

IOWA HISTORY



Courtesy Library of Congress
Not a building standing in Vaux, France, 1919

Betty Adler Reports From Post-war Europe

“We start out sometimes and find a body but not a trace for identification. But we just won’t give up. We know some mother back home will be glad we stuck to the job.”

It was a gruesome task the American soldier in post-war France recounted for Betty Adler from Davenport, Iowa, in July 1919. The Davenport *Daily Times* had sent their correspondent to Europe to report on the “pulse beat and heart throbs of real life” in the cities and villages that had suffered tremendous death and destruction during the Great War.

Adler sailed from New York on the *Rotterdam* on June 12 arriving in Falmouth, England, on June 23. From there she traveled to Paris, arriving just in time to witness the jubilant reactions to the ending of the world war.

“All Paris celebrated in the streets. I was among them,” Adler wrote.

It appeared the whole world was there, singing and dancing in the city streets. Adler painted a picture with words of the cheering throngs as they filled the Champs-Élysées. “See with me this surging mass of celebrants as the search lights of the Eiffel Tower beyond plays upon them,” she invited her readers.

American soldiers marched carrying the stars and stripes and singing “*Hail, Hail, the Gang’s All Here.*” The crowds parted to make way for a rambunctious gaggle of young boys dragging a German cannon left behind by the retreating enemy. Blasts from automobile horns punctured the air, and fireworks decorated the night skies. The revelers raised their voices in singing the *Marseillaise* with a famous opera star who led the chorus from her perch on a balcony overlooking the festivities.

As the celebrating continued throughout the night, Adler wrote “The joy of peace reigns supreme in Paris.”

But Adler had traveled from Iowa to report on “actual conditions” and “personal incidents” of common people as they struggled to return to a normal life. She wanted to move out into the countryside and witness for herself the effects of war. Setting out by automobile Adler visited Château-Thierry, Belleau Wood, Soissons and Reims where she reported on “tired-eyed” people who were returning to the “broken fragments” of their homes.

Her vivid depictions of pine coffin boxes stacked against a fence, of American soldiers searching for remains of their comrades, roads running through fields of live shells and villagers clearing away debris “to begin life over” filled the pages of the *Daily Times*. She wrote about the city of Vaux with its “skeleton houses” and the village of Torcy where “many Davenport infantry boys” had fought. She traveled to Fismes, where a cemetery held 1,500 American soldiers, and to Reims, where “shattered structures” and “powdered plaster” greeted returning refugees.

Adler returned to Paris as French citizens honored their American friends with celebrations on the Fourth of July. Their “tremendous admiration” for America and the “two million men” she had sent to “rescue” the French people shone through as sounds of the “*Star Spangled Banner*” mingled with the “*Marseillaise.*”

Adler’s book, *Within the Year After*, released in 1920 and chronicled her time in Europe.

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