

4-1-2017

Our Doughboys, Part I of III: Prelude to WWI

Arley McCormick

Follow this and additional works at: <https://louis.uah.edu/huntsville-historical-review>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McCormick, Arley (2017) "Our Doughboys, Part I of III: Prelude to WWI," *Huntsville Historical Review*: Vol. 42: No. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/huntsville-historical-review/vol42/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by LOUIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Huntsville Historical Review by an authorized editor of LOUIS.

Our Doughboys Prelude to WWI Part I

By Arley McCormick

In response to an inquiry from the Alabama Department of Archives and History regarding the WWI experience of Private Ben Hope, his mother replied:

Aug 23, 1921

Dear Friend; ...The 15th July 1918 he was in a battle and after this battle he was sighted for his bravery by Col William D. Screws. Then in July 26th 1918 he was in battle at Chateau Thirey. He was in the Rainbow Division. ...

Yours Respectfully

Mrs. Lizzie Hope

PS. His first training was in Montgomery Alabama.

On November 2, 1895, Lizzy Hope gave birth to Ben in Hazel Green, Madison County, Alabama. Samuel, her husband, was ecstatic; Lizzy was relieved. Not even 23 years later, on July 26, 1918, neither Lizzy nor Samuel were on the bloody field in France to wipe the dirt and blood of battle from their son's face as he lay dead alongside others. He was not alone.

The “War to End All Wars” shaped the course of events that many historians characterize as the “American Century,” and its impact on the world is not over. The war destroyed the Hapsburg Dynasty and the Ottoman Empire; it shaped the national boundaries in the Middle East, contributed to the birth of the Soviet Union, and the international reach of Imperial Japan. It sowed the seeds for World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Cold War and the Islamic Reformation the world is engaged in today.

A major political aim of the war instilled in the American psyche the concept of making the world safe for democracy. In the history of mankind, no war has shaped and confused the world order as dramatically. Names that appeared on the public scene would become the characters of fact and fiction throughout the century, and today nearly every American will recognize the names “Black Jack” Pershing, Douglas MacArthur, Harry S. Truman, Adolf Hitler, Herman Goering, Winston Churchill, Charles de Gaulle, Ernest Hemingway, Sergeant York, and even Lawrence of Arabia. North American economic and political impact circled the globe and in the wake of the social and political progress young men from Madison County lay dead in graves across Europe and at home.

WWI is largely forgotten in America. Those who planned and fought the war are all dead. Europe lost a generation of its youth as more men died during WWI than any equivalent period in history. Americans bled for less than nine months, but the prelude affected almost every American and the end has affected Americans ever since. The American interest in the sacrifice to “make the world safe for democracy” is buried somewhere below the interest of all other American wars, save possibly the Spanish American War. Maybe it’s because it was a short war for Americans, maybe it’s because the League of Nations failed, maybe it’s because dictators

and protagonists who fought in the war rose again to fight the second, or maybe we have lost interest in our history. No matter, on the 100th anniversary of WWI, we will remember the sacrifice of a few of Madison County's young men in the following pages.

The world changed rapidly during Ben Hope's life. The residents of a relatively sleepy oasis of agriculture in Madison County would work and gossip about the happenings and would not define the hard work and scarce financial resources as the "Gay Nineties" although they were certainly better than in the preceding 25 years. It was a time when American art was finding its own character, women's suffrage was on the national political agenda, and Elizabethan morality was being challenged by gaudy plays and high profile scandals. Little Ben took no notice of the birth of "Ragtime" because entertainment adopted in the cities took a long time to reach rural communities, and his family situation for the second decade of his life could hardly afford the nonsense created by city culture. They were members of the Hazel Green Methodist Church.

At the age of ten, Ben may have attended the ceremony when the United Daughters of the Confederacy dedicated the new confederate monument on the Huntsville square in 1905. Nearly the whole community attended. His parents possibly attended the opening of the opera house in 1907, and automobiles were becoming a common sight on the streets of Huntsville. Ben certainly would have seen the only truck in Huntsville in 1910.

Ben grew up with meager resources, but his family had many friends and enjoyed the community. Names he may have been familiar with through school activities and sports: Kirk Satterfield,

Opal Roberts, Edgar Freeman, Percy Crunk, and Dock Hill, to name a few.

Ben may have been vaguely aware of the struggle between the empires of the world that was well underway. The Hapsburgs, Ottoman, British, French, German, and Russians were all jostling to retain their share of an economy fed by colonialism. Germany had unified Germanic speaking people in 1870 and occupied the French provinces of Alsace and Loraine.

Here at home, the United States was busy protecting the “New World” from the “Old World” and using the Monroe Doctrine as justification. The panic of 1893 caused middle class Americans difficulty, but as the new century approached, there was optimism, even as the events in Europe captured the headlines and Mexico’s revolution threatened to migrate across our Texas border.

In the first decade of the new century Australia, South Africa, Norway, and Portugal became countries. Bulgaria was freed from Ottoman rule and in the Far East, the Russo-Japanese war was another signal of a changing world.

Ben could hunt in the countryside and fish in the Flint River, play baseball or football, and occasionally slip off to the race track near Huntsville. Somewhere between his work and recreation, he managed to get an education. News of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire made the Huntsville paper as well as Wilber and Orville Wright’s successful flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. Maybe he knew that Robert Perry had reached the North Pole, and the Panama Canal had opened. The gossip would probably not include the subtle rise of advertising and mass consumption stimulated by Henry Ford and the assembly line of automobiles departing Detroit, yet with all the advancement in technology, the ugly vestiges of Jim Crow resulted in 1000

lynching's of African Americans in both North and South during the first 20 years of Ben's life.

In 1912, the first Southern born president since the Civil War was elected; President Woodrow Wilson was a Virginian. The Democratic platform he promoted won the vote of African Americans and split them from the Republican Party for the first time since the Civil War. His first term began with unremarkable expectations as agriculture – the economic engine that drove prosperity in Madison County, grew slightly and steadily each year.

Early in 1914, the President sent General John J. Pershing and a military force to the Mexican border with Texas, to deal with Poncho Villa. That military force included the 4th Alabama Infantry. The 4th Alabama's heraldry dated back to before the Civil War, and during that war, it participated in battles from First Manassas to Appomattox. Young men from Madison County were among the members and the casualties.

In 1914 the 4th Alabama deployed to Texas but never officially crossed the border into Mexico. Its mission was to guard military equipment and stores in Nogales, Texas and train. Training was hot, sweaty, and boringly routine. Marching and bayonet drill dominated the training schedule and many soldiers couldn't decide which was worse, hours of boredom on guard posts or bayonet drill. The townsfolk thought they were the rowdiest bunch of drinkers Nogales had ever known and the Alabamians took pride in their reputation.

Ben Hope secured a good job as a mechanic with the Huntsville Textile Mill but life in Madison County began to change in June, 1914. On June 28th, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the throne of the Hapsburg Empire, was assassinated in Sarajevo. The events that unfolded lead Germany to declare war on Russia, then

France, and on August 4, 1914, Germany invaded Belgium. By the end of the year, Europe, the Far East, and nearly all the colonial powers in between, were sucked into the cauldron. The United States remained neutral.

When Germany invaded Belgium their soldiers were wearing the style of uniforms and toting the same type of weapons and equipment used in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. Soldiers not marching were on horseback, few trucks were employed by the invading army. The British and French had not modernized either and the Italians and Russians were less prepared. In Madison County, the European's shift to a war time economy immediately caused cotton exports to decline. As a result, cotton prices plummeted, causing mass unemployment.

As European stockpiles were depleted, the demand for war materials grew. The Allies began sending millions of dollars to J.P. Morgan, a bank in New York. As a result, the bank began contracting with United States industry to provide raw materials to England and France. The German strategy, however, was to deny their enemy the raw materials for industry, consequently, America's problem grew worse when on February 4, 1915, Germany commenced unrestricted submarine warfare.

The United States economy was not prepared for war, and neither was the military. The meager military forces were deployed on the Mexican border and other places in the Americas. President Wilson, it appeared, was determined to stay neutral, yet there were plans to activate the National Guard in the event of a national emergency. Not activating the National Guard would protect the federal treasury until an actual commitment to war materialized. Yet, there was a national call for civilians to prepare by volunteering to receive military skills training in the summer at a Plattsburg, New York camp. The cost was being absorbed by

private contributions. Nearly all the participants were businessmen and other professionals.

On May 7th, a German U-boat sank the British ship *Lusitania*, causing the deaths of 128 American civilians. The American public had always leaned toward the British and diplomatic protests resulted in a pledge by Germany, in August, to guarantee the safety of passengers traveling on unarmed vessels. However, in November, Germany sank an Italian liner without warning, killing 272 people, including 27 Americans. With these attacks, public opinion in the United States turned irrevocably against Germany.

In Europe, the initial euphoria for war influenced the governments of Britain and France to predict a short war and the U.S. government optimistically promoted a similar scenario. No official prognosticator would ever suggest the battlefields in Europe would be covered with pools of blood and rotting flesh.

On August 22, 1914 the Battle of the Frontiers resulted in the deaths of 27,000 French Soldiers in a single day. Between September 6 and 10, at the first Battle of the Marne, the French halted the German invasion and created the first trenches of the war. The concept of a short war was shattered and inflamed passions drew Americans to the allied cause. Americans fled to Canada, not to avoid war, but to join foreign ranks as infantry, medical personnel, and aviators. It was only the beginning. For the rest of the year and beyond, the slaughter continued.

In July, 1916 the Battle of the Somme resulted in a loss of over a million Germans and British soldiers. The British suffered over 20,000 losses during a four hour period. Entire English villages lost their fathers, husbands and sons, yet the killing continued.

In his campaign during the presidential election of 1916, Woodrow Wilson proudly declared that he had kept the United States out of war. What was not spelled clearly to the public was his agenda for America's future, included leading a new world order – an order that made the dollar the world's trading currency and a government policy of exporting democratic industrialism and popularizing the concept of making the world safe for democracy. To achieve those lofty ambitions, the United States Navy would replace the British as master of the sea; the colonial system would be replaced by democracies under the observation of an American led League of Nations. The Entente (generally West European Countries allied against Germany) listened politely and scoffed. The Entente wanted America to provide soldiers as individual replacements and the Germans were convinced the Americans would never enter the war but considered the idea that when every country of Europe had bled to death, America may very well establish the new world order. President Wilson waited.

In 1916, the Washington Mall filled with lobbyists and Detroit promoted the new industrial consumer market. In addition to searching for water, Los Angeles was promoting cheap silent cinemas to the public and wine. The President was arbitrating between the military and Congress for a larger navy and a National Guard mobilization on paper. Of course the bickering and infighting in Washington, common still today, stalled the plan to fund and create a merchant marine fleet.

In 1916, the most destructive war in the world's history appeared nowhere close to a conclusion and no amount of political persuasion seemed to alter events. The Germans had no respect for the Americans and considered them cowards and weak. The British and French wanted replacements for their dead and dying soldiers believing only if America would provide individual replacements,

the Germans attrition would exhaust their personnel and resources faster and the Entente would win in the end.

Body counts illustrated that WWI was a war of human attrition. Clearly the man and material losses could not be replaced indefinitely. The prosecution of the war was a mess with neither side gaining more than a temporary advantage. The definition of victory was redefined as not losing ground. Each side rejoiced when their soldiers died in a fight for a few yards of dirt only to return to their original trenches. The entire countryside in Alsace and Lorraine was a quagmire of barbed wire, trenches, and death.

In 1917, the German leadership recognized they could lose the war and announced the resumption of unrestricted warfare. That strategy signaled the end of the American public's and Presidential tolerance for diplomatic overtures. Finally, the course of American involvement began to alter as three days later, the United States broke diplomatic relations with Germany.

On January 28, a German cruiser sank the *William P. Frye*, a private American vessel, and on February 22, Congress passed a \$250 million arms appropriations bill intended to make the United States ready for war. In late March, Germany sunk four more U.S. merchant ships. After years of political rebuff and hours after the American liner *Housatonic* was sunk by a German U-boat on April 2, President Wilson appeared before Congress and called for a declaration of war against Germany. After years of diplomatic stiff arms and a German attempt to induce Mexico to rise up against America, the president took action. Four days later, April 6, his request was approved; it was now an American war too.

The Army was poorly prepared. The Army staff of the War Department consisted of 19 officers and that would expand to over 1000 by the date of the Armistice. The nation's Army and Marine Corps were not trained for a European war. They were engaged in

chasing unconventional combatants and not to maneuver on the battlefield of France. Shortly after the US entered the war, “Black Jack” Pershing was interviewed by the President, appointed a full general, and directed to command the American Expeditionary Force. The 4TH Alabama soldiers may have been frolicking in the Nogales bars but General Pershing was paying attention to the events in Europe and was not an advocate of trench warfare. He intended to instill in every soldier that maneuver through a vigorous offense and superior marksmanship would equal victory. The Expeditionary Force would need everything to make victory possible.

The First World War had now reached into the American heartland and Ben Hope could only imagine what his future would hold. Along with thousands of young men between the ages of 21 and 31, Ben Hope, now 5’7” tall with blue eyes, enlisted in the U.S. Army.

Next issue:

Our Doughboys, Part II, Draft and Mobilization

The Author: Arley McCormick is a former soldier and active with organizations that contribute to the history of Alabama.

References:

- Axelrod, Alan. *Selling the Great War; The Making of American Propaganda*. Palgrave McMillian, 2009
- Evans, Martin Marix. *Victory on the Western Front; the Decisive Battles of World War One*. Arcturus Publishing Limited, 2013

- Tooze, Adam. *The Deluge: The Great War, America and the Remaking of the Global Order 1916-1931*. Viking, Penguin Group, New York, New York, 2014.
- Tindall, George B. *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945*. Louisiana State University Press, 1967.
- Fivecoat, David, “Fine Conduct Under Fire: The Tactical Effectiveness of the 165th Infantry Regiment in the First World War”. Master of Military Art and Science, Dissertation. Fort Leavenworth, Kansas 2004
- Engen, Rob, “Steel Against Fire: The Bayonet in the First World War”. *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, Spring 2006, Vol.8, Issue 3.
- *Order of Battle of the United States Land Forces in the World War: American Expeditionary Forces: General Headquarters Armies, Army Corps Services of Supply Separate Forces Volume 1, 2, 3*, Center of Military History United States Army Washington, D.C. 1988.
- *Infantry In Battle The Infantry Journal Incorporated*, Washington DC. 1939
- Heller, Maj(P) Charles E. Heller, USAR. *Chemical Warfare in World War I: The American Experience, 1917-1918*. Combat Studies Institute U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas 66027-6900 September 1984
- Lloyd, Nick. *Hundred Days; The Campaign that ended World War I*. Perseus Books Group, New York, 2014.
- Emerson, Charles. *In Search of the World Before the Great War*. Public Affairs, 2014.
- croixrougefarm.org/history-42nd/

- Rubin, Richard. *The Last of The Doughboys; The Forgotten Generation and Their Forgotten World War*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, New York, New York, 2014
- *Military Report: Lieutenant-Colonel WALTER E. BARE*
- *Montgomery, Alabama, May, 1919. 167th U. S. Infantry*
- *Record, James. A Dream Come True; the Story of Madison County and Incidentally of Alabama and the United States, Volume II, 1970 John Hicklin Printing Company.*
- *Beckett, Jan F. W., The Making of the First World War, 2012, Yale University Press, New Haven and London*