

Letters Home: Miscellaneous

Edited by Trail End State Historic Site Superintendent Cynde Georgen

Between 1917 and 1919, *The Sheridan Post* and *The Sheridan Enterprise* donated considerable space to printing letters home from local soldiers and sailors serving both overseas and stateside. As part of the 2017-2018 *Wake Up America* exhibit, Trail End reprinted dozens of these letters, releasing them weekly via social media. For the most part, we have not changed the spelling of overseas locations, preferring instead to use the sometimes-creative spelling printed in the original articles.

These letters are from men who served in a variety of capacities, from a machine gunner in quarantine, to a postal worker looking for a way to get to the front lines, to a field clerk contemplating the fate of the French people. There is also an “anonymous” letter from boot camp, as well as a selection of short quotes from a number of soldiers and sailors.

ANONYMOUS – Boot Camp

On August 18, 1917, thirteen Sheridan county men left for training camp at the Presidio in San Francisco, California. According to *The Sheridan Post*, the fact that all the men who left were still in camp was a singular event: “Of the bakers’ dozen of Sheridan County men who left here to enter the training camp ... thirteen still remain. That is going some, for a whole lot of men who went to the training camp at that time are not there now. More are sure to leave within the next few days and more will move later. Every man of the Sheridan contingent is shaking in his shoes, says a private communication from one of the shakers, but all are hoping that they will not be among the unlucky ones to draw a black bean.” While we don’t know who wrote the “private communication,” it nonetheless provides an entertaining look at the first few days of boot camp. The letter was printed in *The Sheridan Post* on September 28, 1917.

You would scarcely know the bunch. When we got here we were what you might call a bunch of mixed pickles. A few of the boys had been working outdoors, and were bronzed and hard, but the most of us had come from the swivel chairs, and were putty faced and soft. Some of us were fat and some of us were lean, but, say, you ought to see us now.

Every man in the Sheridan bunch has a complexion like a Crow Injun and an appetite like a goat. We don’t eat tin cans, but that is because we have plenty of other things to eat, but if chuck should run short, I think our appetites would be equal to almost anything.

The boys back at home that used to think it was outrageous when they had to get up at 8 o'clock now scramble like monkeys from their bunks when reveille sounds at 5:30 and they back out into the cold fog as if they actually liked it. They may not like it; probably they don't, but the Sheridan crew are no grouches and from Colonel Zander down to the youngest cub, they are putting up a mighty good imitation of being happy and contented. Their only fear is that they won't last.

Eat! Why, it would make one of you dyspeptic office workers turn absolutely green with envy to see us wade in when the mess call sounds. Men who used to look on eating as a necessary evil are now longing for their childhood days when they could eat at least four times between meals.

But don't get the idea that we are all getting fat. The instructors see to it that no surplus adipose tissue is accumulated. In fact, I am willing to admit that the program laid for us here has got any of the popular anti-fat preparations skinned [by] a city block.

Of course we have some fun, and they are telling a story on a Sheridan boy that you might like to hear:

Training camp regulations are specific on the subject of uniforms. A man must be fully dressed at all times when not in barracks. The other night one of the men from Wyoming decided during study hours that he needed cigarettes. The nearest store was just across the street, and he couldn't see the sense of taking off his bath robe and putting on his jacket for so short a trip. "Besides," he argued, "nobody will see me."

But one of the officers happened to be short of cigarettes at the same time, and the two men spoke to each other just outside barracks, the officer speaking first. "What do you mean by coming out in that rig?" the officer demanded. "Don't you know the regulations?"

"Yes sir," said the student officer. Then he thought he would show the officer what a bright young fellow he was and added: "This is camouflage, sir. I don't want anyone to know I'm a soldier."

The officer seemed to show a strange lack of appreciation of the bon mot. He didn't hesitate a moment. "Entirely unnecessary," he barked. "Nobody would take you for a soldier anyway."

GERALD WILLIAM DUNCAN – Army Postal Service

When he registered for the draft in 1917, twenty-one year old Sheridan resident Gerald Duncan was a clerk at Heald's jewelry store. He was also studying watchmaking at the Bradley Polytechnic Institute in Chicago, Illinois. Although Duncan was a soldier during the war, he was not a fighting one. He was one of thousands of troops who supporting the soldiers at the front lines by working in clerical and office positions. Duncan did his support via the Army Postal Service. "While he is not with the boys in the van of the fighting forces," says *The Sheridan Post*, "it is through no fault of his own, and he is doing equally as important work in the department to which he has been assigned." This undated letter, printed in *The Post* on November 8, 1918, tells a little about Duncan's work with the APS in Montrichard, France.



We have added a statistical section to the post office, and it is my duty to look after that part of it. We are going to add several men to our force and will have quite a post office when we get straightened out. I am very much enthused over our change and feel quite big to think I am practically in charge.

I feel quite rich now as the captain just came in the office a few moments ago and paid us. I now have about two hundred francs in my possession. But that is the only good about it. Now that I have enough money to take a leave, they have shut down on them for the time being. My luck as usual!

I have just about decided on another plan now. It may sound bad to you, but is something I have been wanting to do a long time, and that is to go to the front with a bunch of men. No, not to stay or do any fighting, but take them to the organization to which they have been transferred and then return by the way of Paris. That is about the only way we get to see Paris. Possibly stay there two or three days, then return to your own organization. No danger connected with it whatsoever. Will get to see the ground which the Germans held and see, also, where all the wonderful battles were fought. This will probably be my only chance to see these places and hear the big guns, for I am on the permanent staff here and know I'll stay here as long as I make good.

Another thing I am going to do with my money is to have some real pictures taken and send them home to you. Does that listen any better to you?

We expect new mail from the States tomorrow, and I hope I get several from you.

ROY LEWIS GRAVES – 27th Machine Gun Division

Born in Coryell, Texas, in October 1894, Roy Graves moved to Sheridan in about 1915, going to work as a driver for the City Bakery. When he registered for the draft in June 1917, he was working as a grocery clerk for the Dollar Mercantile Company. During the war, Graves served as an auto mechanic with the 27th Machine Gun Division. He served overseas in England and France before being honorably discharged in April 1919. After the war, Graves returned to Sheridan and worked as a car repairman. He later found employment as a driver for various moving companies and, in 1942, held a position with the Holly Sugar Company. He died in 1969. This letter, written on October 10, 1918, at Salisbury Green in Southampton, England, was published in *The Sheridan Daily Enterprise* on November 6, 1918. In it, Graves tells a little about life in an English hospital.



Dear Ones at Home: Just a few lines to let you know that I am feeling better now than I have for some time and am getting fat on this English diet. I just took a good hot bath and shaved, so I feel much more like writing.

It rained almost all day yesterday and has been cloudy and gloomy so far today. We seem to have landed at the wrong time of the year, for pleasure or sightseeing anyway. Although I have seen enough of England to say that I don't want to make my home here. It seems to be the fad here to have a tooth out in front; it is on account of the water, so I want to move on as my teeth are good enough to say I never miss a meal. One of the boys in our room took the mumps; he has a slight case, so the nurse says, and of course it was my luck to get quarantined with them, but none of the rest have shown any signs of them so it won't be but three or four more days till we are turned out again. We have been laying around, eating three meals a day, not even having to wash our own dishes, but didn't get out of making our beds. I tell you, some of us that come back will make some of the girls ashamed of themselves in a house, even to cooking, as we all get a chance at kitchen work.

You would have a good laugh at our shoes as they weigh between three and four pounds apiece, not pair. They are more comfortable to march in than our civilian shoes were; that is one thing they are careful about in the army that everything fits good before you start across the pond. I have an outfit that I am proud of as it is well matched also. I am not stuck on our caps, as they are small—nothing to protect the eyes; we have to wear them on our ear like a tough guy; we will be tough also when we get a hold of the Kaiser—not putting on any then.

It rather looks now like we may never see Berlin. I want to see the job done up right as I don't want to have to come back in 10 years more and do it up right then, because when I take one more trip on the pond, I never want to leave the good old U. S. A. again ...

HENRY CHARLES KRAJICEK – General Headquarters Field Clerk

Sheridan Building & Loan bookkeeper Henry Charles Krajicek, son of a Bohemian tailor, was twenty-seven years old when he entered the army in February 1918. A former real estate agent with clerical and secretarial experience, he was assigned to the position of field clerk in the general headquarters of the American Expeditionary Force "Somewhere in France." He remained on the headquarters staff until, suffering from a severe case of hyperthyroidism, he was shipped home from St. Nazaire in April 1919. The following letter, written in July 1918 and published in *The Sheridan Daily Enterprise* on August 13, 1918, gives a relatively positive review of France and French culture - rare among the letters home.



NOTE: The Elsie Janis to whom Krajicek refers was an American vaudevillian who became known as "The Sweetheart of the A. E. F." Born in Ohio in 1889, Elsie was one of the first entertainers to take her act to the front lines.

Probably should have written you before this time, but I find that most of my time is much occupied by the time I work eight or ten hours, and write to my relatives. Then again, I have to walk about a mile from where I live to my meals, and that makes up much more time than would be imagined. Have been on night duty all this week, working from 11 at night until 8 in the morning.

Elsie Janis paid a visit to us here at general headquarters, she having been at the various points in the A. E. F., and gave us an outdoor entertainment of one hour. She surely made a hit and will become very popular in the states, and doubly so when the boys return. They are all for her. ...

Uncle Sam is pretty good to the boys. ... Of course, many things we have to do without, but they are negligible when it is realized that "it is war," the French for which expression is, "C'est la guerre." And a very popular expression it has become, not only with the French but also with the Americans. Of course, the boys at the front are not faring so well as we in the matter of being able to buy cigars, etc., because it is quite difficult to get stuff up to them when they are in the trenches, but at that they seem to have little complaint to make. As a matter of fact, but seldom do they complain about what they must endure.

When a man first comes to France, he of course is not placed in a position to see the best of the French people, and our first opinion is that they do not amount to much, but after having been here for a while, and making some acquaintances as I and some of the others who were willing to make them have, we find the French very nice people indeed. They have some customs and peculiarities which are and seem strange to us, but when it is realized that they have had them for generations, it is readily understood how they could become a matter of course in our lives as well as theirs.

Of course, I have not had an opportunity of visiting Paris as yet, and am afraid at times that I may not get there, but it seemed at first that there were no good looking girls in France. However, I find that tucked away in the corners, and very closely watched over by their parents, there are some "queens," and of course they are inducive to studying French, which I am doing. Thus far I cannot say that I can speak the language, but I have sufficient knowledge at present to be able to go any place and take care of myself for the ordinary needs. ...

On the 4th of July, every French village celebrated for the Americans. The Americans did nothing but be entertained, and you may rest assured that the French gave them a welcome that is long to remain in the minds of every American "over there." Some of the Americans feel that they are saving France for the French, and the French give them that impression, but we all know that while we are helping them, we were in reality indebted to them to start with, and are in all probability doing for ourselves at this time what we might in the future have had to do without any assistance. In that event, I do not feel that we are doing a thing for France.

There is one thing that is a certainty, and that is that if you saw the part of France which I have had a chance to see, you would say that the French have "something" for which to fight. It is the most beautiful country you have ever laid eyes upon, not only in spots, but everywhere. Then they have some wonderful historically interesting spots and buildings, such as chateaus and cathedrals, which are a source of much pleasure to visit. The boys that do not get to come over will most assuredly miss something, and we fellows who do not get a chance to go to the front will miss something also. The fighting up there is beyond our understanding, but to hear some of the stories which come to us, which are not just myths, but the truth, it is incomparable.

TWENTY-NINE MORE HEARD FROM – Every Branch of the Service

Letters home from the front were written by hundreds of local soldiers and sailors, not just the eighty-plus featured in this series of *Letters Home*. To give voice to just a few more, we are including below a selection of short excerpts from twenty-nine more letters. Complete transcriptions of all 200-plus letters published by *The Sheridan Post* and *The Sheridan Enterprise* newspapers between 1917 and 1919 are housed in the Trail End State Historic Site's local history archives.

Private Arden Waldo Godwin – Aviation Signal Corps

April 1917, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

This is the life! ... Don't believe anyone who says that the army service is worse than the navy or that the army is a hard place to serve. Knowing what I do, I'd never be a civilian a day if I had nothing in view. Why, this life is grand. I like it better every day.

Private Harry Litman – 309th Supply Company

March 1918, Camp Johnson, Florida

We certainly get to see lots of the country around here and it is wonderful. Last Sunday I was at Atlantic Beach and Pablo Beach. Both these places are on the Atlantic Ocean. It certainly was an astonishing sight to see thousands of people in swimming at this time of the year. I could hardly believe there was such a place in the world.

Unidentified Soldier – U. S. Army

March 1918, "Somewhere In France"

Talk about seasick when I came over that [English] channel! You can tell Mama that she has never seen this boy of hers as sick as he was then. I believe I even lost the meals that I ate in New York over a month ago. I can't account for some things any other way. ... If you or any of the rest of them ever expect to see me again, I'm afraid you will have to come over here to do it. Before I cross the water again, I'll walk across Russia and Siberia and wait for the Behring Strait to freeze over!

1st Sergeant William Mills Norton – 148th Field Artillery

11 March 1918, “Somewhere in France”

We have had a fight with Bosche and came out victorious. I played a very prominent part in it, as they got me hemmed in a dugout and I had to fight for my life or go to Germany, so I chose to fight and came out victorious. ... I have been decorated by the French Government with a cross of honor, the highest honor that can be given a man. It is a Croix de Guerre, with palm, and I am proud of it.

Private Thomas Jefferson Lahey – 624th Aero Squadron

March 1918, San Antonio, Texas

Naturally mother is afraid I will get killed or drowned going over, but I am not worrying about it. We have all got to face the great unknown sometime and the way we go does not make a whole lot of difference.

Cook 1st Class Carl Andrew Lennon – USS Philadelphia

18 April 1918, Hoboken, New Jersey

We sighted two or three submarines on our way to France. Most of the way we are compelled to wear our clothes all the time and our life jackets and water jugs and one little three-day ration of grub. We are rushed out of bed several times each night and have to stand for hours at a time at our station for battle defense with the wind blowing 60 miles per hour.

Corporal Benjamin Comagys Emory – 805th Aero Squadron

June 1918, Louden, England

The fellow whose philosophy is such that there is nothing absolutely essential to his well-being except his conscience, his honor and his god is the one who is going to get all of the good of an army experience and none of the evil. He accommodates himself to what living conditions are available with the least amount of grumbling; keeps his honor unstained and holds a high sense of duty as the incentive for giving the best that is in him.

Private Sylvester Calvin Hitson – 146th Field Artillery

June 1918, “Somewhere in France”

I have not been paid since December. This is the fault of no one, but simply a little bad luck on my part. For four months I have had no mail and for seven months no pay. ... But with all the disappointments and petty annoyances, I have never been discouraged for a single moment. I did not expect to find my path over here strewn with roses, and the disappointments when they come are looked upon as part of the price a man must pay when he engaged in the game called war.

Sergeant Major George D. Johnson – 148th Field Artillery

16 July 1918, “Somewhere in France”

I suppose you have heard of Grant [Barber’s] death. Was killed yesterday morning about seven o’clock. He was just entering the observer’s station to go on duty when a high explosive shell struck the station.

Lieutenant Arthur Crane Lewis – British Expeditionary Force

17 June 1918, “Somewhere in France”

All of this silly twaddle that some people carry back home [in the States] about what a terrible life we have makes me sick. You usually get it from someone who was out here at a quiet time who made a few trench tours or was in about one quiet show. They try to convey this hero idea and have a fuss made over them. I do not want you to think I am pulling this modest hero tale, either, but really our life is not half bad. When we are actually in action, it is dangerous and every one on both sides is scared stiff, but it is very seldom that we have more than two weeks’ line work without a rest. ... It has not been a half bad war, so discount a lot of these hardship stories and do not think of our life as pictured by the stories in The Saturday Evening Post. I take a great pleasure reading those stories. They are all so strange and unjust.

Corporal V. E. Wiley – 104th Infantry

27 July 1918, “Somewhere in France”

We surely did send [the Germans] back once we started at them. Sometimes they would stop and fight, but we would walk right over them, and they would have to move, be killed or made prisoners, many times they preferred the latter. They are a bunch of cowards.

Private William Walling – 15th Field Artillery

July 1918, “Somewhere in France”

Can you imagine hearing “Robinson Caruso” on a phonograph punctuated now and then by the boom of the big guns? Well, I heard it the other night!

First Lieutenant Edward Sheeheen – 148th Field Artillery

August 1918, Camp Fremont, California

Forty Wyoming cowboys, garbed for the plains in boots, spurs, red shirts, bandanas and sombreros, with guns on hips and quirts swung from wrists, detrained at Camp Fremont yesterday morning as a part of the latest draft contingent. They paid no attention to anybody either. This was their last day as civilians, and almost walked over a wonderfully spic and span second lieutenant.

Corporal Leon Alderman – 362nd Infantry

19 August 1918, “Somewhere in France”

We are working hard getting ready for the front. We don't know when we will get there, but I think we will be ready when the proper time comes. ... I hate to think of putting in a winter in the trenches, but I think I can stand as much as some of the other boys have, and some have put in three and four, and I think they must have been some men.

Corporal Lemuel Edward Martin – 148th Field Artillery

13 September 1918, “Somewhere in France”

Well, we are at it again and have the Germans on the run, and they go so fast we are busy trying to keep in range, just to show them they are not forgotten. ... We have taken many prisoners, including very many officers, and they all seem happy.

Lieutenant Guy A. King – 349th Infantry

September 1918, “Somewhere in France”

This is one of those rainy days in France of which you have heard. It has not rained hard but a more consistent, persistent drizzle you could not well imagine, and it does not look like it would ever quit. They say they sometimes have weeks of this kind of weather here and I am certainly

thankful that I have a good roof over my head, and a nice warm place in which to sleep. The boys who are out on the front are not as fortunate and it will sure be disagreeable for them.

Captain George Irvin Smith – 148th Field Artillery

18 September 1918, "Somewhere in France"

In a very few hours we will be on the move again, going no one knows where. We have the proud distinction of being shock troops, and we always get switched around the line to places of attack, where we do our little bit and then move on.

Bugler George H. Miller – 148th Field Artillery

November 1918, "Somewhere in France"

I am now sitting in front of a big fireplace in a little French hut writing, enjoying the heat ... and so are my cooties ... because they are beginning to play hide and seek. I don't know what I would do without them.

Sergeant 1st Class Alansom Morris Halbert – 218th Aero Squadron

November 1918, "Somewhere in France"

I am anxious to get back to the old Wyoming homestead but want to wash my feet in the Rhine and thumb my nose at the Kaiser first.

Wagoner George Rodgers – 603rd Engineers

23 November 1918, "Somewhere in France"

This is some awful looking country and our outfit can figure ourselves lucky that we didn't see any more of this front than we did. ... It certainly is a shame to see these towns without a single building left and lots of good-sized towns driven entirely into the ground. I don't suppose we've seen a piece of ground 30 feet square that did not have a shell hole on it.

First Lieutenant Harold McClung Brown – Medical Corps

2 December 1918, "Somewhere in France"

The children on the streets, both in England and France, are first-class beggars. Our first march through the streets of the city where we landed was besieged by numerous requests for pennies.

If you attempted to give a penny to a child, you could be surrounded by a dozen of them before you could get your hand out of your pocket.

Private John Alexander Barron – U.S. Marines

14 December 1918, "Somewhere in France"

I am still here in the same place, and I guess it will be quite a while before I can walk on my left leg. We sure had a hot place to travel around when I got hurt. There were four of us together. We were stretcher bearers, and today I am the only one of the four alive.

Sergeant Edward Cecil Gwillim – 509th Engineers

December 1918, St. Nazaire, France

We all know what Sherman said about war, but in his day they didn't know what war was, when compared with what war means today with all its modern equipment, its gas, monster guns, airplanes and other engines of destruction.

Private David Vance Smith – Medical Department

December 1918, Bordeaux, France

The French people we have seen are mostly women of the lower classes. We seen women selling chocolates and English walnuts and souvenirs. ... There are women brakemen, motormen and street car conductors over here. ... Women do all kinds of men's work.

Sergeant Lucius Yates Conahey – 234th Engineers

30 December 1918, Gievres, France

Verdun is a big walled city. Its cathedral was on the highest hill in the city. The high spires on it were demolished, a big section of the roof gone, and it was badly mutilated. ... From Verdun I went to Rheims. There I saw one of the greatest cathedrals in the world. The spires on it were demolished, as at Verdun. ... It's the general opinion that the Germans destroyed the spires because they were too valuable as points of observation for the French.

Captain Thomas Verner Moore – Medical Corps

1 January 1919, “Somewhere in France”

We have been living in luxury here since the signing of the armistice. Barracks and stoves, electric lights (sometimes), running water from a hydrant across the street, a few cooties and lots of rats. ... Great dope compared with tents, mud, many rats, field mice and cooties.

Butcher G. C. Behm – 345th Butchery Company

7 January 1919, “Somewhere in France”

We are not doing very much over here now, just laying around and waiting for Uncle Sam to drive over and take us home, and I don't believe that day will be long delayed. If the trip across the ocean going home is as long as it was coming over, it will take a long time to make it. Seems to me they ought to have a rest camp somewhere near the middle of the pond where a fellow could stop until his stomach settled.

Private Carl Donald Tart – U.S. Marines

7 February 1919, Camp Rochambeau, France

We expect to be the last troops to leave France, but I don't care so much. The reason so many boys are kicking is because it is the first time they were ever away from home and they are just homesick. Although they have seen a lot of hardships while they were here, it is the best thing that could have happened to them, for after they get home you will see a bunch of men, and not a bunch of snobs that carry a powder puff in their pocket and a handkerchief up their sleeve.

Private Peter William Kegerreis – 9th Infantry

14 April 1919, Berndorf, Germany

The boys of the 148th Field Artillery have their mess hall walls painted up nicely with all kinds of paint showing western things, like bucking steers and cows, cowboy and deer, with two wolves running beside it. It sure does look like home. They also have an Indian wigwam painted in, and written beside it are the words “Home Sweet Home.”