

Over The Top

Argyle During War Times 1917-1919

"We went over the top sometime ago. I can't tell you where," wrote Even Olson in a letter home from "Somewhere in France." He then described a harrowing mission into no-man's land where the "shots fell so thick and fast that we were not sure whether we were in the German lines or not . . . wherever we went we would find dead soldiers. I tell you it is awful to see." Even, born in

Norway, was working as a hired hand for Theodore Tollakson when he was drafted in October 1917—just four years after becoming a naturalized citizen. Even's letter was one of many George Gaskill published in the Argyle Atlas during the war. Orville Watkins, Perry Everson, John Beahlen, and Jack Lunda also wrote about going over the top.

by Gregory Rossing

After Congress declared war against Germany in April 1917, Argyle's support for the war was also "over the top:" dozens of local men rushed to enlist; a group of women quickly formed a very active Red Cross chapter; families drew upon their life savings to purchase a record amount of war bonds; local residents showed up in large numbers to support frequent patriotic gatherings; and everyone dutifully cut way back on their consumption of wheat, sugar, meat, and coal.

Within the week, Captain A. E. Mitchell and other members of Monroe's Company H drove through



Argyle doughboys include Lloyd Olson far left and Clarence Watkins third from left. This is from an Argyle Agenda Wilma Penniston article. Photo courtesy of Hoot Penniston Sr.

Gaskill wrote, "If there is anything that will put a thrill into people it is the sight of soldiers in uniform bearing the flag of our country." This certainly had an affect on two adventurous high school seniors: Roland Cary and Donald Walden joined up on the spot—and created quite a stir when they showed up at school in uniform. By August many more local

men, including Jack Lunda, Melvin Hendrickson, and Ralph Vinger had also signed on. The Company H volunteers beat the draft. Registration was set for June 5 for all men between 21 and 30. Forty-eight registered within the village, and another eighty-four in the township—Adams township registered eighty-two. Nine from Argyle were drafted by the end of summer but many more than that had already enlisted, including Jesse Arnot, Robert Walden, and Victor Rossing.

There were also many patriotic gatherings. The Methodist Church Sunday School, led by George Gaskill, held a "Patriotic Sunday" that included singing the Star Spangled Banner, America and Onward Christian Soldier. Participants pledged their allegiance to the flag and listened to a reading of President Wilson's Letter to Sunday Schools. In July 1918, when the American troops were finally making it to the front at Chateau Thierry, the Yellowstone Lutheran Church held a "Patriotic and Spiritual Send-off for new Registrants" which included scripture readings, recitations, and songs. It finished with



James Arnot photo: He was the 1905 AHS Valedictorian, village treasurer, and operated the local mill before he was drafted.

Argyle in open automobiles with colors flying in search of recruits. About this

Viola Hanson's recitation entitled Our Boys Over There, and Marie Nelson singing God be With Our Boys Tonight.

Argyle's Red Cross membership of almost 900 was second only to Darlington's 1,035. At an organizational meeting held at Phillipson Hall, Mrs. Mary Williams, the wife of Dr. W.B. Williams, was elected chairperson. Members met several times per week at Woodmen Hall to sew and knit garments and supplies. Throughout the war, secretary Bonnie Vinger sent weekly lists to the Atlas of all contributions, expenditures, new members, and items produced.

In addition to the Red Cross, Argyle residents generously supported French orphans through the local Women's Council of Defense, chaired by Anna Davis. In appreciation twelve-year-old A. David of 40 Rue Tete D'Or in Lyon penned a thank you letter to the family of O.B. Nelson, writing, "It is a joy to realize that I have a godmother in America, especially now that I am alone with mama—papa has fallen on

the field of honor." To support these efforts, the families within the Everson school district raised \$260 (\$5,200).

During a Liberty Loan drive in the spring of 1918 Argyle subscribed five times its quota—the first town in the Seventh Federal Reserve district to do so. This prompted Gaskill to gush, "Argyle never does things by halves . . . we led all the towns in the county in subscriptions for the Red Cross, and always go over the top in every worthy cause. True it is that the world is round and Argyle is at the top." In recognition of its over-the-top efforts Argyle received a flag with five stars—one star for each one hundred percent subscribed.

Throughout the war, Gaskill published dozens of letters from the troops. They give us a glimpse into what it was like for the local servicemen as they went through training, traveled to Europe, fought in the front lines, experienced victory, and returned home—and, for some, recuperating from their wounds in military hospitals. On February 5, 1918, the troop carrier USS Tuscania was torpedoed in the Irish Sea—200 were lost. Among the survivors was Henry A. Oksnee, who was born in Wiota and baptized at the East Wiota Lutheran Church. In a letter home, he wrote, "My place was on the top deck, and I had to help lower the life boats . . . It was sure some experience and I thank God that I pulled through it." At the front lines in October 1918, Angus DeVoe wrote about how they were living like kings off of the rations and gardens left by German troops. "We can hear big shells go whizzing over our heads, gas shells go wobbling thru the air, shrapnel falling from bombs bursting around aeroplanes. I like this better than camp life. Something new every day." J.O. Beahlen, a farm hand on the Farrell farm in Mud Branch, wrote about how he went over the top at 6:45, May 28 during the successful battle for the village of Catigny. "I had a rabbits foot and a four-leafed clover in my shoes (one in each) and luck was surely plenty. I got out OK, no scratches, nothing but a horrible scene in my dome, and a number of Bosche to my credit." Clayton Ellengen wrote, "I was burned with mustard gas . . . I could not see a thing for five days . . . I am nearly all healed up now." John M. Granberg, who was working in transport, wrote during the October Argonne offensive, "We have not seen any [civilization] since July, and nothing but shell holes and blown



Greg Rossing is shown standing next to the James Arnot monument on his June 2021 visit to the Meuse Argonne Cemetery in France. Arnot fell within a mile of this cemetery on October 10, 1918.

up towns, and the cannons roaring day and night."

The Argyle community rose to the occasion and faced the challenges of war with unanimity and devotion—and a new-found purpose. For most of the war, the village suffered no major set backs as people rolled up their sleeves and did whatever they could to support the troops. But starting in the fall of the second year things got much, much worse. Reports started to reach families of the wounding and deaths of loved ones; and, at home, many local residents were suffering and dying from the 1918 flu. Every family was affected in one way or another.

George Gaskill's poignant tribute to a local fallen soldier speaks to all who made the ultimate sacrifice. "He gave his life for democracy that it may live. His Country called him, he obeyed. But he did not go in vain, as he fought for the liberation of France and Belgium. He also fought for his own beloved country and his home. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for friends." Area servicemen who never made it home included James Arnot (Argyle), Oscar



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Individual: \$20 per year

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Historic Argyle is a non-profit organization created to preserve, protect and promote the cultural heritage and architectural history of the people and places of the Argyle, Wisconsin area. Incorporated in 2000, for the primary purpose of acquiring and restoring Argyle's "Saxton House", the boyhood home of Robert M. La Follette from 1862-1870.

Anderson (Fayette), Charles Larson (Woodford), Charlie Bishell (Lamont), Herbert Dobson (Blanchardville), and Theodore Shager (Wiota).

Those who succumbed to the dreaded 1918 flu were most often young adults in the prime of their lives who were supporting young children or carrying out vital roles within the community.

On November 1, the Atlas reported on the deaths of a thirty-year-old mother who was survived by her husband and four small children, and a twenty-nine-year-old father who also left four young children. Often, those stricken quickly developed pneumonia that brought on death within days as is evident in the following headlines: October 11, "Grim Reaper Reaps a Harvest in This Vicinity, Influenza and Pneumonia The Chief Causes;" Oct 14, "Young Man Stricken, A Young Wife Dies Suddenly, Spanish Influenza Breaks a Home;" Oct 18, "1,000 dead at Camp Grant, Flu at the Great Lakes Camp;" Nov. 22, "Mother of Four Dies, The Dread Pneumonia Claims Another Victim;" Dec 20: "Many More Sad Homes, Epidemic Returns with Alarming Results, Mothers and Fathers Taken;" Dec 27: "Deaths of More People, A Sad Christmas in Many of the Neighborhood Homes, Influenza and Pneumonia."

News of the war's end came during the peak of the pandemic. Orville Watkins describes it in a letter, "The war ended on the eleventh month, the eleventh day, and the eleventh hour . . . The Germans surely were some happy birds. The whole bunch came over and wanted to shake our hands . . . I'll bet you had quite a time over in the states when you heard." As reported by the Atlas, the celebrations in Argyle were also "over the top." On November 11, Argyle residents "were awakened by the ringing of bells, the firing of guns, and any other big noise that could be made to indicate the joy and hilarity of the people . . . Argyle went mad with enthusiasm . . . a procession was formed at the school house . . . it ended at a platform built on the square, and here Father McNulty and Rev. Nixon gave stirring patriotic addresses . . . the bells rang and the guns boomed for hours . . . a fire was built in the square and a big stew was cooked in a monstrous kettle . . . in the evening the celebrations broke loose again with a big bonfire on the hill [and] a stack of fireworks were

FIRST PEOPLE'S CELEBRATION

SEPTEMBER 23, 2023

12 PM - 4 PM

**On the grounds behind the Saxon House.
Boyhood home of "Fighting Bob" LaFollette.**

VENDORS, FOOD & MORE!



SPEAKERS

Robert "Ernie" Boszhardt is a professional archaeologist with more than four decades of experience, the vast majority in Wisconsin. He worked for the Mississippi Valley Archaeology Center at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse for nearly thirty years and is now co-owner of Driftless Pathways, LLC. He has authored numerous articles and four books that cover Wisconsin archaeology topics with an emphasis on the Driftless Area, including *Hidden Thunder: Rock Art of the Upper Midwest*. Potential programs include: An Introduction to Wisconsin Archaeology; Paleoindians and Silver Mound; Effigy Mounds and Lidar Technology; Mississippians at Trempealeau; Wisconsin Rock Art; and more.

Topics:

- Archaeology



Robert "Ernie" Boszhardt

1:00



Janice Rice 2:30

Senior Academic Librarian-Emerita

College of Letters & Science | General Library System

Janice Rice is a member of Ho-Chunk Nation & is a retired librarian with a focus on American Indian resources, literature, culture, history, language preservation & revitalization. She received her bachelors degree in Education, with an Area of Concentration in American Indian Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. She received her MLS & MLS Advanced degree in American Indian Librarianship from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She received the Women of Color in Education Awards from UW-Madison & the UW-System in 2009.

shot off. Argyle goes into everything with a vim whether it is on a bond drive or a feast of noise.”

George G. Gaskill, as was often the case, memorialized the community’s post-war feeling in a Jan 3, 1919 front page editorial. “We now enter upon a new year, and our first thought is, What will it bring forth? The world as a whole is rejoicing at what we believe to be the dawn of a new day.”

And no doubt Angus Devoe captured the feeling of returning veterans when he wrote how he missed the “beautiful green valley of the Pecatonica River” and that when the war was over “you may rest assured there will be little time lost in catching the first train traveling in the direction of the setting sun—and God’s country.”

**LETTERS FROM
SOLDIER BOYS.**
**The Boys Tell their Experiences
and What They Think
About War.**
STIRRING SCENES RELATED.
FROM EVEN OLSON.
Somewhere in France, Oct. 23.
Dear Friend: I received your letter
some time ago. I see that Elmer is
at camp, but I hope the war will
end before he has to go any farther,
because it is not much fun to go the
way we have to go.
We went over the top some time
ago. I can't tell you when. You prob-
ably have seen it in the papers. I
hope to come back and tell more than
I can write about. I wish the war
would soon end so that we could
come back home again..

UPCOMING EVENTS

September 23-See page 3.

October 7-Argyle’s Homecoming.

Historic Argyle will sponsor
The Other Brothers Band at
Goodfellas from 1:00 to 3:00 in
the afternoon. There will also
be a “Crafted Spirit Tasting”
from O’Donnell’s Blue Ash Farm.
Argyle Alumni t-shirts will be
available for sale.

Saxton House



The “Saxton House” was located at the main intersection in the village. It was built by John Saxton and nephew, James Waddington of oak lumber from the new sawmill. Previous structures were made of locally quarried limestone. Bob LaFollette lived in this house from 1862-1870 when his widowed mother married Saxton. This image showing the location of the original Saxton House is from a later time period.



As noted by the Wisconsin Historical Marker placed on this site, “This is the surviving portion of Argyle’s oldest existing house, built by John Z. Saxton and James S. Waddington in 1850.” The house was moved from its original site in 1905 and continued to serve as a private residence; it was acquired by Historic Argyle in 2000, moved to a new foundation, and subsequently restored. The restored site is located at 204 N. State St. in Argyle Wisconsin.

Images courtesy of Historic Argyle