

COLONEL RICHARD SLEE  
THE SWIFTWATER WAR MEMORIAL

By Jim Werkeiser, 2007

The Wilson-Fischer American Legion Post #425 of Tannersville undertook two projects in the 80's: the erection of an All-Service Monument honoring all five branches of the military; and an appropriate relocation of the Swiftwater War Memorial. The location of both projects would eventually be the front lawn of Tannersville's Pocono Elementary school on 611.

The first project, the All Service Monument, was completed in 1987 and a formal dedicatory program was held in November with such dignitaries as State Representative Joe Battisto, Atty. Robert Nothstein, and the Tobyhanna Army Depot Commander President. The second project, the relocation of the Swiftwater Memorial, was accomplished in 1992. Of note is the fact the American Legion Post 425 "Closed its Doors" in 2012 and Post 903, under the leadership of Post Commander Tom Bowditch, assumed care of the Memorial plot.

The Swiftwater War Memorial was the fulfillment of a dream of Dr. Richard Slee, his wife and Dr. William Brooks of Allentown.

Mrs. Ella Slee was the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur McGinnis, owners of the Swiftwater Inn and also owners of the plot of land selected for the Memorial site. Her affection for "things military" was well founded. Her father served in the Civil War as Colonel in the 1<sup>st</sup> Pennsylvania Regiment, her husband Dr. Richard, served as Reservist in the Army Medical Corps from 1892 to 1925, and her son, Arthur, served as an Officer at Camp Crane in Allentown, 1917-1918.

Dr William Brooks was the minister at First Presbyterian Church in Allentown before, and after, World War I. Upon enlistment he served as Chaplain at Camp Crane for two war years. His leadership ability earned him the position of Nation Chaplain of the U.S. Army Ambulance Corps in 1921. Brooks and Slee formed a life-long friendship during their Camp Crane Years. Beyond question, the force behind the Monument was Col. Slee. A study of his life-work certainly ranks him near the top of list of Pocono Township Luminaries.

Richard Slee was born in 1867 in Brooklyn, NY. He was graduated from the Long Island University School of Medicine around 1890 with specialization in Bacteriology. AT L.I.U. he became “favorite student” of Professor Spearman, a scientist very much interested in small-pox vaccine, who encouraged Slee to “take up the work”. Hence, in 1892, Slee began manufacturing small-pox vaccine in his small lab in Swiftwater.

What brought him here? Shortly after college graduation Slee contracted cholera and came to the Poconos for the “fresh air and invigorating waters”, lodging at the Swiftwater Inn where he met Ela McGinnis, the inn-keeper’s daughter. They fell in love and married in 1892...so, he remained! Slee also enlisted in the Army Medical Corp Reserves in 1892. Incidentally, Professor Spearman of L.I.U. who was Slee’s mentor, served as United States Surgeon General under Woodrow Wilson’s Presidency. Slee’s work in vaccine manufacturing did not go unnoticed: in 1896 he was appointed Assistant Bacteriologist and Deputy Inspector of the Pennsylvania State Board of health.

Slee apparently enjoyed military life. His work with Medical Reserves was extensive. He was the editor of the U.S. Army Medical Journal, volunteered to serve as Sanitation Officer at the 50<sup>th</sup> Reunion of the Civil War Veteran held in Gettysburg in 1913, served as Sanitation Officer at several summer encampments in Maine, and, in 1913, Sanitation Officer at the Army Artillery Summer encampment in Tobyhanna at Camp Summerall, as it was known then.

When America entered the war in 1917, Slee enlisted for “Active Duty” in the Army Ambulance Corps and was assigned to Camp Crane in Allentown, as Sanitation Officer, with the rank of Lieutenant. By January of 1918, he earned the rank of Major and was appointed Camp “Intelligence Officer”. Finally, in May of 1918, Slee was elevated to rank of Colonel and appointed Camp Commander. Slee’s son, Arthur, served as Sanitation Officer at the camp with the rank of Captain. Incidentally, Camp Crane accommodated 3,000 enlisted men and was located at the fairgrounds in Allentown.

After the War, Slee returned to Swiftwater, but military duty followed him. His small lab was commandeered by the War Department and was assigned the designation of General Medical Laboratory #1, to be staffed by “Qualified Reserve

Officer in all Positions". Of course, Slee would serve as the Commanding Officer. The assignment lasted only until 1920.

Which brings us to the year 1921 and the Swiftwater War Memorial. The year 1921 was a rather exciting year for Pocono Township: the New Lackawanna Trail was completed, the New Fire Tower was erected on Big Pocono the new picnic grove, the first-ever high school graduate, and ... the Swiftwater War Memorial!

The journey from dream, to planning, to groundbreaking, to completion, to dedicatory ceremony, was unbelievably rapid: JUST TEN WEEKS!!! A discussion with local veterans was held on July 21, and on August 3<sup>rd</sup>, a formal planning meeting was held with architects. Ground was broken on August 8<sup>th</sup>, the foundation was laid on the 12<sup>th</sup>, and, on Labor Day September 5, 1921- the formal Dedication Ceremony. TEN WEEKS!!

Included in Dr. Slee's speech at the ceremony was a rather "Edgy" challenge to the so-called "City Folks", and I quote: "Our city friends are apt to joke about those of us who reside in the country about being slow. I challenge any community to show that they might equal our rapid results". There's an interesting story connected to Sles's boast, and, though the following facts are correct, the OPINION of the haste of construction is unsubstantiated opinion of the author. Slee was well aware of Stroudsburg's plan to erect a Doughboy Monument in Courthouse Square. On November 25, 1918 just two weeks' after Armistice, prominent Stroudsburg businessman, Charles Drake, approached the county commissioners with the proposal of the monument. The commissioners agreed, promptly allocation \$1,00 as "Seed Money" for the project, and forward an appeal to the federal government for funding. With this knowledge, why did Slee wait two and one-half years to act? Well, for one reason, his responsibility as Commander of the General Medical Lab, and another reason- Slee also knew the State Highway Department was planning to build a new concrete highway replacing the antiquated dirt East-Belmont Pike right through Swiftwater. He wouldn't dare erect a monument in Swiftwater and then have it destroyed by the new highway. In the spring of 1920, roadwork commenced and by July of 1921, the new Lackawanna Trail had "Cleared" Swiftwater and Slee sprang into action. Did he beat Stroudsburg? Did he ever!!

You've heard the adage "The wheels of the Government turn slowly?" The county commissioners were dealing with the Federal Government for funding for the Doughboy Monument which eventually came through and, on August 11, 1924, the Doughboy Dedication was held... three years AFTER Swiftwater! An interesting side note: Mr. Charles Drake, who proposed the Doughboy Monument in 1918, was one of the first financial contributors to Slee's Swiftwater Memorial. Drake, who was managing editor of the Stroudsburg Times Democrat, was a personal friend and admirer of Slee, visiting Camp Crane numerous times and writing complimentary editorials concerning the Camp Crane Operation.

Certainly, there's a great difference in the cost of the monuments. The total cost of the Swiftwater project was \$580 (according to Jeffersonian newspaper, September 9, 1921): extremely low because of the volunteer labor and Slee's procurement of the 3" cannon and machine guns from the War Department, gratis. The only cost was the bronze tablet, cement and incidentals. The Doughboy, cost \$10,000, most of which came from Government funds (from Commissioners' archives).

The Dedication program was held on Labor Day, September 5, 1921, with more than 1,000 spectators in attendance, including dozens of uniformed Veterans, many local and State dignitaries, and Tannersville's Glenwood Hall Band providing stirring patriotic music. The two main speakers were Captain Brooks and Colonel Slee.

As so it was completed. The memorial, the first World War I monument erected in Monroe County.

To further illustrate the high regard for Col. Slee held by the U.S. military, we read in Moring Press, November 9, 1921: Colonel Slee has High Honor Armistice Day ... "Colonel Richard Slee, of Swiftwater, accompanied by Mrs. Slee, will leave for Washington this morning to participate in the decoration of the casket of the Unknown Soldier who will, on Thursday, be placed in the rotunda of the capital. Col. Slee will represent the United States Army Ambulance Service and will decorate the casket with medal of that organization".

Col. Richard Slee retired in 1937 and moved to Long Island. He returned in 1942, settling in Stroudsburg, where he died in 1945.

The Memorial stood proudly until the World War II years and construction of the 3-lane highway, Route 611. The new highway encroached upon the monument site in two ways; physically, by expanding into the park area and, visually, by raising the level of highway at least one foot thus, in actuality, lowering the site at least one foot. The monument no longer STOOD proudly but, rather, "Squatted" humbly! Finally, in the 80's, the ever-expanding lab complex overran the site.

And then, enter the men of the Wilson-Fisher American Legion Post 425 ... and gratitude to these men for saving a valuable piece of Pocono Township History!

By the 80's the site had fallen into disarray. In addition to the lab encroachment, graffiti had appeared and both machine guns had disappeared. The cannon and plaque mounting were still intact, however. When the Legion Post personnel completed the "All Service" monument in Tannersville in 1987, they turned their attention to the Swiftwater Memorial. Site prospects for the relocation were explored in the Swiftwater area but two serious existed: one, all possible sites were OFF the highly-visible Route 611 corridor, and two, whatever area site chosen would have to be purchased. So, "Hello Tannersville" where the Post already owned the small plot of land on the old school property. As a measure of respect, Post personnel sought the opinion of the last surviving member of the "Swiftwater 24" named on the plaque, George Bogart, who heartily agreed. Mr. Bogart died in 1994.

In 1992, the cannon and plaque found a new home and, as in 1987, an appropriate dedicatory ceremony was held. Of surprise, and disappointment, the Stroudsburg Record carried not one word of either the 1987 or 1992 ceremonies!

The Swiftwater Memorial now has a home again, our gratitude for the effort of Post 425 in providing that home. So, what's my concern? Actually, the question should read what WAS my concern when I commenced this research in January of 2007 because now, after the frustrating research, I have no concern just a bit of curiosity!

During my research of SAINTS AND SINNERS several years ago I was flooded with the names of Pocono and Jackson men who served during World War I. My initial count was about 50. The Swiftwater Memorial listed 24, but none of whom lived in Tannersville. In my naivete I thought (1) I'll find confirmation of all Pocono Township World War veterans and (2) then make a "push" to provide a plaque

listing the names to go with the Swiftwater names, Well, that was 2007 and this is now!

My three main sources of names were the local newspapers, the World War I file at the Veteran's office and the all-inclusive World War I bronze monument, located in East Stroudsburg, which lists 1024 names. And forth source, if you wish to know the 38 Country men who died while in service during World War I, that being bronze plaques on the Stroudsburg Courthouse Square Doughboy Monument.

The discrepancy in numbers between those four sources is very discouraging. My newspaper search (and adding the 24 Swiftwater names) totaled 61 ... the Veteran's Office files total but 33... the Doughboy Monument lists 38 deaths, but NOT George Frantz of Bartonsville which would total 39... and the all-inclusive East Stroudsburg plaque, 50. Further disclosure that muddy water, the Swiftwater Memorial, with its 24 names, went up YEARS before the East Stroudsburg bronze memorial, yet the East Stroudsburg listing of 1024 does NOT include either Harold Widdoss nor Jacob Wolbert who are on the Swiftwater plaque. Also, the name Robert Stadden of Tannersville is not on the East Stroudsburg listing yet I know that he served (letters from him appear in SAINTS AND SINNERS on page 24). Also, a rather humorous revelation: the ONE Dunlap that served is listed as Millard in the newspaper, as Hillard on the Swiftwater plaque, and as Wilard on the East Stroudsburg plaque!

So, ended my hope of providing a definitive listing of Pocono Township World War I Veteran's

There is also a disappointing lack of accuracy among the four sources in identifying the Pocono Township men who died while in service during World War I. The Doughboy Monument honors three: Arthur Koerner of Swiftwater, Frederick Schuh of Bartonsville, and Robert Mader of Tannersville. Missed is George Frantz of Bartonsville! Koerner, Schuh, and Frantz never made it "over there", all three succumbed to the dreadful world-wide Spanish flu epidemic of 1918. Koerner died October 6 at Camp Dix, New Jersey; Schuh died October 16 at Magee Hospital in Pittsburgh, and Frantz died September 29 at Camp Farragut in Great Lakes Illinois.

A side note on the effect on Monroe County of that Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918 which felled over 30 million world-wide: during the month of October 1918, an astonishing 233 Monroe County residents died. At that time, our county population approximated 23,000, so 1% of our county population died during that month. If that percent were applied to our present 170,000 population, there would be a one-month death toll of 1,700 or approximately 60 people per day! Not surprisingly, of the 38 men listed on the Doughboy Monument, only 10 died "In Action".

The fourth Pocono Township soldier who died was Robert Mader of Tannersville, who was killed in action October 2, 1918, in the Argonne Forest of France.

The deaths of Koerner, Schuh and Frantz were merely one paragraph write-ups in the local newspapers, but Mader's was front page with photo and the label of "Hero". He was killed during his Marine unit's third over the top charge of that day and was buried in Argonne Military cemetery.