man came into the office, tremendously anxious to get in. He kept saying "I want to carry on." He had come across from Canada to enlist so that he could "carry on." I found out that he had been in the Canadian Army for six months, four of which the poor fellow had spent in the hospital ill with inflammatory rheumatism, and during this time the poor boy had to be carried instead of being able to "carry on." At last he was discharged because of physical disability. When he got back into his "civies" he met an elderly lady dressed in mourning who said to him, "Young man, I have just got word of the death of one of my sons and I have still got two over there; why are you not in uniform?" The boy could not answer her but broke away from her on a run and took the train to the United States. Of course I could not take him in because he would not have passed the physical examination; but I will never forget the incisiveness of his last remark, "My God, man, I must carry on."

I had a great number of men come to the office whom I thought should not enlist. Many young men who were in schools or universities I advised to remain where they were,

In a few years the inroads which the war has made on our technical men will be felt, and as long as our pool rooms were overcrowded, I strove to keep our schools and universities supplied. Towards the close of the war I went into a large pool room in St. Paul one Sunday afternoon and counted 252 men who appeared to be of draft age. Of course, some of these men may have tried to get into the service and some may have had physical disabilities, but still it was a depressing sight to me, especially when I thought that so many of our brightest young fellows desired to leave their studies for the army.

It took men with a big vision and without prejudice to be in the recruiting game. There were different camps to which the men had to be sent to take their final physical examinations for the different regiments, and frequently the local recruiting officers would send a man back to me asking if I would not alter the regiment because they were afraid the man's heart would cause him to be rejected at the headquarters of the regiment I had designated but that he would be passed at another camp. Again I would be asked to alter the number of the regiment because the examining medical officer of that camp was a crank on teeth and they doubted whether the man would be admitted there. And so it went—the individual idiosyncrasies of the different officers would cause them to reject or admit the same man. I had two very fine civil engineers apply for admittance into the army at the same time. They both had very expensive bridge work done on their teeth but they were both rejected by a new officer at Fort Snelling; the previous medical examiner would have accepted both of them. I wired to Washington asking for a waiver for each of these men. My messages were identical in both cases, except of course for the names, and they were sent the same day; but one waiver was granted, the other was refused.

I think I have already mentioned that the war office forwarded to me the induction papers and that I would distribute

them to the boys and thereby make them very happy. If I did not get them from Washington in a reasonable time I would wire down and hurry them up; then sometimes I would get as many as one hundred in a day. But I presume my messages got too insistent, so they changed the system and sent the induction papers to the boys' addresses direct, and then I did not personally know how long they were taking to come through, and that freed Washington from my importunities.

Just before the armistice was signed an order was issued that recruiting for special units would discontinue except in special cases for such units as the Tank Corps or the Motor Transport Corps. The system worked out this way: every man would be sent to the army through his draft board and placed according to his statements to that board. Selective committees of officers were to be placed in each camp to represent each department of the army, and they were to pick out the proper number of men who would fit into their units. For example, the representative of the transportation units would pick out the railroad men, the officer of the construction and maintenance units would choose all the civil engineers and men having track and building experience, and the medical representatives would claim men suitable for male nurses and for veterinary work and the care of horses. In short, the work I had been doing in St. Paul, was turned over to the officers at the mobilization camps.

One of the most exhilarating things displayed during my whole work was the team work; the railroads did not raise a whimper when I took away hundreds of their men. I do not know how many men left Enderlin, North Dakota, on the "Soo" Railway to go into the army. I must have partially depopulated the place, and from Jamestown on the Northern Pacific I think I got all the male clerks from the division offices as well as dozens of trainmen and enginemen. The Northern Pacific topped the list among the roads of the Northwest for enlistment; each month I made out a report of

the men of various crafts from the different roads and in each month the Northern Pacific was ahead of the others. Quite a number of our men gained positions of high rank.

I desire here to pay a tribute to my stenographer, Miss Anna Zimmerman. No girl could have been more conscientious in her work than she was and I think I am not exaggerating when I say she laid down her life for her country. She developed a cold but would not remain away from her work and at last it got such a hold on her that she took pneumonia and died. She wrote to dozens of soldiers both in this country and in France; she learned to knit so that she could help supply their needs. She took almost complete control of the correspondence with the bureau of war risk insurance, and dozens of women in St. Paul testify to the kindly sympathy that she showed in each particular case. When I saw the Sixteenth Engineers in Camp Upton after their return, most of the men told me how sorry they were that she did not live until their return because they wanted to give her some token of their appreciation. She was a wonderful woman.

The influence of the army had a most elevating effect upon the men, mentally, physically, and socially. Of course some of them came out a little worse than they went in; but the majority of the men were mentally and physically benefited by the regularity of their hours and their meals, by the exercises which squared their shoulders, and by the necessity for immediate response to commands. Thus many minds were developed and men were taught to think quickly who in the past had not been accustomed to think at all. The army scientifically fed the men with bone-making and strengthening food so that almost without exception men lost flesh and gained weight. One man who came in to see me after he got home said he was twenty-two pounds heavier and two inches taller than he had been before.

One of the most interesting cases I had was left until almost the last day of my work. I was in Duluth on November 7,

1918, which was the date of the false news of the signing of the armistice. I was very busy all day, and I put an item in the evening paper stating that I would meet any men who wanted to enlist at the Lenox Hotel after 8:00 P. M. When I got to the hotel I found the lobby filled with waiting men, so I took them to my room in relays. About eleven-thirty I thought I was through, but there appeared a tall red-headed boy before me. I was at once struck with his appearance. At that time I was getting truckmen for the Motor Transport Corps and for the Tank Corps. I asked the young fellow what he was doing and he answered that he was still attending high school. I learned from him that he wanted to go to the University of Minnesota and take up mining engineering, as he thought there was great opportunity for men of that profession on the iron range. All the time I was talking to him I thought what a shame it would be to take this young man from school and send him to France to drive a motor truck, when I knew that when he came home again, ninety-nine chances to one he would not take up his studies where he left off. I told him at last that I could not accept him, that the price he was going to pay was too high. I told him to keep on with his studies, that this war would not last forever and that his country would need men after the war to do certain work as much as they required them now for war work. He pleaded with me and cried when I was obdurate. He told me that I was taking other men into the unit and that he was as well qualified to drive a truck as any one of them. I conceded that, but informed him that the other men, even if they lived to be sixty years of age, would still remain truck drivers; but that if he took my advice and continued uninterruptedly with his studies, he might be an international authority on mining when he was sixty; and that when he gained the pinnacle, I hoped he would, in some moment of leisure, remember the conversation in the Lenox Hotel in Duluth with the gray-haired elderly man who gave him the best advice he could under the circumstances. About a week afterwards my heart

was gladdened by receiving a letter from the boy's father thanking me for the advice I gave and stating that his son had had the good sense to accept it. This letter did me a lot of good. I do not know why but I was pleased.

The quality of the men who left the Northwest to go into the army was of the very finest. I have met many officers of different units since the war closed, and they are unanimous in paying tribute to the readiness, headiness, resourcefulness, and indefatigability of the men from this district. I had the pleasure of meeting the Sixteenth Engineers at Camp Upton on their return from France and I met their commanding officer, Colonel Burgess, who is a Detroit man. He enlarged on the quality of the men who had gone through my office and closed his remarks by saying "Mr. McCree, the men you sent down were the finest men—well, I won't put it that way—I had the finest men in the American army and the men who passed through your office were the most excellent men of the finest regiment. Look at the number of promotions which were made in the regiment, and with few exceptions they were earned by men from the Northwest." I visited Camp Dodge when the men from the Northwest in the Twenty-fifth Engineers were there. I met the officer who brought the contingent from Camp Merritt and he told me that better men could not be gathered together than the men who came from Minnesota. I enlisted upwards of five hundred men for that regiment, and, when I told the officer that it contained that many men from the Northwest, he remarked that they were the backbone of the regiment.

I wish to say in closing that my work was delightful. I was brought in contact with an ever-changing class of individuals; my work was kaleidoscopic; the vast majority of the men were strong, virile, wide-awake, splendid specimens of young Americans. Sometimes when I was bidding them good-by and good luck, I wanted to bid my stenographer good-by and go along with the boys. No wonder I feel young

after training for eighteen months with that exhilarating bunch of fellows. I had the high honor of enlisting 7,421 men into the army. This was more than any other individual in America. The highest number I enlisted in one day was 86. I never had the pleasure of meeting Major General Henry P. McCain of the adjutant general's office, but he bestowed on me a very high honor. He issued a small number of certificates to civilians who had been of help to the army in various ways, and I understand from Washington that I was the first man to be titled "Civilian Aide to The Adjutant General of the United States." I prize the honor very highly.

I corresponded with and met some very excellent men in official life on my trips to Washington. Brigadier General Kerr was very courteous to me, and I shall long remember the poor game of golf I played and the good game he played on the links at the Soldiers' Home, Washington. I was also glad to renew an old acquaintanceship with Brigadier General Frederic V. Abbot and Lieutenant Colonel Archibald O. Powell, associated with Major General Black, the chief of engineers. One of the most delightful men whom I met was Lieutenant Colonel Sanctuary, who was at the head of the war service exchange. He and I got on like brothers; he was never weary of acceding to my many requests and never replied in like terms when I wrote or wired some complaint concerning some apparent delinquency. If I had only known of the great stress under which the men in Washington worked, I would have been less insistent; but I had a host of deliriously patriotic boys prodding me, and I was infected with the virus and was sometimes very impatient.

Sometimes my work was very trying; but my recompense for doing something for the good old U. S. A. was sufficient in meeting so many delightful men in official life, in getting the whole-hearted support of the entire body of the officials of the Northern Pacific Railroad Company, in the letters which I received from different officers in the army and

officials in Washington praising not only the quantity but the quality of men from Minnesota, and especially in meeting face to face young men whose one and consuming idea was to do their bit and carry on. I wish I had command of language fully to express my appreciation of the quiet, incisive patriotism that radiated from those young men that appeared before me; even while I sit and contemplate it, I am exhilarated.

GEORGE W. MCCREE

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).