

Fort Lewis: Convalescent House/ Family Resource Center

During World War I, the American Red Cross built and operated a convalescent house at Camp Lewis (and another at Vancouver Barracks), maintaining the center for about a year, until the wounded war veterans could return to their homes. The Red Cross operated the Camp Lewis house (sometimes called Hostess House) as a very homelike convalescent facility from February 1919 until January 1920, when the army announced a reduction in the Camp Lewis hospital patient count. The Red Cross concluded operations, turned the facility over to the army, and it became an Army Service Club. After two or three more re-uses, the building was restored and in 1997 won the Washington State Historic Preservation Office's Annual Award for Outstanding Achievement in Historic Rehabilitation. Today it serves as Joint Base Lewis-McChord's Family Resource center.

The American Red Cross

The American Red Cross became a major national humanitarian organization during World War I, contributing substantially to the war effort. The organization provided nurses, motor units, medical supplies, and more than 60 convalescent houses at military hospitals across the country. It provided Camp Service in 400 military camps and hospitals that included clothing, soldier emergency financial aid, and recreation. Some 700 Red Cross canteens served millions of snacks and cups of coffee. Other operations included Home Service to assist families of military personnel, providing trained nurses, and recruiting nurses.

The Red Cross Motor Service offered transportation support with 3.5 million miles driven. The organization also funded construction of and operated more than 60 Red Cross Convalescent Houses at military hospitals across the country. Each house had women hostesses who helped wounded soldiers recover and who supported their families and relatives. The huge humanitarian effort earned the American Red Cross the nickname "the Greatest Mother."

Convalescent House Design

The American Red Cross designed the facilities and funded their construction, and the military built the structures. Chicago architect Charles E. Fox (1879-1926) prepared a standard plan, which was often modified locally. This plan laid out the wood-frame building in a cruciform to represent the Red Cross. Indoors, Red Cross symbols were used in woodwork or in the fireplace, and elsewhere as decorative features.

Each house would offer comfort and support to wounded and ill soldiers. The great room of the house had comfortable wicker chairs, writing tables, and a fireplace. The intent was to provide a homelike atmosphere. Patients could come here in hospital robes and not have to worry about the uniform of the day. At the end of the great room was a solarium, which doubled as a stage. For performances, chairs were rearranged to convert the great room into an auditorium.

Two wings created the cross form. One wing had a school room and library and a kitchen. The wing on the other side of the great room had a lounge, an office, and bathrooms. On the second floor of each wing were four bedrooms. Families of patients could stay in these rooms while

visiting. They could cook meals in the kitchen and share grief or concerns with other families. Thus they could avoid having to stay in hotels, where they would have to hide their worry.

Camp Lewis House

The Camp Lewis house reflected some local differences. The Tacoma architect who altered the standard plans added six large Doric columns to the porch. The main entry features three sets of double-leaf glazed wooden doors with impressive transoms and fanlights. Prominent carved crosses decorate the second-floor wooden window shutters. This was the only building of nearly 2,000 on Camp Lewis to be painted. The exterior was painted white with green trim.

Like the other Red Cross houses, it was in cruciform shape. The main hall had a great room/auditorium with a stage/solarium. Rose and blue rugs decorated the great room. In the two wings were lounges, library, and kitchen on the first floor and eight guest rooms on the second floor. A player piano and phonograph were donated and received heavy use. The army-constructed building cost the Red Cross \$24,000. It was located among the Camp Lewis wood-frame hospital buildings.

A Place Like Home

At the February 23, 1919, dedication ceremony, Major General Joseph D. Leitch (1874-1938), camp commander, said the army could take care of soldiers' bodies but could not care for the social needs of the sick and wounded. He said morale was just as important as medical care. General Leitch added that the house would be a welcome relief for soldiers and their mothers, wives, and sweethearts, and would provide the refining influence of home life.

Once the formal dedication was over, the Red Cross house became informal, and soldiers often said it was just like home. In addition to everyday soldier comforting, the attractive building functioned well for major receptions and special events. When distinguished guests visited the camp, receptions were held at the house.

Caroline Paxton (1878-1978), a welfare nurse with Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company, Seattle, hired on at Camp Lewis in 1918 as a Red Cross hostess. She first served in a hospital recreation ward. When the Red Cross Convalescent House was under construction, she became its hostess and went into the building to plan its interior decoration. She helped many lonely and nervous soldiers deal with being away from home. When soldiers asked to get married in the center, she worked with the chaplains and helped with the required paperwork.

On June 20, 1919, the army announced a dramatic reduction in the Camp Lewis hospital patient count. An Olympia Red Cross auxiliary made its last visit that night, bringing cake and strawberries for patients at the convalescent house. With the hospital downsizing, the Red Cross closed its house operations in January 1920. The organization turned over the facility to the army, and it became an Army Service Club.

Army Service Club

The Army Special Services organization, with civilian hostesses, offered soldiers recreation and entertainment. Card parties, bingo, dances, holiday events, children's parties, and weddings took place here.

During a tour of Camp Lewis on January 21, 1920, General of the Armies John J. Pershing (1860-1938) stopped by the Service Club for a reception in his honor. The reception enabled many to meet this great general and hero of World War I.

Caroline Paxton stayed on as a Special Services hostess and directed the Service Club. She organized and participated in the camp social events. She attended teas, bridge parties, and social gatherings with dignitaries, and, most important, she organized social events for the enlisted soldiers.

In March 1945, she received a service award for 25 years of exceptional effort. She retired to Lakewood that year. When the Army Special Services celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1969, Fort Lewis held a ceremony to honor Caroline Paxton as the first army hostess at the post. She received a plaque recording her contribution to soldier welfare. Over the years, hundreds of soldiers had sent her thank-you letters and recalled her untiring efforts. She lived in Lakewood and was active in community activities. In 1976, Paxton moved to Vashon Island.

In 1946, following the construction of a new hospital with recreation facilities, the former Convalescent House became the Fort Lewis Employees Association Club (FLEA Club). Here, post employees could meet after work and relax. The FLEA Club used the house until January 1955, when it was converted into a Youth Center, where young people could come for games and after-school activities.

Family Resource Center

By the mid-1990s, the building had deteriorated badly and demolition was proposed. But Fort Lewis's interest in its historic character led instead to the building's restoration and new use. In 1995, the facility underwent renovation to become the Family Resource Center. On April 11, 1996, the center had its dedication ceremony. The renovation project earned the Washington State Historic Preservation Office's 1997 Annual Award for Outstanding Achievement in Historic Rehabilitation. Today (2011) the beautifully restored building is visible from I-5 interstate highway.

The center served as a central point for the Family Support Groups, now known as Family Readiness Groups. FRGs have meetings and functions here. The Family Resource Center offers programs to improve family morale. These include training, holiday events, and spousal trips.

Frequent deployments have made it one of the busiest places on Fort Lewis and now on Joint Base Lewis-McChord. Deployments bring rough times, with sons and daughters temporarily losing their parents. Spouses lose partners to share in running a home and provide

companionship. The Family Resource Center helps during the deployment and with adjustments required by returning soldiers.

Sources:

"World War I Accomplishments of the American Red Cross," American Red Cross website accessed January 21, 2011 (<http://www.redcross.org/museum/history/ww1a.asp>); "Red Cross Convalescent Houses at Army Hospitals," *Tucson Daily Citizen*, July 13, 1918, p. 7; "Red Cross Building Formally Dedicated," *Oregonian*, February 16, 1919, p. 7; "Dedication Today of Camp Building," *Tacoma Sunday Ledger*, February 23, 1919, p. B9; "Mrs. Paxton Is Honored at Fort Lewis," *The Seattle Daily News*, March 16, 1945, p. 8; "Red Cross Aide Dies at Age 100," *Tacoma News Tribune*, September 2, 1978, p. 6.

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Family Resource Center (formerly Red Cross Hostess House), Fort Lewis, August 19, 2005

Courtesy Joint Base Lewis McChord Cultural Resources Program



Red Cross Hostess House, Convalescent Home, Camp Lewis, ca. 1918
Courtesy Joint Base Lewis McChord Cultural Resources Program



Church service, Hostess House (Convalescent Home), Camp Lewis, ca. 1920
Courtesy Lewis Army Museum



Army Service Club (formerly Red Cross Hostess House), Fort Lewis, 1941
Courtesy Lewis Army Museum

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