



Camp Mills where Rainbow Division trained.

Photos contributed



Wag and horse with gas mask, 1918.



Jackson Berry Potter, Rainbow Division.

WWI Profile: Jackson Berry Potter 1896-1972

By NORMA ECKARD

Jackson Potter was born in Brunswick County, NC. A partial family tree is located in FamilySearch. Photos of her great uncle Jack contributed by Dale Coleman Spencer.

In June 1917, Jack registered for the WWI Draft as required. His registration shows he was single, living in Town Creek, and farming and supporting his parents.

A month later, Jack enlisted in the NC National Guard. He initially was a Horseshoer, but in October, he became a Wagoner, which he held throughout the war.

What is a Wagoner?

Horses and mules were crucial in this time period. Horses and mules carried men to battle and wounded men to safety. They transported food, water, medical supplies, guns, ammunition, and artillery to the front lines through appalling weather, over unforgiving terrain, in horrifying situations, and surrounded by dead and dying men and animals. Yet they continued to do their part, in spite of being terrified and often while sick and wounded themselves, and they worked until they were annihilated by guns or poison gas, or simply died in their harnesses from exposure and sheer exhaustion. Eight million horses and mules died in WWI and Wagoners were some of those responsible for their well-being.

Army vehicle transportation by animal consists of spring wagons, ambulances, and escort wagons. The Wagoner must have the skills to care for the animal and machinery, plus understand how to handle both. He is responsible for his team, harness, and wagon, tools and spare parts, and the condition in which he keeps them is a measure of his efficiency. A successful Wagoner is one who keeps his wagon and animals in good condition and gets his load to its destination at the proper time. This requires constant attention from morning until night.

Recall the WWI Profile of Martin Newman Mintz in which a lack of horses and mules forced his Artillery Brigade to withdraw. Horses and mules and those who cared for them and handled them were crucial in war.

Greg Krenzelo, historian for the U.S. Army Veterinary Corps Historical Preservation Group.

With the country still struggling to heal following the Civil War, the formation of the Rainbow Division offered an opportunity to unite. August 1917, the Rainbow Division was formed with National Guard troops in 26 states from California to Oregon to New York and Alabama. It was an all-volunteer division.

The Washington correspondents who had grabbed the story from the War Department and flashed it red-hot all over the nation had many glorious words to say about the fact that America's sons from the north and the south, the east and the west were at last going to fight side-by-side to make the world safe for democracy. America was sending a "Rainbow" of hope to Europe. *The Story of the Rainbow Division* (1919)

By mid-September 1917, 27,000 men were assembled in Camp Mills on Long Island. The entire country was vested in their success. The North Carolina National Guard was chosen to provide the troops for the 117th Engineer Train. The list of names below shows those from Brunswick County. Most were also Wagoners.

42nd Division, 117th Engineer Train
Wagoner Joseph L. Clemmons, transferred Sept. 27, 1918.
Wagoner Pearl Collum.
Wagoner John B. Cox, transferred May 19, 1918.
Horseshoer James E. Gilbert.
Wagoner Erie J. Gore, SCD Oct. 10, 1917.
Wagoner David M. Hilburn.
Pvt. John H. Holden.
Wagoner George Floyd Kirby.
Saddler Josiah C. Maulsby, SCD Jan. 12, 1918.
Pfc. William O. McKeithan.
Wagoner Dorman L. Mercer, wounded July 27, 1918.
Wagoner Joseph E. Mintz.
Mess Sgt. Clyde Needham, a Bugler at discharge.

Wagoner Walter D. Nelson.
Wagoner Adrian Phelps, SCD Oct. 10, 1917.
Wagoner Jackson B. Potter.
Pfc. Vance Reynolds.
Wagoner Herbert T. Sellers.
Pvt. Oscar David Sellers, SCD Oct. 10, 1917.
Wagoner James D. Skipper.
Wagoner Wesley W. Skipper.

Most of the 42nd Division left the United States on Oct. 18, 1917, straight for St. Nazaire, France. It was one of the first divisions to arrive in France. Some units, including a ship of infantry that was forced to return early in the trip due to engine trouble, did not begin the journey until December. Pvt. Potter boarded at Newport News, Va., on Dec. 8, 1917, joining the division during their intensive training in France.

The day after Christmas, the 42nd Division began a 100-kilometer march to a new training area. This march was later known as "The Valley Forge Hike."

The supply system had not yet been established, which meant the soldiers had little food, no overcoats, and no spare shoes. A blizzard created huge drifts three to four feet deep. Men were often marching barefoot through the snow, creating bloody tracks similar to Valley Forge during the Revolutionary War. They huddled together to keep warm at night, as temperatures dropped below zero. Many became ill and could not continue.

The Americans' respect for the French grew, as they contemplated four years of war and the possibility of never returning home.

Upon arrival, the engineers (and trains) were busy day and night.

Rainbow engineers from the 117th Engineers, originally from North and South Carolina, had worked tirelessly to improve conditions during the division's time at the training area near Rolampont. The regiment built 80 barracks, 70 horse stables, 18 bath units, pigeon lofts, latrines and reworked electrical and water systems for the thousands of Doughboys now preparing for combat.

The engineers then went on to conduct their combat training at night, providing classes for officers and NCOs or small arms ranges, marches and drill.

In February, the 42nd Division prepared to enter the front. They quietly took their places in the trenches in the Luneville sector in northeast France, without alerting the enemy. This was previously a quiet sector but the Americans were anxious to prove themselves. Soon they were in the thick of an active sector.

Look for the photo of French instructor introducing National Guard Soldiers of the 42nd Rainbow Division to life in the trenches during World War I. French instructors taught American Soldiers the basics of trench warfare as the Americans prepared to enter combat in the winter of 1918.

A month later, the division was ordered to rest. However, the German offensive was unleashed on March 21, 1918. The division was ordered to return. The Rainbow Division was given the honor of being the first American division to occupy a divisional sector on its own and under its own command.

Over and over again, the division was ordered to rest, but was unable to do so. It is credited with 264 days of combat, with half the division becoming casualties. It holds the record for continuous duty at the front line for three months straight. Following the Armistice on Nov. 11, 1918, the Rainbow Division became part of the Army of Occupation, remaining in Germany until April 1919.

Details of the 42nd Division's record of continuous duty at the front line will be included in the posts following this one.

In April 1919, Jack returned to the United States with many of his fellow NC Wagoners. He returned to the family farm. He married Fannie Lewis in 1920, raising a family in Brunswick County.

In 1972, at the age of 75, Jackson Berry Potter passed away. He was laid to rest in Peace Memorial Baptist Church Cemetery in Winnabow. A military flat marker is shown.

Sources: Johnson, Lieut. Harold Stanley (1917) "Roster of the Rainbow Division (Forty-Second)," New York, Eaton & Gettinger, Inc. printers.

Reilly, Henry J. (1936). *Americans All, The Rainbow at War: Official History of the 42nd Rainbow Division in the World War*. Columbus, Ohio: Heer.

Sherwood, Elmer W. (1929). *Diary of a Rainbow Veteran*. Terre Haute, Ind.: Moore-Langen.

Thompkins, Raymond S. (1919). *The Story of the Rainbow Division*. NY: Boni & Liveright.

World War I American Battle Monuments Commission (1944). *42d Division Summary of Operations in the World War*. Washington DC: GPO.

If you would like to help us honor Jackson Berry Potter or another Brunswick County WWI veteran, email the Friends of Ft. Caswell Rifle Range at fcaswellriflerange@gmail.com or go to caswellriflerange.com.

A future fundraiser, Oktoberfest, is scheduled for Saturday, Oct. 12, at the Caswell Beach public service facility building (fire station) to raise funds for publishing the book of Brunswick County men and women that served in WWI to continue historic preservation of the rifle range memorial and to honor Brunswick County WWI veterans. There will be a dinner and dance with music by The Back Porch Rockers. More information will follow soon.

Another Roll Call is planned for Veterans Day, Monday, Nov. 11, at 11 a.m. beside the 1918 Fort Caswell Rifle Range Memorial in Caswell Beach.