

Julia Vrooman brought jazz to WW I doughboys

“Julia Scott Vrooman has always been in the news,” noted The Pantagraph in early October 1976.

The occasion was her 100th birthday, held at her East Taylor Street home in which she was born and raised, and spent most of her adult life.

Still spry of mind, if not so much of body, Vrooman recalled her role as a Washington, D.C. socialite during the Woodrow Wilson administration, when her husband Carl served as assistant secretary in the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

At the end of the First World War, she then earned national attention for her charitable work in battle-scarred Europe, as she mostly traveled across occupied Germany to entertain homesick doughboys (as American soldiers were known) with “Mrs. Vrooman’s Jazz Band.”

Julia Scott Vrooman’s life was one of privilege. Her father, Matthew T. Scott, founded the small McLean County community of Chenoa, and owned some 5,000 surrounding acres in northern McLean and southern Livingston counties.

In 1872, Matthew and his wife, Julia Green Scott, moved to Bloomington, purchasing the residence at 701 E. Taylor St (now the Vrooman Mansion bed and breakfast). Their daughter Julia was born there in 1876.

Eighteen years later, in 1894, the younger Julia met her future husband Carl Vrooman while making her “Grand Tour” of Europe. They were married in 1896, and would make their first of many return visits to Europe the following year. Well-educated and modestly wealthy with a shared independent streak, Julia and Carl lived a life forever on-the-go.

Julia arrived in Europe in August 1918, having volunteered to work for the YMCA and its programs serving American soldiers. “I have no children,” she said at the time. “I am in perfect health. I am fortunate enough to be able to speak both French and Italian. If, instead of looking for an opportunity to get into war work, I were looking for an excuse to avoid it, I could not find one.”

After training in England, she arrived in Paris just in time for the armistice. Yet she soon realized that the “long, dreary period” of occupation and demobilization meant that there was much work still to do, especially in the smaller and more isolated American camps with little recreational opportunities.

As such, Vrooman spent the rest of 1918 and much of the following year visiting American soldiers, many of whom were stationed in occupied Germany. She became famous for traveling with her self-styled jazz band comprised of soldiers playing a ragged early ragtime before their fellow countrymen.

“Where the boys did not have musical instruments they made them out of frying pans and other camp utensils,” quipped Vrooman. “It is surprising what a lot of music you can get out of string, stretched over a frying pan—if you adjust your ear to the music.”

Jazz was a newly emerging style of American music given a cultural and commercial boost with the Great Migration of African Americans to northern cities such as Chicago and New York. During the war, the “colored” 15th New York Regiment’s band famously brought its ragtime to France, and this and similar efforts helped spread this distinctly American sound to other units, both black and white, as well as to Europeans across the continent.

Vrooman also used her influence and personal resources to aid French civilians, eventually picking up the informal title, “The Apostle of the Lost Tribes.”

Much to her frustration, it was impossible to keep a stable roster of band mates, given that their units were often on the move or being sent home. “We usually went out into the back districts where the boys seldom saw anybody but themselves,” Vrooman said. “In two different camps I found that the only pianist was in the guardhouse, and it was necessary to ‘borrow’ him from the captain for the occasion.”

She also didn’t hesitate to ask for favors high up the chain of command. For instance, she said both Maj. Gen. Joseph E. Kuhn, commander of the 79th Division, and Marine Corps Gen. LeRoy P. Hunt, “put automobiles at my disposal and gave me the range of the camps.”

The letters back to her mother also tell us that the indefatigable Vrooman was having the time of her life. In one such letter, written in July 1919 from Germany, she good naturedly criticized the local dinner fare. “Why will a German insist on cooking fresh string beans in vinegar, and seasoning their cabbage with cinnamon?” she asked. “However, I swallowed it for the definite purpose of nourishment—it was to furnish ‘beau coup’ steam to run the engine fast and hard that night.”

But the war’s aftermath wasn’t all high adventure for Vrooman. The stench, figuratively speaking, of the millions of dead was never far away. “Paris is gay, but it is a surface gayety,” she reflected. “Every third woman you meet is in mourning.”

Vrooman returned stateside in mid-December 1919 aboard the Holland-American passenger liner “Rotterdam.” According to press reports, “The Apostle for the Lost Tribes” brought an entire French family—husband, wife and two children—with her on the voyage. They had evidently lost everything in the war and were eager to start life anew.

The “Rotterdam” battled a furiously violent winter storm much of the way, sheathing her in ice and leaving her forward rails “twisted and broken.” The ship’s captain said it was the worst storm he had ever seen on the Atlantic.

Julia and Carl Vrooman continued to travel, though they always returned to Bloomington and their home on East Taylor Street. During the Great Depression, Eleanor Roosevelt paid a visit to Julia. The first lady then raved about her host’s whole wheat bread in her syndicated newspaper column, “My Day.”

On May 30, 1981, Julia passed away in the same home she was born in 104 years earlier.

Julia and Carl Vrooman are two of the eight featured individuals in this year’s Evergreen Cemetery Walk, which commemorates the centennial of World War I. Other historical characters include Carolyn Schertz Geneva, a Brokaw Hospital nurse who served in the Army Medical Unit in England, and Edward and Lincoln Bynum, African-American brothers who fought with the famed “Black Devils” regiment in the trenches of France and Belgium.

Presented by the McLean County Museum of History, the Evergreen Cemetery Walk runs the next two weekends, Sept. 30-Oct. 1, and Oct. 7-8. For ticket information, call the museum at 309-827-0428. Hurry, because tickets go fast, and sold out shows are not uncommon.