

Interview with Ms. Claudia Smith, Librarian, Little Rock Central High School  
by LRCHS Eleventh-Grade Junior Alex Crawford in March 2017  
in Regards to Her Grandfather David Wesley Huett, III  
Arkansan Veteran of the First World War

**Alex Crawford:** So today is March 1, 2017 and I am interviewing Miss Claudia Smith about her grandfather David Wesley Huett and his service during the First World War.

**Claudia Smith:** When I was growing up I heard a lot about my grandfather's service. First off - it always surprises people – my grandfather was actually born in 1894, which was, for his generation, early.

**AC:** That is early.

**CS:** It's kind of a long story, but my grandmother was his second wife, and my mother was one of the younger children, so that's how it all worked out.

My grandfather went to war, of course during...1917; I think it was, either 1917 or early 1918. During 1917, the United States did enact what's called a draft now, but Selective Service, and he and his brothers and his cousins all registered, but he was the only one that actually was chosen and went. And he went into service, I think the summer of 1918; he had just gotten married, and he shipped out after training at Camp Pike in North Little Rock. So then he shipped out – it was at the very end of the war – he wasn't actually in Germany very long.

Now I was always told that he was an ambulance driver and a medic, and this is kind of backed up by the fact that when he returned to Conway County, Arkansas, where he was from, he remained very, very close friends with Dr. Mobley, who always said they served together in France. Also, he became a non-certified – back in the day – veterinarian; he used to do a lot of medical work for people, which showed to me that he had training but his discharge papers do show that he was part of the prisoner of war escort service.

**AC:** So is it possible that he may have been not a bona fide medic but a practitioner's assistant?

**CS:** It could have been – I'm not sure, like I said, I haven't been able to find a lot of records – but I did find something recently that showed that the companies, the prisoner of war escort companies, were formed at the very end of the war and that many of the men stayed on to escort prisoners or to be a part of that process, and that may not have been where they started, and he may have started as a medic/ ambulance driver.

**AC:** I see.

**CS:** He could drive, which was very unusual at that time, and then ended up being a part of the prisoner of war escort service.

**AC:** Very unusual, right. I would not be surprised if that was the case; what they probably did was that they took the rear echelon troops and they just made them part of that process.

**CS:** That's what I kind of think too, but I don't know for sure.

**AC:** Well, good detective work!

**CS:** Well, knowing that you were coming to interview me made me think about it even more.

But growing up, the story I always heard was that during the end of the war, during a battle, he was knocked unconscious. He was hit in the back of the head, and knocked unconscious. He didn't know how long he was unconscious, but when he woke up, he was locked in a small building, in the dark, and he knew it had been at least a couple of days because he was very hungry, he was dehydrated, and everything. So, the family story was always that he had a penknife, which back then people always carried around small knives to sharpen their writing utensils, and he began to dig around the hinges to the door, and eventually was able to remove the door.

Now, a funny note to that is that my mother said later that she never really believed that. She just thought that that would be impossible to do, but in 1968 we moved to Germany, my family did, and found, while living there, that the walls in Germany are very thick, soft plaster. And indeed you can even take your fingernails and make grooves in them.

**AC:** Not deep, but if you keep doing it...

**CS:** Right, so I remember, like I said I was about ten or eleven at the time, and she was like going "Oh my gosh, that story was true!"

Anyway, he removed the door, and there was nobody around. There were no guards, there was nothing, and it was very quiet, which was...odd, because, like I said, a battle had been in place the last he remembered.

He *crawled* on his belly across a field, he was so hungry that – he always told – he dug up raw turnips out of the field and ate them, dirt and all.

**AC:** Well, you've got to do what you've got to do.

**CS:** The story there, my mother, either because she was young and didn't remember, or something else.... let's just say that eventually he returned somewhere to where people could help him, and he didn't like to talk about the rest, and I think it was because he spent some time, at least six months, in the hospital at Fort Porter, New York.

**AC:** You mentioned that when he came to, it had been several days and he was locked in – I'm sure he tried getting out –

**CS:** He did. And it was dark; there were no windows.

**AC:** Did he know for certain that he was a prisoner, or was it under the implication that he had just been brought there and left?

**CS:** My understanding was that he had no memory after being knocked out, but waking up in a closed space and being locked in, it was a natural assumption that that was what had happened, that he was a prisoner. Like I said, he didn't know for how long. Again, another side note as to the severity of his injury –

**AC:** That must have been a pretty big injury.

**CS:** Yes, it was. And my grandfather started having strokes early on. And he had a series of strokes over quite a few years and ended up dying eventually from the effect of them, and when he died my grandmother asked for an autopsy, which back in the 1960's – this was in the 1960's – were unusual. But she wanted to know what was the problem and when they did the autopsy they found that his strokes were being caused by a very large tumor at the base of his skull, a tumor that was usually the result of a blow. An injury. So, it must've been quite a blow in order to cause that kind of an injury.

**AC:** Would you happen to know what might have caused the blow? Would it have been a rifle butt or maybe a nearby explosion?

**CS:** I'm going to assume, based on my memories growing up of the story, is that it was probably a rifle butt. Not that it was an explosion – there was never an explosion, there was no mention of an explosion. I was always told that he was *hit* in the back of the head, and that he didn't have any more memories until he woke up.

**AC:** That probably would have done it; if there had been an explosion there probably would have been more of a physical indication that there was something wrong.

**CS:** And it's very possible that there were a lot of explosions, because the other part of the story that I have found out – I didn't grow up hearing this part – I grew up hearing that he had a good life, that he was a productive citizen. He farmed, he was a self-trained veterinarian, very well respected individual in his community, in his church, in his family, but he was very sensitive, my mother said, to sounds, sudden sounds, to smells.

As a matter of fact, a story my mother tells is that my grandmother liked canned fish, like the canned mackerel that you can buy in a can. He could not abide the smell of that, so they would only have it when he was gone, and then my grandmother would scald all the dishes and put them outside so that he would not get any whiff because he was so sensitive to the smell or anything like it.

**AC:** It may have come from the fact that maybe the smell reminded him of somebody who had been injured.

**CS:** This place that he was in the hospital was known for their work with post-traumatic stress disorder, which back then was called shell shock. So we're assuming that that was what he was treated for, was shell shock.

**AC:** Well, that would make sense if he got hit in the head – right at the back of the head, and that caused a tumor, then that must've been not just a forceful blow but one that's to a specific part of the body that's pretty vulnerable. Another thing to remember is that at the time that the Americans entered the war, they were wearing the British helmet, which covered the head, but not the neck.

**CS:** Right.

**AC:** The Germans and the French had a sloping helmet that covered the neck.

**CS:** You're right, we learned the hard way. Oh, by the way, I remember another story about my grandfather. When he married my grandmother – like I said, my grandmother was his last wife – his first wife was very frail and died very young, the second wife, things just didn't work out, and probably because of his war experiences, because he told my grandmother when they first got married, he said: "If something happens in the night, don't shake me, or if I'm having nightmares, don't touch me. Back away, get out of the bed, back away, and call my name really loudly because I might hurt you if you shake me." So that was one of the things that he told her, which is kind of a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder.

**AC:** I'm sorry that he had to go through that. I'm glad that, at least outwardly, it didn't affect his life enough to make it a very bad remainder of his life.

**CS:** That's right, and that's why I was kind of surprised when I found out that he had spent time at this hospital that was known for treating people like that, because even though he had these sensitivities about things, he didn't like surprises, he didn't like loud noises, he was an extremely loving father – he had five children – I remember him, I was young when he died, but I remember him – he was crazy about kids, everybody in the community loved him; he ran a grocery store and he would sit on the front porch, always with one of the kids in his lap, one of his grandkids in his lap, and people would come by and say "Uncle Doc" or "Uncle Dave" or "Mr. Dave". Everybody respected him and loved him; he was a very kind and very sweet-natured person.

So, it did affect him, but I think he was able to overcome so much of what might have happened otherwise. He used to take me everywhere with him. He'd take me when he went to "doctor cows", he'd take me when he went fishing: he took me everywhere he went.

**AC:** So you said that he was born in 1894, here in Arkansas. What town was he born in?

**CS:** They always gave it as Springfield, in Conway County, Arkansas. He was actually from a smaller community a little bit north of Springfield, but Springfield was the county seat at the time, so that's what I was told and that's where everything in the area happened.

**AC:** Did he ever relate what life was like growing up at the time? Did he have any siblings, you mentioned brothers?

**CS:** Oh, yes, he did. He was one of seven boys, and he had two sisters, he had a very large family, they were extremely close, a very close family. When I was a little girl I could walk up and down the road and visit great aunts and uncles all the way, and all I had to do was knock on the door and they'd invite me in, feed me, talk to me, and so I heard a lot about what life was like when they were growing up.

I was five when he died, and we had been overseas and came back in the summer, but I spent a month with him and then we came back six months later because he had started having the final series of strokes and was in the hospital, and again, I went to see him before he passed away.

**AC:** He passed away in what year?

**CS:** December 1963.

**AC:** So he would have been around...

**CS:** He was sixty-nine years old.

**AC:** So he was not all that old, was he?

**CS:** No, he was the first one in his family to die, the first of the siblings to pass away, which was unusual because he was actually more in the middle, towards the younger end of the family.

**AC:** And he sounded like he was an active person.

**CS:** He was very active; he had always worked on farms until the strokes started getting so bad that my grandmother made the decision that they would run the store, because she didn't want him farming any more. She was a very strong person and took good care of him; she was always conscious of what his needs were, so she had made the decision that they would run the store so that way he didn't have to work with the cows and the horses, and all that, because he was having strokes on a regular basis. As a matter of fact, he was still driving, but very rarely, when I was young, but only short distances, because she didn't want him driving.

**AC:** It's a shame he passed away so early, but at least he lived, to an extent, a full life.

**CS:** Yeah, he did. He did, and was very proud of the fact that he had five children, and when he died, he had five grandchildren, I think. He ended up with nine, but he didn't live to see the younger ones.

**AC:** So, did he enlist or was he drafted? I know it's kind of a fine point.

**CS:** It was kind of a voluntary thing, to register, and then, my understanding is that they pulled numbers from those who registered.

**AC:** And he was one of them.

**CS:** And he was one of them, yes. And he was the only one out of his family that served – there was this whole group of those Huett boys who registered together, because I found all their records – but, he was the only one who went and served.

**AC:** I see. When did he start his training?

**CS:** June 1918, I believe, is when he started training. No, wait, I take that back. June 1918 is when he shipped out.

**AC:** So he shipped out in June.

**CS:** I think his training might have started...

**AC:** In late 1917, probably.

**CS:** No, actually, he registered in 1917, but I found something recently, and I don't know where I found it – maybe it's on that copy of his discharge papers. [Both look at copy of discharge papers given to interviewer.]

**AC:** It says: "Born in Springfield, Arkansas, Aged twenty-four years, Occupation of farmer." Here we go, it says that he enlisted July 26, 1918, in Morrilton.

**CS:** In Morrilton, OK. But the training actually was before that, because he married in February of that year, and not long after that he went to Camp Pike for training, at least, that was my understanding. But that was one of the reasons why they married, right at that time. But yes, he shipped out in July.

I've been looking, my mother's been looking, and she has a series of postcards that he wrote to his first wife. Every time they stopped, because they went by train, and every time he stopped, he would get off the train for a break and he would write a postcard and mail it. So the series of postcards shows the journey from Springfield or Little Rock – I'm sure they probably left from Little Rock – to where they shipped out, and I'm not 100 percent sure, but I think it was to New Jersey.

**AC:** That would have made sense.

**CS:** Yeah, Fort something, New Jersey, Fort Dixon, maybe.

**AC:** That sounds right, I think I know which one you're talking about. I'll look that up. [Actual name of Army Training Camp is Fort Dix, New Jersey.] So he got there, roughly around the time when Americans really started showing up.

**CS:** Like September 1918, I think.

**AC:** All right. Do you know if he was immediately put on the front line – no, you answered that question, he was in the prisoner of war escort companies.

**CS:** I think, though, that that was at the end. I really do believe, based on all the evidence of the things he did afterward and his friendship with Dr. Mobley, that he was part of the Ambulance Corps in the beginning. I'd have to get his service record to find that out for sure, because his discharge papers only show where he was and what he was doing at that time, and at that time, and at that time he was part of the prisoner of war escort company, which I've not been able to find out much information about it; it's been very frustrating.

Like I said, Dr. Mobley practiced medicine in Morrilton for many years, and he served in the war also, and was a very good friend of the family; my mother's youngest brother was named after him. From their relationship, at least the impression I've always received from everybody that knew them both, was that they served together, in Germany and France, and Dr. Mobley was definitely a field doctor.

**AC:** I see. So, yes, that probably is the case; he probably had some medical training. Do you happen to know the date of the last battle he was in, before he received the blow to the head?

**CS:** The general information I have, and I don't have anything specific, was that– I told you that they said, that he always told when he woke up and broke his way out of this building, that there was no one around, that he crawled across a field on his belly – that's when he found out that the Armistice had happened. So this was at the very end; this is when that November – November 11<sup>th</sup> was when the Armistice was signed – so during November 11<sup>th</sup> he was unconscious.

**AC:** So, literally, this was in early November, like the last four or so days.

**CS:** I'm assuming so, because I believe – November 11<sup>th</sup> is always called Armistice Day, which was the day that the Armistice was signed – it hadn't been signed when he was injured, but it had been signed when he found his way back.

**AC:** So that's like a three-day span.

**CS:** I mean, I don't think he'd been unconscious for more than two to three days without dying.

**AC:** No. And, as you said, he doesn't remember anything, so he could have, theoretically, been awake at some point, but then lapsed back into unconsciousness. Maybe his captors even gave him something to drink or eat, and then left.

**CS:** Yeah, I mean, it's always possible, but we don't know.

**AC:** I mean, it's an interesting story in it of itself, but there's so much that's missing that would really make the story more complete. Did a farmer perhaps drag him there? Did his comrades?

**CS:** Where was it? Was he actually in France? Was he actually in Germany? Because at that time in the war, my understanding is that it was kind of in that line where you were in France, where you were in Germany, where you were in France...

**AC:** I see. So near Alsace-Lorraine.

**CS:** I don't know. I think that's where the last parts of the war were being fought, so that it kind of makes you think that. I do have the application...

**AC:** And the question becomes, why would, if the Germans are generally in retreat, why would they go out of their way to pick up some guy that they're not sure would live, instead of one of their comrades and take him with them?

**CS:** I know, see, that's the thing we don't really know. It's all a matter of conjecture. And he didn't like to talk about it much. I mean, this is only a little bit of information. My mother knows more about those little pieces. And I mean she was grown when he died, obviously, because she had three children, but other than those facts, he really didn't talk a lot about it. And some of that actually may have come from his siblings, because she's always said that he did not like to talk about it. So it's very possible that pieces of the story actually came from his brothers and sisters.

**AC:** It's still a very interesting story in it of itself...So what happened after he was found, once they brought him back; was he in a poor – I understand that he was in a really poor condition –

**CS:** He was in very poor health; his discharge papers say he was in very poor health...

**AC:** Was he treated at a hospital in France?

**CS:** I'm assuming that he was probably treated – from what I read about the prisoner of war escort companies that were formed at the end of the war, they were formed of those soldiers who were the last ones left, to kind of make their way.

**AC:** So he must've stayed in France a little bit longer.

**CS:** Well, I look at it from the timeline that we know that he was injured and that the war ended in November of 1918. He arrived – I think somewhere in here it says he arrived at the hospital – somewhere in here it says he arrived in the hospital [looks through papers] in the summer of 1919, and then was discharged September 19... he was discharged from the hospital on the sixteenth day of September in 1919; that is ten months after the injury.

**AC:** So he must've been in the hospital quite a bit, then.

**CS:** Yes, I'm assuming he was treated in Germany. Then of course he had to make his way to the ships, to be shipped back, and then was in the hospital in New York, so there is a big gap of time that we really just don't know.

**AC:** Do you know the unit he served in?

**CS:** Well, the one he was discharged from was the 273<sup>rd</sup> PWE Infantry, and I did find out that PWE is prisoner of war escort, and it says that he was discharged, though, by reason of CDD, and I think you're going to find that that has to do with whatever their word was at the time for shell shock. They wouldn't have said shell shock, they would've said concussion or something disorder, I don't know. Because it does say that here, and then it has LD, and I have not been able to find any of that information. It does say that he was in very poor condition when he was discharged, they furnished his transportation, and he did have excellent character. So his poor condition at least wasn't because he was acting crazily.

**AC:** No, fortunately not.

**CS:** Though that's good to know. I never would have believed it, because I grew up hearing what a great person he was.

**AC:** Indeed. Thank you for your time.

**CS:** You're very welcome.