

March 4, 1995

Red Cross and World War I

■ Community efforts yielded Rock Hill chapter.

The American Red Cross was chartered by Congress in 1883. Citizens of Rock Hill organized the first York County chapter on April 2, 1917, four days before the United States declared war on Germany.

If any one person should be considered the "founder" of the York County Red Cross chapter, it would be Dr. R.H. Crawford. He was the son of Dr. T.A. Crawford, the Southern Railway doctor and Winthrop trustee for whom Crawford Infirmary at Winthrop College was named.

In 1915, the younger Crawford spent six months in Germany on the eastern front as a surgeon for the Red Cross. When he returned to Rock Hill, he began speaking to local groups in favor of establishing a local chapter of the agency.

The organizational meeting on April 2, 1917 was at St. John's Methodist Church with the Rev. F.W. Gregg presiding. Prominent citizens, including Crawford; Dr. D.B. Johnson, president of Winthrop College; W.J. Roddey, civic and business leader; R.C. Burts, superintendent of schools; and Dr. W.W. Fennell, head of the Fennell infirmary, all pressed for the formation of a Red Cross chapter. The speeches were largely an attempt to gain public support; a charter had already been issued from the national headquarters in Washington.

The Rock Hill chapter covered eastern York County, made up of the townships of Ebenezer, Catawba, Bethesda and Fort Mill.

Mrs. W.G. Henderson, president of the Rock Hill Library Association, was elected chairwoman. Numerous committees were formed, which speaks to the scope of Red Cross activities.

The YMCA donated temporary office space. E.L. Barnes, head of the local telephone company, donated telephone service. Volunteer doctors and nurses taught first-aid classes.

On April 4, an auxiliary chapter with 250 members was organized at Winthrop with Elizabeth Mather, class of 1917, as the chairwoman. The students enrolled in first aid courses as their first involvement in Red Cross.



Nearby history

LOUISE PETTUS

Mount Prospect Baptist Church organized a black auxiliary. The rural communities of Bethesda, Oak Ridge, Mount Holly, Friendship, Ebenezer, India Hook, Newport, Ogden, Lesslie, Catawba Junction and Flint Hill all had sewing circles. Kate Weston chaired a sewing circle composed of black women in Rock Hill.

Schoolchildren became involved. Junior Red Cross chapters at Rock Hill High School, Rock Hill Graded School, Ebenezer, Oak Ridge and India Hook each reported reaching 100% membership of their student bodies.

The fall of 1917 was trying for the newly organized and inexperienced chapter. An influenza epidemic, which killed an estimated 10 million people worldwide, arrived in eastern York County. It became the task of the

chapter's Home Service volunteers to organize and support efforts to care for the numerous victims of an unusually virile "flu" strain.

An office opened at the Rock Hill Library, which kept a card index of families needing assistance. A canteen, with the aid of \$1,500 in donations of money and food, prepared 7,215 meals, which were distributed every day for two weeks by volunteer drivers of 20 to 45 cars. An emergency hospital staffed by volunteer nurses was opened as was an auxiliary canteen at the Catawba Indian reservation, which was particularly hard hit.

By the end of 1917 the Rock Hill Red Cross chapter had 3,100 members and could look back on nine months of solid contributions to the community.

Lena Springs, wife of Col. Leroy Springs, the president of Lancaster Cotton Mill, organized and directed the activities of a Red Cross chapter in Lancaster. As in Rock Hill, the Red Cross chapter was set up to aid the war effort, but found its greatest challenge in caring for flu victims. Mrs. Springs set up two emergency hospitals to take care of the ill. One of the sites was the cotton mill's clubhouse, designed for mill-worker recreation. She recruited nurses and volunteers to care for and feed the more than 800 people who contracted the flu. There was said to be at least one death on every street in the mill village.

□□□

Louise Pettus is a retired history professor from Winthrop University. Her column appears Saturdays.