

Treasures from the Sherman Room

An Introduction to Brimfield History from the Library's Historical Collections

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Issue No. 20

World War I Letters

The following letter was sent on December 18, 1918 to Mary Anna Tarbell, Brimfield librarian and Hitchcock Free Academy teacher, from Private Clayton Kenfield who was stationed in St. Sylvain, France.

Dear Miss Tarbell,

I received your most welcome letter and the Alumni Association Reunion. I am enclosing the card with the addresses you wished and it gives me great pleasure to join the Association.

It surely was grand news to hear the war was over. There is only one set back and that is that the 71st Reg't., did not go into action. We say over here that the Germans knew we had arrived and didn't have back bone enough to lunch on some more (8) eight inch howitzer shells. You see one shell can be divided amongst so many men. Nevertheless we were all glad to hear it was over and now we are anxiously awaiting the command, "Homeward Bound."

I suppose they have some good times at H.F.A. in spite of the fact so many of the boys are in the service. When we get back it surely will be nice to have a reunion. I will certainly be delighted to attend the entertainments and dances held by the school. I sincerely hope to be able to attend the Senior Class' Play this March.

I am going to tell you a little of my experiences. After being assigned to the 71st Reg't., Hdqr's Co., I had plenty of drilling. One day they told us to pack up and turn in our cots. We all expected to leave for foreign countries but we were disappointed for we had to take our cots back and then it was nearly two weeks before we left Boston Harbor.

We had a fine ocean voyage with the exception of sea sickness. We were two days at Halifax N.S. and then we sailed for Liverpool, England. The English gave us a grand reception. After a hike of about five miles we arrived at a rest camp called Knotty Ash.

We were there just a day and then we entrained for Romsey a town about ten miles from Southampton. From there we went to Camp Standon, a quarantine [sic] camp about six miles from Romsey. After two weeks in Standon we left for Southampton. That was our longest hike being around twelve miles. While at Standon we visited the old city of Winchester. Many of us saw King Arthurs Round Table and the famous Cathedral. An old Roman Castle was also seen while we were there.

From Southampton we went to La Havre, France. We left England about 7.00 [sic] P.M. and arrived in France ar about 3.00 [sic] P.M. We were pretty tired but hiked a distance of about five miles to another rest camp. We were there two days when we left by train to the place where we are now.

We are in St, Sylvain which is a small town about five miles (or eight kilometers on the French system) from here. We are nearly two hundred miles south west of Paris. This part of the country is supposed to be as beautiful a place as there is in France with the exception of the Swiss frontier.

Some of the ancient towns and villages were seen on our trip from La Havre. LeMans and several other places of interest. We are not very far from Doremy, the town where Joan of Arc was born/

We have several places to go for amusement but the Y.M.C.A. is the most popular. They certainly do a wonderful work over here and are greatly appreciated by the boys.

Well I guess I have told you all the news for this time and wish you would remember me to all my old school friends. Hoping to be with you again soon.

Sincerely a friend
Clayton P. Kenfield

Extract from a letter printed in the Palmer Journal on November 14, 1918. It was written by Sergeant-Major Russell G. Skinner, Hdq. 1st Battalion, 328th Infantry to his wife. The cablegram referred to was sent after the battle of St. Mihiel.

If you could see me trying to write this letter I am sure you would laugh, for I'm sitting on a pile of wood near a bonfire out in the open, for we are living in little shelter tents in a patch of woods. If you could see the place tonight you would think you were on Broadway in New York City. The papers came in tonight and each of the fellows has a candle and is writing [sic] letters or reading a paper. I am using a Literary Digest for my table, and with the light from my candle I can manage very well. We have had a long siege of it this time and I could write a very interesting letter if the censor would let me, but he says "Nix", so I suppose that will have to wait until I get home.

I hope you were not scared when you received the cablegram, but I thought as I hadn't had a chance to write, that you would not worry when you heard I was all right.

I have some news for you for I have just received my five stripes giving me the office of Sergeant-Major. This keeps me very busy, for I have to handle everything from regimental headquarters before it goes to the companies in my battalion, and also have to receipt for everything and see that it goes out.

One of my chums, Bill Prostler, whom you have heard me speak of several times, was severely gassed. I haven't heard from him since he was taken to the hospital.

I came across Stanley Hicks and Alvert Smith the other day. They were feeling fine and looked good. We certainly enjoyed our little visit with each other. I am in hopes to see some of the other boys before long.

My courage is still good and from the looks of things you won't need to worry, for I shall be home before long. Well, write as often as you can, but I must go now and make up my report.

Extract from a letter printed in the Palmer Journal on September 12, 1918. It was written by Private Frank L. Geffken of Brimfield, Co. L, 35th Engineers, American Expeditionary Forces in France to his mother.

General Pershing has just visited and inspected us. He complimented us on our work and spoke to all the boys in camp. So you see he knows we are here and is watching our work. The General is certainly a fine-looking man and knows what he is doing; you can see it in his eyes. He told us our work is the vital need of the army, and in various ways proved to the boys just how necessary the work is. He looked over the officers and men and seemed much pleased. We had everything neat and clean. When he came in the kitchen he just smiled. He is pretty gray, but who could help it in his position? I guess I've seen nearly all the important men now, as none is higher than Gen. Pershing.

I have just finished my six months at the front and am now wearing a gold chevron on my left arm: shall get another if the war lasts long enough. I have learned that there is a reason for everything that the U.S. does; they

would not take a man off the farm if they could help it. There is only one way to stop the war, and that is to show Germany that we can't be locked. I shall always be proud that I belong to the 15th Engineers, for we are certainly doing our part.

Extract from a letter printed in the Palmer Journal on December 13, 1917. It was written by Charles M. Streeter to his mother, Mrs. Martha Streeter

France, Nov. 4, 1917.

My address is slightly changed now, for I have been transferred to Battery B, 102d Field Artillery, American Ex-Forces, Via New York, which will be my address. Mail addressed before you get this will reach me all right, for I live only a couple of hundred yards from where I was before. About 20 men were transferred from Hq. Co. to other batteries. I don't know yet what my work will be here, but it will be no harder. The cook says I am growing fat, so you see we are not overworked. I just received a letter you sent to Ayer about Sept. 26. It went to Boston, and from there it followed me here, but not as soon as that mailed later.

It is just like September here now. The leaves are changing some, but right here the trees are mostly pines. There are plenty of chestnuts in the woods, and you can buy them roasted, a whole pocketful for two cents. We have a Sunday service each Sunday, conducted by the chaplain, with music by part of the band. There is also a mass for Catholics, of which there are a good many. This battery to which I belong comes from Worcester and was recruited from towns around Worcester.

By now I suppose all the boys who were drafted are at Ayer. I can imagine how cold it is there even with steam heat. You can cheer them up by telling them it is nice and warm over here, and we get much better food and more of it than we did when I was at Ayer. Now we have regular mattresses instead of bed-sacks stuffed with straw and the stoves keep us warm evenings. But of course when we move it will be a different story. I wonder if any of them are in the company I was in there? If they are, I know they have some good officers and non-coms.

I read of ships being torpedoed on their way back to America, so am never sure that my mail is not on them and lost, but probably most of the ships carrying mail get there. By the time you get this, you will be thinking of Thanksgiving, and I also am wondering if we get any special Thanksgiving dinner. I shouldn't be surprised if we did, but I would like to eat it at home of course. But we really are well off in every way, and so there is no use of complaining. Yours with love, C.M.S.

Extract from a letter printed in the Palmer Journal on November 17, 1919. It was written by Private F.C. Thomas T. Gray, Battery C., 55th Artillery, C. A. C. to his wife, Mrs. Bertie Garmes Gray.

What joy your letters, and especially the pictures, brought me, which I have received yesterday. These two things mean the most to us boys over here.

Just picture me writing this letter in a trench. Flat on the ground, as I am now on the Western Front. There are fine fireworks here day and night. It is like one continuous Fourth of July, with the German projectiles falling constantly.

During the last two weeks, the C. A. C. boys have done excellent work, as we have advanced seventeen kilometers, captured three hundred guns and many prisoners. We do our country's duty, night and day, for now we see the Huns retreating seven or eight miles a day. There is a town only one-fourth of a mile from where we

are now, but alas, all that remains is the name. Must leave this letter now as a call just came to send our projectiles at the retreating Huns.

Back again and still safe with two nights' work done. Since I left we have completely demolished two towns, one town a night. This is a busy time for us. I'm writing this on my large disappearing gun, ready to shoot at any moment. The German and American aeroplanes are fighting overhead. The bombs are falling fast. This is the time we say, "Keep your head down, Yankee Boy". One bomb just fell 25 feet from me. We have grown so used to these things, we simply say to the Huns, "Go to Helena, Montana" and answer them back in their own words.

Last week the box in which I had my company's barber tools and some keepsakes together with three hundred francs, was struck by a bomb. Needless to say it was the last of all.

Now you wished to know about our friends, the Cooties. They are steady company. A whole army in squad formation doing a "military hop" on our backs. Every opportunity I have I boil my clothes, but it is not very often, as the first chance I had in three weeks to even take a bath was when we crossed the Marne river.

Now things are getting pretty hot here and I must take a hand. My gun must be used for something other than a writing table now. But just remember that although we are anxious to come home, we are going to stay and see Victory.

The following newspaper clipping appeared in the Palmer Journal on April 17, 1919

Writes Home From Germany

Sergt. Plimpton of Brimfield Tells of Things He Has Seen

The following is taken from a letter received by Miss Tarbell of Brimfield from Sergt. Robert G. Plimpton of the Headquarters Company of the 301st Engineers. Sergt. Plimpton's home is in Sturbridge, and he is a graduate of the Hitchcock Free Academy in Brimfield in the class of 1913. The picture referred to is a photograph of the scene of the reunion of the H.F.A. Alumni Association, when the school service flag was dedicated.

Brohl am Rhein, Germany
March 23, 1919.

"Dear Miss Tarbell: --

"Last December I received a letter from you. At that time the 301st Engineers were on the march to take up their duties as the Army of Occupation. At Boppard on the Rhine we reached what we thought was our destination and there I answered your letter, but on the same day we received our orders to march again. A little while ago I came across that letter, which in the hurry of moving was never mailed.

"I thank you for the picture of the gathering you sent, and am very much interested in it. Also the card you sent, I have filled out and am returning herewith.

"I suppose a brief account of my overseas service would be interesting to you. I landed in Liverpool, England on Friday, July 26. The following Sunday evening I embarked again at Southampton and landed early Monday morning at le Havre. From there we went to St. Amand, Department of Cher, in the middle of France, and were stationed there about a month, which time was mostly spent in constructing warehouses, camps, etc. From there we went to Toul, arriving a couple of days before the St. Mihiel drive. The work of the 301st Engineers was to rebuild the roads across No Man's land, so that the artillery and supplies could be carried up to the new lines. The first camp of the Headquarters' Detachment was right in the former No Man's land, in two-man tents beside the ruined village of Flivey. After about two weeks there our camp was shelled and we moved back a couple of miles to Barnecourt, where there were some houses still standing, in which we made ourselves at home. Here we stayed until the armistice was signed. Had it not been signed we would have got out anyway, for we were to have gone forward in the drive scheduled for that time.

"The following Sunday we started our march into Germany by way of Lorraine, Luxembourg (where we stopped a week), and Trier, cutting across from Bermastel on the Mosel to Boppard on the Rhine.

“It was a pleasant surprise to come into Germany and find the people pleasant and anxious to make us comfortable, and not sullen and hateful as I had expected to find them. Newspaper accounts, at least those I have seen, about the attitude of the Germans toward the Americans, are not to be depended on. They would have you believe that the soldier is the poor dupe of German propaganda, to create sympathy for the Germans and enable them to escape some part of their just punishment. The papers say that the Germans are cringingly polite and good to our faces, but would really like to stick us in the back, so to speak. These articles are an insult to the mentality of the American soldier. We know that some part of the German friendliness is assumed because it pays to be pleasant, but it can be seen that the average attitude of any individual German to any individual soldier is not so two-faced as newspaper articles would lead one to believe.

“Brohl, the place I am now in, is on the Rhine about 18 or 20 miles north of Coblenz. It is a town of about 1600 inhabitants, and there is nothing particularly attractive about it.

“I have had an opportunity to travel along the most picturesque parts of the Rhine from Bingerbrück near Mainz, north. I have seen the castles, the famous Königstuhl and the rock of the Lorelei. How well I remember “The Lorelei” in Hitchcock Free Academy. I know part of the lyric in German now.

“Just south of Brohl is Andernach, an old historical town dating back from Caesar’s day, when it was known as Andernachum. Much of the old city wall is still standing, as well as the great Round Tower which still shows a great scar in its side where the French, years ago, tried to blow a hole to enter the city. It is what I learned in your class in Mediaeval History in H.F.A. that enables me to appreciate what I have seen in the past few months.

“I correspond with Robert Plimpton. In the near future I hope to have a two-weeks’ furlough, and if I do I shall try to see him.

“Sincerely, Your old pupil,

“Raymond G. Plimpton.”