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# Graduate, 1st Place: World War I War Front and Home Front: The Correspondence that Brought Them Together

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Michelle Thole

World War I War Front and Home Front: The Correspondence that Brought Them Together

HIS 57201 Fall 2022

Dr. Sace Elder

The First World War was the first time American soldiers had participated in a war at a distance from home that did not easily facilitate home furloughs. Although the United States and Europe are physically separated by more than 3,500 miles, the relative distance between American World War I soldiers on the war front and their families on the home front was minor; the correspondence between them mitigated the physical and cognitive distance.

Historians of the First World War have explored soldiers' contact with their families while in training camps and the US military's intentional cultivation of a balance between strong masculine and gentle feminine characteristics through that contact, the development of a network of Hostess Houses in which soldiers could find rest and entertainment and families travelling to visit them would have accommodations, and the effects of total war mobilization on the relationship between home and war fronts. Benjamin Ziemann studied Bavarian soldiers' correspondence to determine the ways personal letters connected home and war fronts and how they experienced the war. This paper aims to enhance the extant scholarship on correspondence between home and war fronts from an exclusively American perspective, building upon Benjamin Ziemann's analysis and conclusions in his 2007 book *War Experiences in Rural Germany*. He asserts that the death and destruction witnessed and partaken of by front line soldiers was not a brutalizing experience, rather it either faded in their memories or was transformed into an enhanced appreciation of home and family.<sup>1</sup>

### **Historiography**

World War I scholarship in the past fifteen years has revealed many ways in which connection between home and war fronts was cultivated and maintained both before and after deployment. In her paper, "Homespun Manhood and the War Against Masculinity", Elizabeth

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Ziemann, *War Experiences in Rural Germany, 1914-1923*, English ed., *The Legacy of the Great War*. (Oxford, UK ; Berg, 2007).

Gagen showed that the US military prioritized family relationships as part of preparing soldiers for deployment, fortifying their familial emotional connections through direct physical interaction at training camps. She determined that “the government and military invested significant resources in ensuring that soldiers’ masculinity was not brutalized, but instead encouraged protracted contact with home and family.”<sup>2</sup> She claimed that the First World War marked a transition point in military masculinity from a hyper-masculine warrior identity to one more balanced between trained soldier and active member of a family. This transition was accomplished by intentionally involving both young women and older “foster” mothers in the lives of soldiers at camp under strictly controlled circumstances to reinforce their love for home and family, and by extension, their nation. Integrating home space and military space prior to active duty did much to connect war and home fronts once the men were shipped overseas.

Hostess Houses constructed within the perimeter of military camps as just-like-home spaces where civilian and military life comingled when wives, mothers, and families arrived to visit their soldier loved ones were part of the intentional military effort identified by Gagen. Cynthia Brandemarte provided insight into the importance of those YWCA houses as key facets of the home front. Her scholarship is a counter narrative to the image of women on the home front engaged with the war front through domestic aid such as bandage rolling, knitting, and sewing or taking the place of men in factories.<sup>3</sup> The women who lived in and ran the Hostess Houses often became mother figures for men whose mothers had died or were otherwise not part of their lives.

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth A. Gagen, “Homespun Manhood and the War against Masculinity: Community Leisure on the US Home Front, 1917-19,” *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 16, no. 1 (February 2009): 24.

<sup>3</sup> Cynthia Brandimarte, “Women on the Home Front: Hostess Houses during World War I,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 42, no. 4 (December 2008): 201–22.

The blurring of home and war front through the actions and activities of women and families at home has a great deal of scholarship. Tammy Proctor's book *Civilians in a World at War, 1914-1918* is an excellent example of the extent to which the home front and war front were integrated structurally, politically, and emotionally. Through total mobilization, all citizens were active in participating in the war in some capacity – medical aid, buying war bonds, rationing, and sending letters and packages. Through their “fears and prejudices, their hopes and ideals”, soldiers brought their homes with them to the war front just as much as the war was brought to their families on the home front.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to connecting war and home fronts through direct interaction with families in training camps and support and aid mobilization efforts, that attachment was maintained through correspondence. Many studies on letters, postcards, and newspaper articles from the Great War have been conducted. For this paper, Benjamin Ziemann's analysis of rural German correspondence provides an example framework. He analyzed letters between rural German soldiers and their families to discern how the war was experienced for both sides and how those experiences overlapped, drawing a distinction between the subjective descriptions in letters and the objective media discourse on war experiences.<sup>5</sup> Ziemann's aims were to “evaluate the assertion that front line soldiers were generally ‘brutalized’ by their experience” and to “bring out the inner connections and interactions between wartime experiences at the front and at the home and thus to analyze both settings as one all-embracing context.”<sup>6</sup> He concluded that the extraordinary death and destruction of the First World War was not a brutalizing experience for front line soldiers but that it translated into an enhanced appreciation of home and family or

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<sup>4</sup> Tammy M. Proctor, *Civilians in a World at War, 1914-1918* (New York: University Press, 2010). 28.

<sup>5</sup> Ziemann, *War Experiences*.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* 6-7.

simply faded in their memories. Though the current study will not match Ziemann's in scope, it will provide preliminary analysis of how the experiences of the Great War were similar or different between the two major states that may be useful for further research.

### **Methodology**

Through analysis of the personal correspondence of four American military men serving in various branches of the armed forces and, where present, their families, I intend to demonstrate the close emotional and intellectual connection maintained between home and war fronts. Curry Thomas was a volunteer for the Naval Reserves from Virginia, writing to his half-sister, Ella. Emil Whitesides was an Army draftee from Utah writing to his parents, Ed and Mary. Max Ottenfeld was a volunteer for the Army from Wisconsin writing to his parents and family, the "folks", and Edgar Andrews was an Army National Guardsman from Massachusetts writing to his parents, sister Sue, and uncle Frank who was also serving in France.

This paper explores four American soldiers' correspondence, demonstrating the close ties maintained between families and the role letters played in sustaining soldiers' humanity and sense of self during the death and devastation of the war. They were chosen based upon their easy access as publicly available digitized media due to limited time constraints for research and distance from more extensive archived materials. Furthermore, each man served under different circumstances and in various branches of the armed forces. Though the collections were selected somewhat randomly, the variety among them makes the similarities more striking and allows for an entry into analysis utilizing the methodological example of Benjamin Ziemann. This paper operates as a test case for his conclusions that the experience of the Great War did not brutalize them but rather reinforced their connection with home and family. However, an analysis of the

context within which the letters were written is required so we begin with a summary of military censorship and its influence on wartime correspondence.

### **Military Censorship**

According to Myron Fox, a past vice president of the Military Postal History Society, censorship of American military correspondence became prominent in the Great War due to an increased literacy among active soldiers compared to previous American military engagements. The primary categories of information censors were looking for included unflattering information about the armed forces, intelligence useful to enemy forces, morale trends, and sexually explicit content. Letters written in foreign languages read by censors delegated by the unit's officer were often confiscated and undelivered because the censors were seldom multilingual, and so could not determine if any of the concerning categories were present, whereas those processed by the base censor were opened and examined.<sup>7</sup> The military censored both incoming and outgoing mail though mail from the front was more uniformly scrutinized. Due to suspicion of German spies prowling the East Coast, soldiers' mail went through the hands of censors before they even left the States.<sup>8</sup>

Civilian correspondence for other Allied countries was also tightly controlled and censored. British mail was sent through special censorship offices where letters were searched primarily for subversive ideas and American letters passed through post offices established by the Central Censorship board and checked for connection to Spain, Latin America, and East

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<sup>7</sup> "Censorship! | American Experience | PBS," accessed October 28, 2022. & "Censorship | International Encyclopedia of the First World War (WW1)," accessed October 28, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Scott L Kent, "Letters from the Western Front: The Correspondence of American Doughboys and American Censorship during the Great War 1917–1918 - ProQuest," accessed October 16, 2022.

Asia. Letters were also monitored at blockade checkpoints where neutral countries' letters and parcels were included in the examination.<sup>9</sup>

The importance of correspondence between home and war fronts was emotionally and psychologically profound for both sides. Soldiers were reassured by incoming mail that they were remembered, loved, and still had a place in civilian life after the war and communicated their safety, love, and advice in outgoing mail. Families at home were comforted in the assurance of the safety of their loved ones with each letter received and offered encouragement, communicated anxieties, and shared news from home with each outgoing message.<sup>10</sup> Letters, packages, and newspapers sent to soldiers at the front served as a vital connection to their families at home, conveying tangible food, clothing, and letters as well as the intangible love, warm sentiments, and encouragement that prompted their shipment; they were assured that they had not been forgotten.<sup>11</sup> Knowing its importance, writers frequently attempted to circumvent censorship efforts through codes, allusions known only to the writer and reader, and veiled references to known European or battlefield landmarks.<sup>12</sup> American soldiers were deployed much later in the war and for a much shorter time than their allied brethren so they had less exposure to the constraints of official censorship. This may have impacted the level of circumvention and self-censorship employed by American soldiers in comparison.

### **The Letters**

#### **Curry Thomas**

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<sup>9</sup> "Censorship | International Encyclopedia.

<sup>10</sup> "War Letters: Communication between Front and Home Front," *International Encyclopedia of the First World War (WW1)*," accessed October 28, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Proctor, *Civilians in a World at War*. 32.

<sup>12</sup> Andrea McKenzie, "Correspondence, Constructs, and Qualification in World War I," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 26, no. 2 (February 2001): 255–76.



The record of correspondence between Curry Thomas, a volunteer for the Naval Reserves from Virginia and his half-sister, Ella, contained within the Virginia Baptist Register consists of eleven excerpts. Though the record is sparse and indicates Curry was only involved in one foray to the front, it nonetheless reveals the deep affection between the two. During his training cruises along the East Coast, he writes to Ella of the strenuousness of the training and watch duties – and the fearsome size of the mosquitoes. Curry says he “never knew they grew so large.”<sup>13</sup> Ella’s concern for her step-brother and her eagerness to do what she could to improve both his health and comfort is evident in the swiftness of her package arriving containing citronella, mentioned in a letter only four weeks later.

The excerpts mention two furloughs, one before sailing for Europe and one just after returning. On both he visited his mother, finding restful quiet and joy. In October and November of 1918, Curry refers to the influenza outbreak, noting that it appears worse to him in the United States than Europe and his relief that his family had not gotten it. The final two excerpts demonstrate a determination to build a life at home saying, “I feel that my place is at home...In the Navy you give up any idea of ever having a home and I am one of the home-loving kind.”<sup>14</sup> Just two months prior, Thomas had been planning to remain in the Navy. The rapidity of his change of plans is a clear indication of his attachment to his home and family.

From Curry Thomas’ letters we can make two connections with the rural German soldiers studied by Ziemann. The first is the two furloughs, during which he finds restful quiet and joy visiting his mother. They correlate with Ziemann’s findings that time away from the front was looked forward to as a break from the stress of military life and a chance to “enjoy seeing their

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<sup>13</sup> Lamar Thomas, “WWI Letters of Curry Thomas,” *The Virginia Baptist Register* 55 (2016). 4111.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas. “WWI Letters”. 4113.

loved ones again.”<sup>15</sup> The second, Curry’s communication of a determination to build a life at home after the war parallels Ziemann’s finding that “peasant discourse revolved around a wish to return to the family, a community both of everyday life and of production.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Emil Whitesides**

Though the archive of letters sent between Emil Whitesides, an Army draftee from Utah, and his family is extensive, I was unable to gain access to them outside of the analysis presented by Rebecca Anderson in her article, “‘Dear Son Emil’: The Whitesides Family Letters”. The selections Anderson includes in her article still give insight to how the family remained close over the time and distance of Emil’s deployment in France.

In addition to the surely universal requests for more and longer correspondence, which of itself speaks to the intimacy of the family and the importance of physical items to hold and cherish in place of people, the stationary chosen by each writer identifies them and represents their character.<sup>17</sup> Emil’s father chooses to write primarily about the farm in almost narrative form using stationary with his employer’s letterhead while his mother is much more poetic in her descriptions of the actions surrounding her and writes on plain paper. Though the forms they choose are different, each is attempting to send “home” to Emil through their letters. In fact, his mother writes, “[I] just want to make you think of home as it is, so you can seem nearer.”<sup>18</sup> Likewise, Emil sends vivid descriptions of the French countryside home to his family. Emil’s family correspondence is so dear to him that he burns the letters in his possession when he thinks he might move closer to the front. Perhaps the most important way Emil maintains a close

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<sup>15</sup> Ziemann, *War Experiences*. 48.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* 270.

<sup>17</sup> Rebecca Andersen, “‘Dear Son Emil’: The Whitesides Family Letters, 1917–1919,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 86, no. 3 (July 1, 2018): 273.

<sup>18</sup> Andersen, “‘Dear Son Emil’”. 274.

relative proximity to his family is through his commitment to openly maintain his Latter-day Saint identity and faith. He writes often to his family about opportunities to attend services and his resistance of the vices of liquor, cigarettes, and sex that surround him.

As was seen in Curry Thomas' correspondence, Emil Whitesides' letters can be connected to Ziemann's research in two ways. First, his father's very businesslike letters written on workplace stationery primarily about the farm and Emil's vivid descriptions of the French countryside provide a symmetry with Ziemann's Bavarian farmers who wrote a "litany of discussions on livestock process, how the crops were doing, the slaughtering weight of pigs, and so on...document[ing] their ongoing emotional ties with the civilian contexts from which they came," avoiding descriptions of the realities of the war.<sup>19</sup> Second, Emil's commitment to openly maintain his Latter-day Saint identity and faith accords with the importance of religion to Bavarian soldiers serving in France. Ziemann discovered that Catholicism, the dominant faith in Bavaria, was an important factor in stabilizing and sustaining the mental and emotional health of soldiers, particularly as they wrote in their letters requests for prayers for their safety.<sup>20</sup> Though Emil's faith served to maintain his identity rather than comfort him in the face of potential death, both outcomes serve to reinforce the idea that front line soldiers did not fundamentally change during the war because of their connection to their home front lives.

### **Max Ottenfeld**

Max Ottenfeld was a volunteer for the Army from Wisconsin writing to his parents and family—the "folks." The record of Max's available letters is more extensive than either Curry's or Emil's, though still limited as digitized public access documents and containing only letters sent home. The First Division Museum website has numbered the letters up to 91 though only 25

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<sup>19</sup> Ziemann, *War Experiences*. 118.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 127-131.

of them are published on the site. The reasons the others are not available are not given by the First Division Museum. Without doubt, more conclusive findings would be possible with access to the entire collection, particularly if the withheld letters had been sent to Max from his family rather than the reverse or if they were omitted from publication due to sensitive or controversial content.

Max served in the Signal Corp and wrote extensively to his family about his training in Texas, even sending a sample of the “Wig-Wag” in writing to wish his family “A Merry Christmas” in December of 1917.<sup>21</sup> The letters Max sent his “folks” while in training are the longest in the collection and routinely open with a wish of good health to his family and a quick reassurance of his own. He gives several accounts of excursions and entertainments provided by the Y.M.C.A. and Knights of Columbus, the girls he took out, and his continuing training.

Max enlisted with two of his friends, Jake and Wally. Throughout his letters he relays information about their situations to pass on to their families, including when they are separated to different assignments once they arrive at the front. “You ask in your letter if I heard from Jake or Wally lately. No, I haven’t heard from --- either for a long time. That is I haven’t since August and not at all from Wally since I came over here. I suppose their mail is delayed somewhere also.”<sup>22</sup>

Letters #5 through #13 are filled with descriptions of Max’s days, training, eating, “loafing”, and often having a good time. But the mood and tone shift in letter #16 after his arrival in Europe. At the first couple of training camps in England, Max still tells of spending his time in many of the same ways as he did in Waco, Texas, but he begins to include a great many more questions for his family. He asks about their work and expresses his concern when it is not going

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<sup>21</sup> “Letters From WWI,” First Division Museum, accessed November 21, 2022. Letter #5.

<sup>22</sup> “Letters From WWI,” Letter #45.

well, if they are receiving the allotments he sends home, and how his brother and sister are doing with work, school, and letter writing. At the conclusion of his signal training in France, he anticipates being sent to the front and expresses a bit of concern, both directly in wondering what he should do with his personal items and letters and indirectly in how he tells about a drop in his signal examination scores; once he scores high enough, he will be shipped out.

A second shift can be seen in letter #40 when Max writes from a hospital in France where he's recovering from an exposure to gas. He is still cheerful about his "chow" and eager to reassure his family of his safety but also anxious about not receiving any letters since leaving the Signal School for the front. A couple of lines in the letter are given to describing his experience at the front. "Since I wrote last, I have been through h—a good many times but still am alive and kicking. I've been over the 'tops' a good many times since then and have seen all of the worst horrors of the war. Seeing dead and wounded now is nothing new to me."<sup>23</sup> By far, this letter has the most questions for his family of any in the collection. As Max continues his recovery on light duty at a hospital in Luxembourg, he is aware of the shift in his mood; in letter #45, sent about a month after letter #40, he resumes his long and cheerful style of writing that he used while in the Waco, Texas camps, full of descriptions of his day-to-day activities. It is likely that the signing of the armistice contributed to his improved mood.

After leaving the Luxembourg hospital, he tells his family of using his knowledge of the German language as an interpreter, notably without any animosity or hostility toward the Germans. The people in Luxembourg are surprised to hear him speak and understand German so well and even more so to discover that he learned it not from having a German heritage or in school but "living among German people" in his home community.<sup>24</sup> One letter from this time

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, Letter #40.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, Letter #45.

gives an insight into what his family had been writing to him since he refers specifically to letters his family had sent. They want to know what division he was placed with after he left the hospital and tell Max about their plans to celebrate his homecoming, how glad they are to get a letter from him, and that things at home are starting to go “back to pre-war ways.”<sup>25</sup>

The group of letters #60 through #70 from Max are during his prolonged recovery from an illness suspected of being the flu as well as waiting for his many lost teeth to be replaced and to finally be sent home. They reveal a low time for Max since he is not getting letters, the weather is bad, and he is confined to the hospital and grounds. He complains of not being able to write a good letter because he is not where there is any “news” and that he has gotten no letters since being separated from his unit; still, he seems to write every day asking questions about the work at home, the returning “boys”, how life has changed since the armistice, and the progression of the weather, though a few of his letters from this time are only a couple of paragraphs. The mood and tone shifts seen in the letters written during his hospital stays and the increased number questions for his family and his anxiety about not receiving any letters suggest that Max’s injury, illness, and the lack of communication from home distress him so he intensifies his effort to receive comfort from his family through their letters.

The letters written during his recovery from suspected influenza appear on Jewish Welfare Board and Red Cross letterhead; a Jewish Army Chaplain had spoken to him in the hospital, and offered him writing paper, news, and company. The mention of the Jewish Welfare Board and the conversation with the chaplain are the first indications of Max’s Jewish faith contained in the letters published by the First Division Museum. In contrast to Emil and the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, Letter #56.

Bavarian soldiers in Ziemann's study, it does not appear that Max's faith was especially important to him in sustaining his will to fight or in retaining his identity.

Letters #76, 82, and 86 show Max to be a changed man from the one who began writing from Texas in December of 1917. He has been discharged from the evacuation hospital and finally gotten back to his unit and the letters that awaited him there. The Max writing in April 1919 is much more conscientious of his family and solicitous of how they are living, their health, and the wellbeing of their collective friends. He laments his parents' moving from Wisconsin to Chicago but also says "anything under 2000 miles is walking distance."<sup>26</sup> There is hardly a mention of food when his previous letters regularly described how well he was fed or complained of how bad the food was. He still tells his family about the places he visits, but more than half of the letters are about *them* and for the first time, he sends "Best regards to Uncle, Aunt, Harry and the rest" as part of the closing of his letter.<sup>27</sup>

Clearly, Max Ottenfeld was impacted by his service during the Great war; he matured. Over the course of 21 months and travelling through Missouri, Texas, New York, England, France, Luxembourg, and Germany, he went from a carefree and inwardly focused man to a conscientious one aware of the importance of family, home, and connections. There is no indication that what he experienced brutalized or desensitized him, that he developed any particular love for violence, or a hatred of the enemy. Rather, his experiences during the Great War did the opposite; they fostered a softer side appreciative of those who love him, his own life, and how those aspects enrich him more than the pleasures of food and fun.

Max Ottenfeld's letters corroborate Ziemann's analytical findings in ways different from Curry's or Emil's. Max's experience offering to interpret German without any hatred or hostility

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, Letter #82A.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

toward the Germans equates with Bavarian soldiers demonstrating a similar lack of animosity toward the enemy. Though they wrote about their outrage toward Italy after the spring of 1915, Ziemann asserts that it was due to a sense of betrayal; “notions demonizing other countries as the enemy and the stereotypes bound up with them failed to sway how soldiers from rural areas interpreted the war.”<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, the lines Max writes describing his experience at the front deviate from Ziemann’s observations in communicating his dangerous activities and injuries; most Bavarian soldiers “hesitated to tell their relatives about moments of particular danger, or sometimes even injuries, because they wished to avoid ‘making [their] loved ones’ hearts even heavier.”<sup>29</sup> Whether this indicates a level of frankness Max possessed that the average Bavarian did not or simply places him in the minority rests upon further analysis of American soldiers World War I correspondence.

Max recounts several excursions and entertainments provided by the Y.M.C.A. and Knights of Columbus. Though these entertainments and diversions are not part of Ziemann’s analysis, the scholarship of Gagen and Brandemarte on the importance ascribed to familial attachment by the US military in combination with the enthusiasm with which Max refers to them indicate that they were important connections to his home life.

### **Edgar Andrews**

Edgar Andrews was an Army National Guardsman from Massachusetts writing to his parents, sister Sue, and uncle Frank who was also serving in France. Of the four men selected for this study, Edgar’s collection is the only one including letters from home, allowing for a more

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<sup>28</sup> Ziemann, *War Experiences*. 138.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 118.



thorough analysis of the connection between war and home fronts as communicated via wartime letters.

Edgar arrived in France in October of 1917. The letters from his early time in Europe are filled with descriptions of the drills and training he and his comrades undertake. He recognizes the hardships and danger of his situation but also sees opportunities to travel and shows an interest in learning. He's very aware of the censorship of outgoing letters, telling his family frequently that he wishes he could alleviate their fears by telling them more about where he is and what he is doing but can't on account of the censors. On March 29, 1918, he writes to his mother, "It is useless for me to tell you what has been going on for it would be cut out by the censor." In fact, almost two of every three letters in the collection bears the approval mark of a superior officer, with the censorship most consistent in the early letters, waning as Edgar's unit becomes involved in more heavy action, and disappears entirely with the armistice.

Like Max, many of the men in Edgar's battalion are friends or acquaintances from home and he writes home often about them. He recognizes the changes in his friends and tells Sue she will "not know lots of the boys when we get home. Some look older while others look five years younger."<sup>30</sup> Of the men he billets with, he speaks kindly, though by the end of his service, he writes much less about his comrades except to lament how many of them have died.

By December of 1917, Edgar is involved in action. He is part of a group "bringing in several hundred horses from one town to another" and injures his ribs when thrown from one of them. He writes about the incident in separate letters to his mother, father, and sister though the telling was different for each. He writes his mother first but his father gets the most detail. Edgar's concerns are different for each parent; his mother he wants to assure of his treatment and

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<sup>30</sup> Edgar D. Andrews Collection (AFC/2001/001/103623), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Letter Jan. 6, 1918.

recovery while his father is told a more adventurous version.<sup>31</sup> Though the way he told the story varies according to his audience, it is clearly important to him to keep his family abreast of his health and reassure them of his safety.

Edgar shows a tendency to plan for his future. He asks his mother to put as much of the money sent home as she doesn't need into an account for him, buys bonds, and takes out a life insurance policy. After the hardest fighting he participates in, he tells his family that he wants "the simple country life...lots of room to move about in and lots of pure country air."<sup>32</sup> Edgar tells Sue in his April 10, 1918, letter that he wants to have a good time just walking into a restaurant with her and ordering a sandwich and glass of milk when he gets home. It is a mundane and everyday event to have lunch with one's sister, but writing about a place they both know and thinking of the ordinary suggests he wants to return to the normalcy of his life with his family before the war.

Just before the first major US military engagement at Seicheprey in April 1918, Edgar indicates that he knows he will be advancing to the front and is apprehensive, repeating a phrase of uncertainty he used previously in reference to the life insurance policy he took out, "you never can tell what might happen." He lets his family know in a way that will alert them without getting censored, telling them – "after next week my mail might be slower as I don't expect to be able to write as often for a little while." The Andrews' family and friends very closely follow the war's progress through the newspapers so they can get some level of news of Edgar through that medium if he is unable to write himself. He gives another clue in his letter when he thanks his mother for the checkerboard she sent, appreciative of its suitability for travel and providing

**Commented [SE1]:** I'm not sure you have evidence to say what he was feeling. You might say it suggests a desire for closeness and normalcy—a return to the intimacy of prewar days?

<sup>31</sup> Andrews Collection, Letters Dec. 17 & 21, 1917.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, Letter May 26, 1918.

“many pleasant hours...when we hit the trenches.”<sup>33</sup> In July of 1918 he again counts on the newspapers to tell his family of the engagements he’s involved in, choosing words carefully due to the likelihood of specifics to be cut by the censors. Following the Second Battle of the Marne, he writes his mother, “You will notice by the date that I am still in good health and very well at this very important time.”<sup>34</sup> Edgar knows by the time he writes his letter and his mother receives it, the events of the battle would have been published at home. Indeed, they were. She writes back to Edgar upon receiving that news: “Your letter of July 30 just received, you can imagine how very welcome it was. I don’t know when I received anything that gave Sue & I more real joy. Pa will be home tomorrow and he will be just as happy as we are. We have know[n] that you were in [the] thick of the fighting this month and have anxiously watched the papers to follow your movements.”<sup>35</sup> In the time Edgar has spent at the front, he has learned how to circumvent the censors in getting information to his family, perhaps from his own experiences with censorship or from the advice of more seasoned European soldiers.

Sue, Edgar, and their mother tell each other of their dreaming on several occasions. Edgar of Sue playing the piano, Sue of Edgar and the future, and his mother of Edgar and uncle Frank together on a walk.<sup>36</sup> Sue even tells Edgar that she wishes she could be transported to where he is through her dreams so she could see him; she would “retire nights at 5:30 so as to avoid the rush.”<sup>37</sup> Everyone dreams but not everyone or every family communicates their dreams to each other. That the Andrews family does indicates both that they think of each other often and that they used their dream stories to maintain a close connection over the time of Edgar’s

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid, Letter Jan. 27, 1918.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, Letter July 30, 1918.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, Letter Aug. 16, 1918.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, Letters April 10, May 9, & August 16, 1918.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, Letter July 31, 1918.

deployment. Another way Edgar makes his family feel close is to name his dugout after his sister. He paints a sign, “Villa Suzon” with a dove and flower, and hangs it over the door as a visual reminder of his favorite person in the safest place he has at the front.<sup>38</sup> In doing so, he equates family and home with safety and happiness.

By May of 1918, Edgar has been in active duty for six months. Still, he uses his limited supply of letter writing materials to describe the beauty of his surroundings - the sunshine, green grass, fair weather, singing birds and owls, and the tame foxes taken in by another group of boys - noting how unfortunate it is to be fighting a war in a place like that. The intentional effort to appreciate the simple splendor of his surroundings in spite of the circumstances is evident in the next line – “As you must know the song of birds is not the only thing we hear or the spring flowers the only thing we see, but they are the best.”<sup>39</sup> Edgar is certainly not being brutalized by his experiences in the trenches of the Western Front.

August and October of 1918 show very few letters from Edgar but a great number to him from his mother and sister. (There are no letters in the record from Edgar’s father.) His mother faithfully relays the steady stream of callers inquiring after his safety, the movements of his father in his work for the railroad, what she learns of the war in the papers, and her anxiety for his physical and mental health. From his sister he learns of the social events of Boston and all the fellows courting her. Each of these elements of home life recall the vitality of Edgar’s home and family and give no indication of serious concern for Edgar becoming desensitized to violence only “discouraged and downhearted” to which Edgar replies, “never fear, dear sister, it is [tense]. I sometimes feel that way, but after thinking of what has taken place since that happy bunch of fellows left the camp at Framingham, I have to laugh, not because there is anything funny about

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, Letters May 27 & June 1, 1918.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, Letter May 26, 1918.

it, but because I am still alive and have all my faculties and that alone is enough to keep anybody happy.”<sup>40</sup>

Edgar’s letters confirm Ziemann’s findings in three ways. First, Edgar writes often about his plans after the war. Ziemann’s rural soldiers also viewed their time at the front as a temporary disruption and looked forward to returning to their civilian lives; the experiences of violence and the soldier comradery of military life did not deter them from wanting to get their lives “back on track after the return home”<sup>41</sup> Second, he sends news home about loved ones at the front. Soldiers from rural Germany too drew comfort from serving with others from their communities and “made much of such encounters in their letters of memoirs.”<sup>42</sup> Third, Edgar’s conscious choice to contrast the beauty of his surroundings with the ugliness of the war matches the rural German’s tendency to write about farm business and avoid attempting to describe their war front experiences.<sup>43</sup> The letters to Edgar from his mother and sister are a slight deviation from the findings of Ziemann. While they support Ziemann’s conclusion in that they give no indication of serious concern for Edgar becoming desensitized to violence, neither do they lament the wartime conditions at home. Ziemann notes that many peasant German women grew despondent in their communications to their husbands; this difference may be due to the prolonged hardships they endured in relation to American women.<sup>44</sup>

### Conclusion

The letters of Curry Thomas, Emil Whitesides, Max Ottenfeld, and Edgar Andrews are unremarkable – that is what makes them supportive of Benjamin Ziemann’s conclusions about

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, Letter October 18, 1918.

<sup>41</sup> Ziemann, *War Experiences*. 122.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 116.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 118.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 158.

the effects of front-line experience on Bavarian soldiers. He endeavors to fill a gap in World War I historiography that includes studies of letter contents but in ways unconnected to social structures and mentalities. He analyzes the correspondence and veterans' activities of a specific group of German World War I soldiers to challenge their adoption as "embodying the discontinuity produced by the experience of war, as a model of uprooting, brutalization, and the aggressive reordering of social relations."<sup>45</sup> His analysis reveals that there were tensions within the German army between regional forces, and there were significant war weariness effects due to the longevity and harsh conditions of the war. Though they felt themselves to be victims of a regime's efforts to advance their own interests, they did not feel uprooted or brutalized.<sup>46</sup>

Within this case study Curry Thomas' restful quiet and joy visiting his mother on furlough and determination to build a life at home after the war, Emil Whitesides' conversations with his father about the farm and the beautiful French countryside and dedication to his faith, Max Ottenfeld's emotional growth and interactions with Europeans translating German without any animosity, Edgar Andrews' tendency to plan for his future and assurances sent home about loved ones at the front, and the absence of concern for Edgar becoming desensitized to violence all confirm Ziemann's findings that "most front-line troops made a constant effort to prevent ties with their civilian identity and families from being severed. This depended on a constant stream of information and interpretations reaching the field by means of the armed forces' postal service."<sup>47</sup>

What remains to be done now is a further expansion of this initial examination of American correspondence and the extension of the study to other nations' Great War letters,

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 270.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 118.

memoirs, diaries, and veterans' activities; "future researchers...compar[ing Ziemann's] findings with those for other regions or groups."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 3.

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