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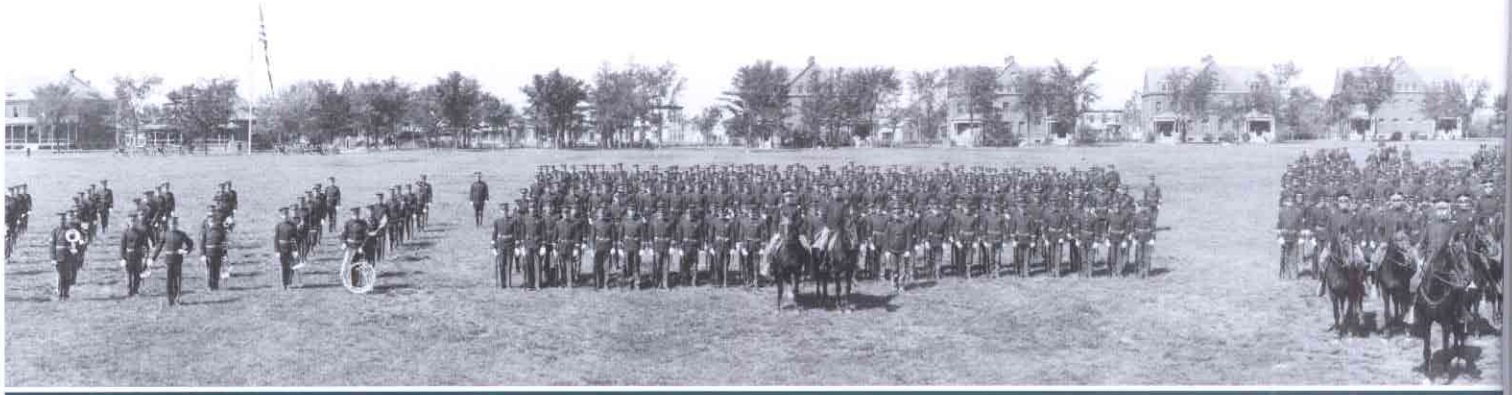

THE PLATTSBURG IDEA

BY PENELOPE D. CLUTE

A rigorous summer program in northern New York, begun as a civilian military training camp for students and businessmen, took on vital importance in World War I.

During the uneasy summers of 1915 and 1916, thousands of young men volunteered for six weeks of military training and maneuvers at northeastern New York's Plattsburg Barracks and other camps around the country. Called Civilian Military Training Camps, their existence embodied the Plattsburg Idea—a national preparedness philosophy which held that, in a democracy, it was a citizen's duty to prepare himself to defend his country.

As Army Chief of Staff, General Leonard Wood established the volunteer camps over strong opposition from the Army and the top echelons of government. Wood, a career soldier and a graduate of Harvard Medical School, had been the first commander of the Rough Riders under Teddy Roosevelt. He strongly believed in Universal Military Training (UMT) and publicly promoted it, arguing that, with six months of UMT, the "service would have a large reserve and society would have an uplifting institution." According to historian Michael Pearlman, Wood also claimed that military training would promote the work ethic, lower the crime rate, Americanize the immigrant, teach "responsibility" to the young, and "bind together all classes of society into one common purpose."

These historic panoramic photographs of the Plattsburg training camps have been recently restored and are on display at Plattsburgh City Court, which is now housed in a former camp barracks. This photo is actually six feet long. | CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Convincing the People

But professional soldiers of the time generally opposed amateur volunteers, and President Woodrow Wilson, himself an isolationist, did not want America drawn into what he considered a European war. With no support from West Point-trained soldiers and no money from Congress, General Wood brought his case for UMT directly to the people. His numerous speeches around the country convinced many doctors, college presidents, and academics; one was Dr. Charles W. Burr, a professor of mental diseases at the University of Pennsylvania, who wrote, "Unless the American boy is taught obedience, unless he learns to submit to authority, unless he learns that the highest manhood is to obey, unless he learns that work is a blessing, not a curse, this country is doomed...Universal military training will do much to stiffen up, to make firm-fibered and manly the boys of America." The idea of UMT also appealed to many wealthy, college-educated young men of New York and New England who realized that physical hardship and demanding discipline would be an antidote to their lives of luxury and privilege.

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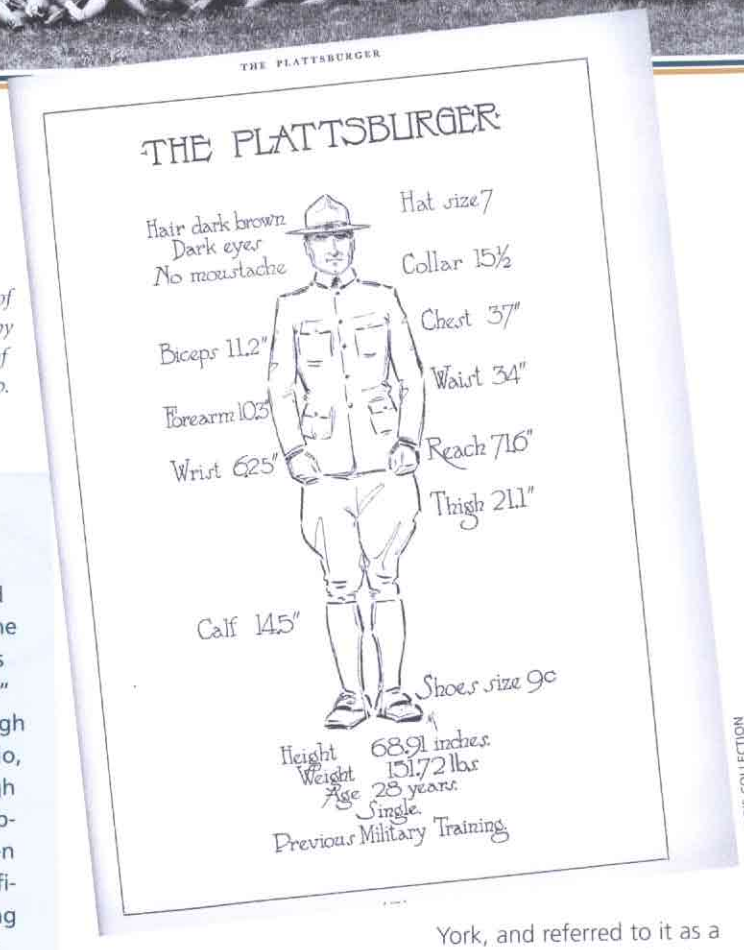
Theodore Roosevelt (left) confers with General Leonard Wood, originator of the Plattsburg Idea. TR was a strong advocate of training civilians for military service.

Wood established the first small summer training camps in 1913, attracting college students in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania and Monterey,

"Universal military training will do much to stiffen up, to make firm-fibered and manly the boys of America."



AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

The statistics for this portrait of a Plattsburger were obtained by averaging the measurements of the members of the 1917 camp.

HOW PLATTSBURGH LOST ITS "H"

During the time period covered by this story, the City of Plattsburgh was spelled without an "h." According to Plattsburgh City Clerk Keith Herkalo, the Town of Plattsburgh (with an "h") was established in 1785. Between 1892 and 1894, local officials—misunderstanding new guidelines about naming post offices—changed the name of the post office to Plattsburg (no "h"). In 1950, a query by the editor of the *New York State Legislative Manual* prompted postal authorities to delve into their records to resolve the discrepancy, and the spelling was changed back to Plattsburgh.

California. These student camps expanded in 1914 to Ludington, Michigan; Asheville, North Carolina; and Fort Ethan Allen outside Burlington, Vermont. By 1915, the camps were no longer limited to college students. The June 30, 1915 *New York Times* reported that a summer camp for business and professional men would be held at Plattsburg in northern New York, and referred to it as a "movement started by the Harvard Club."

Summer Camp for Businessmen

Many prominent New York City officials, including thirty-six-year-old Mayor John Purroy Mitchel, enrolled in Plattsburg's first Businessmen's Training Camp. The police chief and forty police officers also attended, as well as an alderman and the collector of the Port of New York. More than ninety percent of the first "Plattsburgers" were college graduates, some from aristocratic families; others were nationally known political figures, including former Secretary of State Robert Bacon.

A 1915 article in the *New Republic* entitled "The Plattsburgh Idea" stated that "[t]he associates of this camp do not propose to militarize the American nation. They seek rather to civilize the American military system. They do not propose to turn civilians into mere automatons. They seek rather to attach soldiering to citizenship; and they seek to do it in such a way as to make the soldier really a civilian." Historian John Garry Clifford believes the "article spoke of the 'real danger of national disintegration,' how democracy in America was identified too much 'with having one's own way' and not enough with the responsibilities of citizenship. The ideal of 'national service' put forth at Plattsburg might serve as a 'social hygiene' if applied judiciously."