

THE GREAT WAR & ITS STORIES: JACOB SCHOMBER, CO 1, 26TH INFANTRY

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A few years ago we celebrated the 100th anniversary of the conclusion of The Great War, as World War I was called before there was a World War II. The middle of Europe had been simmering for some time before the spark of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria set the European continent afire.

The United States was slow to enter the war. There was a strong sense of isolationism throughout the country and President Wilson could not be swayed. A series of events, however, compelled Congress to declare war—the sinking of the *Lusitania* with 128 US citizen lives lost (1198 total deaths of a possible 1962 passengers and crew), a possible conspiracy with Mexico (the Zimmerman Telegram), and a changing political climate at home. Even when we entered the war, we were slow to mobilize. We had no military infrastructure to support such an effort and our troops were considered untrained and ill-equipped for the challenges ahead.

Using Jacob Schomber, a doughboy from Issaquah, Washington, as our case study, we looked at the variety of records available online and on site. The fact that Jacob is from Washington is almost irrelevant, as most of the records we will look at have no specific tie to that state and instead are records that might be found for any WWI soldier in any state of the union.

We traced Jacob's life from the point of what we knew about him based on the records we could find "at home," starting with his letters he wrote to his girlfriend, Minnie Wilson, while serving in the Army. We then expanded our knowledge of Jacob by going back to identify his parents and siblings and going forward to find him married to that same girl back home and his request for a Washington State special veteran's bonus. This record search included online sites—many listed in the Resource list below and some on site records as well. Repositories searched included the Washington Archives (the source for the Washington Veteran's Bonus Plan), Issaquah History Museum, Ancestry, Family Search, HistoryLink (a WA peer-reviewed history website), etc.

Context is important. By understanding the motivation for going into war and the thought processes of those who were opposed to the war, we learn about conversations that Jacob may have had. We can also learn about the horrors that the French and the British experienced, and those of the United States once we entered the war. This context of the world is not window dressing or the scenery of the stage where Jacob was a player, but provides us with an understanding of what happened and why it happened. It also aids us in our interpretation of the documents. Various resources are listed that provide that information below.

We pay homage to our WWI veterans by spending a little time in getting to know them better.

LESSONS LEARNED

While conducting genealogical research of any WWI soldier, I found I needed to:

1. Understand the historical context
2. Look for artifacts at home; interview relatives
3. State a focused research question
4. Develop a flexible research plan
5. Start online with what I knew
6. Start at known beginning point, which may be in the middle of the chronology of your ancestor
7. Build a timeline
8. Be methodical
9. Be ethical
10. Look at resources that don't name your ancestor
11. Conduct U.S. census work; read the whole census entry; look on the page previous and the next
12. Gather implied clues
13. Be flexible about dates and spelling of names
14. Search records by surname, locality and topic, including Images and the FamilySearch Labs project
15. Get creative if you cannot find person of interest in census
16. Gather all pertinent censuses
17. Procure vital records, probate and land records
18. Read FamilySearch Wiki for information about locale and topic
19. Seek out local and regional repositories
20. Revise/update the research plan



On 12 July 1973, a fire broke out in the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis destroying 16-18 million records. Approximately 80% of all Army records between 1912 and 1960 (WWI and WWII), and 75% of the records of the Air Force between 1947 and 1960 (records alphabetically after “Hubbard, James) suffered catastrophic damage. Since that time, efforts of preservation have resulted in many of the records being restored. So do not despair—ask for the records!

Not all records were destroyed and the preservation work is cutting edge. Unaffected were the records of the OSS of WWII (Archive II in Arlington, VA), and the Navy and Marine records in addition to the early in the alphabet records for the Air Force.

Websites checked as of 4 November 2024. Select and paste the URL into your browser.

RESOURCES

- Ancestry. <http://www.ancestry.com> \$\$; library edition is free at most Public Libraries; Has 410 record sets but many are WWII. I used a Keyword prompt of World War I - World War II and 99 record sets appeared but many were still WWII.
- BBC. "World War 1." <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01nb93y> A wonderful documentary of the war time activities before the US entered the war.
- Bellamy, Jay. "The Zimmerman Telegram." *Prologue*, National Archives. <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2016/winter/zimmermann-telegram> Winter, 2016. 48:4. Was it a conspiracy to change public opinion or was it a reality?
- Bryan, Jami L. "Fighting for Respect: African-American Soldiers in WWI," *National Museum of the U.S. Army*, blog, 20 January 2015. <https://armyhistory.org/fighting-for-respect-african-american-soldiers-in-wwi/>
- California Military History, "California and the First World War," Official Histories of the California National Guard and Naval Militia during WWI <http://www.militarymuseum.org/HistoryWWI.html>
- FamilySearch, Wiki. <http://familysearch.org>. A go-to site for me, especially as they add more and more image only documents. Conduct Wiki searches on locale and topics, including WWI. At this site you can search by war, locale and record type. https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Military_Records
- Ferriero, David S. "Remembering WWI." *Prologue*. National Archives, Spring 2017, 49:1. <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2017/spring/archivist-wwi>
- Flickr, search on NARA WWI. <https://www.flickr.com/search/?text=NARA%20WW1> Lots of great photos . Make sure they are in public domain; read the terms of service.
- Fold3. <http://www.fold3.org> . \$\$ This site, mostly known for its military records may have some you can use.
- Fryxell, David. "In the Trenches." *Family Tree Magazine*. March/April 2017, p. 52-57. Subscription access only.
- Greenspan, Jesse. "World War I's Native American Code Talkers," *History*, blog, 29 May 2014. <http://www.history.com/news/world-war-is-native-american-code-talkers>
- HistoryLink, specifically for the state of Washington, but you might have a similar site. Washington women who died in WWI. <http://www.historylink.org/File/679>
- Issaquah (WA) History Museum, Minnie (Wilson) Schomber Collection. <https://www.issaquahhistorymuseums.com>
- Krieger, "When the Spanish Flu Outbreak Started in Kansas, It Didn't Take Long to Hit California," *The Tribune* [San Luis Obispo, CA]. blog, 2 December 2017. <http://www.sanluisobispo.com/news/local/news-columns-blogs/times-past/article187746443.html>
- Laskin, David, *The Long Way Home* (no place : Harper Perennial, 2011). The story of 12 WWI soldiers who enlisted in the U.S. military and were also immigrants.

Library of Congress, "Maps of World War I," The Occasional Papers, Series 7. You will have to dig for these. This link takes you to the Geography and Map Reading Room only.

<http://www.loc.gov/rr/geogmap/pdf/plp/occasional/OccPaper7.pdf?loclr=blogloc-ww1>.

Manning, Mary J. "Being German; Being American," *Prologue*. National Archives.

<https://www.archives.gov/files/publications/prologue/2014/summer/germans.pdf>
summer, 2014.

National Archives. "Enemy Alien Registration Affidavits, 1917-1920." (5900 online, the remainder in RG 21 & 118.) Only 5000+ are digitized by surname. Did not have to be an "enemy" to qualify, only an alien. Look also in Ancestry and FamilySearch.

[https://catalog.archives.gov/search?q=Enemy Alien Registration Affidavit](https://catalog.archives.gov/search?q=Enemy+Alien+Registration+Affidavit)

-----, St. Louis, "Request Military Service Records." Best to have service number to obtain record. (See Ancestry's transport lists for number) Might be quicker to hire local genealogist to pull record.

<https://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records>

-----, St. Louis, "The 1973 Fire: National Personnel Records Center,"

<https://www.archives.gov/st-louis/military-personnel/fire-1973.html>

-----, "World War I Centennial: Commemorating the Great War." (lots of resources here!)

<https://www.archives.gov/topics/wwi#event-timeline/item/archduke-assassination>

-----, "The Zimmerman Telegram" <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/zimmermann>

National WWI Museum and Memorial, Kansas City MO. <http://www.theworldwar.org>

Order of Battle of US Land Forces the World War, 1917-1919 (Washington, DC, 1949). 4 vol. set., p.p. 106-111. This is an important resource. The Order of Battle outlines what each regiment of the land forces experienced in great detail. Check your local public and academic libraries. If anyone finds this online let me know.

Preservation Lab at the National Archives, St. Louis. Amazing work they are doing to save

WWI records. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xNvAudiRwU>

Ship Scribe, index to images of ships of WWI and their history.

<http://www.shipscribe.com/usnaux/ww1/nameindex1719.htm>

Straus, Michael. Great War History Commission. Video. WPA project to survey all veterans of WWI by state. The Commission was not formed for every state.

<https://www.ancestryacademy.com/videos/great-war-history-commission>

Unit histories, *Google* "WW I [company or division]" So much is online.

Yockelson, Mitchell, "They Answered the Call," *Prologue*, National Archives, Fall 1998,

30:3 <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1998/fall/military-service-in-world-war-one.html>

----, "America Enters the War," *Prologue*, National Archives, Spring 2017, 49:1.

<https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2017/spring/wwi-america-enters>

Youtube, <http://www.youtube.com>. Search NARA WWI

War History Committee, "California, WWI Soldier Photographs, 1917-1919,"

<https://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=1784>

Washington State Archives, Olympia. Check your own state to determine if it had a service bonus plan.

I hope you take the time to identify your WWI soldier and research the documents that are available to help you tell the story of your ancestor.