



Washington: World Capital in the World War

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Article Summary: Sheldon describes a six-week visit to Washington, D.C., where he had gone to seek government approval for war service projects of the State Historical Society.

Washington: World Capital in the World War

Six weeks is the longest time I have served a sentence at Washington, D. C. The occasion of my going was the need of contact with the departments at Washington controlling certain activities of the State Historical Society. We flew from Chicago to Washington — Ruth Sheldon and myself. The cost was not much more than the railway fare, Pullman and food. It was the farthest and highest I ever flew in my life — about nine hundred miles and about eight thousand feet for most of the distance. A great rolling ocean of clouds was beneath us most of the way. We stopped only once — at the Cincinnati airport. East of Cincinnati the cloud billows parted at intervals. It was the first time in my life I had looked down upon the top of the Allegheny and Blue Ridge mountains. Glimpses of the mountain passes seen below called up pictures of the pioneers crossing these mountains in the 18th and 19th centuries. The path of George Washington and Braddock's army was below us part of the time. The Cumberland Road, also, painfully created by the feet and animals of the pioneers. Two centuries of exploration and search to find the paths for the American people into the land of prairies and plains beyond the mountains. Only four hours today, flying over the tops of the mountains from the lakes to the Chesapeake Bay.

Washington has an air-field on the south side of the Potomac River toward Alexandria and Mount Vernon. It is on a great bottom like the Platte River at Fremont or Columbus, — two or three miles in extent either way, with a vast pavilion airport and landing field which will accomodate the air navies of the world; and will, no doubt, within the present century. Today the airships arrive every hour from Chicago, from Detroit, from St. Louis, from Miami, from New York, from Boston, from many lesser local points. Every airship is loaded with passengers, and hundreds seated in the great glass waiting room watch

for friends or rise at the call of their ship. Lincoln is destined to be such an air center of the Great Plains region stretching from Canada to Mexico. Here are the plains, the clear sky, the central path of travel east and west, north and south.

My first objective in Washington was the WPA divisions which control the operation of war service work in Nebraska. I met Mr. Kiplinger, Mr. Child and Mr. Chapman, with whom I had some previous correspondence and contact. All three said that the approval of the War Department was absolutely required for carrying forward the war service projects of the State Historical Society. All three said that nothing could be done with the War Department, which would approve only such projects as had upon them gunpowder and blood. After each such statement I asked for direction to the officer who controlled approval of war service projects. Finally I was informed that Col. George Parker, in Room 3151, Munitions Building, was the military authority who determined whether a project was actually a war service project or not.

I sought Col. George Parker. In order to get into the War Department Buildings the visitor is put thru several degrees. They do everything to him except to make him take off his shirt. After passing this inspection I had a metal label affixed to my coat and was sent up to the third floor.

Col. George Parker was an officer in the 82nd Division overseas in the First World War. I had some brief contact with the 82nd Division myself in that war. He has a vigorous military bearing and Southern accent. I told him in fewest words the war service work of the Historical Society in Nebraska, and that we desired his approval. Musing, Col. George Parker said, "Sheldon — Sheldon. Do you know George L. Sheldon of Mississippi?" I told him that George L. Sheldon was a cousin of some degree and I had gladly aided in his election as Governor of Nebraska. "Gov. Sheldon owns a plantation near ours in Mississippi," said Col. George Parker. From there on the going was easy. He asked me if I knew Fort Robinson, and Wounded Knee, and the colored Ninth Cavalry. We had a grand time exchanging memories of the Nebraska frontier and the Indian wars. So I parted from Col. George Parker with an invitation for him to visit in Lincoln after the war is over.

The Nebraska delegation in the senate and house in Washington numbers at present seven men. There will be only six when the next Congress assembles, and we do not know just now which six it will be. But I called at every congressional office in a single day and had contact with the members and the office staff. What greetings we give and get when we Nebraskans meet far from home!

There are no political party lines in the make-up of the Nebraska delegation just now. Every man (and every woman) in the offices is aggressive as a buffalo bull for ending the war in the one and only way, — and for Nebraska to be a potent force in the operation. Splendid moments of reminiscence and fellowship in all these Nebraska congressional offices, which are in memory, but for which there is no space here.

In the Union Station I spent six hours one Sunday studying the tides of humanity which flowed in and out, never ceasing. Especially I studied those unnumbered groups of two which made a large part of that flowing human tide. Each group had a man in uniform and a woman at its center, and the whole drama of two human lives, and possibly more, set in one tragic act — parting. "*Scheiden thut Weh*," says the German song. A reporter with a notebook and a good imagination could write a thousand stories each day in Union Station in Washington and never speak a word. The stories are already written upon the faces of the two (and sometimes more) who are about to part. Some faces are tear-strained. Some lighten the heart-rending agony by flashes of laughter, trying to make the parting seem hopeful. But it is parting just the same. And I watched those partings between the uniform and the woman for hours.

Washington is the world's capital. It will be the world's capital for the next two hundred years. After that we do not know. Rome was the world's political capital for over four hundred years. Shall America be wise enough and true enough to the interests of the human race to make it the radiating center of influence for two hundred years — and more?

— The Editor.