Digging up the dirt from World War I

By SALLY ACHARYA

This photo of Camp AU was shot from the roof of Hurst. The road at right is Nebraska Avenue, and Massachusetts Avenue is at top.

Waste from dismantled labs was burned or buried after the war.

Soldiers encamped at AU during World War I practice their camouflage skills in

It was to be the world's last war. So when it ended, there was no need for the poison gas and other munitions produced in "the largest laboratory this side of the sun or other burning stars."

That's how a contemporary report described the complex that employed 2,000 chemists in workrooms at the McKinley Building, in the present-day Mary Graydon Center, and in makeshift structures near the tents of the 100,000 soldiers who trained on campus during the war to end all wars.

But after Nov. 11, 1918, the Gas and Flame Division of the U.S. Army had nowhere to send the products of its labor. So an estimated $800,000 of World War I munitions, according to the AU Courier, was "taken back to the limit of the university acres"-the writer neglected to mentioned where-and put into "a pit deeper than the one into which Joseph was cast . . . (to stay hidden) until the elements shall melt with fervent heat, when the earth and the works therein shall be burned up."

The earth and its works have not yet burned up. The works, in fact, have expanded so much they've erased the once-rural landscape, with AU buildings sprouting in what used to be distant corners of campus, and other distant corners sold off to become the homes of dignitaries.

Then on Jan. 5, 1993, a construction worker driving a backhoe in Spring Valley heard a thwack. At the breakfast table the next morning, AU archivist George Arnold spotted a tidbit on a back page of the Metro section: World War I shells had been unearthed near a Senator's house.

"Oh boy," Arnold said to his wife, "this is going to be big." He cut his breakfast short and went to the archives to prepare for the storm.

camouflage skills in this c. 1918 photo by building a mock house facade to hide a tank or other military equipment from aerial surveillance.

Poison gas experiments were conducted in these buildings.

Photos courtesy of University Archives

By the evening news, the wartime history of AU was no longer a curiosity to file in carefully labeled library boxes. The hunt was on for the "pit deeper than the one into which Joseph was cast."

Camp American University

World War I shadowed AU from its first day of classes. Between AU's 1914 opening ceremony and the arrival of the first 28 students, a Serbian nationalist assassinated the Austrian crown prince at Sarajevo and plunged Europe into war.

It wasn't much of a campus yet. The only building was Hurst Hall. McKinley was still under construction. But by the time graduate students Junius Cates, Elbert Lathrop, and Morton Cooper stepped into the amphitheatre to accept AU's first diplomas, the downtown policy makers who were contemplating war had become familiar faces on campus. President Woodrow Wilson had spoken at the opening ceremony. William Jennings Bryan, Wilson's first secretary of state, sat on AU's Board of Trustees.

On April 6, 1917, the U.S. declared war on Germany. It took only 24 days for the university to offer its property to the war effort. The small batch of students--all pursuing graduate degrees and many of them Washington professionals--found their classes moved to professors' homes as barracks went up across 50 of their campus's 90 grassy acres.

From Hurst Hall east across Massachusetts Avenue was Camp Leach, where 100,000 soldiers trained in camouflage tactics. From today's School of International Service past the Hamilton building was Camp American University, where chemists worked "to match the wits and savagery of the Germans," as the AU Courier explained.

Specifically, they made mustard gas, a sulfur-based agent that blisters the skin, and Lewisite, an arsenic-based agent that causes blistering even faster than mustard gas. They tested chemical weapons on animals and exploded gas over practice trenches full of soldiers to check the effectiveness of gas masks.

Even amid the patriotism of wartime Washington, there were complaints. Trolley riders weren't happy to sit next to soldiers with reeking overcoats. Acidic debris from AU labs pitted street signs as far as Georgetown. Once a cloud of gas blew into the house of a neighbor, who happened to be a former senator, which caused a stink in more ways than one.

back to top

When the war ended, the labs were dismantled, and their beakers and vials, it was assumed, went into that pit with mortars and shells. "Would that it were as deep as the cellar of Pluto and Proserpine," emoted the writer for the AU Courier, ending his 1921 article with a Latin blessing: "Requiescat in pace." Rest in Peace.

The Army returns

At the archives, Arnold has a faded aerial photo labeled with letters, but no clues to their meaning. "What is this 'I'?" he asks. "Let's see. If you're working at Hurst, and you want to bury something 'at the far corner of the campus,' this point"he points to the 'I'"is about as far as you can get."

The I connects two spots: a grove behind Hamilton and Kreeger, and former AU property that is now a gated, formal residence, where a plot with a kitchen garden for sesame seeds and other staples of Korean cooking is a reminder that this is someone's home: in this case, the ambassador of South Korea.

Of course, just because the AU newspaper reported 80 years ago that $800,000 worth of potential toxins were buried thereabouts doesn't make it so. But it was time to find out. Enter the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, who are charged with cleaning up FUDS, Formerly Used Defense Sites, for all branches of the military.

After years of sampling and surveys, the trail of clues led straight to that unexplained letter 'I.' Under the ambassador's garden were found breakdown products of mustard gas, shells for mortars, and 75 millimeter shells-some of them empty, some with mustard compounds-and elevated arsenic levels hinting at the presence of Lewisite. Arsenic's greatest danger is to children exposed over long periods of time, according to the on-site operations officer, Major Brian Plaisted.

Now as the year 2000 draws to a close, about 200 truckloads of contaminated dirt will be carted off from the ambassador's yard and replaced with clean dirt. The trucks will move through AU's property, which is less disruptive and more controllable than using city streets, says Plaisted.

Meanwhile the southern half of campus-including the Child Development Center, within sight of the suspected dump site-is also being sampled, with results expected in mid-January. So far the only evidence of contamination has been found near the Watkins building and behind Hamilton and Kreeger, where high arsenic levels, buried vials, broken glass,

and other laboratory debris hint strongly to Plaisted of a burial pit.

From Jan. 8 to 11, the offices of enrollment, admissions, and performing arts will move to temporary locations yet to be determined, while soldiers and Army civilians in protective suits dig for the legacy of 1918.

Could $800,000 worth of toxic mementos from Camp American University be buried at the edge of campus? "That seems a little high for what we've found," Plaisted says. But only the January dig will tell for sure.

article next