

The Great War

by Raymond Betz

I was seven years old when World War I began. It was August 1914, and my dad and Guy Wild were stacking grain by the barn. Whenever they came in with a load of bundles, my job was to pump a fresh bucket of water for them to drink. I was carrying the bucket down to the barn when I heard Guy Wild—and I can still hear his voice like it was yesterday—“Now you’ll hear the bullets cracking you’re your ears,” he said.



Raymond Betz, Age 12



That autumn I started school in Byron’s one-room school house with Maude Doyle as our teacher. She told us about the countries involved in the war and we learned where the war was taking place.

War news came to us from people who had heard stories and from newspaper accounts. Before bond drives, the newspapers carried stories that today would be called propaganda. One I remember was about the German soldiers who nailed their victims in the shape of a cross to the side of a barn.

There were five bond drives in Byron, headed by Albert McChain, our neighbor. I was one of six children and each of us had a \$50.00 bond.

For three years we followed news of the war, and the news was that the Germans were gaining. Newspapers reported that the Germans’ “Big Berthas” could reach Paris.

Maude Doyle kept the Byron students informed about the war. Whenever there was an announcement, she would stand at the school door and tell us as we

entered the room. She did this in April of 1917. "America is going to war," she said.

It wasn't long before men were being drafted. On a muggy, hot August day I saw the first troops pass through on their way to war. A convoy came up the road from Camp McCoy. They were in Oshkosh trucks with dump boxes, and the men were sitting in the boxes. The troops stopped at our farm to rest for two hours. Our big yard was covered with soldiers. There must have been 1500 men on the grass or standing in line for a drink of water. I was supposed to be carrying water that day to the men at the barn, but I didn't get much of a chance to get to the well because those soldiers were waiting for water and I let them drink.

I watched them. Some were laughing and joking, others were quiet and sad. Some of the men talked to me and asked me about my chores. I was awestruck by the sight of all those soldiers, so many men, and I knew why they had to go where they were going, and I wondered how things could get so bad that this would happen.

The soldiers got back in the trucks and headed east toward Lake Michigan. As the trucks topped the hill, one soldier fell out and broke his leg. He didn't go to war with the men who gathered in our yard that day.

Then men from Byron were being drafted. They were the young ones first, but later on even my dad was drafted. He was 44 and was deferred because of his age. Our neighbor had two sons who were sent to France. One was an engineer, the other a sharpshooter. They wrote to their dad that men were falling on all sides.

As the war continued, the need to feed our troops and the vast food shortage in Europe became part of our daily lives. Sugar and white flour were rationed. Sugar and flour were important to us. We could get substitute flour that made black bread so tough that it was like eating stones. All the good bread bakers started making bread out of oatmeal.

Our school held a box social to support the war effort. The school was packed with people that day. I bid 25 cents—which was the limit on student

bids—for a box lunch made by my neighbor, Lucille Zahn. She had made deviled eggs. The prize winner was made by Sarah Raymond. Her box lunch was wrapped to look like the American flag and was bought by the auctioneer for five dollars. That was a lot of money in those days.

The war really hit home the morning Maude Doyle stood at the school door and told the students that two Byron men were killed in the Battle of the Argonne. I knew both Glenway Raulf and John Bohan. Glenway was known to every student in the school. His family lived next door, and he played baseball with us. If he was driving down the road with his wagon, he'd stop and give my sister and me a ride to school. There wasn't a peep out of any of us students that day.



John Bohan



Glenway Raulf



Sylvester Wittman

We began hearing rumors of peace, that the Germans were being pushed back. There were some radios in Fond du Lac, so we often learned about events through word-of-mouth. The only radio in Byron was Sylvester Wittman's, and it was through him that we learned of the Armistice. We were eating dinner on November 11, 1918. It was summer weather, 70 degrees, and we ate with the kitchen door wide open. Sylvester rode up to our porch on his bicycle, put his foot on the step and said to us, "How are you enjoying peace?" That afternoon town whistles blew and church bells rang for an hour.

In the years after this war I talked with the men from Byron who went to the battlefields. I won't forget their stories of the hard work they had to do in France, but that is another story. This one is about being seven and recalling the first major event in history to enter my life.