

# Letters Home: Non-Combatants

---

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 and women who did not serve in the military, but went to great lengths to support those who did. Some served with the Red Cross and YMCA; others perform religious duties; still others were married to soldiers who sailed overseas.

## ROBERT H. WALSH – American Red Cross

Born on the Isle of Wight to an Irish clergyman, Robert Walsh was nineteen years old when he emigrated from his native England to the western United States in 1884. He soon made his mark in banking. When America entered the war in 1917, the bank president felt he had to do something. Too old to join the army, Walsh joined the American Red Cross instead. Along with his wife, Charlotte Silsbee Walsh, he went to Europe to organize distribution hubs for American-made Red Cross materials. For her part, Charlotte served in the ARC "canteens" until ill health forced her to cut back. Walsh's frequent letters to Sheridan urged citizens to support the work of the Red Cross, and his earliest missives, told the story of why such support was needed.



From Dijon, France, 19 January 1918; printed in *The Sheridan Enterprise*, 18 February 1918

*A week after my arrival in Paris I was ordered to this place to help organize it as a large distributing center for the French and American armies and hospitals. ... In the dim light of very early morning you would laugh to see me heading a large gang of the most disreputable looking workmen refugees, woundeds, the very old, the very young, all talking indescribably and strong with the "delicious" odor of garlic. ... Labor is very difficult to get of the kind I have described. Women are used where ever possible. ...*

*My wife went at once to canteen work on her arrival. She was sent to a post in the French war zone very close to an historic place of which we all have heard so much since the war began. The*

*work was very hard - day and night shifts of eight hours each. When on the latter, the workers had to beat it frequently from the steaming canteen to bomb-proof caves until all was quiet again. A month of this and alas she became very seriously ill, but she is now getting much better and hopes to be at work again before long.*

*If you ask me what is needed most over here, I should say "everything, especially surgical dressings and the warm things to wear." If you could send some of our Sheridan coal, that would indeed be a blessing as never before have I been so entirely and always cold as during the last four weeks.*

Undated letter from "Somewhere in France;" printed in The Sheridan Post, 29 March 1918

*I wish I could draw a pen picture that would even in a small degree call to your mind the suffering and the sacrifices of the people in France, of the refugees who have been driven out of their homes, leaving behind them all they had in the world, to live now on a meager charity. Don't imagine for a moment that these mean only the poorer classes; all are in the same fix, the rich and poor alike, [and] they bear it without a word of complaint. On all sides the wounded, some of them with dreadful injuries, poor mutilated bodies, with which to carry on life the best way they can til death ends their sufferings. The parents who have given their sons - to my knowledge as many as four to one family - the widows who have not only lost a husband but their means of support as well. These people have endured the horrors of war now for almost four years; still they fight on, still they give freely, not only of all that life holds most dear, but also of their money.*

*Then let no one who has not yet suffered these woes speak of sacrifice, or difficulty in subscribing to Liberty Bonds. Let him rather go down on his knees and thank his God that so far he has been spared the trials that have befallen so many of his fellow men; let him be thankful that so far his sacrifice has only been one of lending money to his government, at good interest, and the best of security. ...*

From "Somewhere in France," 26 March 1918; printed in The Sheridan Enterprise, 29 April 1918

*As the time draws near for the second big [fundraising] drive for the American Red Cross, I wish very much that I might be at Sheridan to tell of the work over here, how the money is spent, of the good that is being done and of the extreme necessities that must be provided for by the American people as long as the war lasts. ...*

*The chief power of the A. R. C. lies in the comfort that it brings not only to our own soldiers and those of our Allies, but to the people at large, of those countries which have been ravaged by the war. I use the word "comfort" in the sense that when you give food, clothing [and] medical*

*assistance to the hungry, the cold, and those who are sick and wounded, you give them as well a feeling of hope and renewed courage. You raise them from the depths of despair and hopelessness to which their physical miseries have reduced them.*

*The A. R. C. ... greets the newly arrived soldier at his port of landing. It stretches all the way from there to the front trenches, giving him food and other comforts on his journeys, in his camps and wherever else he goes. When he is fighting or when he is wounded, sick or tired, it gives him, from its immense and varied supplies, all those things which are outside the usual equipment or not immediately available by an army in the field.*

*During air raids, Red Cross workers with ambulances or other means of help are always amongst the first to save life and property. They accept cheerfully the dangers of war in the performance of their duties. Women as well as men. And from what I have seen of these workers in France, you may rest assured that all are doing their best to maintain that high standard of human endeavor which is an American's by right.*

*But money is needed to carry on this work. More and more money until the end of the war. It is splendid encouragement to workers over here to know that the people in their home communities will pour out their wealth freely to carry on this work of mercy and relief. I could tell you stories that would draw money from a stone, but alas, I have neither the ability nor the time to write them. ...*

#### **KATHERINE RACHEL GEDDES – American Red Cross**

Toledo, Ohio, native Katherine Geddes was well known to Sheridan area residents; she came West every summer to spend time at Dome Lake in the Bighorn Mountains. During the war, she worked as a volunteer relief worker for the American Red Cross in France. She traveled to Paris in August 1917 on behalf of the ARC's Surgical Dressings Committee and didn't return until January 1919. In early 1918, Geddes wrote an indignant letter from the Hotel Belmont in Paris, in which she addressed rumors that the dressings made by volunteers in local Red Cross chapters - such as those in Sheridan County - were substandard.



*Your letter of the 16th of January reached me in due time. You said in it that it had been reported ... that the surgical dressings made in America and sent to France for redistribution to both United States and French hospitals were so badly made that our organization spent most of its time in remaking them.*

*Though I was sure that was not so, I made an investigation personally, and from the head of this Faisanderie Branch of Surgical Dressings, I have the statement that the dressings received from America are practically perfect, and from the head of the receiving department, who not only receives the cases from America, but under whose supervision the dressings are repacked for shipment - that the American dressings are 100 percent good.*

*Please, therefore, continue to deny the false statement. If possible, trace it and go directly to the person with the facts.*

*Cases sometimes arrive which have been smashed and the dressings become dirty, or the cases have in some way become wet and the dressings in them, in consequence, mildewed, but that happens in transportation and is in no way the fault of the American workers.*

*We have on our lists 1,900 and some French hospitals which may call on us once a month. At Faisanderie we make only about one-third of the dressings for them, and the other two-thirds come from America. So you see, it looks to me as if the person who is making such ill-advised remarks is trying to cause trouble or else is swallowing German propaganda.*

*One thing certain, no intelligent person would make such a serious charge without investigation and without endeavoring to get some facts. I have given you the result of an investigation right here, and also the facts, so it is very evident that the author of the remarks is hardly fit to be at large.*

#### **WILLIAM AMBROSE ANDERSON**

At the time he registered with the Selective Service in 1917, Iowa-born William Anderson was serving as secretary to both the Sheridan Commercial Club (a precursor of the Chamber of Commerce) and the Loyalty League (a group of private citizens concerned with fundraising for the war effort). The Commercial Club furnished him with a salary; the Loyalty League gave him an opportunity to help with the war effort. But it wasn't enough. After the thirty-three year old Anderson was not drafted for military service, he entered the overseas service of the Y.M.C.A. in October 1918. By January 1919, he was in the mountains of France, serving as "Hike Master" for soldiers on leave at a resort in La Bourboule. It is from here that he sent the following letter. After the war, Anderson returned to Sheridan where he worked as a newspaper editor - a career path he continued to follow after moving to southern California in the late 1920s. He passed away in Seal Beach, California, in 1972.



*La Bourboule is situated almost directly south of Paris in the heart of the beautiful and picturesque Auvergne Mountains. Here and at Mt. Dore, another village four miles distant, are situated famous hot mineral baths which have historical associations dating back to the Roman occupation nearly 2,000 years ago. The two towns are modern summer resorts, composed chiefly of large hotels to which come the wealthy French people during the summer months to enjoy the baths and the scenic and historical attractions.*

*The region now embraces what has been designated as the Auvergne Leave Area. Frequent leaves from the monotony and hardship of the lives of the soldiers have been found necessary in order to keep up their morale. The French soldiers have, of course, been able to spend their leaves at home. The same has been true of the British soldiers. But, of course, it has not been practicable to send American soldiers home on leave. Accordingly, the government has arranged with the French government for the use of a number of regions as Leave Areas. The places selected are all in the most beautiful and interesting places in France. The men are permitted to go to these places on seven-day leaves. They are quartered at good hotels, the expenses being paid by the government. As far as possible, all military routine is relaxed.*

*You can see what a program of this kind means to men who have only recently come from the field of battle or from the drab, colorless monotony of camp life.*

*The Y.M.C.A. functions in connection with the Leave Areas program of the army by providing wholesome, interesting recreational facilities. Here and at Mont Dore the Association has rented the Casinos. These buildings are really French community houses. Here in pre-war days, the people who came to the resort went for the amusement, which included concerts, gambling and the cafe which has such a large place in the life of the French people. The buildings are admirably adapted to the needs of the Y.M.C.A. The building here includes a large theater, general assembly rooms, canteen quarters, and large library and writing rooms. The "Y" program includes orchestra concerts afternoon and evening, excellent vaudeville, moving pictures, indoor games, dancing and hiking.*

*I have been assigned to hike leading. Imagine yourself in the heart of a region almost as beautiful as our own Big Horns, surrounded by healthy, interesting young Americans, and you will appreciate how delightful I find my task.*

*I am sending you a bit of heather which I gathered high up on the mountainside. From the spot where I stooped and picked it, I could see the French Alps one hundred fifty miles away, forty French villages, two mirror lakes, a medieval castle, and landscape of incomparable beauty.*

## IRA WILLARD KINGSLEY – Volunteer Camp Pastor

Born in Vermont in 1875, Ira Kingsley had served as a minister his entire adult life, in Nebraska, Wyoming and - later - in Colorado. When America went to war, hundreds of volunteer clergymen were needed to minister to the spiritual needs of soldiers at their training camps. In May 1918, Reverend Kingsley, pastor of the Sheridan Methodist-Episcopal Church, requested a leave of absence from his church duties to serve as a camp pastor somewhere. The request was granted and Kingsley ended up at Camp Wheeler - a 21,000 acre tent city located near Macon, Georgia. When he left his comfortable post in Sheridan to serve in the military camps, it was one of the great adventures of his life. Kingsley's undated letters describing some of the events he witnessed were published in *The Sheridan Post*, starting in May of 1918.



*The throwing of the hand grenades was especially exciting. This is done from the trenches. The top of a man's head, when the grenade is thrown, is seemingly barely above the top. The grenade is shaped something like a lemon, and those that they use here are timed so that they will explode in about five seconds after the pin is pulled, and when the explosion comes, they destroy anything within a radius of 35 feet. You may imagine a man does not take any great length of time to 'wind up' when he is making his throw.*

*Probably will remain here as camp pastor. There will be 10,000 of the northern troops in here between May 25 and June 1. My work will be largely with them.*

In a second letter published in June 1918, Kingsley describes this influx of troops.

*There are two things in the life of an army camp of unusual interest. One is the induction of new recruits, and the second the sending out of the trained men for overseas duty - both of which events have happened during the past three weeks. The "rookies" of the May draft, ten thousand strong, began to come in from Michigan and Illinois, the latter part of May.*

*Talk about efficiency! I can't say as to other camps, but I want to say this for Camp Wheeler: the way in which these men were received, assigned, examined, and informed was little short of the marvelous.*

*The trains came in at all hours of the night, and the men came at the rate of two thousand a day for five days. For days prior to their coming, squads of men were putting up tents, clearing the streets, putting cots in the tents, etc., so that everything was in readiness several days beforehand. The first train had come in about 2:30 a.m., Monday morning, May 27th. They were met at Camp Wheeler station, marched directly to their company streets, assigned to tents and*

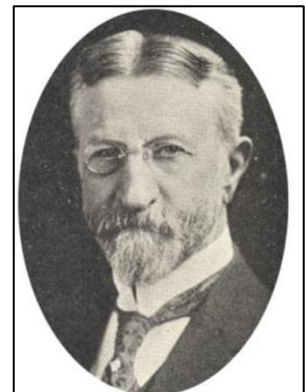
went directly to bed. The YMCA boys met them as they were being assigned blankets, with drinking water and fresh peaches. After a couple of hours sleep they were given breakfast, marched to the medical headquarters for examination, vaccination and typhoid inoculation. In twenty-four hours after arriving in camp. those who were found physically fit (most of them were), had their clothing issued them and appeared in uniform. ...

As you know, the men are in quarantine during the first three weeks. ... These men have [now] about completed their period of observation and will [soon] be assigned to their various units. The fine thing about it all is the cheerful, optimistic way these men take hold. It was a tremendous climatic change, and they suffered a good deal the first few days with the heat; but there is very little complaint, and the officers of the Dixie Division are very proud of them, and believe me when these men are fit, an army of 2,000,000 of them will make the Kaiser know that America is in to win.

In closing, I have just one thing to say: If the people of the United States, the folks who stay home, do not back these boys to the utmost, materially, morally, and spiritually, we deserve to be licked, and to suffer all the indignities that German "frightfulness" can visit upon us.

#### **MILTON DeWITT LONG – Concerned Citizen**

The son of a United Brethren minister, DeWitt Long was born in Sandusky County, Ohio, in 1854. After being ordained himself, Long went on to a long career in the ministry and - sometimes - education. In 1884, for example, he was hired as a professor of "languages, mental and moral sciences" at Fostoria Academy in Seneca County, Ohio. After his daughter moved to Sheridan in 1905, Rev. Long followed, taking charge of the local Presbyterian church. During the war, Rev. Long - in the company of other ministers and community leaders - was one of President Wilson's so-called "Four-Minute Speakers." Addressing topics of national interest, the group got its name by presenting short monologues during the four minutes it took to change reels in movie theaters across the country. This letter, published in *The Sheridan Post* in August 1918, describes a visit to the army training facility at Camp Lewis, Washington.



A large number of Sheridan homes have reason to be interested in Camp Lewis, and a few days ago I drove down from Tacoma and had a time with the boys. ... It was my hope to get to grip the hand of every Sheridan County boy remaining in camp, but I was not able to find them all in the limited time I had allotted to my visit. But the parents and wives may rest assured that the boys in camp are doing finely, though I suspect that some of them get lonely at times ...

*I was deeply struck with the conduct and order of the thousands of young soldiers. At almost any hour until ten o'clock at night women and girls may be seen, very frequently alone, or in groups of three or four, in all parts of the camp. In almost any city in the country these would have received comment from some of the young bloods on the street. But here they passed and repassed without even a challenging look. Morally, Camp Lewis is a safer place than any town of its size in America.*

*Later I had the pleasure of visiting the ship yards at Seattle. Strangers are not allowed within the gates without a pass, and I had gone without a pass. However, that look of harmlessness which I wear won the day.*

*I saw the steel ships in every stage of construction and was exceedingly fortunate in seeing a finished one start on a trial trip over the sound. She was delightfully camouflaged. My conception of camouflage was wrong in one particular. I had supposed that the colors were put on in wavy or spiral designs, but they run in absolutely straight lines, but in very odd designs. This one was painted very brightly in grey blue, white and black. I could draw you a picture of it, but I will wait till I see you. These patterns swept up over hull and cabin and wheel-house.*

*Indeed, ship building, and the getting out of lumber for that purpose, is the one outstanding wonder of this northwest. ... Whatever else Washington and north Idaho are good for, they are good for timber. I wish you would ask the chamber of commerce to pass a vote of thanks to Marcus Whitman for saving that part of the country to us. However, if you are busy, you can let that wait.*

#### **MARTHA LOUISE HUNTLEY FEILD – Commander's Wife**

Captain James Harrington Feild Jr, may have commanded men from the 148th Field Artillery at the front lines of St. Mihiel, Champagne-Marne, Meuse-Argonne and Blanc Mont, but he was definitely not in command of his correspondence. Most of the Sheridan resident's letters home were quick notes scribbled during his brief down times. One said simply, "We are all alive, well and in good spirits. Plenty to eat and weather is ideal. Busy? Yes, working to beat the Dutch, so to speak." The real correspondent of the family was Feild's second wife, twenty-seven year old Martha Louise Huntley Feild. Born in Ohio and raised in Sheridan, she married James in New York just before he sailed to France in January 1918. She remained in New York for the duration of the war, seeing the soldiers off and greeting them upon their return. From her home in Washington Heights, Martha wrote newsy letters to *The Sheridan Post* in which she told of war work in the "Great Metropolis," as well as a little about life in her noisy urban neighborhood.



**NOTE:** We do not have a photograph of Martha Louise Huntley Feild in our files. If you know of one and you'd like to share it with us, please contact us at trailend@wyo.gov.

*I was down at the Red Cross headquarters the other day. I wish you could see the building. This is the New York chapter headquarters. It is on Fifth Avenue, an old house which has been remodeled to suit the purposes and needs. Dark and dingy inside. A westerner would be insulted if asked to labor in such a place. Even if said labor was for a good cause. However, the New Yorkers were doing their bit. Every woman was doing her level best. The first floor is devoted to offices, information, employment, committees on different work, etc. The second floor is where the completed articles for shipping abroad are sent. The women in charge of this floor were working like mad, dodging from one thing to another; however, they seemed to have a system, which counts for a great deal.*

*Saturday we were down at the woman's department of the National Defense Committee. This is a public employment bureau, you know. Applications for women munitions workers were being taken that day. The International Fuse & Arms Co., at Bloomfield, N. J., had asked for women workers. When the next draft comes, one thousand men will be taken from this plant, and these women are to replace them. All kinds and conditions were applying. Women who had never done a thing in their lives were expecting to make \$7.00 per day.*

*One woman I talked to had been working in a munitions plant at Hartford for a few months. She said the first week she worked she made \$20.00. She has four sons in service and hasn't anything else to do, so she chose this for her work. She was a strong husky Irish woman. Another one was French, a dancer. She had hurt her knee and couldn't dance again, so she was headed for Bloomfield. Another had been spending all her time making cookies for soldiers and decided she could do something more. She had never done anything but a dab of clerical work when she was a young girl. She was forty-five years old; she told me so. Two women of Austrian birth were turned away. Fifty out of three hundred were accepted and sent to the plant.*

*Several movie men were taking pictures in all this melee. You can imagine what a buzz it was with three hundred women in one room. One large portly dame was so afraid she wouldn't get in. I have never been in a crowd in my life that a woman of this type wasn't butting around. They all seemed, however, to have the right spirit. Do or die. In a way, I think this sort of work is going to relieve the tension for the women. The poor souls need something. Every place you go you hear someone speak of a son, brother or husband who is in France. The other day as I came from the Metropolitan Museum I counted ninety-seven service flags in the windows of apartment houses. This was coming from 163rd to 180th Street. Part of the distance is through the business district, too. It shows that not very many families have all their people on this side.*

*This is Sunday evening; the usual concert is on. Four player pianos, all playing different tunes, one female song bird ah-ah-ing with all the tremolos. Two Victrolas, one grinding "Abide With Me," the other "Casey at the Bat." Down below we have a phonograph made in a can factory, I think; on this infernal machine the owner uses Woolworth's best records. "Let's All Be American Now" sung by some forlorn hick is enough to make the strongest of us weep. Especially when it comes forth full steam ahead, thusly: "Let's all be A-merry-kins naow."*

*Why people are content to live in each other's back windows is more than I can understand. That is what it amounts to. I'm told that this is a paradise here on Washington Heights. I can readily believe it, judging from the little I have seen of the east side. Certainly this is a complete change from Sheridan, Wyo.*