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The Trials of Transcriptions: A Look Into the United Spanish War Veterans of Holland, Michigan

By Autumn Balamucki

Tucked away in Centennial Park, under a small bush near the Veteran's Monument, sits a medium-sized boulder with a faded bronze plate, lying in dedication to the Spanish-American War Veterans from 1898–1902. Simple block writing provides the only dedication to these veterans in Centennial Park—a small point of recognition, remembering the United Spanish War Veterans (USWV), and solidifying their place in Holland's history.

As a student intern for the Joint Archives of Holland, my first interaction with this stone slab occurred while reading through the meeting minutes of the United Spanish War Veterans Camp No. 38. As a student at Hope College approaching my senior year, I found the existence of this memorial surprising. How had I lived in Holland, as a history major no less, and never come across it? My initial response was to make sure that this boulder still actually existed in Centennial Park. What surprised me most was not only that it did, but that finding photos or information on it was so difficult. The only proof I could find of its existence was a small passage in the *Digital Holland* segment on Centennial Park, briefly mentioning it under the War Memorials section. I mention this small memorial because, as I spent my summer studying the United Spanish War Veterans Camp No. 38 of Holland, I found that their history is very much like that of this boulder—a little tucked away and hidden, but still buried in the heart of Holland.



My journey with the USWV and the Joint Archives began in January of this year, when Professor Petit of the history department at Hope College put me in contact with Geoffrey Reynolds, the Mary Riepma Ross Director of the Joint Archives of Holland, regarding a potential summer internship. At the end of the previous semester, I had briefly expressed my interest to Professor Petit in

finding an opportunity to gain experience in my field over the summer, as the next year would be my last at Hope. This opportunity through the Joint Archives seemingly came out of nowhere for me, and I was as surprised as I was excited when it did. And although I had no idea what to expect, I jumped at the opportunity to work in Holland over the summer.

However, as we now know, plans shifted a bit for everyone when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States, and my story is no different. It began in March earlier this year, when I was eating *chifa* (a Peruvian take on Chinese food) with two of my fellow students at a small restaurant on the Calle Marcavalle in Cuzco, Peru, about a month into my study-abroad term. The COVID-19 scare hadn't struck Peru with the persistence that it had the United States yet, but most of my group still harbored concerns that our program would send us home in the coming months, especially if the case count elevated. On that day in March 2020, Cuzco had just reported its first two positive cases of the virus (tourists,

(continued on page 2)

From the Director



In March, the Hope College campus shifted to remote operations to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and protect the broader community from the virus. Therefore, this issue of the *Joint Archives Quarterly* is the first since February 2020 and is numbered 1-3 to keep us on schedule with catalogers. We look

forward to the day when we can open our doors to the general public once again.

This issue includes an article from one of our summer research students, Autumn Balamucki, documenting her work with digitized archival material during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This student research experience was possible through the generous donations we receive each year from donors like you. We have included a list of last year's donors to publicly thank you for your financial support.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

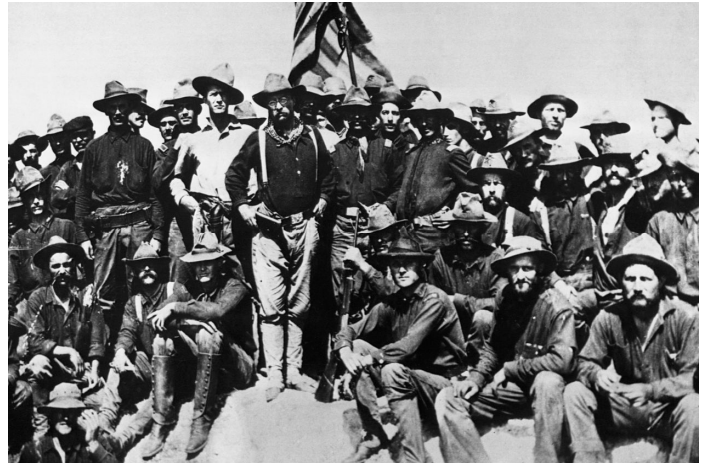
Trials of Transcriptions (continued from page 1)

no less), while Michigan's numbers were quickly elevating. Rather than book an international flight home, it would have been safer to stay there, right? That was our line of thought anyway.

Sitting in that restaurant, the three of us experienced one of those moments where all eyes are drawn to the news playing on the television, and, looking around, you slowly realize that everyone else, employee and customer alike, is watching as intently as you are. As the screen showed the words "FRONTERA CERRADA" ("BORDER CLOSED") during the Peruvian president's speech, each of us met each other's eyes with confused shock on our faces and thought, "Well, what now?"

Unfortunately, that was the last free night we had in Cuzco that term. The day after the president announced the border closure, the government immediately cancelled all air traffic both in and out of the country, leaving me and the rest of my group quarantined with our host families, unable to leave the house except for emergencies. Luckily, after two weeks of quarantine, eight other students and I received an email that we could leave on a repatriation flight the next morning. The transition from having the freedom to explore a new country every day, to being restricted to a single house with an all-Spanish-speaking family (although they were lovely), to returning home, once again quarantined, was an experience of stress and adaptation that I claimed to be, as I so eloquently wrote in an email to my professor, a whirlwind of crazy.

It so happened that my struggle to adapt with this unique period in our history ended up bringing me closer to another group of people, in another time in history, whose experiences with global change and the necessity to adapt far surpassed mine. Their story begins one hundred and twenty-two years ago, in 1898, on the verge of the Spanish-American War, as a group of soldiers whose lives would see a great amount of change and adaptability in the coming years. These soldiers followed the veterans of the Civil War, and preceded the well-known soldiers of World War I. They saw times of war, times of peace, of economic depression and prosperity, of political unity and dissention, and throughout it all they adapted to the changing world around them that the first half of the 20th century brought.



Colonel Theodore Roosevelt and his Rough Riders at the top of San Juan Hill, Cuba, July 1898

The Spanish-American War, arguably one of the lesser-known wars in United States history, lasted 114 days, from April 21–August 13, 1898. In a basic sense, the United States and Spain entered this war with the objective of controlling Cuba. From a historical standpoint, this war represented the induction of the United States into the world of imperialism, the juncture between the internal conflict that the Civil War brought, and the following century of external conflicts. Many today know this conflict because of Theodore Roosevelt and his infamous Rough-Riders. But for a number of the soldiers in this war, whose fathers and relatives either fought in or lived through the Civil War, this war represented the reunification of two halves of the United States who, even after 40 years, still felt distant from each other.¹ It imparted an immense sense of pride to many of the veterans who played a part, most of whom were neither drafted nor previously enlisted, but made up, according to the United Spanish War Veterans poster from 1936, "The only 100% Volunteer Army the World Has Ever Known."²

The veterans of this war entered the 20th century with a sense of pride for their country and their fellow man and with an immense sense of respect for their elders, especially those of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) who fought in the Civil War years before. After the war, veterans from across the country banded

together to form the United Spanish War Veterans, a series of clubs that installed their presence across the country. These clubs provided forms of welfare and representation to their fellow men, as well as those in their respective communities, including assisting with hospital bills and pension receipts, organizing and participating in Memorial Day services, and even buying the occasional bag of groceries or a bouquet of flowers for a fellow comrade's wife.

As these groups began to form in 1904, veterans of the Philippine-American War—often called the Philippine Insurrection (1899–1902), and the Chinese Relief Expedition (1898–1901)—also called the Boxer Rebellion, gained admittance to these clubs as well. As these three foreign wars came to an end in the early 20th century, the United States government never created new pension funds for the additional two wars, and instead categorized these three separate groups of veterans together with the title of “Spanish-American War Veterans” on all official paperwork and pension receipts. Because of this, when the United Spanish War Veterans group (USWV) was founded in 1904, the members of these various clubs encompassed three separate United States foreign conflicts.³



Holland Camp No. 38 letterhead

The story of the USWV in Holland began in 1911 with the formation of the United Spanish War Veterans of Holland Camp No. 38, which remained active until the death of the last remaining member, John Henry Van Lente, in 1975.⁴ My journey with this camp began shortly after my return from Peru, when Geoffrey Reynolds of the Joint Archives contacted me regarding the internship we discussed earlier. He explained that the Joint Archives of Holland received a generous donation of the meeting minutes and other documents from the Holland Camp No. 38 USWV, and that my first job was to transcribe them. I vividly recall him emailing me and writing “Let the fun begin!” As my semester’s schedule had drastically changed due to my early return from Peru, I was more than ready to get to work. Since I could no longer do research in the Archives as we originally planned (due to the Hope College campus shifting to remote operations), we decided that the best course of action would be for me to research from home and to stay in touch through email and the occasional video chat. We initiated a “COVID-19-free” pick up at his front porch in Holland so that I could have the paper copies of the minutes and, as he said, the fun began. Did I know what I was getting myself into? Absolutely not.

The next four and a half weeks consisted of me at my kitchen table, pouring over meeting minutes from an unfamiliar group with unfamiliar people—many of which had questionable penmanship. However, as the days and the pages progressed, I began to hear the voices of these veterans, or comrades, as they called one another. As I read and typed (and read and typed and read and typed...), their actions began to have meaning, and the story that they told through these vague monthly meeting minutes began to take shape in my mind. Simple sentences changed from frustrating to fascinating, and I was hooked. Although their stories and mine are very different, I recognized their frustration and lack of control in being forced to adapt to the changing world around them. After transcribing roughly 500 pages of their meeting minutes, I knew that their story needed to be told.

There is a lot to say about the struggles that these men faced—these men that not only took part in a foreign war, but lived through both World Wars, the Great Depression, and with that the loss of friends, financial support, and at times even respect. However, I want to shift the perspective in this by talking a bit about how they coped with all of this change, because it wasn't the struggles they faced that inspired the researcher in me, it was how through the loss of all of it, they never lost their hope for the future and their pride for their service.

Perhaps the most trying times for many American citizens in the last century, including the families of the Holland Camp, occurred during the Great Depression in the 1930s, and while the camaraderie and bonds of these men was something to behold, it came at an emotional cost as well. On February 11, 1931, members of the Holland Camp attended the funeral of Comrade Eugene F. Gourdeau at Rest Lawn Cemetery. The *Holland Sentinel's* claim in 1931 of Gourdeau's unexpected death rings true in the written words of the Camp's minutes,⁵ the only way in which to truly represent is to read for yourself:

We the Comrades of Holland Camp do hereby wish to express our loss of a comrade who was always loyal, cheerful, and courteous, always in favor of Good government, and firing as a True Patriot. In his going we loose [lose] a comrade who we loved, and while we feel deep Sorrow that he no more serves with us, yet his memory will ever abide, and be cherished by us as one we are thankful to have known and honored.⁶

The loss of Comrade Gourdeau marked the first of many. As veterans aged and the world changed around them, no longer was it uncommon to hear about the death of a fellow comrade, or to hear about the lack of work available, or the lack of pensions received. Life changed in the 1930s for these veterans, and for many other Americans, just as life is changing in our world today. As a researcher, this passage also marked my first experience of being so emotionally invested in a

historical document (translation: I definitely cried while reading this passage).

It can be easy to separate yourself from history when viewing it as simply a snapshot in time, or a puzzle to be put together, and if I am being honest, I think that is what attracted me to the subject in the first place—reading a story that I already knew the ending to. To follow the journey of one group of people through so many years of their lives though, brought to light a whole new aspect of research for me. While I often found myself irritated with how *every single adjutant* spelled Gourdeau's name, differently and incorrectly, hearing the loss in their words and in their hearts struck a chord in me, and made me realize just how attached I was getting to these people whom I have never and will never meet.

To add hurt to heartache, about a year later in 1932, the People's State Bank regrettably shut its doors, causing distress to many in Holland's community, including the Camp, who stored many of their funds there.⁷ At the meeting of March 14th, 1932, the motion was made "exonerating Comrade Van de Water from any blame in having some of the funds of the Camp in the peoples bank."⁸ This is one of the few instances where the local effects of the Great Depression in Holland were outright expressed via the adjutant. While the Camp ended up moving its funds into the new Holland City Bank, which had merged with the People's State Bank when it shut down, the Camp took much more caution with their funds in the following years, which we can see through their suddenly very specific quartermaster reports at almost every meeting after the shutdown.

Later that year, on the night of December 23, 1932, roughly seventy men and women of the Holland Camp and their Auxiliary filled the room in celebration of the Camp's annual Christmas party, a tradition that not even a harsh year of economic depression could halt. Two pine trees stood at attention, and decorations filled the air with the ever-present sensation of Christmas. Even given the circumstances, the joy and hope of the season permeated the room, and men, women, and children alike came together in a time of unending hardship to celebrate and comfort each other. Comrades and their wives sang duets, and children lightened the room with Christmas carols. Even Santa Claus made an appearance, singing along with the children to "Jingle Bells" and giving them each their own little Christmas present.⁹

As a researcher, this Christmas celebration touched me. They say that hindsight is 20/20, but it can be hard to imagine such an experience of hope and love in such a time of grief and hardship. It is difficult to envision that after all the struggles that life gave these families that year, after losses of comrades, jobs, and financial security, that such happiness and camaraderie could persist.

We know from basic historical research that the 1930s were a trying time in United States history, but without

hearing it from the source, it is difficult to imagine a history that seems so distant, even if it was only 90 years ago. While that Christmas party showed hope, it also showed the financial burdens that caused these men to experience the difficulties to meet their basic needs that persisted in the 1930s. Just one example of this occurred in January 1933, when the Camp took advantage of the War Department selling cheap underwear and clothing items to veteran organizations, which many comrades accepted gratefully.¹⁰ Due to factors such as job loss, financial strain, and the difficulties to meet basic needs, celebrations in this era were not always easy for the men and women who lived in it.



"The Hiker" in Lansing, Michigan, dedicated to all Spanish-American War Veterans. Photo taken from John A. Slaghuis's Certificate of Appreciation (1946) as certification that Slaghuis was a contributor to the Hiker Memorial Monument of Michigan.

As the issue of financial strain was so prevalent during the Great Depression, it only makes sense that veteran pensions would hold a place in the minds and the concerns of these veterans. Even at a national level, with the Bonus March of 1932, the tensions regarding veteran pensions were high.¹¹ On a local level, the effects of the Great Depression brought a rising importance to these issues of pensions and welfare in the veteran community in Holland, as well. In the early 1930s, the USWV Holland Camp's welfare committee suddenly gained a much higher level of importance and recognition within the Camp. Only a select few members, appointed by the commander, had the power to take charge of such important matters. It was not a new occurrence for these veterans to discuss pensions at a meeting, but with the gradual arrival of the Great Depression, the significance of a reliable and livable pension became increasingly urgent.

Until 1920, the pensions extended to Spanish-American War veterans remained very limited, only provided to those veterans or their widows who experienced death or significant disability in direct connection with their time in the service.¹² Over the next decade, many veterans, including the members of Camp No. 38 of Holland, continued the fight to raise not only the financial value of Spanish-American War Veteran pensions, but the availability of them, as well.

This fight to raise pensions worked for a time, as after the first time in 1920, the federal government raised

pensions again in 1926 with the Knutson Bill, and again in 1930, even though in the latter year President Hoover originally vetoed the bill, though Congress overrode his decision. However, between March 31, 1933, and November 30 of the same year, a new Economy Act drastically reduced the number of veterans and families receiving pensions, as well as the amount provided to those families still receiving. According to the statistics in the *Fort Worth Star-Texas Telegram* from 1934, the amount of Spanish-American War veterans and widows receiving pensions reduced by 32%, and the amount of money given out by the government reduced by roughly \$6.50, a 67.5% decrease from before.¹³

In Holland, this drastic reduction in pensions largely affected the priorities and the goals of the Camp. Before the Great Depression began, the Camp and their Auxiliary held regular gatherings with their relatively ample funds, and plans for erecting a hiker monument in Holland were regularly discussed in meetings. At the beginning of the 1930s, meetings began to focus much more around acts of the welfare committee and helping fellow Comrades and their families, rather than socials and monuments. At the November meeting in 1933, the Camp appointed a committee of three comrades to distribute “Repeal the Economy Act” stickers, protesting the new economy act that dramatically decreased Spanish-American War veteran’s pensions in an already trying time. The focus of the Camp shifted with the times and, as usual, these veterans adapted to the new reality they lived in.

Although this camp experienced some of their most trying times in the early 1930s, the hope and faith of these veterans remained strong, and to be honest, reading about their stories and struggles gave me hope that we as a community will make it through ours as well. It’s no secret that 2020 has been a challenge for many, myself included, but just as they made it through their time of the Great Depression with hope still in their hearts, so will we make it through this. On that note, I see no better way to end this article than to detail how that Christmas party in 1932 ended. At the end of the array of speeches that winter night in December 1932, “Comrade Oscar Wilms gave us a very timely talk on the blessings of this depression, and how each one could get some blessing out of it if we looked at it in the right way, at the end of his talk he asked the camp and auxiliary members to stand and give a military salute to the memory of our dearly beloved departed Comrade Eugene Gourdeau.”¹⁴ Seven years later, in 1939, the pride of these veterans in themselves and their comrades after the trying years of the Great Depression came to fruition with the laying of the Centennial Park stone in remembrance and appreciation of the Spanish-American War Veterans that served.¹⁵

Endnotes

¹Hugh L. Stephenson, *I Am Proud To Be A Spanish-American War Veteran*, 1936, United Spanish War Veterans Holland Camp 38 (H20-2041), Joint Archives of Holland.; Barbara A. Gannon, "They Call Themselves Veterans": Civil War and Spanish War Veterans and the Complexities of Veteranhood," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 5, no. 4 (2015): 532.

²Stephenson, *I Am Proud To Be A Spanish-American War Veteran*.

³Gannon, "They Call Themselves Veterans," 531.

⁴"Spanish War Veteran Dies Here At 95," *Holland City News*, March 20, 1975.

⁵"Decoration Day Committees Will Miss 'Gene' Gourdeau," *Holland City News*, February 12, 1931.

⁶Slaghuis, Meeting Minutes, February 11, 1931, 45, United Spanish War Veterans Holland Camp 38 (H20-2041), Joint Archives of Holland.

⁷The People’s State Bank, which shut its doors in January of 1932, was located at what is now the building of the Fifth Third Bank on East 8th Street in downtown Holland.

⁸Slaghuis, Meeting Minutes, March 14, 1932, 69. United Spanish War Veterans Holland Camp 38 (H20-2041), Joint Archives of Holland.

⁹Slaghuis, Meeting Minutes, December 23, 1932, 90-91. United Spanish War Veterans Holland Camp 38 (H20-2041), Joint Archives of Holland.

¹⁰Slaghuis, Meeting Minutes, January 9, 1933, 92. United Spanish War Veterans Holland Camp 38 (H20-2041), Joint Archives of Holland.

¹¹In July 1932, thousands of World War I veterans and their families, as well as affiliated groups, protested in Washington to receive the \$1,000 compensation certificate promised to them early due to the hard times of the Great Depression.

¹²With the Act of June 5, 1920, limitations slightly loosened, and the U.S. government extended the grant of pensions to veterans who served the Spanish-American War efforts for at least 90 days and suffered from permanent disabilities unrelated to their own misconduct, as well as those over the age of 62.

¹³"Spanish War Pensions," *Fort Worth Star-Texas Telegram*, March 5, 1934.

¹⁴Slaghuis, Meeting Minutes, December 23, 1932, 90, United Spanish War Veterans Holland Camp 38 (H20-2041), Joint Archives of Holland.

¹⁵Slaghuis, Meeting Minutes, August 28, 1939, 216, United Spanish War Veterans Holland Camp 38 (H20-2041), Joint Archives of Holland.



Autumn Balamucki is from Traverse City, Michigan, and is currently a senior at Hope College with a double major in History and Global Studies. She works through her coursework at Hope with a passion for history, languages, and a lot of coffee.

The Joint Archives of Holland



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*Members of Holland Camp No. 38 Department of Michigan veterans of the Spanish-American War.
(Image from Holland Happenings, Heroes & Hot Shots, Volume 3, by Randall P. Vande Water.)*

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