

The Guardian, Charlottetown, Mon., April 5, 1971

ACROSS THE ISLAND

Island Man Made First U.S. Tracers

By NEIL A. MATHESON

A GUARDIAN of 1935 carries a "World War One" story of an Islander who fashioned and manufactured tracer bullets for the United States Army. With typical American modesty the story from the U.S.A. says the bullets were better than any used either by the other Allies in that battle against Kaiser Wilhelm, or by their opponents.

The man, George J. Clark, was a son of William Clark who lived in Campbellton, New London. It was the first time I heard of there being a Campbellton in New London, but William Johnstone who lives now East of Kensington, confirmed for me that there is such a place in such a location.

J. Loring Raynor, former Summerside contractor, who lives now in Charlottetown, is the man who told me about the Tracer bullet story. There are relatives of Mr. Clark still in this province. L. Loring Raynor's father was a cousin of George Clark.

Silas Raynor, Traveller's Rest was one of the pioneers in the Silver Black Fox industry here. Silas was a brother-in-law of Clark.

And Clark married a Central Lot 16 girl whose surname was Crossman. Loring tells me Clark died at the age of 95 years.

Purchased 'Old Anchor' Forge

THE STORY says that Clark came to West Hanover, Massachusetts in 1899 and purchased the old "Anchor Forge" where cannon balls were made during the Revolutionary War.

"Here Clark started to make firecrackers which is still his principal occupation at the same location, in a plant which now covers 200 acres fenced in, another 150 acres adjoining, and an airport of 100 acres." The "now" of course refers to the 1935 date on which the old Guardian story was written.

The story of the tracer bullets began when Clark started to make aluminum powder sometime in the early 1900's. And old timers should get a kick out of the simple and practical method he used for grinding the powder. He bought saw dust from comb manufacturers where their saws had ripped out the teeth for the aluminum combs. He made what the old story says was "the first aluminum powder in North America.

Carpenters' Clawhammers

"CLARK PROCURED a dozen carpenter's clawhammers and attached to cams in a machine in such a manner that they pounded the aluminum sawdust into a fine powder.

"A man named Charles (Aluminum) Briggs tended the machine and got his nickname because he was covered with the Aluminum powder inside and out."

If that sounds like an exaggeration, I think so too, but it's a different quote from the old story.

In 1914 – the war started on August 4 – England and France had machine guns firing through the propellers, with tracer bullets to show where the bursts of bullets were going.

It looked as though the U.S. might get into it at any time – they actually entered in 1917 – and they had no tracers for their machine guns. The old story says they didn't even know the formula of the chemical used.

'Must Make Our Own Tracers'

"ENGLAND AND France gave us samples of their bullets but because their guns were of a different calibre, we found we must make our own", a spokesman said.

The war department found one firm that tried to make the tracers, but the effort was abandoned after expenditure of \$100,000 – and that was a lot on money in those days.

The old story is lengthy at this stage, but the war department heard about Clark and sent for him by telegram.

CLARK WAS worried and he got to the appointed rendezvous spot as quickly as possible. He described the experience like this:

"The guard at the gate said I couldn't enter, which was all right with me. All I wanted to know is why they had ordered me to report there.

"The guard took the telegram and in about five minutes came back with two other guards. They walked me to the office of the Commandant, one on either side. I knew that I hadn't been spying for the enemy, but I felt like a spy with those two guards with rifles behind me.

Issued Strict Warning

"CLARK WAS taken to the man with the formula and then warned by the Commandant never to let any of those things leave my person for spies would search my bag, I would be followed and if there was one thing they would like to get their hands on, above all else, it was the stuff I was carrying," the New London native reported.

That night on the train he said "I slept in an upper berth and kept the plans and chemicals under my night shirt. I thought I slept but I know that I didn't close my eyes for I was always watching for a hand to come into that upper berth after those secret items under my nightshirts."

Tests were successful and the first question to Clark was "How many can you make? When can you ship the first 100,000? How much will they cost?"

Only Plant In The Country

THE DESIRED tracer bullets were put into production at West Hanover and for more than a year it was the only plant in the country that was able to make this type of bullet.

There are many stories about this colorful and efficient son of Prince Edward Island. His holdings were large – perhaps "huge" would be the right word.

Biggest Outfit In U.S.A.

THE 1935 story said Clark's "National Fireworks Company" was probably the biggest outfit of its kind in the country, with factories stretching from Maine to Texas and from New England to California.

Here's one of the closing paragraphs:

"George R. Clark, now president of the National Fireworks Company, sits with his feet on the littered desk, smoking his battered old pipe and telling of the old days.

"He brings out his old shoemaker's knife, still shiny and sharp, that he used when he first came to Rockland. He still has his stool and kerosene lantern that he used in the factory where he made shoes."

There are many interesting stories about Island-born men who made good in other places; the story of George R. Clark is one of the more interesting ones.

My thanks to Loring Raynor for bringing it to my attention.