

## **Helen Fairchild, White Deer Valley's Own**

**by**

**Nelle Fairchild Rote**

### **An Essay on Helen Fairchild**

I was pleased to be invited by ACCOUNTS to write about Helen Fairchild, her place in the Susquehanna Valley, and to tell of her short life as an Army Reserve Nurse in World War I, 1917-1918.

The hard working farm people of the Valley had more important work to do than keep diaries and write about themselves, so we must settle on observing their



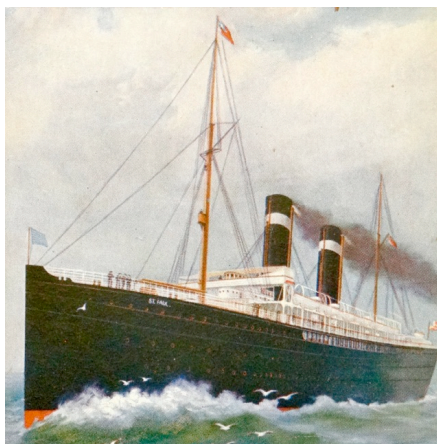
Helen Fairchild

lifestyle, and go from there. But this is what we know: Helen Fairchild was raised on what is now the Reaser farm on Route 44 in Union County. The longest number of her years as a farm girl left few records. The shortest part of her life, a nine-month period during WWI, was far different from life on the farm, but is recorded in many government documents, personal letters, and a few photos.

Here is a brief synopsis of Helen Fairchild's life which the rest of this article will describe. She was born November 21, 1885, and died in France on February 18, 1918. She had left the farm to study nursing at Pennsylvania Hospital in Philadelphia

and graduated in 1913. Before the United States joined our allies in World War I on April 6, 1917, Helen and her friends had enlisted in the newly formed US Army Reserve Nurses Corps.

In May 1917 while visiting her parents who had just moved from Allenwood to Watsontown, she received government orders giving her a few days to report for duty and to appear on the docks in Philadelphia to sail overseas to an unknown destination. She left immediately.



S.S. St. Paul transported Helen Fairchild and Base 10 to Europe

The Allenwood countryside was the place she loved, as she told how homesick she was in the letters she wrote to her family. She had exhibited signs of stomach problems while in nursing, but it did not deter her from setting forth on the great adventure that took her life.

This year, 2017, is the hundredth anniversary of the United States entrance in World War I. Stories are being remembered, the battles are being studied, and for Nurse Fairchild, impressive honors have come her way. The Helen Fairchild American Legion Nurses Post was organized in Philadelphia; and in 2001 her history was featured in the commemorative booklet at the opening of Fort Indiantown Gap National Cemetery; Nurse Fairchild's likeness is one of five nurses on a tall mural on its outside wall at the Institute of Fine Arts, Philadelphia; and on November 18, 2005, the Watsontown bridge was named the Nurse Helen Fairchild Memorial Bridge – a fitting tribute connecting the two counties, Union and Northumberland, the land she missed and appreciated to the end.

## Family and Early Life

A small farm girl raised in the Valley left the area to study nursing in the city of Philadelphia. In 1916 she, Helen Fairchild, enlisted in the newly organized United States Army Reserve Corps, sailed overseas in 1917 to France, suffered in the Great War, and now lies in France in Somme American Military Cemetery so very, very far from Elimsport, Allenwood, and Watsontown.

Her father and mother were Ambrose and Adda Dunkle Fairchild. Ambrose and Adda's children were Sol, Hunter, Helen, Edwin (Ned), Christine, Blanche, and Donald. Christine married George McFarland and was the only child who lived to an old age. My father, Ned, was a big man, and he told me the only man heavier was Frank Allen, of Allenwood. My dad tried to enlist in World War One and was turned down due to an "athlete's heart." He died at age fifty-four. Frank Allen also died at age fifty-four.



Adda and Ambrose Fairchild, Helen's parents,  
512 Main Street. Watsontown, Pa., c. 1917.

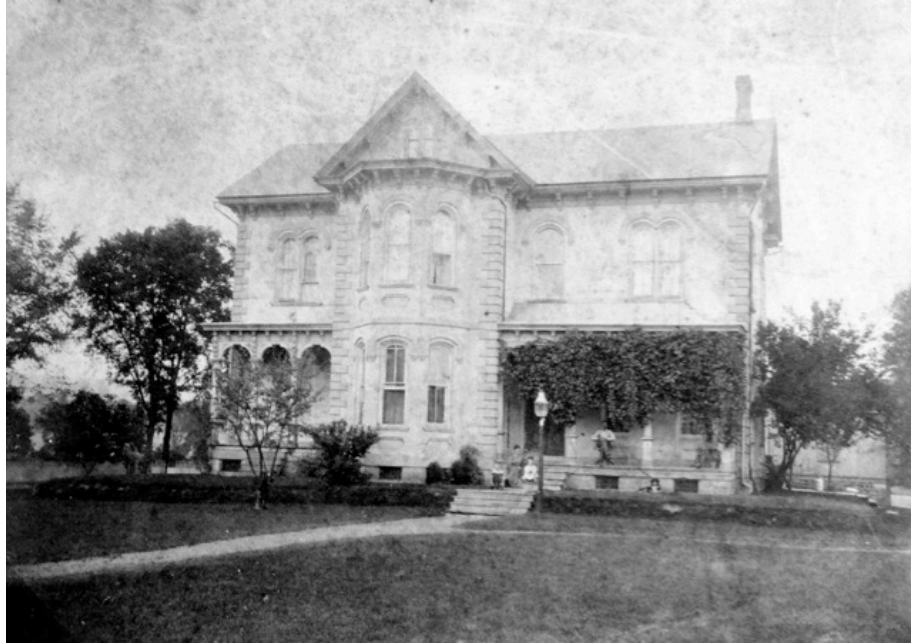
My father told me the family owned the first car in the valley. He said he and his brothers were given orders to let the car rest in the evening because it had been

driven during the day. He would smile when recalling how all the boys loved racing their horses on the straight stretch of road between Dewart and Watsontown.

Christine told me that she and Helen worked hard on the farm, and had to lift heavy milk cans up on the milk wagon for its regular run to the creamery. Aunt Chris said Helen was not a big person, and I think Christine worried about her. In Helen's letters from overseas during the war, she noted how she had to rise early in the morning to get the farm work done. She also wrote that now so far from home, she was homesick for the sour cherries from the trees in the yard, and how she missed the chicken dinners on Sunday.

My dad told me the two front rooms of their home, where Helen grew up, were so big you could be able to drive a team of horses from one room to the other. He said an open staircase spiraled to the attic, and the ceilings were fifteen feet high in the rooms. He told tales on Ambrose, his father, saying he was so stingy he paid his nickel for the trolley and made Adda pay hers. She obviously had some money of her own. Adda's father, Hiram, was on the first board of directors and first treasurer of the Farmer's National Bank of Watsontown. That fits in with the story Helen's sister, Christine, told about Aunt Helen and the egg money. One time their mother planned to go visiting, and told Helen if she took care of the chickens she could keep the money she got for the eggs. But, her father had different ideas. He took the egg money. Christine said that is when Helen decided to go to Philadelphia for nurse training, probably in order to become an independent woman. This was the Victorian era, with stirrings of suffrage and independence for young females.

The house where Helen grew up appeared a bit eerie. It was two and a half stories high, built of brick with a layer of smooth stucco. To me, the neighboring farmhouses made of wood with wrap-around porches looked much more approachable. In 1976 I suggested to Mr. McCool Snyder of the Union County Historical Society he might want to visit and evaluate the house for the National Trust for Historic Preservation. He did, and the house was accepted by the Historical Society in 1978, due to its architectural design and the history of Benjamin Griffey, who built the home in 1886. Mr. Griffey built and operated the White Deer Woolen



“Milliner’s Mansion” with Helen, sister Blanche (on stairs) and parents Ambrose and Adda Dunkle Fairchild (on porch) about 1890.

Mills during 1848-1850, a six story wooden structure powered by an 85 horsepower overshot waterwheel. It housed a woolen cloth and felt hat operation which supplied blankets to the Union soldiers during the Civil War. Griffey lived only a short time in the house, dubbed the Milliner's Mansion. There was a fire in the woolen mills, and he had moved out of his new home by 1889. The photo of Helen and her parents and sister, Blanche, was taken around 1890, judging from the approximate age of the two little girls.

The Register application also names Nurse Helen's bravery in service in WW1, adding to the historical significance of the house where Helen spent her formative years. The house is three and one half miles west of Allenwood on Route 44. A fire destroyed the top floors in 1980, and the house was never rebuilt to its original splendor.

A group of Helen Fairchild's younger friends from Allenwood area went camping each year by the Susquehanna River. The photo below was taken around 1911, judging by the age of my mother, Phebe Fisher. Mother would have been



sixteen years old. Helen, born in 1885, would be 26. At this time she would be in nurse training in Pennsylvania Hospital, Philadelphia. Helen's two future sisters-in-law are in the photo, Henrietta is fourth from the left, and Phebe is third in from the right. Phebe would marry Edwin Fairchild, and Henrietta McCarty would marry Hunter Fairchild. Hunter died in 1919, leaving her with baby Lawrence. She remarried, and as Mrs. George Childs, she was a beloved teacher in the Allenwood, Watsontown area. Phebe's sister, Nellie, is first in line with her long legs extended straight up in the air, while all the others demurely crossed their ankles. This was typical of the innocent pranks played on each other in this era. The gentleman in the background was the chaperone for the group. In the Victorian era, one must always have a chaperone!

It may well be it was on this camping trip at age sixteen that my mother, Phebe, accomplished one of her most satisfying feats. In spite of being lame, she swam the width of the Susquehanna River. When swimming, mother felt "normal," she told me. She didn't feel handicapped in the water.

My mother was crippled from polio she contracted as a toddler. She became ill the day she had taken her first steps unassisted, and her older sisters, Martha and Marguerite, worried they had encouraged her to walk too much. But during her lifetime, she managed very well under all circumstances with humor and intelligence.

## War Time Service

Helen Fairchild graduated as a nurse from Pennsylvania Hospital in 1913 at age twenty-eight. She remained there practicing nursing until May 18, 1917. In anticipation of the United States entering the drawn-out world war in Europe, an Army Reserve Nursing Corps unit was formed in October 1916. Helen joined, as did many nurses from surrounding hospitals. The nurses thought that the unit most likely would be deployed around the United States, but this was not to be.

Helen's story moves forward quickly from this point. The United States entered the war on April 6, 1917. Helen had planned to work in private duty nursing at Long Neck, New York, at eighty dollars a month, with expenses expected to cost no more than twenty dollars. With some free time, she visited her parents the first week of May, when they moved from Allenwood to 512 Main Street, Watsontown. It was the former home of her grandparents, Hiram and Christiana Dunkel Fairchild. Within days of arriving home Helen received a telegram ordering her to report to the docks of Philadelphia by May 12 for overseas duty. She left immediately and her letter writing began:

May 14: "Dear Ned and Phebe, [who now are living in Maine], Try and write to Mother often, for she worries when she doesn't hear from you often. Lovingly, Sis."

May 16: While waiting for her ship she wrote, "Dear Mother, I have had indigestion twice since I came down, and my legs don't ache as much as they did. Hope it lasts. I am going to stop the rheumatic medicine soon, but am going to keep up the blood tonic for a while. Heaps of love, Helen."

May 26: "Dear Mother, --we were on the water eight days, but I didn't waste much time getting sea sick, and I like to die all day Sunday and Mon., but Tuesday morn had to have para-typhoid vaccine. Everybody had to take it, and everybody had a severe reaction. Gee, most of our enlisted men are millionaires or millionaire's sons and as for our doctors, well, Philadelphia does not have men any finer, and I am one of the lucky ones to get in at the first call. Heaps of love, from your own, Helen."

May 28, Liverpool: "--tomorrow off to London."

June 8, London: "I really have not felt so good in ages. I am tanned and freckled and no trace of sea sickness now. Yesterday we had tea with Miss Emily Sargent, a sister of John [Singer] Sargent, who is considered America's most famous living artist, so you can see we are being well entertained, but for

all that, I am ready to go to work.”

June 8, same day: Headlines read **ALLIES EXPLODE 19 UNDERGROUND MINES BREAKING THROUGH THE HINDENBURG LINES**. The villages of Messines and Whtcheete [Wyschaete] disappeared into oblivion ... Thousands lay beneath the ground to forever be entombed there. Some of the bomb craters were 300 feet across and 75 feet deep, now part of No Man's Land. At the time of the explosions, the ground shook in London at No 10 Downing Street, home of the Prime Minister. No doubt the nurses felt the tremor. What were their thoughts?

June 8, same day: Taking advantage of the distraction and destruction, General Pershing, Commander of the American Expeditionary Forces, crossed the English Channel into France.

June 9: The next day our nurses and doctors also crossed the English Channel, traveling by train up the coast of France to British Base Hospital No. 16, at Le Treport. It was north of Omaha Beach where our American troops landed in World War II, also in June, D-day, in 1944. Arriving tired, dirty, and hungry, the British nurses rolled out of their beds and our nurses gladly fell in. The Base hospital had temporary-looking accommodations, a huge, sprawling place of huts, tents with 500 beds, and duckboards for walkways. Canadian General Hospital No. 3, a permanent hospital, was located at the edge of the Base hospital grounds. The fishing village was in view from atop the high, white, cliffs. The Base was now designated American Base Hospital No. 10, and manned completely by our Americans.



Postcard photo of English nurses setting up tents

July 15, Sunday: “I have just come from the church service held in the little church here. This was a Presbyterian service held by the Scotch Padre. That is



the name they use here instead of Minister. The whole service is so familiar it made me homesick. I think I'll walk along the cliffs in time to watch the sun go down. The sunsets here are beautiful. I'll put my heavy dress on for it gets very cold in the evenings. We can only go out in our dark blue serge uniforms. Just as soon as I get home I am going to get dresses in all colors of the rainbow, but never again a blue serge one or a blue felt hat. Gee, I know now how the poor kids in orphan asylums must feel when they all have to wear the same clothes. Heaps of love and a kiss for each one of you, ever your own, Helen."

July 15, same day: Headlines screamed, "GERMANS USE MUSTARD GAS FOR FIRST TIME AT YPRES AND NIEUPORT," which is just north of Helen's Base Hospital 10. The number of wounded that can be handled in event of a crises is 2,000, with a maximum of 1,400 beds. This new gas, an oily substance with a smell of mustard, burnt the flesh down to the bone and dissolved the lining of the lungs.

Nurses and doctors were affected by the gas as they handled the patients, with eyes streaming and stomachs churning. Helen's hospital expanded to its full capacity and a call went out for more nurses, which had to be sent over by ship. On July 19 the British Medical Corps requested small surgical teams from Base 10. They would be close to the Front lines in preparation of the Third Battle of Ypres-Passchendaele. Helen went with Dr. Richard Harte as his surgical nurse. The team was made up of two doctors, a surgical nurse, and a sergeant-orderly. They took along their own operating room supplies and left for a 100 mile trip into Belgium. They had to travel the same narrow, rutted roads now occupied by wounded men coming back, and horses, wagons, and troops advancing forward. Dr. Harvey Cushing passed them on the way up and commented how dusty they all looked. The group arrived at British Casualty Clearing Station No. 4, a mobile surgical unit, but quite large, with over one hundred white tents. It had been given the name of Dozinghem, and to this day, its Dozinghem British Military Cemetery is a testament to the location of CCS 4. It is located on Luc Inion's grandfather's farm, not far from Poperinghe, Belgium.

July 22: The surgical team arrived under shell fire, but the main battle was to follow.

July 31, daylight: "A volcanic explosion of planetary proportions," described Dr. George Crile. "The operating rooms ran day and night, without ceasing. Teams worked steadily for twelve hours on and twelve hours off, relieving each like night and day shifts ... there passed through a group of CCSs over ten thousand wounded in the first forty-eight hours." Crile reported, "I had two hundred deaths in one night in my own service. Our dump ran as high as eighty waiting, and at one time we were thirty-six hours behind the list waiting on the stretchers for operations."

August 4: Helen wrote, "I see no end to this." Dr. Cushing wrote, "Around 30,000 were casualties, with no advance made." On this date General Haig called a halt to the general offensive because no ground was gained and tens of



Bottle stoppers and thermometer fragment recovered from the area of Casualty Clearing Station No. 4 in Belgium

thousands of his men were killed. Yet, Haig asked for more troops. Censorship was enforced. No cameras, no descriptive letters ... but the pathologist, Dr. Krumbhaar, and surgeon, Dr. Harvey Cushing, kept diaries, and as a hospital director, Nurse Julia Stimson, was able to bypass the censors. She wrote her mother, "It is a marvel that human beings can stand it at all."

August 17, night time: The CCS was marked with red crosses, but the German planes heavily bombed the location on two consecutive nights. Helen's team was operating the first night. Many soldiers and wounded German prisoners were rewounded and killed. Two sources said that Helen gave her gas mask to a soldier. It is probably that she put her mask on a soldier who was on the operating table or nearby, contrary to instructions and military orders. For unknown reasons, Helen and Dr. Harte left that night in an ambulance, according to a diary kept by Dr. Krumbhaar. They returned to Base 10, traveling again, the one hundred miles to the coast. Dr. Harte reported for duty the next day, but no record can be found of Helen. Her next letter home made no mention of her experience.

August 29: Helen wrote a cheery letter to her mother telling of ordering pretty things for herself and Christine – "beautiful hand embroidered nightgowns and an envelope chemise. I think I'll get us each one set made with hand made yokes. Some time when you want to send me something, send me some peppermint candy and a cake like that recipe of Henrietta's, the one with the nuts and raisins for that will keep well. I hope that if you are going to take that trip in a new car next summer, I will be there to go also. Send this letter to Henrietta, and I will write to Ned and Sol next week. I sure would like to see little Lawrence. Tell Christine I will write to her soon. Heaps and Heaps of

love, Your own, Helen.”

December 29: “Dear Mother, Did Henrietta get the letter I wrote thanking her for the good cake? I wrote her a long one. Please tell me what everyone seems to have heard concerning me at home. Of course, whatever it was, as you know, is not so, for as I told you often, anytime anything should happen you would be notified. With heaps of love and thanks from your own Helen.” Among the one hundred pages of letters Helen wrote, this was her last letter.

January 24, 1918: “OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL – It is with much regret to inform you of the death of your daughter, Helen Fairchild, on January 18, 1918 of yellow atrophy of the liver.”

Helen had had exploratory surgery three days earlier, and her autopsy reported she died from the effects of the chloroform anesthesia. She died a painful death, “not wanting to be touched due to the pain.”

She was given a military funeral with all available military representatives, medical personnel and organizations attending. Later she was moved from the Base cemetery at LeTreport to Somme American Military Cemetery, Bony, France. At that time her VA records show she was 5'2" tall, and approximately 122 pounds. That was too small to have been sent into harm's way. Even soldiers had standards as to height and weight.



Fairchild grave marker, Somme American Military Cemetery, Bony, France

There was chlorine in mustard gas, chlorine in chloride-of-lime used to bathe wounds, and chlorine in the chloroform anesthesia. It was too much for her system to handle.

Her one hundred pages got moved from one place to another, always guarded by the little niece who had sat in the attic reading them so long ago. The letters are now safely kept in the American Army Medical Museum, San Antonio, Texas.

The Daughters of the American Revolution asked for her story to be written for their magazine. It was picked up and published online under Primary WWI documents. It was the start of a book and the naming of the Nurse Helen Fairchild Memorial Bridge, Watsontown. The nurses of the Helen Fairchild American Legion Nurses Post in Philadelphia were proud as the internet spread her story around the world. One hundred years later, her image and story have become an icon, especially for little girls, nurses, and patriots everywhere.

Helen had written, “Oh, I’ll have books to tell when I get home.”

### Further Sources on Helen Fairchild

For those interested in studying the life of Helen Fairchild in greater depth, the following sources can be useful:

1. One hundred pages of Helen's letters written to her family in 1917. Letters located in the American Army Medical Museum, San Antonio, Texas.
2. *Nurses of Passchendaele*, Caring for the wounded of the Ypres Campaign, 1914-1918 (Amazon.com), by Christine E. Hallett, PhD, in both nursing history and nursing. She is Professor of Nursing History at the University of Manchester, UK. Alongside an analysis of the intricacies of their wartime practice, Hallett traces the personal stories of these extraordinary women.
3. *Nurse Helen Fairchild World War I 1917-1918*, by Nelle Fairchild Hefty Rote, Lewisburg, Pa., 384 pages, with photos, maps and bibliography.
4. Conversations with Christine Fairchild McFarland and her son, G. Rich McFarland.
5. *Base Hospital 10 in the Great War*, by Paul Hoeber. Pages describing Helen's funeral.
6. *Finding Themselves*, by Julia Stimson, who went overseas on the ship, USS St. Paul, with Helen.
7. *From a Surgeon's Journal*, by Dr. Harvey Cushing, who mentioned crossing paths with Helen's surgical unit on way to Front, and then operated a few miles from Helen's location.
8. *The Way of the Eagle*, by Major Charles J. Biddle, in which he told of bombings August 17, 1917. This chapter has been edited out of the second printing.
9. Personal diary of Dr. E. B. Krumbhaar, pathologist at Base Hospital 10. Diary located at College of Physicians and Surgeons, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
10. Morning Report of Base Hospital No. 10 Medical Department dated August 3, 1917, Health Record of Helen Fairchild, Department of Veterans' Affairs, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
11. Burial records, National Archives Trust, College Park, Maryland.
12. Post Mortem Report, College of Physicians and Surgeons, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

I want to thank ACCOUNTS’ editor, Tom Greaves for inviting me to write this article on Helen Fairchild, and lending assistance as this project came together. NFR

