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## **Son of WWI Soldier Tells How Red Poppies Came to Georgetown**

Georgetown's red poppies, now in full bloom and serving as the inspiration for this weekend's Red Poppy Festival, trace their origin to one bag of poppy seeds carried back to Georgetown with a soldier after World War I. Henry Purl Compton gave them to his mother who planted them in her front yard at 507 E. Seventh Street. From that yard, aided by nature and citizens who later planted seeds, the red poppies have spread all over town. Georgetown was certified by the Texas legislature as the Red Poppy Capital of Texas in 1990.

The story of Henry Purl "Okra" Compton, the poppy seeds, and his interesting life were recounted in a recent interview with his son Carter Compton, who now lives in Waco. Carter Compton remembers his father telling him about his service in the war. After Henry Purl Compton served as a corporal in the U.S. Army in World War I, he brought back the red poppy seeds in a Bull Durham sack, which was a little cloth drawstring bag for tobacco. H.P. Compton's mother Maggie planted them in her front yard and "every year they'd come back up. She'd water them and take care of them," says Carter Compton.

H.P. Compton served in the 36th Division of the Army as an MP from 1917 to 1919. His honorable discharge record, which can be found at the Williamson County Clerk's Office, shows that he served in France on the Champagne Front from the Suippes Sector to the Aisne River in October of 1918, and took part in the Meuse Argonne Offensive.

Carter Compton says the sight of the battlefield cemeteries had a huge impact on his father. "He told Mother the thing that got to him more about that war than anything was when he went to Flanders and saw all those crosses. And most of them were American soldiers," says Compton.

After returning to Georgetown after the war, H.P. Compton worked as a salesman and later married and moved to Abilene, where Carter Compton grew up. In the summers, Carter would come to visit his grandmother here in Georgetown. Her house had a wood stove and an outhouse in the back yard. He recalls learning to swim in the San Gabriel River. "My dad would walk along the bank, watching me."

## **An inventor and storyteller**

In Abilene, H.P. Compton became an inventor of several unique devices, including a side light to increase nighttime safety for passing automobiles, a parking meter which operated without a spring or timing device, and a cigarette machine requiring only one foot of counter space.

He also was a storyteller and told tales from his own life at meetings and social events in the Abilene area.

His nickname, Okra, came from an early attempt at entrepreneurship on his farm in Georgetown. According to the story, his parents told him to plant one hundred acres in cotton and left him to this task. Knowing that a neighbor made \$1,000 from one acre of okra, the teen-aged H.P. Compton reasoned that if he planted 100 acres in okra, he'd make a fortune. When his father realized what he had done, he explained to his son that one acre of okra was enough to supply the whole country, and ordered him to plow it up. But rains kept him from working in the fields, leaving the Compton family with more okra than they could possibly consume, and not a penny in profit. After this venture in vegetable farming, H.P. was known by the locals as Okra.

Carter Compton recalls another story from his father's service in Europe, a story which would later be featured in a talk at the Lions Club in Hamlin, Texas. A poster for the talk claims that, "Okra served 28 days in the front line trenches without a gun and is believed to be the only soldier to have ever captured an enemy without the aid of a weapon of any kind."

"Now that's true," said Carter Compton, looking at an original framed copy of the old poster. "They would have trenches on both sides of the line. The German soldiers and the American soldiers would try to infiltrate their lines at night under the cover of darkness. As a runner, he was in one of the trenches delivering a message from headquarters to the firing batteries, the artillery positions. And he heard two guys coming, speaking German." Carter says that his father knew just enough German to say, "Put down your weapons." And so they complied. "He just bluffed them," says Carter. Then his father picked up one of the weapons and took them back as prisoners to the American lines.

In yet another Okra story, Carter Compton says that his father filed for mineral rights on the moon in Travis County Court in 1954. Of course, this was long before Apollo astronauts landed on the moon fourteen years later. "Had he filed that in the World Court, that would have been a valid claim," joked Carter Compton. "This was back when only in comic books was space exploration on the radar. It made a good story, too."

Like his father, Carter Compton enlisted in the military and served in the National Guard for six years. He would go on to become a successful insurance executive, working for firms in Austin, Dallas, and Waco.

H.P. Compton lived to the age of 78 and died in 1974 in Abilene.

Carter Compton is now retired and living in Waco with his wife Tanya.

### **Story of Okra and the poppies at the public library**

A 21-page paper called *From War Zone to Poppy Zone: The Story of Okra Compton and the Georgetown Red Poppies* was researched, compiled, and published by the Williamson County Genealogical Society in September 1993. Material from this paper was used in this article. The paper is available in the Texas History Room at the Georgetown Public Library, located at 402 W. Eighth Street.

For more information, please contact Keith Hutchinson, public information officer for the City of Georgetown at (512) 930-3690.