

Stepping into the Great War

Pendleton's reaction to the U.S. entry into World War I a century ago

This week, on April 6, Americans mark an important milestone: the 100th anniversary of the U.S. entrance into what was then known as the "World War." This event forever changed the United States, but it can seem like so much ancient history — unless you take time to discover how it played out in your hometown.



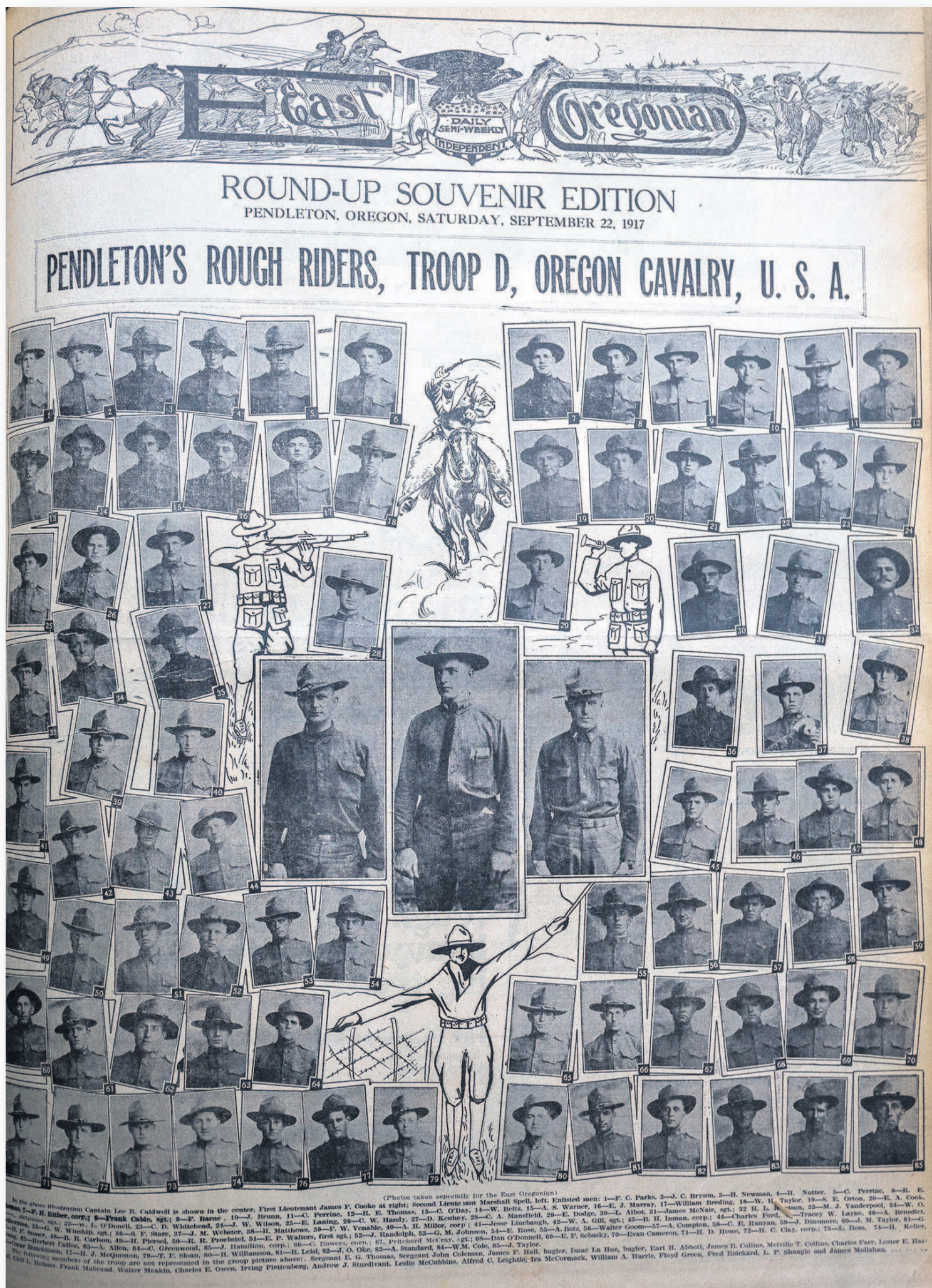
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Comment

Then as now, Pendletonians will find that the *East Oregonian* was on the scene to write a detailed and colorful first draft of history. Legendary editor Edwin Burton Aldrich was in his seventh year at the helm of the *EO* in 1917. He understood the significance of this first global conflict when it was only distant thunder here. Aldrich fed Pendleton readers a steady diet of war news from August 1914, from straight reporting on big events like the Lusitania sinking to human-interest stories, such as the first write-up of what became known as the Christmas Truce of 1914. He cleverly included war-related features in high-volume special editions like the Round-Up souvenir insert, highlighting items with a local angle, like British and French purchases of war horses from area stockmen.

Like his president, Woodrow Wilson, Aldrich initially believed that U.S. should remain neutral. "It is not our war," he would say, declaring that the U.S. ought to get rich selling its goods to all comers and position itself as an honest broker for the postwar. But he clearly felt that while Pendletonians might not be interested in war, war might well be interested in them. He wanted them to be ready in case the conflict extended a deadly hand.

War did indeed come to the U.S. in April 1917. After a long series of German provocations — attacks on U.S. shipping, civilian deaths, German intrigues with Mexico — President Woodrow Wilson had had enough. In a speech before Congress, he announced that the U.S. would "make the world safe for democracy" in joining the conflict on the side of the British and French. Aldrich immediately got behind his president and began coordinating and chronicling the community's response. The *EO* announced plans for a huge patriotic rally and parade, which involved every civic organization in town. Readers learned that Pendleton High School students were responding with alacrity. Younger boys hastened to guard the wheat fields from the German saboteurs everyone expected, and the girls formed a chapter of the Girls National Honor Guard, a group that promoted patriotism. Aldrich urged Pendletonians to begin conserving food and hired the Umatilla County extension agent to help readers with weekly tips.

Of course, the spotlight shone brightest on those tasked with doing the fighting. Readers already knew of Pendleton native Joe Despain, who had gone north to join the Canadian Army in 1916 and was already demonstrating his battlefield bona fides. Buckaroo athletic standouts Sheldon Ulrich and Clell Brown announced they would forgo the remainder of the PHS spring sports season to join the Marines, who as ever promised the toughest training and combat assignments. Pendleton's bronco-busters, ranch hands and adventurers, led by Round-Up heroes Lee Caldwell and Dell Blancett, stepped up to form their own cavalry unit, Oregon National Guard Troop D. Reminiscent of Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders, they posed tough and unsmiling for the *EO* prior to their departure for the war. The draft would soon pull in many more area residents, including local rancher Robert Ingalls and Manuel Monese, the son of an Echo-based Portuguese immigrant.



(Photos taken especially for the *East Oregonian*)
 In the above illustration Captain Lee R. Caldwell is shown in the center. First Lieutenant James F. Cooke at right; Second Lieutenant Marshall Spitz, left. Enlisted men: 1—F. C. Parks, 2—J. C. Bryson, 3—H. Newman, 4—H. Nutter, 5—C. Perrin, 6—R. E. ...
 The following members of the troop are not represented in the group picture above: Sergeant E. G. Thomas, Sergeant John Coleman, James F. Hall, bugler, Isaac La Rue, bugler, Earl H. Abbott, James B. Collins, Melville T. Collins, Charles Farr, Lester E. ...



Grover Minthorn, Isaac Patrick and other Umatilla Indian Reservation comrades would also join the fight, serving with white soldiers. Famed Round-Up competitor George Fletcher hoped to form up with his pals in Troop D, but soon learned that he and other African-Americans would have to be content with bringing democracy to Europe in segregated units. Once the troops were on their

way, Aldrich used his editorial bully pulpit to maximum advantage. He began to teach readers how to think about the war. Where before he pronounced a pox on the houses of all the combatants, he now made the Germans the villains-in-chief, Kaiser Wilhelm becoming the "Potsdam viper" and his troops "mad dogs." Pendleton readers learned that they now could return an historic favor to France:

as France had helped the U.S. win its revolutionary war, so the U.S. would liberate France from the Kaiser and his henchmen. At the same time, Aldrich took a tough stand against anyone harboring doubts about the war. He declared in one of his first wartime editorials that "the time for discussion is over." It was now everyone's solemn obligation to support President Wilson and the

troops. Aldrich soon began calling out dissenters near and far. When maverick Wisconsin senator Bob LaFollette offered an early peace plan that President Wilson rejected, he became "Herr La Follette," the "Senator from Germany" in the *EO*. In Pendleton, a man warning teenagers on Main Street that war wasn't all romance and derring-do landed on the *EO* front page after his arrest for "disparaging the Army." Aldrich instinctively recognized the power of his newspaper in wartime and would use it shrewdly in the months to come, reporting, educating and enforcing the official line on the war.

The declaration of war 100 years ago represented just the beginning of a major national effort to get an army up, running and overseas. Umatilla County and Pendleton would send more than 1,000 men and women to Europe to help Great Britain and France defeat the Central Powers, and their deployment would give rise to some controversial developments on the home front. E.B. Aldrich stood ready with his knowledge, convictions and *East Oregonian* to shape as well as report on all of them.

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