

Einstein and His Times **“Letter from Camp Funston” Reading**

Introduction to “Letter from Camp Funston”

Life at Camp Funston

Reflections of Army Sergeant Charles L. Johnston

(from <http://members.cox.net/~tjohnston7/ww1hist/>)

Charles L. Johnston was my dad.

He died when I was six months old. In a way, his death was an irony. He served during World War One as a member of Ambulance Company 239, 10th Sanitary Train, at Camp Funston (part of Ft. Riley) Kansas. He nursed soldiers during the influenza epidemic of 1918-1919, the worst pandemic in history, and never fell to the disease. Twenty years later, he died of peritonitis from a ruptured appendix.



Charles L. Johnston
1895-1940

My mother passed away in 1992. In disposing of her personal effects, my sisters and I came across a bundle of letters my dad had written to my mom while he was in military training. They weren't married then. They were only serious sweethearts. They married in 1919 when he returned from military service, and they subsequently had six children.

But, because my dad described his experiences in detail, and because my mother never threw his letters away, we now have a grassroots window on national and regional history we otherwise would not have had. It is an account that is too good to keep to myself.

Because of his untimely death, I never got to know him in the real sense. I have always heard my mom and my brother and sisters talk about what a great guy he was, and of course I accepted that. But, after reading his letters, I feel I have come to know him personally.

The Birth of Camp Funston

According to the publication, *Cantonment Life at Camp Funston*, the decision to build Camp Funston was made by the War Department in June 1917. Funston was the largest of sixteen divisional cantonment training camps constructed during World War One. This fact was more than likely due to its central location (Ft. Riley was initially known as “Ft. Center” because of its closeness to the geographical center of the continent). With a capacity of over 50,000, it was to draw trainees from all the Great Plains states. A committee composed of planning engineers, landscape architects, and representatives of the U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps met at Fort Riley and selected a large meadow on the Fort Riley government reservation, near the Kansas River (also known as the Kaw River). Construction began July 1, 1917 and the camp was completed December 1 of that year at an approximate cost of \$10,000,000. It covered approximately 2 miles of what was referred to as Pawnee Flats. The camp was named in honor of Major General Frederick Funston, a colorful figure who had distinguished himself in the Phillipines, Cuba, and in the aftermath of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake.

The Zone

Because of the number of trainees anticipated and the desire for convenient location of commercial facilities to meet their commerce and entertainment needs, the Army decided to turn to private business. An enterprising businessman named H. P. Powers purchased Kellyville, a small town on the northern edge of the developing Camp Funston. He then auctioned off lots for the development of stores, theaters and shops. He changed the name of the town to “Army City”.

Although Army City was being developed with private capital, it nonetheless proceeded under the watchful eye and at the pleasure of the U. S. Army. The Army called it the “Zone of Department of Camp Activities and Amusements.” Understandably, the recruits shortened that to “The Zone.” It included three theaters with an average seating capacity of 1900 each, a pool hall with 70 tables, a 40-chair barbershop, a bank, a drug store, clothing stores, bowling alleys, and restaurants. Its storefront business grouping was a forerunner of today's malls. The Zone had a frontage of 2,000 feet...a little over six football fields long. It was a favorite destination for the soldiers and their guests. The finished construction was

said to have cost \$1,500,000. Each of the concessionaires paid a percentage of their gross income back to the Camp Exchange.

The Zone was to be short lived, however. The war was over in 1918. With peace, the Army shrunk. Without the built-in commercial support of 50,000 soldiers, the Zone did likewise. In 1922, it officially ceased to exist.

Camp Funston still exists, though not as the large installation it once was. Its main purpose now is temporary housing for military personnel undergoing special training for duty in Iraq.

The Influenza Pandemic

History documents the 1918 influenza epidemic starting in Spring 1918. However, Dad's letters make no mention of it until the end of September. Molly Billings, in her excellent site on the 1918 Influenza Pandemic (see <http://www.stanford.edu/group/virus/uda/>) explains why:

"...A first wave of influenza appeared early in the spring of 1918 in Kansas and in military camps throughout the US. Few noticed the epidemic in the midst of the war. Wilson had just given his 14 point address. There was virtually no response or acknowledgement to the epidemics in March and April in the military camps. It was unfortunate that no steps were taken to prepare for the usual recrudescence of the virulent influenza strain in the winter. The lack of action was later criticized when the epidemic could not be ignored in the winter of 1918."

The Manhattan Mercury, a daily newspaper in Manhattan, Kansas, published an interesting account of how the pandemic affected Ft. Riley and the surrounding areas. See <http://members.cox.net/~tjohnston7/ww1hist/flu.html>

Letter from Camp Funston

(from <http://members.cox.net/~tjohnston7/ww1hist/10-06-18.html>)

October 6, 1918
Camp Funston, Kansas

Good morning my dear.

I am writing you a line or so while I am on the job. It's about 3 a.m. and all the poor old boys are resting very well. I am sure some nurse, believe me. Don't even get sleepy on the job. I have been working nights for about three days now, from 7 to 7 and fight the flies the whole day long while trying to sleep. I thought I was getting along on very little sleep when I was home, but this has the world cheated. There are 15 or so of the fellows to be put back to duty today, but they will fill the place up as soon as the beds are vacant.

Lots of them go to the base hospital every day and quite a number of them are "checking in" but there is bound to be as there are between 6 and 7,000 cases in the camp. I sure wish that they would all get well, for I am rearing to come home, believe me.

One of the boys played wise and got sick while he was home, his mother being ill. He is down with pneumonia, so will have a prolonged visit while home. Think I will try that when I come, eh! I guess they have this influenza dope in most every camp in the U.S., but I feel perfectly safe right here with it all the time. I feel fine and dandy and eat like a starved hog. I think I will forget all I ever knew about drill and all the other Army dope, for we have to run this just like we see fit, and as about 30 of the boys of our Company are in the hospital now, we are shorthanded for nurses. You better come up and take a job. We have 5 lady nurses, but only one works at night, so you can get on the same shift as I am.

Sure wish I was there to spend the Sunday with you. I expect, in fact I know, that we will work today the same as any other day, for there is no one else to do the work. I never did know that a sick fellow was so hard to wait on before. These birds almost chase you to death after water or pills or something else all the time. They all have high fever and kick the covers off as fast as one can cover them. When the fever gets too high, we must give them sponge baths to run down the temperature. Each of our men has about 20 patients, so you see we are pretty busy rookies. I guess that I didn't know any of those boys that died, which you wrote of.

Well sweetheart chick, I have spilled about all the gossip that I can think of with this dead for sleep head of mine. Goodnight, honey. Write me a big fat letter.

Always your man,

Charles L.