

Letters from the Boys: Wisconsin World War I Soldiers Write Home

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gues that four of the politicians—Governor Emanuel Philipp, Milwaukee’s Socialist mayor Daniel Hoan, founding member of the Socialist Party of America Victor Berger, and Senator Robert M. La Follette—“gave voice to reason” as “they tried to lead with humanity and respect for people and the law (238), attributes the author underscores as important for a democracy and the overall reputation of the state as “the war demonstrated the frightening fragility of civil liberties” (3).

Pifer, retired from his position as Director of Reference and Public Services for the Library-Archives Division of the Wisconsin Historical Society, credits his wife, Marjorie Hanon Pifer, as a historical analyst for the book. Together, they mined the archives of Wisconsin for a rich variety of primary sources, including photographs and political cartoons. The cartoons alone merit a separate book and make theirs all the more fascinating while underscoring the visual nature of war on the home front. The book will appeal to readers interested in World War I home fronts but also to those interested in the history of civil liberties, immigration, and politics in the upper Midwest.

Letters from the Boys: Wisconsin World War I Soldiers Write Home, by Carrie A. Meyer. Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2018. viii, 223 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$19.95 paperback.

Reviewer Matthew J. Margis is a historian at the U.S. Army Center of Military History in Washington, D.C. He earned a Ph.D. in history from Iowa State University in 2016 with a dissertation on the evolution of the National Guard during the Progressive Era.

The United States experienced a renewed interest in World War I during the centennial of American entrance into the war. Carrie Meyer’s *Letters from the Boys* tells the story of the Wisconsin doughboy experience through their own words. She reproduces a series of letters published from 1917 to 1919 in two Wisconsin newspapers (the *Independent Register* and the *Brodhead News*).

Part one of the book recounts the experiences of various soldiers in the 32nd Division who volunteered for service in the Wisconsin National Guard, from their enlistment through the postwar occupation of Germany. Part two follows Roger A. Skinner, who enlisted in the ambulance corps in 1917. Skinner’s experience as an ambulance driver was different from that of his counterparts in the 32nd Division, but his relatively long tour of duty covers the whole of American belligerency and provides an overview of the changing nature of the war.

The letters throughout the book discuss the monotony of camp life, the dangers and harsh conditions of trench warfare, interactions with

French citizens, and the soldiers' attitudes about the war in general. A few letters also describe interactions with African American soldiers, reflecting the racial realities of the time. Of course, censorship and the fact that families allowed the papers to publish these letters meant that most do not give details about locations or the true horrors of World War I combat. Yet these letters do offer a glimpse into the mindset of the young men who volunteered for service in the American Expeditionary Force.

Much of Meyer's previous work has focused on the history of the rural Midwest, and this book is no exception. The soldiers discussed in *Letters from the Boys* hailed from three small towns in Green County, Wisconsin, which the author describes as "a quintessential Wisconsin rural dairy county" (5). The letters contained herein reflect that reality. By focusing solely on Green County, Meyer allows readers to take a step back into an early twentieth-century farming community. The soldiers often compared the sights on the Western Front to their home towns, and readers will appreciate the soldiers' concerns for their family farms and the descriptions of French farms and the French countryside.

This book will be valuable for those interested in the rural Midwest or casual readers seeking insights into life on the Western Front. Readers more familiar with military history, or World War I historiography in general, will not find new analysis or new insights in this book. And because the author relies on letters reproduced in newspapers, it is not possible to follow a single narrative pertaining to American operations. Nonetheless, the book restores voices from the past, and anyone interested in the doughboy experience will connect to the young men in the book. Carrie Meyer ensures that their voices will endure for generations to come.

Minnesota 1918: When Flu, Fire, and War Ravaged the State, by Curt Brown. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2018. 304 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Jeff Nichols is a doctoral candidate in history at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He wrote an undergraduate honors thesis at the University of Iowa on the 1918 influenza epidemic.

Minnesota 1918 chronicles two often-forgotten catastrophes: the Spanish influenza epidemic and the Cloquet-Moose Lake Fire, a conflagration that consumed 1,500 square miles across seven northeastern Minnesota counties. "Paint with numbers and the canvas turns unimaginably dark: nearly 1,500 Minnesota soldiers dying in combat in the World War I trenches of France; 453 fire victims; more than 10,000 deaths in the state