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The **Man Who**
Would Have Been
Elsewhere



A reluctant politician, Urbana's Brand Whitlock saw his real calling in literature, and even saving the people of Belgium from starvation was a distraction. Or was it?

THE VOLUNTEER REVERENTLY PULLS THE FLAT, faded box from its dusty drawer in the basement of the Champaign County Historical Society. The hinges are split and the satin lining shredding, William Alexander explains, but the contents are still treasured—seven flour sacks, each tagged in a neat French script that identifies the original owner, “Madame Whitlock. 1915.”



By **Cheryl Heckler-Feltz**
Photos by **Eric Albrecht**

12-15-76

Bill & Gay
Soc. W. 17th
William Alexander
under the colors
of Urhina's
forgotten hero

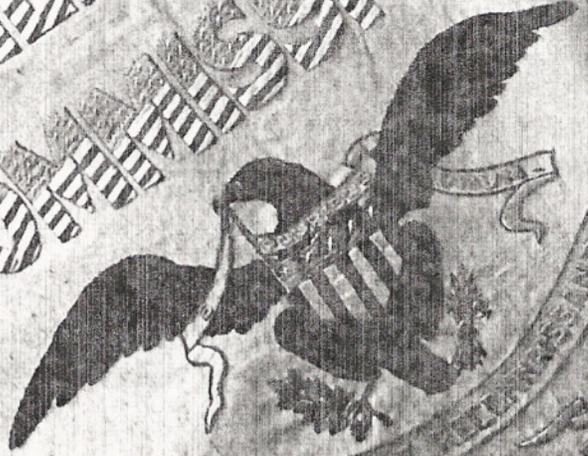


BRAND WHITLOCK



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"These aren't the most valuable items we have, but they are extremely unique," says Alexander, a retired mechanical engineer and weekly society volunteer who points out that he was born in 1917 and is thus two years younger than the sacks. Only once or twice a year does anyone come by to see them, Alexander adds as he opens the box on the counter of a rural general store display. Gingerly, he unfolds the flour sacks, which are no ordinary sacks at all but a reminder of a war far away in distance and time from today's Urbana.

THE FIRST FLOUR BAG was carefully cut open and pressed flat. On one side of the rough burlap sacking, a frame was elaborately embroidered around the plainly printed words, "American consul relief war donation for Belgian non-combatants. 49 lbs. of flour contributed by the people of Kentucky and southern Indiana USA through the *Louisville Herald*." On the other side is a painted portrait of the American ambassador to Belgium, Brand Whitlock. A seamstress edged the whole banner with red, yellow and black roping, depicting Belgium's colors.

The Urbana "flour" sacks are all highly decorated, their plain American labels of origin—Hastings, Nebraska, or Louisville, Kentucky—surrounded in embroidered flowers and lace that was painstakingly stripped apart and rewoven around words of thanks. The Ursuline sisters of Kloosterbeck outdid all the others, transforming their sack into a map of Belgium, surmounted by an American flag (with the field of blue stars located in the wrong corner) and a Belgian flag.

Before Rwanda, before Bosnia, before the Marshall Plan, there was Belgium. Invaded without warning in the opening days of the first world war, the Belgian

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government fought to hold a small strip of its own territory between France and Germany. Most civilians, however, were caught inside territory controlled by the German Army of Occupation, which did not consider feeding enemy civilians a high strategic priority. To the rescue came the ambassador of the still-neutral United States, Brand Whitlock, Urbana's most famous native son.

Whitlock was an unlikely national savior. A former journalist, a former lawyer and a former reform mayor of Toledo, Whitlock took the overseas job from Woodrow Wilson in 1914 because he thought a sleepy diplomatic post in Brussels was the ideal place for him to get on with the real work of his life—writing novels. Nine months after Whitlock arrived, the Kaiser's army crashed into Belgium, capturing its major cities. Within months, Ambassador Whitlock was the only thing standing between the common people of Belgium and starvation.

World War I ushered in several new horrors of war, but along with mustard gas and the tank came another innovation, the humanitarian relief effort. Whitlock was the man behind one of the first international efforts that rejected mass starvation as a legitimate tool of war. The flour sacks that flowed into occupied Belgium from neutral America proclaimed a higher humanitarian right. It was the *people* of the United States, said Whitlock, who were aiding the *people* of Belgium. His task was difficult: The shipments were always challenged and frequently rejected by the Germans.

DURING THE DREADEFUL YEARS OF 1914–1915, these sacks and thousands more like them from every corner of America kept the civilian population of Belgium alive. For the impoverished Belgians,

embroidering and painting the flour sacks was their only way to thank the man whose popularity was second only to their own royal family.

More than 75 years later, the sacks in the basement of the Champaign County Historical Society are a delicate if nearly forgotten memorial to Whitlock. Like the sacks themselves, his memory and reputation have badly faded in Ohio and in Champaign County. It is understandable. Whitlock himself could never decide what he should be remembered for.

BORN IN URBANA IN 1869 AND RAISED in several small Ohio cities where his father served as a Methodist pastor, Whitlock grew up breathing the fiery moral fervor of an earlier America. During the summers, Whitlock stayed often at the Urbana home of his grandfather, Joseph Carter Brand. Grandfather Brand was a larger-than-life Ohioan, an unrepentant fire-breathing abolitionist who actually shot at federal marshals to assist a fleeing slave in Champaign County in 1858. When the Confederates fired on Fort Sumter, Grandfather Brand rushed to the colors, serving all four years in Washington in the Commissary Department.

According to his adoring grandson, Joseph Carter Brand was not only present at Appomattox, he was the first to drop his own hardtack into the blankets of broken Confederates because he hailed from Virginia and had many relatives in rebel uniform. Following a diplomatic tour in Germany, Grandfather Brand returned to Urbana to become its mayor and a powerhouse in the local Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) chapter. Whitlock remembered his grandfather's fierce attachment to his rose garden (he would name each and every plant) and Republican politics.

In those days—as now—Champaign County was wholly, almost blindly Republican. The Republican party, Brand Whitlock wrote, “was elemental, like gravity, the sun, the stars, the ocean. One became, in

Urbana and in Ohio for many years, a Republican just as the Eskimo dons fur clothes. It was inevitable. It was not a matter of intellectual choice, it was a process of biological selection....”

Like his grandfather, Whitlock sought social reform. Unlike his grandfather, he rejected the Republican party. The 1896 presidential race between William Jennings Bryan and William McKinley opened cracks in young Whitlock's birthright faith. Dismayed by the growing gap between capital and labor, Whitlock found himself moving toward the “Progressive” position. Still he worried that expressing his new political views to Grandfather Brand would be tantamount to announcing he had become an atheist. Amazingly, when Whitlock confronted his grandfather, looking him right in the eye and saying, “I like Bryan,” his grandfather looked at him right back and said, “So do I.” Grandpa's Urbana neighbors decided that senility had overcome the old man.

Yet Brand Whitlock was torn his whole life, torn between his Republican genetics and his progressive politics, torn between his notions of justice and the reality of the law, especially in turn-of-the-century midwestern cities where local corruption greased every wheel. Mostly, Whitlock was torn between his passion for a greater social good and his desire to be a great writer. “It seemed to be my fate, or my weakness, which we too often confuse with fate, to vacillate between an interest in literature and an interest in politics,” he wrote in his memoirs.



SALVATION FROM starvation inspired needlecraft.

He started as a journalist, first in Toledo and then Chicago. Searching for a more lucrative career, Whitlock turned to the law in 1894. He became a defense lawyer after concluding that his first and only prosecution case ruined the life of an innocent man. A life-long opponent of capital punishment, he wrote, “There is no insti-

tution which society so cherishes as she does her penal institutions, and most sacrosanct of these are the ax, the guillotine, the garrote, the gibbet and the electric chair.”

Whitlock specialized in defending underdogs and low-lives, including prostitutes, murderers and the insane. He said they were easier to like than most politicians. "Generally, the moral atmosphere of politics was foul and heavy with the feculence of all the debauchery that is inseparable from privilege," he wrote. "Politics in those days [and not just in those days] were mean. It did fill me with disgust and made the whole business utterly distasteful."

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In literary time, *J. Hardin & Son* was too late. In 1915, it would have been a sensation. By 1923, his subject had already been usurped by Sinclair Lewis in *Main Street* and by Sherwood Anderson in *Winesburg, Ohio*. Moreover, Whitlock's slightly florid pre-war prose style sounded hopelessly antique. He continued writing, turning out eight more novels but, according to his journals, he steadily lost faith in his artistic ability. Whitlock's political battles typi-

DISGUSTED BUT FASCINATED, HE could not stay away from the public arena even in his fiction. When he first hung out his shingle in Toledo in 1897, he did nothing to recruit clients and secretly hoped he would be left alone to write *The 13th District*, a muckraking novel about ward politics. In time, he fell under the thrall of Toledo's reform mayor, Samuel "Golden Rule" Jones, that city's famed cleanser of municipal corruption who converted Whitlock to his unique ideology of social Christianity.

When Jones died, Whitlock agonized over picking up his mentor's fallen banner. "I thought it all over again in the watches of the night—and thought about the unfinished manuscript on my library tables—and, at last, since somebody had to do it...." Whitlock did it four times, winning election to rule and, with mixed results, reform Toledo from 1906 to 1914. Refusing a fifth term, Whitlock gladly accepted the post of minister to Belgium. He expected a rest. He ended up in the middle of a world war.

Afterward, he tried to make up for lost time. In 1919, he published his account of the Belgian crisis including his unsuccessful efforts to save the British nurse Edith Cavell from a German firing squad. Resigning from the diplomatic corps in 1921, Whitlock turned to fiction full-time, finishing the novel he had started 10 years before, *J. Hardin & Son*, a scathing exploration of small town hypocrisy.

cally left him dyspeptic, anemic and longing to return to the unfinished manuscript in his desk drawer. Now finally free of politics and diplomacy, Whitlock found his private light of literature failing.

Whitlock resided in Europe to the end of his life in 1934 and was buried in Cannes, France. He married twice. In 1892 after a whirlwind courtship, he married Susan Brainard of Springfield, Illinois, who died of an illness just four months later. In 1895, Whitlock married Ella Brainard, his late wife's sister. They never had the children that Whitlock craved, but Ella stood by him through 39 tumultuous years of politics, war and literature.

Biographers consistently note two points about his life: it was filled with more excitement than any of his novels, and it was not what Whitlock really wanted. Today's Belgians—whose ancestors struggled for survival in 1915—certainly can be grateful that he was distracted from literature. Perhaps the Belgians have forgotten him entirely, but at least they are alive to forget.

In his last years, he said he often dreamed of Urbana, the one place that never overwhelmed him with demands, except to sit through his grandfather's lectures on roses and Republican politics. In Urbana, Brand Whitlock is remembered most poignantly by a box of embroidered flour sacks. ♦



WHITLOCK'S INNOVATION was the humanitarian relief effort.

An Urbana resident, Cheryl Heckler-Feltz swears Grandpa Brand's Republican admonitions still hang in the air over Champaign County.