



Major Fenner and the Clemenceau Cannon

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Article Summary: Premier Clemenceau of France had presented a cannon to Fenner in appreciation for his wartime work. Fenner gave the cannon to the Nebraska State Historical Society, but in 1942 the historical relic became part of a World War II scrap-metal drive.

Note: Fenner provided this shortened version of a 1941 *Sunday Journal and Star* article about his World War I service as deputy commissioner of the American Red Cross in Europe.

Cataloging Information:

Names: L B Fenner, Georges Clemenceau ("the Tiger of France")

Nebraska Place Names: Burwell

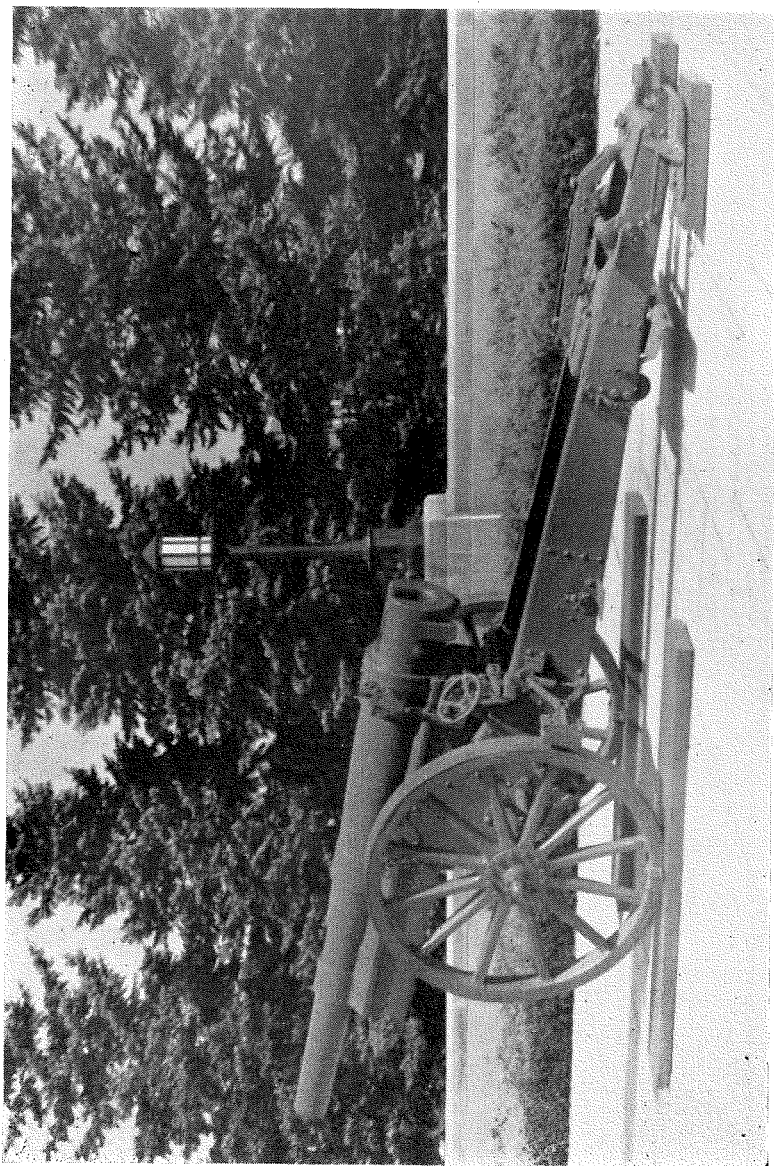
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MAJOR L. B. FENNER OF BURWELL

Deputy Commissioner of the Red Cross in Europe, 1918



Krupp Cannon Presented by Premier Clemenceau to Major L. B.
Fenner of Burwell; in turn presented by him to
Historical Society September 27, 1941

Major Fenner and the Clemenceau Cannon

Behind the Krupp cannon shown elsewhere in this magazine lies a story of unusual interest. It was written by Lulu Mae Coe and published in the *Sunday Journal and Star* of May 4, 1941. It is the story of Major L. B. Fenner of Burwell, Member Extraordinary of the State Historical Society, and, with his wife, grantor of a deed to 7,000 acres of choice Garfield County land to be sold, upon their death, toward erection of the Historical Society Building upon those unsightly vacant lots just east of the Capitol.

Miss Coe wrote of "this slender, gray-haired man with the bright blue eyes who is Burwell's most distinguished citizen," and who sailed for overseas service as a "dollar-a-year man" in April, 1918. "'A small-town man, very much a private in the international organization of the Red Cross,' as he said. Before his return he had become deputy commissioner for all Europe in the American Red Cross, with the assimilated rank of major. To him, in those many months in Europe, came honors granted to no other Nebraskan, and other honors unique with him for all civilian Americans."

As a business man who had succeeded in his own home field, Mr. Fenner was sent at once to the Surrey estate of Lord Astor's sister to establish the first convalescent hospital for Americans in London. Lady Astor had a similar nursing home near by, and many courtesies were extended to our modest Nebraskan during his months at these delightful manors.

Then followed his months in France, "where his first job was washing dishes in a canteen in the Gare du Nord." Presently promoted to a lieutenancy, he built up the metropolitan canteen system in France for the A. E. F. and soon was caring for the wounded French and American soldiers in the district of the Seine.

From Paris Mr. Fenner went to Rome "to organize the Hoover relief commission for the Balkan states, and became food director in the relief of children, the ill and the aged." After the

war he took up work for civilian relief in Serbia, "one of the saddest countries of stricken Europe." Within a month Mr. Fenner (then a captain) was feeding 2,000 families at each of three stations in Belgrade, while canteens to feed 2,000 undernourished children of the poor twice daily were in operation. Typical of his despatch is the fact that once, asked to open a canteen in a week, within thirty minutes he was feeding 200 Serbian soldiers.

Of his post-war experiences and honors in Serbia, and especially at the opening of her first Parliament of Yugoslavia that was addressed by Prince Alexander, Miss Coe tells a story that stirs the pulse. It is richly worth a trip to the Historical Library to read, as are three other stories in that issue: his later work as deputy commissioner for the Red Cross in Europe, with the rank of major; his work in Paris when the soldiers of France, returning from German prisons, were "kicked from place to place, hungry, homeless and forgotten, finally to be rounded up by the thousands and incarcerated in another prison—the stockade of the Grand Palais. Those very poilus who had been loved and feted so before the war was won, but now just 3,500 furious, insubordinate, mutinous men." May there not be some mysterious connection between the ingratitude of France in 1918 and the degradation of France in 1941?

And finally, the story of that day when a visitor came to the stockade to congratulate the commissioner on his work, astound and embarrass him by a close embrace and a kiss on each cheek, and ask what he could do personally for Major Fenner. It was the Tiger of France, and the cannon now gone to Nebraska's scrap pile was his answer to Mr. Fenner's hesitant but earnest request.

That 6,800-pound gun, "cut in a dozen places by shrapnel, was captured in 1918 by the Tenth French Army on the Hindenburg lines on the Chemin des Dames." It was Major Fenner's desire that ultimately it should go to the Historical Society as custodian for the State. The gift was presented at an impressive ceremony September 27, 1941, and there the cannon remained on the open court at the north Capitol entrance until October 1942, when this unique historical relic was dismembered and thrown onto Nebraska's junk pile during the scrap-metal drive. That every ounce

of it was charged with sentiment for Major Fenner, symbol of a thousand cherished memories, is evidenced by the night letter sent to the Superintendent of the Historical Society. Reading between the lines, one can understand what this naturally reserved man felt when the Clemenceau cannon—most prized, perhaps, of all the gifts that had been made to him, was marked for destruction. The telegram reads:

Personally, perhaps selfishly, I would prefer to have the German cannon remain the property of Nebraska, my state and my home for fifty-five years. The cannon symbolizes two years of thrilling experiences in World War I, and I am very proud that the French Government did Nebraska and me the honor to give us the gun. Over there I was known as "the man from Nebraska" more than as L. B. Fenner. I was blessed to be able to work for the American Red Cross and to bring the touch of the hand and the love of the people at home to the hearts of thousands of American boys in the A. E. F. I was privileged to feed and clothe, in the name of the people of the United States, thousands of starving children in many foreign countries. They loved me and loved America. Hundreds of them would kiss my hand and touch my uniform in awe and reverence. It was a wonderful and thrilling and never-to-be-forgotten experience, and worthy of the love that I returned.

The cannon epitomizes all this to me personally, and if the people of Nebraska understood it all it would mean the same to them. However, I believe that we are now threatened with a greater disaster than befell us in 1918, and if in the judgment of you men in authority at Lincoln the cannon should be used against our enemies now, I give my full approval.—*L. B. Fenner.*

The sword is always conquered by the spirit.

—*Napoleon.*