

# IOWA HISTORY



*Courtesy Library of Congress*  
Crowds in Paris on Armistice Day, November 11, 1918

## Webster City Woman Sees the Great War Firsthand

“...the sea was so rough that we all agreed to go down with the ship rather than try to freelance it with a lifeboat.” Bernice Brown jokingly wrote about her voyage from New York City to France on the liner, *Rochambeau*, in 1918. Luckily, she didn’t have to get into a lifeboat; and she didn’t go down in the ship. She arrived safely at her destination in Europe.

Brown, a native of Webster City, had been working in the publicity department of the YMCA in New York City, when she landed the coveted assignment to travel to the war front to locate American women working in the Red Cross and to tell their stories. After surviving the “delightful terror of submarines” on the dangerous sea voyage, Brown landed at a French port “somewhere in France” on the very week that the armistice to end the conflict was on everyone’s minds. She was greeted by comments such as: “The party’s over.” And, “Did you get a return ticket?” After four years the war-weary French were ready for peace, and they believed the news that promised an armistice would soon be in place.

And, although those optimists were correct about the end of the war being near, organizations such as the YMCA and Red Cross had plenty of work ahead as Europe began to settle in to a post-war period. For one thing, millions of soldiers were in Europe; and many would remain at least for a time after the war ended. Many Americans were serving in the

military and the Red Cross. There would be much to write about for Brown in her role as a representative of the YMCA publicity department.

Brown described the situation in Paris when she arrived there as “grim and dreary.” Cafes closed their doors at 9:30 p.m., and hundreds of poilus (French infantrymen) in “shabby, faded” uniforms who were on leave expected to return to their detachments at the front. She talked to a French woman whose husband had been home for a short leave but had returned to duty. “He went away a young man and smiling. His hair is grey now,” the woman said.

On November 11 at 11 a.m. when the armistice was officially signed, Brown wrote about the scenes in Paris. Shop girls, doughboys, army nurses and old women joined hands as they spilled into the streets—singing and shouting. The city was covered with confetti, bunting and flags. “Viva la France!” the French shouted; while doughboys claimed, “We’ve done ‘em in!”

The celebrations went on for days. Businesses and schools closed; churches held special victory services; there were parades everywhere. Spectators climbed in trees and on rooftops to catch a glimpse of the festivities. French aviators provided a show overhead, swooping so low they “barely skimmed the tops of the trees.” Even at night the aerial shows continued with the planes festooned with torches.

From France Brown moved on to Germany. It was there she ran across a fellow Iowan. Pvt. James Matchett, a 19-year-old mechanic from Glenwood, had been serving with the Rainbow Division when he was listed as missing in action. Brown visited him at a hospital in Strasburg, where his status had been changed from missing in action to prisoner of war, news that must have delighted his mother and friends back home in Iowa.

After eight months in Europe, Brown returned to the United States on the liner, *S.S. La Touraine*. She made a name for herself in the 1920s as a fiction writer. Her short stories and poems appeared in magazines including *McCall's*, *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Collier's Weekly*. One of her pieces, “Why Girls Leave Rome,” a story of a Roman flapper’s experiences, promised to “bring many a rollicking laugh” to her readers. Brown also made time for occasional visits back home to Iowa to see her parents, who lived in Des Moines.

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