

Carl Schurz Vrooman (1872-1966) & Julia Scott Vrooman (1876-1981)

Napoleon Bonaparte is supposed to have said, “An army marches on its stomach.” During “**The Great War**,” (today referred to as World War I), Carl and Julia Vrooman of Bloomington worked hard to make sure the American army marched with full stomachs and good diets. After the war’s end, they continued these efforts to help feed the millions of starving Europeans whose fields were left ruined by four long years of battle.

Both Carl and Julia came from families known for their public service. Carl’s father was a lawyer and a judge. Julia’s family tree included Adlai Stevenson I (her uncle), who was vice-president of the United States under President Grover Cleveland, and Thomas Jefferson. Her father, Matthew Scott, founded the town of Chenoa and turned 5,000 acres of land in McLean and Livingston counties into tenant farms.

In 1894, when Julia was about 18 years old, she met Carl while traveling in Europe. Later in life, Julia liked to tell the story of how he proposed to her in every cathedral in Europe. She finally accepted while riding in a **gondola** on a moonlit canal in Venice. Married two years later in her sister’s home in St. Louis, Missouri, Carl and Julia’s love lasted through nearly 70 years of marriage, as can be seen in the many loving and caring letters they wrote each other when they were apart.

Carl was a man of many interests. He began his career as a **publicist** and writer, and was an active supporter of the Democratic Party. But, his greatest interest was the improvement of agriculture. Early in their marriage, Carl served as a **Regent** of the Kansas State Agricultural College. Later, he and Julia moved to Bloomington where he became manager of some of the Scott family’s Midwestern farms, largely in McLean County.

Carl believed that the latest scientific findings, business methods, and technology could increase a farm’s productivity. He believed in raising livestock, using **lime** to fertilize the soil, and crop rotation. He accused traditional farmers who planted the same grains year after year of exhausting the soil and “mortgaging their children’s future.”

In 1914, Carl was appointed as Assistant Secretary of Agriculture by President Woodrow Wilson. In this job he traveled across the country, promoting the newly formed **Extension Services**. These services were designed to help people in rural areas learn about the latest ideas in agriculture and homemaking. He also urged better banking systems to give farmers longer and better loans and pushed for better roads so farmers could get their products to market in a timely manner. To promote these ideas, Carl wrote and published several pamphlets. One of which was such a success that the Department of Agriculture distributed nearly one million copies.

Early in 1917, the United States government began making preparations for its entry into World War I. Carl was made a member of the National Emergency Food Garden Commission. This group was tasked with encouraging people all over the nation to create vegetable gardens in their back yards or in vacant lots. A booklet called *The Food Garden Primer* was produced, which taught beginner gardeners all they would need to grow a productive garden. The plan was to make as many people as possible partly food **self-sufficient**. This would free up food that could be sent to feed U.S. soldiers and starving allies in war-torn Europe. Gardens were planted in every **nook and cranny**, in public and private spaces, all over the country. Originally, the plan had hoped for one million gardens. By the war’s end, over five million had been planted.

Carl traveled all over the country to promote the war garden program, encouraging farmers to increase food production, and for women to conserve food. He spoke to women’s clubs telling them “for every **regiment** of soldiers fighting for their country there should be a regiment of women conserving food, **economizing** and aiding in every way to solve the food problem.” He said it was their patriotic duty to support the war effort.

Julia too was traveling and speaking in support of food programs. At a meeting of the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution, she said it was a woman's duty "to see to it that every atom of food that is not absolutely needed here, is conserved and not one bit is wasted." "It is no longer a 'far off war' but this is our war," she said. Wanting to be even more actively involved, Julia decided to accompany Carl when he was sent to Europe by President Wilson to help the **Allies** solve their agricultural problems. While there, Carl reported that not only did European soldiers need to be fed, but also millions of European civilians whose lands were ruined by war.

In 1918-19, Julia worked with the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) helping U.S. soldiers on the front lines. In the months after the war's end, she formed a jazz band of soldiers to entertain and improve the morale of the troops in Europe. After the performances she would frequently host dinners and hold cocoa parties for the soldiers the band entertained. She bought the food with her own money. Her biggest problem was keeping the band together since members were frequently transferred away. For her efforts at this time, Julia was later made an honorary member of the John H. Kraus Veterans of Foreign Wars post in Bloomington.

After the war, Carl was chosen by the American Farm Bureau to head a relief mission to Europe. He was charged with collecting, processing, and shipping nearly a million bushels of corn to the starving nations of Eastern Europe as a gift from American farmers. Later, the Polish government honored him for the work he did in feeding so many needy people.

Back home in Bloomington, Julia continued her efforts to bring food to the hungry. She organized the Russian-Near East Relief Carnival, a six-day event said to be the largest charity event ever held in Bloomington at that time. Held at "The Oaks," the former home of Asahel Gridley on Grove Street, it featured thirty-five activities including dancing, shows, bands, games, demonstrations, food and drink, boxing bouts, and even fireworks. An estimated 50,000 tickets were sold at the gate. Julia managed the over 500 volunteers who put on this successful event. Overall, \$6000 was raised, which today would equal about \$86,000.

In the years that followed, Julia and Carl Vrooman remained active members of the community. Both were members of Second Presbyterian Church. Carl was a member of the original Lions Club in Bloomington and an honorary vice-president for life of the McLean County Historical Society. He was a Mason, an active member of the Community Players Theatre, and an officer in the McLean County Red Cross. Julia was a member of the Federation of Women's Club and was elected president of the 17th District Federation of Women's Clubs in 1922.

Julia and Carl often opened their home for community events. Many formal dances and tea parties of Illinois Wesleyan University fraternities and sororities were held there. During the **Flu Pandemic** of 1918-19, their home was used as a hospital. During World War II, they sectioned off the third floor of their home as apartments for soldiers and their families.

Shortly before their seventieth wedding anniversary in 1966, Carl died suddenly at the age of 93 on April 8. Julia lived for another 15 years. On her hundredth birthday, Julia said she never knew a couple closer than she and Carl. They had, she said, a **marvelous** and interesting life. Julia died quietly at home at 701 East Taylor Street on May 30, 1981. She was 104 years old. Carl and Julia are buried next to each other in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

Discussion Question: Why was food so important to winning World War I? How did the Vroomans help with efforts to provide food to people at war and at home?