I left home on the night of August 26, 1918, with two trunks, a duffle bag, a suitcase, a handbag and several packages. I wonder how much of it I’ll bring home....

Thus begins Edith Harris Scott’s account of her six months as a volunteer singer entertaining American troops in France during the last days of World War I. At the age of 47, she kissed her husband and children goodbye and left Pittsburgh for France. It was 1918, and my grandmother was part of a Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) group that included businesspeople, musicians, nurses, and canteen workers, all dedicated to helping with the “War to end all wars.”

A hundred years ago, Edith, my grandmother, was a well-known Pittsburgh church singer and elocutionist. She served with entertainment groups in both the Panama Canal Zone and in France during WWI. But to me, growing up in the 1930s, she was simply Nannie; she never told me of her previous life. In fact, I knew little until I discovered her diary in my mother’s papers some 25 years after her death.
A brown leather book with EHS stamped on the cover and titled “The Great Adventure,” Edith’s diary is small. In neat, legible handwriting, she covered six months of experiences in France from 1918-1919. This was an unexpected treasure; no one had ever mentioned that Nannie had written of her time there. Indeed, the “adventure” itself was seldom talked about.

Before WWI, in the days when women wore floor-length skirts and rarely worked outside the home, my grandmother was an exception. With her rich contralto voice, she was a popular singer, not only in Pittsburgh churches and recital halls, but in foreign countries and cultures. Before the canal opened in 1914, Edith sailed to Panama with a YMCA group to entertain workers and their families. The YMCA had been overseeing the morale and welfare of America’s military since before the Civil War. As part of its mission, the group started overseas entertainment for troops during the Spanish-American conflict. Colonel George Washington Goethals, appointed to lead the canal-building, realized the need for amusement and diversion for the workers, and delegated the YMCA to build and run clubhouses for meetings, dances, and concerts.

In 1917, when the U.S. entered the war, the Pittsburgh YMCA mobilized its forces to help with the effort. They put “Y” recreation huts at every railroad station in the city and recruitment huts on campuses at the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Tech. Raising millions of dollars locally, they also formed an overseas entertainment unit to go to France; Edith was among the local artists chosen for this work. (During World War II, that wing of the YMCA expanded nationally to become known as the United Service Organizations for National Defense, or simply, the USO.)

Edith Harris was born in 1871 in Wales. When still a child, she was sent with
her three sisters to live with family friends in Boston. There, she trained at Emerson College and met my grandfather George Scott, the son of real estate entrepreneur and Pittsburgh politician Colonel Andrew Scott, an honorific given him by the Pennsylvania militia during the Civil War. There are two accounts concerning George Scott’s education: the Colonel’s 1888 obituary lists a son at the University of Michigan, while family members have told me that George had at least one year at Harvard.

Whatever the truth, George and Edith were married and returned to set up housekeeping in Pittsburgh. They were a popular couple: George was tall and handsome; Edith had a charm that would prove invaluable. George had received an inheritance of rental properties that brought in a substantial income. In this era of popular songs like “A Bicycle Built for Two,” a family story is that, when sent off to buy a bedroom suite, the newlyweds returned instead with bicycles and matching bicycle suits.

I recently visited an exhibit at Pittsburgh's Frick Art Museum titled Off the Pedestal, which examined the “New Woman” through the eyes of famous painters, starting just after the Civil War. A common thread throughout the exhibition was the bicycle, presumably a symbol of American women’s evolving emancipation. An 1896 ad for the Overman Wheel Company of a pretty girl on a bike, together with paintings of women playing tennis and croquet, even smoking cigarettes, all represented a growing independence and athleticism. Charles Dana Gibson put his famous beauty, the Gibson Girl, on a bicycle in several paintings, using it to exemplify this new era’s journey toward liberation and empowerment for women. Edith was of the same ilk: she left home and hearth to travel abroad in the middle of a war. She serves as one of the links in a chain progressing from the tightly bound and
restricted Victorian woman all the way to Sally Ride, the first female astronaut.

There were two children from the marriage: David and my mother Margaret. The good life lasted about 15 years, and then the money ran out. What happened to the "inheritance of nine rental houses" was never explained to me; I can only make assumptions. I do know that for their first 20 years, they had several Pittsburgh addresses; my mother recounted living in Munhall as a child, at her marriage they lived on Grafton Street in Highland Park, and Edith gave an address on Maryland Avenue in Shadyside for her passport. My theory is they lived on George's inheritance, selling houses off, one by one, until reality struck. My grandfather George went to work at the U.S. Steel plant in Homestead, while an energetic and dynamic Edith sang to earn income and put my mother Margaret through college.

By 1918, both were in their late 40s. Margaret was out of college and working as a legal secretary, and son David attended Kiski Preparatory School in Saltsburg, Pennsylvania. George, too old to enlist, kept on at U.S. Steel, and Edith continued her volunteer work for the YMCA while still giving programs and recitals. She was concert soloist at several local churches and also taught singing and elocution. A friend's mother knew her as "Madame Scott," a title I assume came after her stint in France.

That fall the war was ending. The paperwork for my grandmother's tour of duty in France had taken months, and her group of 22 women didn't leave Pittsburgh until late August 1918. They went by train from Pittsburgh to New York to Montreal; a month was spent, both in New York and in Canada, in conference, in endless waits for uniforms and official functions, even giving concerts and recitals upon occasion. Finally, they boarded a ship sailing out of Quebec:

*September 29: this is a day long to be remembered. Before 7:00 a.m. the anchor had been raised and we steamed off to...*
where? We are the center boat, the flagship of the fleet, 26 vessels, and we are only 24 passengers, counting the Lieutenant and the doctor.... Our convoy is also surrounded by aeroplanes; it is really a comfort to think that when we reach the extreme Danger Zone we can look out and find so many friends.

By wireless, every morning, we get reports of the epidemic of Spanish influenza closing Boston's schools. Hundreds of sailors were in quarantine back in Quebec with the dreaded disease.

The armistice was only days away by the time my grandmother's group arrived in Le Havre, northern France. Their ship, part of a convoy of destroyers, had been caught in a hurricane strong enough to disperse the pack, and the difficult crossing took over three weeks:

To my surprise, even when the sea was increasing in roughness, my mal-de-mer had vanished. The generally stormy weather kept growing in force for several days, passing through all kinds of squalls, rain, wind, snow and sleet, though the Officers on the boat would only confess to its being a "bit choppy."

During one whole week they made scarcely any progress, and in fact were headed most of that time toward the north or even west. Her diary relates the final onslaught of a North Atlantic storm:

At last, on Tuesday, October 8, the fury of all the preceding storms seemed to gather and concentrate in one terrific battle, and what a night! For hours, pandemonium reigned. The officer on the bridge told me that at 3:30 a.m. the old boat was in the trough, on its side, and he was saying his prayers... never before had he felt so near to death, and never before had he to actually look up to find the sea.

And yet I had several naps through the night. I believe I was the only one who slept, with not a sign of seasickness!

Then, with the storm over, they assessed the aftermath:

This morning we were permitted to inspect the damage done (by the storm); thick iron supports to the 6" guns had been twisted, and 4" planks had been splintered. Part of the bridge was blown

I was put with an English Police Woman, who wore a khaki coat and hat with a peak, brown gloves and carried a cane. All the time I kept wishing I had a cane so I could practice her moves.

"Checking out at the A.P.M. office at le Mans." Edith Scott, far right.
away and the hatchway aft was torn off... soaking their stores of sugar, flour and other foodstuffs the crew was bringing to relatives in Britain... Ventilator funnels were broken off; life rafts were torn loose on deck. I want no more hurricanes.

Two days later the boats arrived in Scotland: Our companions are joining up, one by one. We now have six ships in sight out of oh! so many!

After finally landing, they went by train to meet with the control group in London. There they were sorted out and distributed where necessary, according to their wishes and talents. Although a professional singer, my grandmother had hoped to be more of a "hands-on" helper. A motherly, warmhearted lady and a mother of two children herself, she had wanted to meet the soldiers, to talk, to comfort, to advise. She relates trying a 10-hour shift in London with another worker and an English bobby:

At 5:00 p.m., we reported to the International YMCA canteen, and Miss Porter and I started out together. We had dinner, visited Eagle Hut, talked to a lot of the boys; now I was put with an English Police Woman, who wore a khaki coat and hat with a peak, brown gloves and carried a cane. All the time I kept wishing I had a cane so I could practice her moves.

Finally Edith decided against this kind of field work: this walking, visiting various "Y huts" through a fog where I could hardly get my breath ... my mind was made up. I knew I couldn't stand that work. A few days later it was decided she should go to Rennes as a Regional Singer and Reader. After relocation, she traveled east to Paris for Armistice Day, November 11, 1918:

Such rejoicing! Flags appeared by magic, everyone marching, often in families, the adults carrying large flags and the youngsters, small ones, all singing La Marseillaise; I walked down the Champs Elysees to the Place de la Concorde through the crowds, trying to keep from being hugged and kissed by the volatile French!

After the peace, public sentiment in America wanted no more of Europe and its wars, and the demobilization proceeded as quickly as possible, although it would be five years before the American soldiers left the country. As the able-bodied men and casualties were still stationed all around France, in camps, hospitals, and recovery centers, the work of the YMCA continued for months.

Edith's area of assignment was primarily in northern France; she gave concerts and readings from Cherbourg on the west coast to Amiens, 100 miles north of Paris, to Dijon,
Such rejoicing! Flags appeared by magic, everyone marching ... all singing La Marseillaise; I walked down the Champs Elysees to the Place de la Concorde through the crowds, trying to keep from being hugged and kissed by the volatile French!

100 miles south. Her days ranged from officers' luncheons and dinners to hours of hard work. A typical diary notation reads: Today I sang in five wards (in the American Hospital) at St. Nazaire, both diphtheria and flu cases. The boys were weak but so happy to see us.

Many times she gave two, even three, programs a day, then left by train that night for a new assignment. Here, she arrives in Brest:

Service at Navy Hut at 10 a.m. Social service at 2:00, Navy Hut service again at 6:45 and sang at Officer’s Club at 8:00.

Stayed at Miss Cleve’s apartment enjoying warm sponge bath and good bed.

Most of these assignments entailed a return to Paris, the center of relocation, then a trip out, day or night, by car or train. Often the workers had to get their own hotel rooms. In a rainy winter, cold and damp, Edith recounts the difficulty of finding a room in a new town and “cold coffee and bread” for breakfast:

Weather here at LeMans bad, if not worse, than Brest. We sang at the Mess Hall of the Labor Battalion to 1,500 men. (As there was no stage) we stood on a table. Then another program at Classification Camp at 6:30. Went to Paris on 12:15 (midnight) train, arriving at 4:30 a.m. Tried for room at Petrograd (a favorite hotel) but no luck; had breakfast there, however.

Plagued with recurring colds and laryngitis, a singer’s worst enemies, she wrote of several hospital stays and the kindness of the French doctors in caring for her: Dr. Lautier finds my lungs not right, the effect of laryngitis, and painted my throat with iodine; he is recommending the south of France.

In happier moments, however, she wrote of her delight in the camaraderie of the workers, and of their pleasure in simply
bringing a touch of home to "the boys." In one stay in Paris she took advantage of some famous French skills by having two tweed suits made. She writes of buying some beautiful violets to show the tailor the color I wanted.

Still not in voice by late February, my grandmother and a few other workers were sent south to Nice for the warmer weather. There she marveled at the sun and the markets massed with blooms of all varieties. On a trip to Monte Carlo by the long route over the mountain, she wrote, From where we stood in the snow we could look down on groves of lemon and orange trees; lower down, closer to the sea, were the palm trees and the beds of pansies, daisies and cyclamen.

Some 80 years later, my husband and I spent a winter in a suburb of Nice, remembering Edith's description of the sunny south of France. Here was the same warmth and blooming flowers she described with the groves of oranges and lemons transformed into le Fete du Citron, an annual event up the coast in Menton. Always to a theme, one year it was 15-foot tall figures constructed of wire, covered with the colorful citrus fruit, then placed around the park in beds of flowers with more fruit all decoratively strewn. The Lemon Festival is an inventive, wonderful, and, to me, totally French happening.

Edith, the singer and the energetic, dedicated volunteer, was a grandmother I never knew. She was my Nannie, quietly knitting at one end of the couch in our living room some 20 years later. She never spoke of France or Panama or any of her trips to Europe. The only real information I have is from a few family stories and the diary she kept. I did know Nannie had sung to the troops in France, but it was never discussed. I knew she wasn't well, and that she'd been operated on for breast cancer.

That great old cathedral looked so helplessly pathetic, so weakened and pounded that it seemed powerless to hold up its towers.
We should have known each other better, as she lived with my family during the Depression years when I was a little girl. A small house in Wilkinsburg Manor, near the Verona streetcar line (now Robinson Boulevard), it had three bedrooms, one bathroom, and a lot of people; my parents, two children (my brother and I), one grandmother, and Helen, the maid. The household was civilized, considering the generations involved. It was quiet, with everyone either out, reading, or knitting. The kitchen played no part in my life, as nobody except Helen seemed to be in there. I never liked to eat but Nannie always coaxed me to try something more.

My grandmother went to Florida in the winter, to return in the spring. I shared a bedroom with her, and since she liked to read, I learned to go to sleep with the light on. She always wore a corset, sort of a wraparound undergarment, although she wasn’t a large woman, and she was very natural in revealing her mastectomy to me. Nannie sewed; she made me a dress with ruffles that I wore one summer to her Christian Science Church on Clyde Street in Oakland. They gave me a Bible with my name engraved in gold letters. Once, a good friend of Nannie’s, who lived in a big square house on Shady Avenue just up from Fifth Avenue in Point Breeze, came to get us in a chauffeured car.

Nannie was soft-spoken, had long conversations with my mother, and gave me licorice drops she kept in her room. She sang very little, really only with me, and I never heard her perform as a singer. However, after the war she often gave readings, a holdover from an earlier time before films, radio, and TV were popular entertainment. Programs, both public and private, consisted of a performer reading narrative poems, verses, and even lyrics to songs. My memory is of one of Edith’s performances at a Fox Chapel club around 1940, early into WWII before the U.S. joined in. She gave a moving reading of “The White Cliffs,” a long dramatic poem by Alice Duer Miller about upper class Britain in the previous war sending off its young men to fight, a very timely choice. A few years later, it was the basis for a movie, The White Cliffs of Dover starring Irene Dunne, an actress of the day. Edith’s sense of the theatrical made her especially good at this kind of narrative work, even into her late 60s.

The concerts to the troops were often semi-classical and religious in theme, and church services were a big part of the work. However, light popular songs of the era were also in the repertoire; these were the ones she taught me. My favorites were “Good Morning, Mr. Zip-Zip-Zip!” (if the Camels don’t get you, the Fatimas must)” and everything George M. Cohan ever wrote. Cohan’s marching beat of “Over There” and “Give My Regards to Broadway” are still icons in any movie or TV show about WWII and were high on soldiers’ request lists to the singers. She also taught me sentimental songs like “There’s a Long, Long Trail A-Winding,” and “Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag” and fun stuff: “K-K-K-Katy” and “How Ya Going to Keep ‘Em Down on the Farm After They’ve Seen Paree?” I knew them all by heart. Edith’s vivid description of the ruined cathedral at Reims became more poignant, and even symbolic, to me later when I realized her own loss. After the war, my grandmother’s voice never regained its quality, and she never sang in public again.

The main resource, and source for italicized quotes, is Edith Harris Scott’s diary. Others include:

Donald and Dana Manges. Home at 72 (iUniverse, 2005).


Dana Fulton Manges was born just after the stock market crash of 1929. She grew up in the Pittsburgh suburb of Fox Chapel, and graduated in chemistry from Wells College. Her first job, “and the best,” she says, was with Dr. Edwin Land in the color research labs at Polaroid Corporation in Boston. Now a grandmother herself, she is married to Donald Manges, a retired advertising man; they have three sons.