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LETTERS FROM THE BOYS WHO FOUGHT IN WWI

By Carrie A. Meyer



U.S. Marines landing, from a recruiting poster.
Courtesy of the Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/catalog.html>

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

This issue presents an article about the young men from Argyle who fought in WWI, from the perspective of the letters they wrote home. Several of these letters were published in *The Argyle Settlement in History and Story* by Daniel G. Harvey. The book was self-published by Mr. Harvey in 1924 and presents a history of the Argyle settlement from the 1830s when the first Scotch settlers arrived, up to the 1920s. It also contains a history of the Willow Creek Presbyterian Church. Carrie Meyer has written this very interesting article based on the letters that were published in this volume.

Dr. Meyer is an Associate Professor of Economics at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. She has written other articles for the *Nuggets of History* and her most recent book, *Days on the Family Farm – From the Golden Age through the Great Depression*, was published in 2007 by the University of Minnesota Press. For anyone interested in learning what farm life was like in the first half of the 20th century this is a wonderful book. It can be found in the Midway Village gift shop or you can order it from the following web site if you cannot find it locally. http://www.upress.umn.edu/Books/M/meyer_days.html Dr. Meyer has published two previous books and numerous academic papers. She was a Peace Corps volunteer and is an avid gardener.

IDEA FOR AN ARTICLE?

If you have a subject that you have researched, or an idea for an article that you would like to pursue, give me a call. I would like to encourage original research into some aspects of local history that have not been adequately pursued. I can be reached at 986-4867.

Thomas Powers, Editor

Letters from the boys who fought in WWI

By Carrie A. Meyer

I came across these World War I letters while doing research for my book, *Days on the Family Farm*. I thought they deserved attention because the letters were preserved in a surprising place. They are contained in the 1924 book by Daniel Harvey, *The Argyle Settlement in History and Story*.¹

Harvey's book is primarily a history of the early days of the "Scotch Settlement" northeast of Rockford. It contains details to thrill descendants of the pioneers: the names of all the early families; specific immigrants that came from Campbeltown, Scotland on the Gleaner sailing vessel in June 1842; lists of students who attended one-room school houses between the mid-1840s and 1924 and their teachers. The book even contains a diagram of the Willow Creek Presbyterian Church that identifies which families sat in which pews in 1878.

A ruthless editor might have had a field day with it; but it is among the most extraordinary and delightful histories I have read. The story begins in the Kintyre Peninsula of Argyleshire, Scotland and is graced with a poem by Robert Burns. Another poem by an old Campbeltonian (well worth the read) illustrates the Gaelic dialect. Subsequent chapters are similarly strewn with poetry and verse; and Harvey closes his book with the sermon preached at the funeral of John Greenlee, founding father of Argyle.

Greenlee's daughter contributed a chapter, where, among other things, she described the early availability of wild game, native animals, and wild flowers: "There were asters, cardinal flowers, wild tiger lilies, shooting stars, lady slippers, cranes-bill geraniums and Indian compass." She recalled a long line of Indians that passed by the school house on their way west: "The braves were mounted on their Indian ponies, carrying their guns, and I recall how straight each one sat looking stolidly ahead neither to right or left. Straggling along after them, on foot, of course, came the squaws, carrying the burdens, and many a one had her papoose strapped on her back."

What I mean to say, by way of preface, is that, in addition to the extraordinary chapter containing the war letters, this book is full of sparkling gems of potential interest to many who might not have thought to look between the pages of *The Argyle Settlement in History and Story*.

¹ The book was self-published in Rockford. Most of the letters were published in newspapers prior to 1923 and are thus in the public domain. So I have quoted liberally for your enjoyment.

American troops played a quick and decisive role in World War I. They were not deployed on a large scale on European battlefields until early 1918 and by November 11, 1918, the armistice was signed. In May 1918, over one million U.S. troops were stationed in France and about half were on the front. They made the critical difference. One young man put it this way in his letter home: "The dirty Huns are licked to a frazzle and, believe me, the Americans did their share in cleaning them up."

Sergeant Lawrence W. Penniman of Rockford described the turning point at the battle of Château-Thierry on June 18, 1918: "When things looked pretty blue, the Marines stepped in at Château-Thierry and blocked the advance. You can't imagine what a thrill it gave us to hear that the Americans had turned the trick. To have it turned at all was a wonderful boost, but to have it done by the 'Yanks' was the psychological thing. Everybody had been waiting to see how they would be and they were better than the best."

He further described the "renewed energy and courage" that came with the next big advance and how the big trucks filled with men kept on rolling from that point: "The camions would come in and the relief would climb on and away we would go. Now we are having a comparatively quiet time and we most certainly do need it to fix up the trucks."

Despite the late U.S. entry, there were heavy war casualties: 53,402 American lives were lost in battle and nearly 206,000 more men were wounded. James Greenlee was on the Château-Thierry front on the Vesle River August 5, 1918. He later wrote home to his sister: "The platoon I belonged to went over the top with some other companies. We had nearly forty men when we started and the next morning when they got the company assembled there were only fourteen of the platoon there to report and only three of the squad I was in. A lot got wounded and quite a few were killed. I always think I came out of it mighty lucky although I have had lots of just as close calls at other times." At least six men from Rockford died of war injuries.

Some, like George Barnes, died months after being discharged. George was drafted in May 1918 and reported to Camp Grant for training. He wrote home to his father from Domgermain, France on November 24, 1918 and was discharged at Camp Grant in mid-April the next year. Months later he died at Rockford Hospital from complications of "trench mouth" – a severe form of gingivitis common in the war. George had written about riding in box cars with 40 men for four days at a time, and sleeping in French barns and in a 500-year-old chateau. "It was a fine building when new," he wrote. George also described Domgermain as "a dirty little village . . . about the size of Rockton." Of the food he noted, "Corn willy, salmon and beans do get kind of tiresome and I can imagine eating Thanksgiving dinner at home." (Corn Willy is a dish based on canned corned beef, which was plentiful for the WWI soldiers.)



World War I Poster, Courtesy of the Library of Congress,
<http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/catalog.html>

Many of the men were in excellent spirits before the end of the war. D.C. Ralston wrote to his mother in Caledonia: "I am still feeling fine. Have had some real army life lately, but it left me as good as ever. I can sleep any place, in any position now. Recently I rode sixteen hours in a truck with a couple of sandwiches for a meal the entire trip. Landed in a village at 3 a.m. Hiked for an hour and found ourselves in a big forest. Here we fell out for the remainder of the night, or morning, as it was about four or four thirty. I just put on my overcoat, lay on the ground and was soon having a good sleep. It is cold over here in the nights, but it didn't bother me at all. I never take my clothes off unless we are back on rest. My shoes and leggings I generally get off, however."

Sergeant Penniman was certainly feeling elated when he wrote to his family sometime before the armistice: "The news has been so good of late that I feel as though it [is] nearly time to fatten up the calf. We . . . are all wonderfully optimistic and predict a quick termination of the affair. . . . I am wondering how long it will be after the fighting is over until they start sending us home. . . . I somehow feel that next year at this time mother will be sounding reveille for me."

But Penniman had also had plenty of discouraging times: "I was at the gas attack that the Germans started their second offensive with and I helped to evacuate the towns in the path of the advance. Several times we pulled out one side of a town as the advance guards of the enemy were coming in the other. I know very well how discouraging it is to keep retreating and retreating."

Penniman explained that as part of the "Mallet Reserves", his job was to "go wherever there is an emergency." He had also been in the delicate position of passing between enemy lines: "I was up where the Germans first tried to break through this last spring. We went between the German's and the English lines at one time. We didn't know it, however, and evidently the Germans didn't either. While we were there we heartily cursed a dense fog that made it almost impossible to see. Little did we know what it was doing for us. We found out later and took back everything."

Penniman got to know the western front well: "I have been on almost every sector on the western front for a time at least, so I know practically all of the country that is being or was fought over as well as I know the country around Rockford. I believe I know some of it better, for I had to go over a lot of it in the dark."

Thomas J Ralston arrived in France in May of 1918 with the 131st Infantry. He wrote to his father describing how British, French, and German trenches differed. "Fritz [the Germans] believed in having deep dugouts . . . The British will make anything do for shelter and the French had the daintiest system of trenches and dugouts of any." Ralston was gassed on the battlefield not long after arriving and sent to a hospital in France to recover. He described the experience: "We were stationed for a few days along the Meuse River while waiting for the line to be brought up on one of our flanks and while there we got everything Fritz had. A little valley that we were in, he flooded with gas and shells. When we started again we crossed the river and took hills on the other side. I got mine this time and had to be evacuated and after several days came down here which is practically the geographical center of France."

Many of the boys from the Argyle community already had years of valuable farm experience with gas engines and automobiles.² There were more than 1.5 million automobiles on U.S. farms in 1918 and about as many stationary or portable gasoline engines. The U.S. farm boys put their experience to work on the western front. Huge Andrew drove an ammunition supply truck at the front. He wrote to his mother in December 1918 about his experience after arriving in France. His unit was sent to pick up "twenty-five trucks, two-ton Pierce Arrows." They moved them back to Souilly the next day and "spent two or three days oiling and greasing the trucks. Then we started in working and have been at it

² See Meyer, Carrie. *Days on the Family Farm: From the Golden Age through the Great Depression*. University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

ever since. We hauled ammunition till the last week of the war. We would load our trucks in the daytime with ammunition then at night we would go up to the guns with our load. . . . We have been under shell fire, gun shells, rifle fire, and fired on from airplanes, but I haven't been touched with any kind of shells or rifle fire. We had to drive without lights and there were some of the blackest nights I was ever out in. We always traveled in convoys. Sometimes we had thirty or more trucks in a train."



World War I Poster, Courtesy of the Library of Congress,
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He continued, "We were [in Romange] on November 11, and you ought to have heard the yelling when the news come in that the war was over. It started away up the line and came down. We could hear it for quite a while before we knew what it was all about. When we heard what it was, we yelled too and passed it on."

After the armistice Andrew had spent some time "travelling about all over Germany . . . looking for gasoline. . . . The gas cars seem to change their routes after we start but we can't get word of it until we reach the place we were told to go and get it." He slept on the seat of the truck. "It was just the right length," he

wrote to his mother, "and I slept fine and warm." He described the little towns that the allies had captured: "most of them you would hardly know that there was a town there, nothing but a few walls standing, all shot to pieces."



World War I Poster, Courtesy of the Library of Congress,
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Walter Ralston was among the boys that mentioned the censoring of letters home and the fact that after the armistice he could write much more freely. On December 23, 1918, he wrote to his mother and sisters, "This is Sunday again and I will write a few lines. Our letters are not censored quite so rigidly now, and we are allowed to write things we could not think of writing before."

He began by telling his family about that first turning point at Château-Thierry in June of 1918: "The Château-Thierry was really the start of the last big offensive and from that time on, the Germans retreated. We were in that drive from start to finish and I saw many things I will never forget. . . . To see so many dead

soldiers lying where they fell in trenches and piles of fallen stone from wrecked buildings and dead horses hitched to wagons and heavy guns is an awful sight."

As a member of the 23rd engineers in France, Ralston, like Huge Andrew, worked with heavy trucks. He wrote, "We were the first American truck company here and have credit for doing some good work. We worked in twenty-four hour shifts building roads for the big guns as they can't travel on poor roads. One morning . . . we brought up troops and saw them take positions in front of the big seventy-fives [quick-firing artillery pieces] which were stretched across the fields as far as we could see. The drive started and we saw the boys go over the top and later we began bringing back the wounded. Our big trucks never stopped. For days at a time we hauled up supplies and carried back the wounded. It was a terrible struggle but the Germans found that they could not stop the Yankees . . . and they were driven back. . . . My work was to keep the trucks in running order, fussing with a bum magneto or carburetor while the shells whistled over my head; with a steel helmet on and my gas mask hanging around my neck and rifle within easy reach. At first I was a little nervous, but I soon got used to it for the trucks had to run and that was my business. In the midst of all this came the word of father's sickness and later his death. It was an awful blow but I had to go on as though nothing was wrong at home."



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Others learned to fly airplanes, and not all ended up in active duty. Wilbur McEachran wrote home from a training camp about his first experience flying a plane alone: "I don't know just how high I was, but I just took a chance in landing and my judgment was o.k., for I cut off my motor at just the right spot. . . . I hardly felt the bump when pulling up on the ground." McEachran later went to France and took planes to the front. Others trained but did not end up in active duty. Francis Picken wrote of bombing practice in a camp in Texas; before the close of the war he was qualifying to be a bomb dropper. He was discharged and arrived home December 17, 1918. His brother Ralph did not see active duty either, but trained on the U.S.S. Hartford in Charleston S.C. and was discharged February 1919 after a year in service.

At least one of the sons of Argyle took the opportunity while overseas to visit the homeland. Stuart Ralston landed in Liverpool, England in January 1918 and soon went to France as a communications specialist with the Signal Corps. He was discharged in New York in September 1919. Ralston was able to obtain two weeks leave before coming home, and he visited Scotland and England. "Most of this time," he wrote, "was spent in and around Campbeltown in the country known as Kintyre."

In his letter to his mother, not long before armistice, D.C. Ralston made the following philosophical assessment: "It will soon be one year. Short, yet long, happy, yet sad; eventful and educational, a wonderful experience; something not to be forgotten. One of dark, but now the brightest of all four years for the allies. We have overcome the hardest things and are now going on in quick and powerful strides. Germany is doomed. We are the victors and before many months the final battle will be fought. The U.S. is a late entry but a strong factor at the wire." His words are a good summary of the mixed experiences of these young men from Argyle who fought in World War I. The parents, family, and community members they wrote home to had every reason to be proud.

Sources

I am indebted to Daniel Harvey for the letters presented in his book, *The Argyle Settlement in History and Story*, 1924. Most of the letters were copied from newspaper articles and not all of them were dated, but it was easy to tell if they were written before or after the armistice.

See my *Days on the Family Farm: From the Golden Age through the Great Depression* for more complete background on gasoline engines and automobiles on farms in Winnebago County during the Golden Age of Agriculture (1901-1914). The book also contains a chapter on the home front on the farm during World War I, including a description of the Spanish Flu, which killed many more service men than military injuries did.

Pat Cunningham's *Rockford, Big Town, Little City*, 2000 is the source for the military deaths of men from Rockford who served in the war.

Terminology that was unfamiliar to me -- such as Fritz, Corn Willy, and seventy-fives -- was easily explained by appealing to the internet and Google.



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