

Kathryn Olive Graber

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Kathryn Olive Graber was born on the family farm in Jefferson County, IA, on 30 January 1877, daughter of Jacob Graber and Mary Amanda Heckethorn.

She was schooled by private tutor in the Mennonite fashion, then attended Fairfield High School. After starting nurses training at Burlington Hospital, Olive returned home several times to care for her terminally ill mother and seriously ill sister, thus delaying her graduation until she was 28 years old. When she graduated on 23 June 1908 she was one of the first RNs to take the state board examinations in Iowa. For a short time, Olive was a private duty nurse and then returned to Burlington Hospital as an assistant to the superintendent. In 1910, she inaugurated a school nurse program at the urging of a group of doctors, school administrators and community members. Burlington was only the second city in Iowa (after Des Moines) to launch such a program.

Olive interrupted her work as a school nurse in 1917 to join the ranks of Unit R, a medical corps organized through the efforts of Dr. J. Frederick Clarke of Fairfield, IA, and attached to Base Hospital 32 at Contrexeville, France. She enlisted in Unit R along with 20 other nurses from southeast Iowa. The group assembled at Ellis Island in New York harbor on 30 January 1918, Olive's 41st birthday, and departed the US on 16 February 1918 aboard the *SS Carmania*. They arrived at Le Havre, France on 7 March 1918, stopping briefly at Liverpool.

In Contrexeville, Olive was assigned to Hospital E, a medical hospital with 229 beds (323 beds in emergency capacity.) On 2 June 1918, she wrote in her journal that she had 55 patients of 11 different nationalities on her floor (spelling from the original text is retained):

“Also had on my floor an Algerian that went in a german dug out -- and killed 22 boch[e] & came out unhurt but loked a man of that type I could not help but being afraid and took my orderly with me every where I went but they all seamed so appreciative and wanted to take my hands. The French are so excited about the Boch[e] and afraid they will not win the war.”

A couple weeks later, Olive volunteered to join a small group from Base Hospital 32 detailed to serve on the front at Baccarat from 18-24 June 1918. The group provided immediate care to men wounded by machine gun fire, shrapnel or gas attacks. They stood in the trenches, where the ground was never dry and soaked feet and legs were a way of life. She recorded these observations in her journal (reproduced as in original):

“Jun 28 – At Bacrat [Baccarat] was in an air rade – the german dropped 8 bombs -- and had a large machine gun in air plane -- the machane [gun] was about 100 feet above our place of sleeping. Miss McDonald was head of the evaquation hospital – she was wounded in an air rade with the British service had one eye lost by schrapnel – was there from Monday until Sat. and worked 12 hrs a day. Was very tired -- but was glad to do what I could for the boys -- came home June 29 – went to church Sunday am – and on duty Sunday pm at the Cosmopolitan Hospital.”

After the Armistice, Olive was granted leave from 11-24 December 1918 and traveled to Nice, France. When she returned to Contrexeville, the unit was making preparations to be shipped home. Olive joined 15 other nurses who volunteered to provide temporary relief for nurses at Base Hospital 90 in nearby Chaumont (AEF headquarters.) She served there from 17 January to 5 February 1919.

After her return to the US on 4 March 1919, Olive resumed her career as a school nurse in Burlington, IA. She raised funds to provide medical and dental care for children who had no other means. Her own wages often paid bills for tonsillectomies, glasses, or other needs of children. She set up vaccination and immunization programs and collected winter clothing for kids under her care.

In 1949, she retired to the Hotel Burlington after nearly 38 years as a school nurse and one and a half years spent in the Army Nurse Corps. She never owned an automobile and walked many hundreds of miles around the city during these thirty-eight years. Sen. Jack Miller sent her a letter containing a first-day issue of the stamp honoring the nursing profession. His letter stated: “Of the many deserving nurses you are doubtless Dean of Iowa nurses. As such you may take pride in the love and respect we all have for you.”

In 1930, Olive served as president of alumni association of the Burlington Hospital School of Nursing. She was active in the Burlington Business and Professional Women’s Association and the Iowa State Registered Nurses Association (serving as president of the District No. 2 in 1932.) She was a member of Post 52 of the American Legion at Burlington, IA.

Reflecting on the years of Olive’s service, her great niece Joyce Keller noted, “She left a secure job to volunteer for service on the front lines – at the age of forty. She didn’t seem much interested in amassing a fortune or possessions. I’ve thought of her walking the streets of a moderately large city on feet and legs damaged during wet conditions during the war. This is not the act of a selfish person.... I hope her selfless devotion to others comes through in her story.”

Olive Graber died on 10 July 1964 at the Soldiers Home in Marshalltown, IA, and is buried in Evergreen Cemetery, Fairfield, IA (division S, plot 2-027.)

Sources:

Graber, Kathryn Olive, personal journal, unpublished, among items at the State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City.

Hitz, Benjamin D. A history of Base Hospital 32, including Unit R. Indianapolis, 1922.

Keller, Joyce. Kathryn Olive Graber, RN, World War I nurse, unpublished manuscript, among items related to this topic at the State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City.