

IOWA HISTORY



(Courtesy Library of Congress)
The remains of a French village, World War I

The Sooner, the Better

It was both a “horrible and wonderful spectacle.” That’s how Roger Lewis, a Manchester, Iowa native, described the view from his billet near the town of Monthairon, France, where he was stationed with the 110th Ammunition Train during World War I in 1919. They were situated in the Meuse River valley, and Roger reported the soldiers could see gently rolling hills for miles in either direction.

The company had moved to their new location in November 1918 after the Germans had “made things just a trifle too interesting” for them to “live peaceably” in their previous location. Their new billet was an old barn in a pine woods that Roger said was quite comfortable.

However, he admitted the old camp had been a bit more luxurious. Consisting of an abandoned furniture factory and several nice houses with fireplaces in each room, Roger claimed it was the best place he’d lived since his arrival in France. The furniture factory contained old cane-bottom chairs, and that gave Roger and his army buddies an opportunity to do something they hadn’t done in a very long time—sit on a chair.

During the fighting, the men of the 110th Ammunition Train hauled shells and rations to the soldiers at the front lines. Each morning they set out with their loads, after picking up supplies at Souilly, headquarters of the American First Army. (It was also home to several thousand German prisoners of war.)

Roger commented on the change in the landscape as a result of the war. Where dense woods had once covered the earth, he could see nothing but a “mass of shattered trees, trenches, dugouts, barbed wire entanglements and shell holes.” A single wall from a bombed-out building was all that remained in one town. The rest of the village had been leveled to the ground. All the towns were “shot up pretty badly” according to Roger. The beauty of the surrounding area was “marred by ruined towns and shot up woods.” He admitted the shell fire had “wrought a great deal of havoc.”

Roger's army duties were lightened by the occasional letter from home. One day he received seven, including some "Kodak snaps." But in a letter sent home to his parents, he asked for some blank writing paper and a stick of Yucatan chewing gum.

Thanksgiving dinner at the army camp in France was not the traditional meal, but the men were pleased with their fare. Fresh boiled beef, French fried potatoes, gravy, canned sweet corn, bread, coffee and condensed milk made up the holiday meal. The soldiers thought the French fried potatoes were "mighty good." As a special treat, the men were given a pack of Fatima cigarettes and two pieces of "genuine Lowney's chocolate."

Roger missed the annual Thanksgiving dance at the Manchester armory; but "by George, I'll make up for it when I get home" he wrote to his parents.

He hoped he'd be home by the following spring but wasn't certain. One thing he was sure of, "the sooner, the better."

Source

"Roger Lewis Writes Interesting Letters," *Manchester Democrat*, Jan 8, 1919.

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