Freeport earned warm gratitude from U. S. soldiers and sailors during World War I. There was a War Camp Community Service center at what today has become the southwest corner of Sunrise Highway and Church Street – with free food, refreshments, dancing and entertainment – for all service men who accepted its hospitality.

Camp Mills in Garden City (later Mitchel Field) was the Army base of many men who enjoyed the 1917-18 equivalent of a USO unit. At first one or two small buildings on Brooklyn Avenue near Main Street, where Al White’s Restaurant now stands, housed the center. But when activities outgrew the original quarters, Schwab’s Tavern (situated at the present site of a Strauss accessories store) was converted into a canteen.
Local people did more than provide a place for soldiers and sailors to meet. Walter Schmidt, a Navy man on the U.S.S. Kentucky, wrote in a letter to a Freeport newspaper: “By such a welcome you touch the very heart of a man. He may write, he may read, he may have refreshments, etc… and be made to feel at home in every sense of the word.”

The front room of the building offered refreshments, while the south portion was a dance hall where orchestras and entertainments gladdened visitors. Cakes, coffee and cigarettes, supplemented on occasion by a meal, were paid for by voluntary contributions from citizens.

Besides Camp Mills service men, members of the armed forces on leave from warships, training camps and other military establishments found a warm welcome. The center also sent magazines to them.

On Sundays, representatives of local churches took the men to services of worship, then treated them to a home-cooked dinner.

Smith F. Pearsall, publisher of the weekly Nassau County review, Sidney Swezey and F. Howard Covey were leaders of the canteen. Robert Nutt was chairman of the house committee; James Sutphin headed the entertainment committee which held two dances weekly, and Mrs. John Hartmann, wife of Police Captain Hartmann, had charge of recipes that gave high standing to the cooking department.

Mrs. Robert H. Earon, social service chairman in this area for the Red Cross at that time, recalls that some social events for military personnel were conducted at the
former Opera House when it stood on Brooklyn Avenue, and in the Freeport Club (now Spartan Masonic Lodge on Grove Street just south of Sunrise Highway.

In October, 1917, a local correspondent for the South Side Observer had this to say about the War Camp Community Service:

“Our reputation as a village is spreading, and our crowd of soldiers is growing. Saturday night we fed nearly 400, and Sunday night considerable over 400, which added to those served by the Presbyterian Christian Endeavor Society, probably totaled over 1,000 entertained for the two nights…

“The reception work of the past week was in charge of the Rev. S.O. Curtice, assisted by Robert W. Nutt, supervisor, Hiram R. Smith and Capt. John Hartmann. Among the men on duty were William P. Jones, Mrs. Travis, Charles P. Seaman, O.W. Valentine, Fred S. Howell, Raymond J. Miller and E. B. Thompson.
“Saturday night Mrs. J.A. Sutphin was in charge, assisted by the In and Out Luncheon Club with the following members: Misses Annie and Edna Eldridge, Mary Roe, Florence Thompson, Mrs. Frank Wetmore, Mrs. John Denton, Mrs. E.B. Thompson, Mrs. Harold Cook, Mrs. Arthur Whitehouse, Mrs. Smith F. Pearsall and Mrs. John E. Golding.

“Sunday night Mrs. A.T. Davison was in charge, assisted by Miss Florence Wright, Mrs. Alvin G. Smith, Mrs. Edward Thompson, Mrs. Frank Westmore, Miss Annie Eldridge, Miss Edna Eldridge, Mrs. Ray Ackerman, Miss Gladys Story, Mrs. Charles M. Hart, Mrs. Joseph T. Hewlett and Miss Stella Foreman.”

The Freeport center welcomed from 1,000 to 2,000 boys each week from September, 1917, to September, 1919. There were more than 150 workers.

“Welcome Home Day” soon after the war’s end was a big day in Freeport. Robert G. Anderson, Village President, headed a general committee of citizens which comprised the Village Board of Trustees (John H. Mahnken, Silas A. Williams, Henry L. Maxson and Franklin Bedell) and a representative from each religious, fraternal or civic organization in the community. Smith F. Pearsall was secretary and Hamilton G. King assistant secretary.
Committee chairmen included Clarence A. Edwards, parade; John H. Mahnken, speakers; Smith F. Pearsall, invitations; Robert G. Anderson, entertainment; James A. Sutphin, reception; Henry L. Maxson, medals; Smith F. Pearsall, publicity, and Village Trustees, dinner.

Medals were presented from the reviewing stand at the termination of the parade. Col. Richard Derby and Major-General Alexander of the 27th Division, U.S. Army, delivered the welcoming address.

Starting at Pine and Church Streets, the parade traveled west on Pine Street to Long Beach Avenue; thence south to Rose Street; thence easterly to Ocean Avenue; thence northerly to Merrick Road; thence east to Main Street; thence north to Lena Avenue; thence west to Ocean Avenue; thence south to Brooklyn Avenue; thence east to Main Street; thence south, crossing the railroad tracks, turning west to and along
Railroad Avenue into Olive Boulevard (the unpaved route of the New York City water supply route before it became Sunrise Highway) and the reviewing stand.

In the large clubhouse entertainment was provided on 141 nights: dances, games, sings, and special performers. A total of 10,000 home-made cakes were used. The center sent thousands of boys to private homes for dinners and entertainment.