



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

The orphaned “doughboy” who found a home in Alexandria

Alexandria Times, November 1, 2018

Image: Koffler's prayer book, Alexandria Library, Special Collections.

As the City of Alexandria prepares to commemorate Alexandrians who served in World War I, we thought it appropriate to tell the story of one resident who served.

Born in 1890, Joseph Koffler lived in his hometown of Manchester, England until he immigrated to the United States in 1907. When he enlisted in the U.S. Army in February 1918, his occupation was listed as a fabric cutter. Other documents list him as a baker. Either way, these occupations don't capture Koffler's itinerant life before the First World War.

Orphaned by the time he left England, Koffler, whose sister Sarah had immigrated to Baltimore before him, inherited enough to allow him to live on his own at a young age. He tried a variety of jobs in New York, Calgary, Canada and Baltimore.

Following his enlistment, he served in France from June 1918 until April 1919. Koffler had bad feet, and a couple of hours on Camp Meade's drill ground convinced him that he wouldn't be able to march across France. Assigned to a base hospital in France, Koffler served as a cook, an experience connected to his future career. Years later, he related one event in particular to his son Samuel, also known as Sonny. It was in the summer of 1918, and Koffler was assigned to hospital duty in a chateau. A small biplane flew close to the grounds, and the pilot dropped a tobacco can knotted in a long, grease-stained towel. Inside was a note to one of the nurses confirming a date with Captain Eddie Rickenbacker.

It's interesting to note that Koffler didn't become a naturalized citizen of our country until he was already serving in France. Perhaps one of the most interesting objects in his papers that are held in the Special Collections Library is the Jewish Prayerbook issued to him during his enlistment. Inside, are the prayers written in Hebrew on the right side, and in English on the left.

After his return from the war, Koffler briefly moved to Baltimore, worked in a textile factory and married Mollie Appel, a young, Polish woman from a Jewish family. He had met Appel while working in the textile factory before he enlisted. She became an American citizen when she married Koffler.

Starting in 1928, the Kofflers owned and operated the neighborhood Koffler's Market at 529 Oronoco St., which is now the Olde Towne School for Dogs. The rest of the Appel family moved from Baltimore to Alexandria as well, and her father also opened a grocery store. The Kofflers had two sons, but the older Henry died as a child. The younger son Samuel joined the Navy and moved to Hawaii. Koffler died in his home on Janney's Lane in 1965. Mollie Koffler sold the store shortly after his death.

The life of Joseph Koffler reflected many trends of the United States in the early 20th century. While he didn't come from southern or eastern Europe, he came from a non-Protestant family. He became naturalized primarily due to his service to this country during World War I, and while his early life





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

was dominated by industrial work, he was able to save enough to open his own store, which he operated until his death more than 40 years after he returned from the war.

Koffler's service to his adopted country and his commitment to Alexandria for more than 35 years as a small business owner makes him not only part of national and world history, but our city's as well.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.