

A Letter From France

The following letter was received by Jeweler I. H. Lynch from his daughter Gladys who spent the Summer in France, together with a few associate teachers from Highland Park High School, Detroit, Michigan:

Dear Papa: I believe my last letter ended just as we were going to take a trip to the battle fields at Verdun. We left Paris from the east station. Here we saw many Americans anxiously waiting for the train to the battle field, as we were. We were met at the station by a young French lieutenant with a "Croix De Guerre" and other medals. He had been in the thick of the war, was shot through, but managed to save his superior officer. The minister of foreign affairs was also at the station. It was through him that such an interesting trip was planned. We found compartments reserved for us on the train. The scenery was beautiful, with small fields of different colors which made it look like a patch work quilt. We went through Chateau Thierry and could see the Billeau woods in the distance. We could see signs of the war, hangers for air planes, buildings in ruins in all stages of repair. We went through Chilon-sur-Marne; the Marne river was almost dry. We began seeing cemeteries with black and white crosses; the black for the Germans and the white for the Allies. At the station of Verdun we were met by the Commandant Eparness; he was commandant at Verdun during the war and is still in charge of the citadel; he is partially paralyzed, but is jolly and full of fun as if he had not seen all the sorrows of war. There were five military automobiles waiting for us, so we immediately started out for a view of some of the forts. Verdun is rapidly being rebuilt, but the outskirts are still in ruins, but we passed hundreds of shacks put up by the French for refugees—a couple of families lived in each—tar papered covered shacks. We now saw the broken down trees and barren ground. Now and then a poppy could be seen or a blue flower. Our chauffeur pointed out where there had been forests, but now only stumps remained. We passed through village after village; in some all that was left was the name. We passed a monument erected to the right flank of the fifth division U. S. A. on November 1st, 1918. This marked their furthest advance just before the Armistice. We now reached one of the large American cemeteries. It was all surrounded by burlap because they were disinterring bodies to be sent back to America and they wouldn't let us enter or even look in. As we went over the hill we could see the piles of coffins. It seemed as if it would have been much better if they had left them there. American soldiers were stationed in a hut across the road, and they brought out a register to see if we had any friends buried here. Next we came to Montfaucon; this is one of the strongholds of the Germans. It was here that the German Crown Prince had his lookout. The Americans helped capture this—the remains of the cathedral still stands. We moved on and stopped at a little cafe which was nothing but a shack in charge of a crippled soldier. We could get nothing but bottled wine or vichy water, a mineral, because the spring and wells were destroyed during the war. We now moved to Vanquois—we had to climb up a very high hill. We went up the side where the Germans had been stationed. They had their fine dugouts of concrete and iron; they had built steps up the hill with a railing. We could find remnants of electric fixtures. We had to climb over much barbed wire and saw many unexploded shells. We finally reached the top. It was like a big crater—nothing but a mass of rocks and wire. The Germans had been stationed on one side and the French on the other; they had fought here for years; a lovely village had been here at one time. We could easily tell the difference between the French and the German side. The German wire entanglements were fastened like a cork screw going into the ground—while the French was on the saw buck style or stake and rider fence of former days. They were much easier to move. The French dugouts were of wood and sand bags—they were not durable. We had to hurry down the hill because every evening at five, they, the workmen, shoot off the unexploded shells. They gave the signal first, so we jumped into a German dugout and whenever a shell exploded we felt as if we were raised off of the ground several inches. We had a sensation of real war. On the way back to Verdun we stopped at a little French cemetery. The commandant told us that 20 or 30 bodies of unknown soldiers were brought here daily and buried; and even while we were standing here a small cart drove up and off of it was taken a rough oak coffin and carried

by two men and placed in the grave. A young priest said the prayers; he was very pleasant and was in charge of the cemetery. We felt as if the war were not over yet. On the white crosses were printed, "Sal-dat in Connus."

We now came back to Verdun and went directly to the citadel where we were to stay all night. It is an old fort started in the 15th century by Clovis, continued by Henry IV; later by Urban in 1622 and in 1835 was made into a fortress. It is very strong and is built on the side of a hill and has many underground passages. It is used as a listening post and a hospital. Although Verdun was held by the Germans, they were never able to get hold of the citadel. During the war about 4,000 were accommodated, and about 300,000 loaves of bread were made daily. We were met at the "petits soldat" (pouilles) young soldiers in training. In their blue uniform they saluted us, carried our bag and showed us to our rooms. There were in a long casement or long alcoves with 13 rooms partitioned off; the partition did not run clear up to the ceiling. This one casement is used to entertain celebrities, such as the kings of Belgium, Spain and Italy, and we were the first group of women to stay all night here. Soon dinner was called and we ate in the officers' mess-room, with the Stars and Stripes in prominence. We had a delicious dinner, served by the "pouilles"—the commandant and major acting as hosts. They kept filling the glasses up first with red wine and then white. During the meal the commandant entertained us with stories of the war, and after dinner drank toasts and smoked cigarettes. We took a short walk around Verdun; we walked in the streets because the people all sit out on the side walks. We then retired. Many days were around the room; the doors inside they had heat, but even then it was ice cold because the sun never came in; the covers were damp and heavy, but we thought it was a wonderful experience. We slept fairly well, considering the sentinel who pranced up and down and banged his gun down and the snoring of the people. We were told to put our shoes outside the door, and found them well blacked the next morning. We were called the next morning at 5 o'clock by "Huit heures Mesdames." Inside our clothes and hair were wringing wet. Our breakfast tasted fairly good, with army bread, butter, coffee and condensed milk (Arrowroot brand) and maple. Then the commandant took us to his private dining room and showed us relics of the war, medals, etc. A beautiful cigar box given by the English. Many flags were around the room; the Harvard pendant was pinned to the American flag, and we were told that the Harvard Glee Club had been there a few days before. We then visited the private soldiers casement and where only one soldier sleeps now, four slept during the war. We then went into a beautiful hall at the end of which was a stage where plays were given during the war. It was here that the body of the unknown soldier was chosen—the bodies of eight ("pouilles") unknown taken from each sector. Then came 18 young soldiers. We were told to stand at attention around the room and not move during the ceremony so that the audience would feel respect for these proceedings. The minister of war gave a wreath of flowers to a young 18-year-old soldier and he was to place it on any one of the coffins, he made the rounds and then came back and everyone was waiting breathlessly where he would place the wreath. It was placed on one of the commandant said he was so surprised when it happened to be placed on a body taken from the Verdun sector. The body was then placed under the "Arc de Triomphe," just as one of the unknown dead was placed in Arlington cemetery Armistice Day. We were registered in a book where we saw many famous names, such as King Albert of Belgium, Van Dyke, Marie of Romania, Victor Emmanuel, Poincaré, Pilsudski, Pershing, the West Point Boys. Then we visited the ruins of Verdun. We saw many signs saying that "This building had been a boys' school; now in ruins." Many stores have been rebuilt, but we could see signs of shell holes.

We then had luncheon in the citadel. The general came and paid his respects to us. We then visited some more forts. Fort Travennes, very old, formerly a medical college, with draw bridges, three gates and tunnels. We could see piles of rusty guns, shoes, belts, etc. Then the Fort of Vaux, built in 1880. We went inside three dark tunnels. We saw a well that had been destroyed by the Germans and a chapel. Our feet were soaking wet. It made us think of the poor soldiers who had to stay here. It took the Germans three months with unceasing effort to capture this fort. In the distance we could see they captured it by the use of gas and hand grenades. Some of the French stayed in here seven days without water. We saw many graves outside the fort. In the distance we could see Beaumont, but didn't have time to go to it. On the way we passed where once stood the Village of Filley, but not even a wall remained. About 400,000 were killed and 300,000 still un-found. It was here that a monument was recently erected to the dead of the American Legion. Right here there is an "assure" where bones that are dug up are placed temporarily. It is now only a little shack under supervision of the Red Cross. The bones are placed in boxes covered with white cloth and many wreaths of flowers on top and marked "Soldats Inconnus" (unknown soldiers) Any one going in here signs his name on the books and pays 10 francs—money to be assured. Outside of this is a very interesting monument put up by the Knights of Columbus. The first stone was laid by an American. Near here is the "Franchie d' Baronettes," or the French bayonets. During the German raids many soldiers were buried alive and bayonets are sticking up at all angles. This has a roof of stone over it and a monument put up by Mr. Raul, an American. At this monument we were joined the commandant in a salute to the dead. Every one had tears in their eyes. It was a very impressive speech. We then went on to Houdromont, "a Poste de Secours" (a rest camp) During the war soldiers came here for refreshments because there was a wonderful spring here. We found helmets, hand grenades, gas masks, etc. We then drove back to the station, tired out, but with a feeling that we never could forget this visit. The ground around Verdun has been bought by the French government because it will be about nine years before the ground will be fit to use. It is too dangerous to work because they might run over shells. The government of France is especially nice to Americans and American visitors because they want us to see the real conditions.

Paris people seem to be happy and cheerful. Prices are high. About every third woman is in mourning. We noticed the children are not as sturdy as American children. They say it is because the Germans took so many of the cows and the children don't have much milk to drink. I am now back again in Detroit and feel that our trip was well worth while; would like to take the

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