

## **Pesotum and Tolono, Illinois During the Great War**

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When the United States entered the Great War in April of 1917, entire communities throughout the nation went to war. Men and women, at the warfront and at home, did their part to sustain their nation during what seemed a time of international crisis as the entirety of Europe seemed, from the American perspective, to be collapsing in upon itself. From urban sprawls to the smallest of rural communities, neighbors gathered to honor their men about to march in the ranks of the army and to provide whatever materials they could to the war effort. Nestled in some forgotten corner of the world were two towns of special significance to me, Tolono and, most particularly, Pesotum.

The prairies surrounding Pesotum were the final destination for my German-Catholic ancestors during the final decades of the nineteenth-century. I grew up within the town as the fifth generation to be raised within that township's limits. Pesotum was not quite as inconsequential then as it is today, but it certainly had not grown much since it had been formed from another township in the early 1860s. Five miles north sat the township of Tolono, a larger town that, like Pesotum, sat along the Illinois Central Railroad. For the past three years I have called this town home and have but little familial ties to this place. When the war broke out, these communities largely rallied to the flag to provide money, material, and, most importantly, men to fight against the Hun and his allies. Both communities seemingly activated the communal spirit that had been almost a necessity then, but hardly exists now, to actively pursue the community good. Women joined the Red Cross while men donated to the Y.M.C.A., school children donated what few pennies they had, editors of local newspapers shamed and encouraged their neighbors, and still others put their talents with literature, song, and vaudeville to raise funds for the war. Others, however, expressed their dissent and refused to be drafted, donate to the Red Cross, or buy Liberty Bonds, while a smaller group actually voiced their disapproval of the war.

No one in my family from Pesotum, or anywhere else for that matter, served in the Great War. My great-grandfather and his brother were enrolled for the draft, but likely because of the birth of my grandfather in late 1917 and the fact that they were farmers, these men had been exempted from the draft. Yet, wartime Pesotum and Tolono are truly interesting miniature studies of the home front. Both towns had an active press that was so pressed for things to print that they published as many letters as they could from the boys in khaki in camp or in Europe. The editors also used their columns to discuss the war spirit in their towns while local groups and organizations used it to post needs and wants for their organizations. Local papers were also sent to the front and many of the soldier's letters expressed thanks for such charity and a connection to home. From these newspapers an image emerges of communities at war interconnected between the home front and warfront. What follows is a tentative exploration of those interconnections.

### **Home Front**

“To Our Boys”

I am thinking today of the lads far way,  
Who are fighting for you and for me.  
They are fighting the Kaiser,

You'd better be wiser and do your bit today,  
 For the time is coming when you can't be  
     lumping along the same old way.  
 Are you writing today to the lads far away?  
     Who are anxiously waiting to hear from  
     The old home town and all they hold dear.  
     Are you doing your bit today?  
     Are you deserting our boys today?  
 For just a few dollars will bring lots of joy to the Kaiser  
     just over the way.  
     Would you sacrifice our lads to make the Kaiser glad?  
 Would you live in bonds and slavery for just a little bravery  
     in sacrificing each day?  
 For the lads in France who are giving their all for you and me.<sup>1</sup>

Written by Orville Moore, a fourteen-year-old boy from Pesotum, this poem, "To Our Boys," is illustrative of the importance placed upon the community in supporting local men going off to war. The nature of this poem is not at all surprising given the context in which it was written. By March of 1918, when this poem was published, Pesotum and Tolono residents had been visited by federal agents investigating the recent failure of a war bond drive and reports of dissident utterances by men in the area. The questions young Moore asked throughout his poem were, as we shall see, the same as pro-war townsmen were beginning to ask their antiwar and Pro-German neighbors who were seemingly bringing shame to their town by not voluntarily supporting the war. The other, larger target of this poem was citizens who were not against the war, but not so ardently for it to donate a large amount of their time and money to the war effort. It sought to remind them of the greatness of their country and to shame them into supporting the young men that they probably knew on a first name basis. Coming less than a year after the United States entered the war, this poem provides a glimpse into the divisiveness of the war, but more importantly, given that it was published in the local paper, the ardent support that the majority of the towns' men and women had given to the war effort and, more importantly, their hometown heroes.

The response to war had been largely positive in Pesotum and Tolono. Both towns' newspapers adopted an uncompromising pro-war disposition and proudly printed the names of every recruit who had volunteered or was drafted to serve the country. As the first volunteers left their homes for camp, local groups dedicated to the troops' comfort and the prosecution of the war began to spring up in the area. Probably the most recognized group was the local chapters of the Red Cross in Pesotum and Tolono. Barely over a month after the United States entered the war, the Red Cross already had members in Pesotum and Tolono. Mrs. Hoffman, a resident of Pesotum whose son had been the first from the community to volunteer for the war, had already become a member of the Red Cross. On the day before a formal meeting encouraging the establishment of a Red Cross chapter in Pesotum, Hoffman used the town's newspaper to request combs, mirrors, needles, cloth, tooth brushes, tooth paste, and other creature comfort necessities from local residents to put into eighteen comfort bags for soldiers from the area. The next day, May 19, 1917, Mr. Huckins the county organizer of the Red Cross came to Pesotum to "explain the organization, its purpose and the duty of every man, woman and child to join" and to help formally establish the chapter.<sup>2</sup> Packages such as those put

<sup>1</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, "Pesotum Boy Writes War Poem," 3-29-1918.

<sup>2</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, "Red Cross Branch to be Organized Here," 5-18-1917.

together by Hoffman for the soldiers would become one of the chief activities of these local chapters of the Red Cross. Other activities included a sewing circle where the group's members sewed hospital garments, articles of clothing, and flags. One such flag, a service flag, was presented to the Sunday school class at the Methodist Church<sup>3</sup> from which several boys had volunteered. "The flag," sewn by Mrs. Hoffman, had "a red back ground with a white field and contains seven stars, each star representing one young man of that class who is serving his country."<sup>4</sup> By February of 1918, the Red Cross in Pesotum had enough volunteers for an instructor from the Champaign Chapter to come to Pesotum and instruct a seven class course on sewing surgical dressings to eighteen local women. More ladies were always welcomed, however. To encourage greater participation, the local Red Cross wished to inform "Ladies who have not as yet taken any of the lessons" could "join the class at any time" as "They will receive their instructions from the members of the class who qualify for this purpose. The only requirement necessary for new candidates is that they be provided with a white coif and long sleeved white apron or long sleeved white dress."<sup>5</sup> When this sales pitch failed, the chapter used the newspaper to publicly shame and encourage women into helping by appealing to their motherly instincts and familial ties stating that:

Your boy may go to France; if he should be wounded the Red Cross will care for him. Will you women who are mothers and sisters of soldiers come and help us make the garments he may need. We have plenty of material but we need more workers. We meet every Tuesday and Friday afternoon at the home of Mrs. Chas. Clark. If you can't possibly attend the meetings. Call and take some sewing home. Your baby has plenty of warm clothing this cold weather. Won't you make some little garments for the refugee babies that have nothing but rags? We furnish material and patterns.<sup>6</sup>

Probably the most public demonstration of their contributions to the war effort was the involvement of the local Red Cross in war bond drives and holding banquets for soon-to-be shipped out soldiers. On December 14, 1917, the Tolono chapter of the Red Cross held "a sumptuous banquet...in honor of the young men who will soon represent Tolono at the front in the present great world conflict." Laying out the food on tables that had been setup in the shape of a cross, the banquet held about seventy-five guests with eleven guests of honor. After dinner, prayers were said and speeches given to honor the young men.<sup>7</sup> Five months later, the Tolono Red Cross Chapter held a similar banquet for eight drafted men about to leave for training. This time the meeting drew some 250 to 300 residents of the town. After opening the meeting with a prayer and the singing of "America," twenty to twenty-five men of the community were called up to make short speeches in support of the war and praising the men. Three members of the local clergy soon thereafter gave speeches and "Orville Moore sang three beautiful songs and was applauded loudly by those present." For lunch, the men and all those attending were treated to "Coffee, sandwiches, and cigars" and were soon "presented with comfort kits from the local Red Cross. They were also given a package of gifts to be opened only when on their way

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<sup>3</sup>This Church is located on Locust street a little south and west of the home in which I grew up.

<sup>4</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, "Present Class Service Flag," 11-16-1917.

<sup>5</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, "What the Red Cross is Doing," 2-22-1918.

<sup>6</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, "Red Cross Notes," 1-25-1918 .

<sup>7</sup> *Tolono Weekly Herald*, "Red Cross Set a Sumptuous banquet," 12-14-1917.

to the training camp.” At the close of the meeting, the entire assembly finished the banquet by singing “The Star Spangled Banner.”<sup>8</sup>

Other groups unaffiliated with the Red Cross also sprung up. While the Red Cross was busy with their sewing, knitting, and cutting committees, The Pesotum Patriotic Girls Club was organized in November of 1917 “to look after the tastes of the boys regarding sweets, that is, they are going to supply them with candy and confections just as some clubs furnish them with Tobacco.” They had already sent a box of “4 1-2 pounds to our boys at Camp Logan” and vowed, that no matter where the boys were, as long as they had their address, no son of Pesotum would be without his sweets.<sup>9</sup> The Good Fellows’ Club of Pesotum, a club apparently active before the war, also did its part to help and honor the men going off to fight in the war. Dr. J.F. Hilgenberg, a local doctor on his way to serve at the front, was inducted into the Good Fellows’ Club and presented with a “fine golden watch” as George Hoffman told him as a “souvenir of the esteem in which you are held in this community” and to remind him “that there a bunch of fellows back home that are in perfect accord to the action you have taken in the defense of our Country.”<sup>10</sup> The Good Fellows’ Club, like the Pesotum Patriotic Girls Club, also made sure the men did not do without some creature comforts from home. Two weeks before Thanksgiving the club put a notice in the Pesotum paper requesting “all the good things a soldier boy likes, except turkey or any kind of fowl or fresh meat” that could spoil to be put into boxes to be sent to Pesotum men at Camp Logan in Houston. People were requested specifically to bring canned fruit, canned pickles, cake, cookies, candy, ginger bread, cigars, fresh butter, tobacco, nuts, apples, cocoa, chocolate, and condensed milk to a local store as the box would have to be shipped by November twenty-second to reach the men in time for Thanksgiving.

Other groups and activities sought to raise funds for the local Red Cross Chapters. School children in the third and fourth grade in Tolono began saving pennies to donate to the Red Cross and had donated no less than sixty-one pennies in a single week.<sup>11</sup> The Pesotum Camp of Woodmen contributed their entertainment talents to fundraising for the Red Cross at one dollar a seat fundraisers in Tolono, Pesotum, and Ivesdale. They put on a vaudeville show complete with seven acts of comedy and singing sometimes backed by an orchestra.<sup>12</sup> During a controversial and rousing speech by a man only referred to in the Pesotum press as “ex-chief Gunner Waite” from Britain on a speaking tour to rally the U.S. into full-fledged support of the war, the local citizenry promised the local chapter of the Red Cross some \$750 dollars in funds to buy materials for their endeavors.<sup>13</sup> A few weeks later, the same man spoke in Tolono and succeeded in raising some \$1,000 dollars for the Red Cross there.<sup>14</sup>

For all this community activism and expressions of public unity, dissent amongst the populace in both towns was extant. Ex-Gunner Richard Waite’s speech had touched a nerve with some of the local populace that came to hear him speak. His reputation had preceded him to Pesotum. Businessmen of the town had heard him speak and were so impressed by him that they immediately set about persuading him to come to Pesotum. In Peoria, Waite had “shaken the city of Peoria and other large cities to their very foundations by his great description of the war.” He spoke from his experiences of being on a battleship sunk in the Dardanelles and his

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<sup>8</sup> *Tolono Weekly Herald*, “Drafted Boys Given Farewell,” 4-5-1918.

<sup>9</sup> *Tolono Weekly Herald*, “New Club Organized,” 11-16-1917.

<sup>10</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, “Show Their Esteem,” 8-10-1917.

<sup>11</sup> *Tolono Weekly Herald*, 11-9-1917.

<sup>12</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, “Benefit Red Cross Entertainment,” 12-11-1918.

<sup>13</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, “Red Cross Notes,” 1-25-1918 .

<sup>14</sup> *Tolono Weekly Herald*, “Waite Makes Them Come Across,” 2-22-1918.

fighting in the trenches where he learned “what it means to take the bayonet thrust. Twice he has been sent back torn with wounds and yet he is full of the war spirit. Everybody should hear him.” So graphic was his speech reputed to be that absolutely no women and no boys under sixteen years of age could attend.<sup>15</sup>

It appears that there was good reason for this prohibition. Writing a few days after Waite had given his speech, C.W. Meneley of Pesotum wrote a review of Waite’s presentation. Meneley, after spending considerable time laying out his contributions to the war effort—donations to the YMCA and his son in the army—and the fact that he was neither a man of German ancestry nor sympathy, but “a man of science” spent considerable amount of time lambasting Waite’s remarks. Meneley took offence when Waite had boasted to the crowd that he had drank all sorts of liquors at the front and that “a cigarette and a glass of rum are essential in giving courage to ‘go over top,’” stating that Waite’s remarks were “a slam at the clean manly Christian boy who scorns all these vices.” Meneley was also perturbed that Waite had given “advice on the platform to send only cigarettes, not candy, to the soldier boys” believing this advice “an insult to every father and mother who has a boy in the army who has not formed the habit.” Obviously, Meneley expressed a certain naivety when it came to conditions at the front, but he was not solely offended by Waite’s remarks about soldiering. Probably the second most perturbing aspect of Waite’s speech to Meneley was his discussion of the German mind. Waite had apparently expressed “that the German brain is inferior to the Anglo-Saxon brain either in quantity or quality which he asserted was true of quality.” It was not only as a man of science that Meneley protested these qualities, however. He believed this speech “an injustice to our German-American patriots who are our neighbors...I can’t help it but I stand ready during this war to take off my hat to any German-American patriot before I will do so to an American born citizens who is an ardent patriot.”<sup>16</sup> Meneley’s stand against Waite’s anti-Germanism undoubtedly stemmed from the immigration of German Catholics, including my direct and indirect ancestors, into the Pesotum Township over the preceding decades. When he said “German-American neighbors,” he literally meant his neighbors. Not all citizens, however, shared Meneley’s disdain for Waite’s remarks. Though noting the criticism leveled at Waite’s remarks “in some localities for the rough-shod manner in which he has handled some of his topics” the editor of the *Tolono Weekly Herald* further remarked that “soft words have accomplished little or nothing as far as the pro-German question is concerned. If the Gunner’s words can raise \$1,000 per day for the Red Cross then he is, in our opinion, accomplishing far more each day than some of his critics will be able to accomplish in a life time.”<sup>17</sup> Despite this remonstrance and the pride of over \$1,000 pledged after Waite’s speech, J.J. Ryan, the *Herald’s* editor, still had to grasp with noteworthy dissent and complacency. “We have many citizens,” Ryan reported, “who are well able to give a substantial sum each month for carrying on the work. Their names are conspicuous in the appended list, by their absence...There are those among us who should hang their heads in shame for refusing to support the Red Cross substantially during the war.”<sup>18</sup> In spite of Waite’s best efforts not all men had heeded his call or listened to his speech. Those who had, like the businessmen of Pesotum who originally enticed him to their town after hearing him speak, knew what was going to be the message of Waite’s remarks and even relished in them enough to bring Waite to their own town because they thought it would do some good in curbing antiwar and bolstering pro-war sentiments and voluntarism. Although both towns posted large sums of

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<sup>15</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, “British Army Officer to be in Pesotum,” 1-11-1918.

<sup>16</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, “Ex-Chief Gunner Waite and His Speech,” 1-25-1918.

<sup>17</sup> *Tolono Weekly Herald*, “Waite Makes them Come Across,”

<sup>18</sup> *Tolono Weekly Herald*, “Waite Makes them Come Across,”

money after his appearance, it is evident that the war had bred a notable divisiveness on the home front.

By the early months of 1918 reports of dissent from the war in Tolono, Pesotum, and the surrounding area had already begun to surface. Although Tolono and Pesotum would both hold banquets on the eve of the departure of drafted men, communities throughout the area nonetheless judged men for their hesitance to volunteer. In July of 1917, as the eighty-one men who had been enrolled to be drafted in Pesotum nervously awaited their fate, a fake report circulated that a number of men from the community had been drafted. One of the “prominent businessmen” of Pesotum reportedly had called one of the supposed draftees a “slacker” resulting in a fight between the two men. Similar fights broke out throughout the county.<sup>19</sup> It is apparent that failure to report or “slacking” after being drafted was indeed a problem during the war. By October, the Adjutant General had instructed the Urbana exemption board to take “drastic measures against deserters who refuse to report when called to service.” The board was to secure the cooperation of the police and the public to apprehend any deserter.<sup>20</sup> Though it certainly was a problem in some areas, it does not appear to have been so in Pesotum or Tolono, despite how many “slackers” may have been around.

Nonetheless, it appears that dissent in these communities was real. In November of 1917, after recent reports from the Department of Justice warning “of a widespread plot to burn farm property” by antiwar/Pro-German men, the corn crib, barn, tool shed, and the garage at the Reat Baker farm three miles north of Tolono was fired by an incendiary. Less than a week earlier “a similar fire” that was supposedly the work of the I.W.W. “broke out at the home of Rodney Smith” just northeast of Urbana. Together, these two fires, whether accidental or wanton acts of political violence, led many to fear the attacks from local terrorist organizations.<sup>21</sup> Whether or not there was any veracity to these reports, it is certain that enough pro-German and anti-war feelings existed in the area to warrant an investigation by the federal government. After the failure of Pesotum, Tolono, and, in fact, the entirety of Champaign County to meet its Liberty Loan quota in November of 1917, the federal government sent in agents to conduct an investigation. “Champaign County is in for a federal investigation,” reported J.J. Ryan, “and when Uncle Sam’s agents are on the ground a number, it is said, will have reason to shake in their boots.” In fact, it had become known only a few days before that “the government [men] have been at work in this county getting a line on all persons who...have been heard to make disloyal utterances. They had no trouble in getting a list of these and they are being warned personally by the federal agents.”<sup>22</sup> Despite these warnings, it appears that many of the dissidents continued expressing their antiwar opinions. A few months later, in February and March of 1918, opinion pieces appearing in both the Tolono and Pesotum papers lambasted the antiwar men of their respective communities. The editor of the *Tolono Weekly Herald* warned that “These men should understand that we are in the war to stay and the time for argument is past. The people who have listened to these anti-American sentiments have been patient, hoping that the authors would eventually come to their senses and look at the war from the American standpoint. But there will come a time when patience ceases to be a virtue.” The worst of those who had berated the government and even humanitarian organizations such as the American Red Cross were not even “German born subjects, but men who were born and reared under the protecting folds of the Stars and Stripes, men who should be willing to sacrifice their all in the defence of country they make the target

<sup>19</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, “Fake Report Causes Fight,” 7-16-1917.

<sup>20</sup> *Tolono Weekly Herald*, “To Deal With Draft Deserters,” 10-5-1917.

<sup>21</sup> *Tolono Weekly Herald*, “IWW is Suspected of Incendiarism,” 11-23-1917.

<sup>22</sup> *Tolono Weekly Herald*, “Tolono Failed to Go ‘Over the Top,’” 11-2-1917.

for their vile insinuations. And in some instances they are not even of German extraction.” The article ended with a call for every “true blue American” to help stamp out the “menace at home.”<sup>23</sup> As early as September of 1917, A.F. Albinger, editor of *The Pesotum Chief*, was reporting that “we hear some people say that it is a shame to have soldiers of German birth in this country fighting Germans in France, because it might be their relatives.”<sup>24</sup> By February Albinger was so concerned with German participation that he sought to encourage a greater effort in support of war by the Germans living in the vicinity of Pesotum. Attempting to put their immigration to the United States and their participation in the war into a greater, worldly perspective, Albinger addressed the German population directly.

You of German blood why did you leave Germany? Because you wanted to be free, you wanted to be independent, you wanted to escape the tyranny of that government. You are faithful to the United States. You have shown this by your enlistments, you have shown this by your labor, you have shown this by your donations to the war camp funds, you have shown this by your subscriptions to the liberty loans. Show this again by encouraging more of our boys to go to the front, show this by holding in contempt that man who wishes to shirk his burden to leave another bear his load. Show this again when the next liberty loan comes so that as usual we will see an American, with a German name, at the head of the list, thereby proving to the Kaiser and his proud advisors that you have a real love for your Vaterland, but that Vaterland is not Germany, but America.<sup>25</sup>

By the first of March, however, one citizen of Pesotum had become so disgusted with antiwar sentiment in the community that he wrote a vitriolic letter to the editor. “A Loyal Citizen” wrote in reference to the “men in our nearby community who seem determined to get themselves into trouble by uttering disloyal and insulting remarks against the United States.” He reported to have heard men threatening to kill any man who would report them to the authorities, threatening to desert to the German army if they were sent to France, and hoping that “Germany would whip the United States.” “A Loyal Citizen” was so disgusted by these men that he suggested that a “positive and speedy remedy” to curbing such sentiments would be to confiscate every disloyal citizens’ money they had earned in the United States “and give them a passport to Berlin with no protections from the American army or navy, simply leaving them at the mercy of their angel of hell, the Kaiser, in their trip across the sea.”<sup>26</sup> A few days after these sentiments were published in the paper W.H. Kerrick of the Department of Justice came into town “to put a stop to some of that pro-Germanism or disloyalty that exists here.” He interviewed four citizens in the town and it was “understood that the federal agent is to return here again to call on several of our farmers, residing east and west of town.”<sup>27</sup> In the end, Albinger closed by stating that “men who attempt to breed sedition and make unpatriotic utterances lose the respect of their fellowmen and in the end will be ashamed of their conduct.”<sup>28</sup> Commenting on the federal agents visit to Pesotum, “Editor Wilson of the Tuscola Review” was far less measured in his criticism. He believed that “The right brand of patriotism

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<sup>23</sup> *Tolono Weekly Herald*, “Pro-Germanism in Tolono,” 2-22-1918.

<sup>24</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, “Fighting Relatives,” 9-14-1917.

<sup>25</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, “Our Position on the Great War,” 2-8-1918.

<sup>26</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, “What Do You Think of These Men?”, 3-1-1918.

<sup>27</sup> These farming families included significant numbers of my direct and indirect relatives. Unfortunately, nearly everyone of the generation who could have at least heard the stories of Kerrick’s visit is dead and no stories survive to my knowledge.

<sup>28</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, “Federal Officer Here,” 3-8-1918.

and loyalty is spontaneous and comes from the heart. The kind these slackers and traitors profess isn't worth a d—. There is a day of reckoning for them and it isn't far off."<sup>29</sup> This day of reckoning for dissidents, however, never occurred in Pesotum or Tolono. What may have happened in these towns, had the wrong thing been said at the wrong time can be illustrated by what befell a German farmer in Sidney who, though having moved to Illinois decades before, had always been "a Hun at heart." This farmer, while eating at a local diner, had made a "remark...that he would kill his son before he would let him go to war." Many others from Sidney had heard enough and attempted to lynch him. The German farmer was saved from the "hotheads" only by the timely intervention of more coolheaded members of the town. Nevertheless, he was banished from the town and his farm and told to never come back. The town also went the extra step of reporting him to the federal authorities.<sup>30</sup>

Clearly while most of the inhabitants of Pesotum and Tolono ardently supported the war others did not. Despite the failure of their Liberty Bond drives, pro-war citizens of both Pesotum and Tolono could still take pride in what was probably the biggest contribution to the war effort to emanate from any community—manpower. Residents of Pesotum believed that "Pesotum has more enlisted men than any other town of equal size in the state."<sup>31</sup> This contribution, as demonstrated by C.W. Meneley's naivety about "going over the top," was a far greater contribution than any person who stayed on the home front could appreciate. Leaving the safety of their homes, many of these young men marching off to war would experience places, people, and events that would leave an indelible mark on their post-war lives, if they were lucky enough to survive. Travelling further than they ever had and seeing things their family probably never would, these men wrote scores of letters home trying to explain the sometimes strange, sometimes wonderful, and sometimes terrible experiences the war put them through.

### Soldiers' Letters

#### "The Boys Far Away"

I am dreaming today of the boys far away,  
 The boys in khaki, blue and gray.  
 They belong to different nations,  
 Their flags are different colors too.  
 I hope the dear Lord will protect them,  
 The way He does me and you.  
 They are fighting to save our country,  
 And the glorious flag too.  
 There's many a million fighting,  
 To save the red, white, and blue.  
 The Kaiser has very many men,  
 Yet Uncle Sam has still more,  
 But oh! How the Kaiser will jump  
 When the Yankees knock at his door.  
 Some Day the Yankees will beat him,  
 That he will fight with us no more.  
 Let's go over and see the Kaiser jump  
 When the Yankees knock at his door.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, "Comments on Federal Officer's Visit Here," 3-22-1918.

<sup>30</sup> *Tolono Weekly Herald*, "Sidney Farmer Near Lynching," 3-29-1918.

<sup>31</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, "Federal Officer Here," 3-8-1918.

<sup>32</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, "The Boys Far Away," 4-5-1918.



Written by thirteen-year-old Margaret Samulowitz of Pesotum, this poem, like much of the pro-war sentiment at home, is ripe with the overconfidence of patriotism and home front ignorance of the carnage of war. The soldiers marched off with this same ignorance. A shocked Guy L. Bauman of Tolono wrote his wife soon after his arrival in France after a stint in Britain. "The people over there," he said referring to Americans, "can't realize what this war is without seeing France. Nearly every man you see is a cripple in some way. The women do nearly all of the work." Continuing Bauman believed that "England shows the effects of war lots worse than the part of France I have seen" as the food shortages in Britain did not exist in France.<sup>33</sup> As for depictions of actual battle, of the letters published, only two letters written by William Holl of Pesotum even attempts to broach the topic. "All sorts of funny things happen around here," stated Holl:

though they are really serious if one wants to take them that way. Whenever those big guns go off it shakes the country for miles and the billets we are in just tremble for fear. The other night our guns started a sweeping barrage fire and of course Mr. Boche was coming back with some of his big stuff and a shell burst near enough to shake the billets, and a piece of plaster or tile shook loose and fell down on a fellow's head who was sleeping. He jumped up and starting yelling "I'm hit," "I'm hit!" He really thought he was shot. It was some time before he was calm.<sup>34</sup>

In another letter published two weeks later, Holl came the closest to describing the horrors of the battlefield without inciting the wrath of the censor. All Holl could tell his brother was that his regiment's batteries were "making it d— hot for them...At night it looks like a great display of fireworks." Knowing that he could not say much else Holl used the Pesotum and Tolono area as a model to describe to his brother the vantage point he occupied with the artillery behind the lines.

Picture Yourself where you are with the battle line at Tolono. Every house and building in "Podunk" is full of soldiers with camouflaged roads, etc, and trucks and supply wagons moving day and night. Holl's Hall would be a first aid hospital. The bank would be the sector post office. Huff's drug store would be an army canteen. Siefken's store would be a store room for supplies. The school might be a Y.M.C.A. In the streets would be the field kitchens making hot coffee and hash. Davis' pasture would be an aviation field. Riemke's elevator might be an observation tower until the Boches got the range on it. I'd like to use Dave Mix's store for something but the Boches probably burnt it on their retreat.<sup>35</sup>

Holl's letter, though certainly playful must have made an impact on the reader. These were local reference points he destroyed or requisitioned for the military in passing with his pen. Even for this reader nearly eighty-two years later, and with only some of these buildings still standing, the imagery it invokes is shuttering. The record for *The Pesotum Chief* disappears soon after this, leaving whatever letters were published in its papers during the fateful summer months of 1918 lost to the public record. Nevertheless, the soldiers who ventured forth to fight in France had experiences that are worthy of note. Like Holl who had used his home as a

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<sup>33</sup> *Tolono Weekly Herald*, "Letters From the Boys in Khacki," 3-15-1918.

<sup>34</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, "We Are Up and At 'Em Says William B. Holl," 4-5-1918.

<sup>35</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, "WM. Holl Describes Battle Front," 4-19-1918.

reference point to describe what it was like at the front, other soldiers compared their experiences in camp and in different countries to their lives in southern Champaign County.

Yet, even before this, those who had stayed behind were learning the more mundane horrors of warfare from firsthand accounts. Everett Hunter's first experience in a trench had not been particularly pleasant. After arriving at the frontline trench at his training camp around 8 p.m., a couple of hours later "it started to rain and by morning the water was about six inches deep all over the trenches. It made us believe that Sherman defined war right. I saw lots of men lying in two or three inches of mud and water sleeping." The rain continued all through Saturday "so by night it was almost impossible to get any place at all." Luckily, his unit was going to be relieved, and it was his duty as a courier to deliver the message. Though he made his "first trip in the trenches part of the time in water hip deep" the second time, his commanding officer gave him a breather and let him go over the top to deliver the messages. He also reported that during the training exercise they had three gas attacks that, he reported with the naivety of a fresh recruit, were not all that bad except the masks were a little uncomfortable to wear.<sup>36</sup> Other men stationed at Camp Logan with Hunter, Charles Bloom and Algert Robbins, reported similar experiences.<sup>37</sup>

Besides discomfort in the trenches, men also found other facets of military life uncomfortable. Men found discomfort in their army issue uniforms, particularly their boots. Several men reported in a group letter that their hob nail shoes were cumbersome and made their feet look "twice as large as they really are. It is a hard job to keep in ranks with them on."<sup>38</sup> Charles Bloom, the first man to be drafted from Pesotum, echoed these sentiments when he said "Our shoes are big enough to put both feet in one shoe."<sup>39</sup> Besides the horrors of the trenches and ill-fitting uniforms, camp life had also brought about threats from illness. While some soldiers had to deal with the discomfort of the inoculations side effects many others had to deal with quarantines that lasted for several weeks. Weather, too, could also be a source of discomfort. While some went to camps as close as Rantoul, many others traversed the country to camps in Washington State, Wyoming, Iowa, Texas, and onwards to the eastern seaboard in preparation to be shipped out. The resulting, sudden shift in climates, army procedure, and army inefficiency often left the men bewildered and in discomfort. Writing from Kelly Field in San Antonio, Charles Murray admitted that "The first few days down here I had some difficulty in getting myself acclimated to the climate, which is almost destructive to a person who is not acclimated to it." Murray's ignorance of the local ecology had also led him to sit "upon a cactus leaf by mistake," a mistake, he realized "rather quickly" as it "wasn't anything like a cushion" he had been expecting and he had "been picking thorns ever since."<sup>40</sup> Others during January of 1918, in Houston of all places, were dealing with blistering cold due to military inefficiency and ill preparations. "Some of the tents were without...stoves" meaning the only way to keep warm was to stay bundled and wrapped up in bed. This is certainly not the way recruits wished to spend their time off duty."<sup>41</sup> For at least one local man the trip to camp had not been all that comfortable, owing largely to army discipline. Everett Hunter and a train load of men embarked from Champaign at eleven in the morning on a Tuesday and arrived at Camp Logan in Houston, Texas at five in the morning on Friday. During that entire trip they "were allowed to get off of the train only twice, one hour in Memphis and three hours in New Orleans. We

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<sup>36</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, "A Letter From Everett Hunter," 2-15-1918.

<sup>37</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, "Algert Robbins Letter," 3-15-1918 & *Pesotum Chief* "Chas. Bloom's Letter," 3-8-1918.

<sup>38</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, "Letter of Thanks," 12-4-1917.

<sup>39</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, "First Drafted Boy Writes Back," 9-14-1917.

<sup>40</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, "Charles Murray in Texas," 3-29-1918.

<sup>41</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, "Letter of Thanks," 12-14-1917.

kept guards at the doors of the cars all the time, with orders to allow no one off...Our chief amusement was when we stopped to talk to all the pretty ones we could see and there was always plenty of them.”<sup>42</sup>

Despite drill, discipline, and some discomfort, most recruits from southern Champaign County greeted their new life with optimism. Although he slept on cots that had a penchant for turning over while a man slept and had received a shot for typhoid fever that made “every one of us sick,” Russel Baker told his mother that he enjoyed “this life very much.”<sup>43</sup> “We are getting drilled about four hours each day now,” reported J.J. Ryan, “I am learning what right-about-face, right-squad and all those mysteries mean. This is the life! And say, old boy, we are not in the infantry. This is the coastal artillery. Our company has a big 12 inch baby to play with.”<sup>44</sup> The novelty of the experience exhibited in Ryan’s letter certainly played a large role in bolstering the excitement within the recruits from southern Champaign County. Like Ryan’s gleeful depiction of his “12 inch baby,” Samuel Murray found “a job that suit me just to a ‘t’—am with a machine gun company—learning to shoot a 1000 pound rapid fire gun.”<sup>45</sup> The sight of the submergence of a submarine was worthy enough to have been noted in several letters and for at least one man, Herbert Smith stationed at the airfield in Rantoul, his letter writing stopped altogether to watch a plane take off despite having been at the airfield for a significant period at that point.<sup>46</sup> Though it seems rather mundane, these men, living in an age without buffets on every street corner, also relished in the seeming novelty that they could eat all the food they wanted and relished even more, it would seem, in their weight gain.<sup>47</sup>

Such novelty was not relegated to army life; it was also in the towns, cities, and villages surrounding their camps. Lafayette Woodworth was astonished to find farmers in Georgia “plowing the fields for cotton but corn and other grain is very scarce around here. I guess it is too hot and dry for it.”<sup>48</sup> Paul Hoffman in training at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia described how he and two other men daily went out and took a lot of photographs of the area. He had gone up “on Lookout Mt. the other day” and believed it to be “a wonderful sight.”<sup>49</sup> Other soldiers took in other wonderful sights. Writing from Camp Pike in Little Rock, Arkansas, Sam Murray told his friend to believe all the stories about “razor-back hogs and two-toed mules” because “believe me they’ve got them down here in Arkansas.” Further commenting on his surroundings Murray thought “they had made a mistake when they called this place Little Rock, they should have called it ‘All Rock,’ as that is all I have since I’ve been here.” Like other soldiers’ letters, Murray and his squad mates had fun talking to “all the pretty ones.” “We are having lots of fun with the Arkansas girls,” Murray told his friend Gus, “they just go ‘nuts’ when they see a soldier boy in khaki.”<sup>50</sup> It is impossible to know whether Murray knew this letter would be published, but the attitude of “boys will be boys” does not seem to have prevailed amongst their parents.

Home front concerns over the men’s moral behavior are evident in a number of letters written back home to Tolono and Pesotum. Several letters reassuring soldiers’ parents and neighbors of their good behavior appear in the columns of both towns’ newspapers.<sup>51</sup> This is

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<sup>42</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, “Pesotum Boys O.K. at Camp Logan,” 10-26-1917.

<sup>43</sup> *Tolono Weekly Herald*, “From Soldiers in Camp,” 4-26-1918.

<sup>44</sup> *Tolono Weekly Herald*, “From Soliders in Camp,” 4-19-1918.

<sup>45</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, “News From The Soldier Boys,” 9-28-1917.

<sup>46</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, 2-26-18.

<sup>47</sup> A couple of examples can be found in *The Pesotum Chief*, 10-2-1917, & *The Pesotum Chief*, 11-22-1917.

<sup>48</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, “Fay Woodworth’s Letter,” 3-15-1918.

<sup>49</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, “Paul Hoffman O.K.,” 3-8-1918.

<sup>50</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, “Private Same Murray Writes,” 11-22-1917.

<sup>51</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, 3-18-1918 & *The Tolono Weekly Herald*, 2-22-1918.

illustrative of the interconnection of communities, as no matter what military community these men joined, they were, to those back home, first and foremost members of their respective towns and expected to represent them well. Their hometowns never let them forget their home and the soldiers were glad for it. Besides worries about the effect of the army on soldiers moral bearings, the Red Cross and other groups had, as illustrated earlier, made sure the men would not do without their creature comforts from home. Though the packages thrown together in Pesotum by the Good Fellows' Club for the soldiers' Thanksgiving festivities at Camp Logan had arrived a little late, the soldiers nevertheless saw fit "to thank each and every one of our Pesotum friends for the box of eats and smokes sent us. They sure did taste good to us." In fact, they had arrived just as the men had recovered from the Thanksgiving meal they had partook in a few days before, making it a must welcome and unexpected gift.<sup>52</sup> William Holl was delighted when he received a box from Pesotum containing tobacco, chocolate, and other items including butterscotch that was, in Holl's estimation, "18 karat."<sup>53</sup> When they were not receiving packages and reading papers from home the men were trying to find some sense of normalcy at Soldiers and Sailors Clubs, the halls of the Knights of Columbus, or at the local chapter of the Y.M.C.A., all of which were set up with all the amenities of comfort. Otto Heischmidt reported that the Knights of Columbus building in Louisville "has every convenience for the entertainment of the boys, victrolas, places to write letters, in fact almost anything one could wish for."<sup>54</sup>

Yet, despite all of these efforts to keep the men comfortable and the novelty of their experiences, "the boys far away" nevertheless, and probably inevitably, became homesick. Possibly as a sign of the transformation their experiences had wrought or, more probably, homesickness, many soldiers' letters referred to their hometown as "old Pesotum," "old Tolono," or "the old town." Some of these sentiments revolved around the creature comforts of the town. Writing from a camp in Rockford, Illinois, Ralph Robbins told the editor of *The Pesotum Chief* "To tell Geo. Hoffman he had better bring his [soda] fountain up here."<sup>55</sup> For his part Sam Murray longed for the chance to "spend a night behind the wheel of the Maxwell<sup>56</sup>" before he was shipped off to the frontlines.<sup>57</sup> Probably the most frank admission to affinity towards home came from William Holl while he was on the frontlines in France. "They all kid me" Holl said of his fellow soldiers "to the effect that Pesotum is only a whistling post on the I.C. but nevertheless it suits me quite well."<sup>58</sup> Certainly, as many of the boys from Pesotum and Tolono boarded their ships to go across the pond, similar thoughts crossed their minds. Though they had encountered people and places far removed and far different than their home while still within the states, they were about to enter a completely alien world with strange people and strange towns with no other means to judge them than their previous life experiences.

First, however, they had to make it across the Atlantic. For many of these men, this trip seems to have been one of the most uncomfortable experiences in their lives since entering the military. Philip O'Brien of Pesotum was one of the lucky ones. He reported that although he "was quite sick for the first two days" he had a great trip as he soon got over it and "felt fine for

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<sup>52</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*; "Letter of Thanks," 12-14-1917.

<sup>53</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*; "Wm. Holl Describes Battle Front," 4-19-1918.

<sup>54</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*; "Letter From Camp Logan, Louisville," 3-18-1918.

<sup>55</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*; "Soldier Boys Write Letters," 10-5-1917.

<sup>56</sup> The Maxwell he refers to was a model of touring car that had recently set a record for crossing the United States in ten days.

<sup>57</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*; "News From The Soldier Boys," 9-28-1917.

<sup>58</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*; "Wm. Holl Writes From France," 1-9-1918.

the rest of the trip.”<sup>59</sup> William Holl’s depiction is an exercise in contrasts. He reported that the passage to Europe had been a safe one with a “couple of storms on sea.” These storms were nothing to worry about, he reassured his parents, as “our ship being a big one we rode the waves for fair.” Despite the ships ability to ride through the waves, he told his folks “I wish you could have seen this bunch when they were all sea-sick. Believe me, it was some disgusted bunch. The fish were fed well as long as the boys couldn’t hold down their lunch, and some of them were sick for days.” Needless to say Holl was glad to set his feet on land at the end of his voyage. As he told his parents, “I never realized that the ocean was so big. It’s too wide to suit me.”<sup>60</sup> Guy Bauman described his trip across the ocean to his wife at home. Bauman told his wife “I was sea sick for three days. The first day I felt like I was going to die and the second I wished I was dead, and the third I thought I was sure gone. It was the worst feeling I ever had.”<sup>61</sup> In a sense, this was the American soldiers’ middle passage. Leaving their homes they embarked across the ocean and endured physical ailments that, frankly, seemed like hell. When they emerged on the other side they were in different world, living a completely different existence than they had even in camp at home in a world that seemed strange and curious.

The first sign of this transformation was in the dating and placing of these letters written right after disembarking. Without exception all of these men signed their letters with some variation on William Holl’s description of “somewhere, sometime” that became a trademark of his letters from France. The censor would now be an ever more vigilant and active force in determining what could and could not be stated in letters to loved ones, hence, the reason why Holl’s description of a battlefield in France earlier in this section took on its characteristics. The battlefield, however, was not the only new experience these men were about to encounter. Like in their travels in the United States, they found strange and novel people and experiences awaiting them in their new world. As Holl told his parents, “Believe me” landing in Europe, “will seem like going from one world into another.”<sup>62</sup>

Wherever the men ended up overseas, they were struck by the seemingly strange world of which they were now a part. One man, Jay Marten ended up in Cuba in a camp near San Juan Hill. He had went to Santiago and believed it to be “a queerly built city, a mixture of old and new, all jumbled together with wide streets and narrow ones, all ‘as crooked as a dog’s hind leg.’”<sup>63</sup> Only two men, one a sailor and the other a soldier, appear to have spent any significant time in Britain. As a sailor, Joseph Rund of Pesotum came to port in a variety of places. While he was in London he saw, among many other famous sites, the Tower of London, St. Paul’s Cathedral, Westminster Abbey, the Parliament Building, Buckingham Palace, and the King’s residence. From London he went to Liverpool where he was struck by how “a sailor is sure ‘ace high’ in England.” Given the treatment he apparently received, it is probably not that much of a surprise that he found “the English are the grandest people I have ever met.”<sup>64</sup> Philip O’Brien’s account was a little more descriptive. O’Brien fancied “the small streams and the beautiful hills” of that “beautiful country.” “The farms are small but in good condition,” O’Brien reported, “Everyone who is not at war is working. Women are helping with the spring work.” Despite the natural beauty of the place he found the people to be “so much different than we Americans”

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<sup>59</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, “Corporal Phillip O’Brien Tells of Trip Across,” 4-5-1918.

<sup>60</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, “WM. Holl’s Letter,” 12-7-1917.

<sup>61</sup> *Tolono Weekly Herald*, “Letters From Boys in Khaki,” 3-15-1918.

<sup>62</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, “WM. Holl’s Letter,” 12-7-1917.

<sup>63</sup> *Tolono Weekly Herald*, “Marten Brothers, Widely-Separated, Write Home,” 2-22-1918.

<sup>64</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, “Sees Historic Places,” 1-11-1918.

and neither disparaged or held them up on a pedestal. It was as if he still did not know quite what to think of them.<sup>65</sup>

Like those in England, the men who disembarked in France could not help but notice the differences in people and places. Probably the richest set of correspondence published was William Holl's correspondence with his family. "Over here," he told his brother Harry "every other door in any town is a café but not what we term café. A café here is a wine room with tables to sit down, and from which French wines are served, but nothing only the non-alcoholic kind is sold...I have tried it all, but it is worse than vinegar. I can't see it." Holl was also thrown for a loop by the odd fact that he had not "seen a single soda fountain in all the country I have been in. In America, you know, we would not think much of a burg where we could not find a soft drink joint."<sup>66</sup> It was not all bad though, in another letter Holl described how he "ate a dinner in a French café which was quite a dream to me. I had my dictionary with me and for dinner I had soup, fried rabbit, French fried potatoes, brussel sprouts which is a French dish similar to cabbage sprouts, bran bread and cider at the price of four francs, 50 centimes or 90 cents in our money." Deciding to see the city whose name he could not or simply did not divulge Holl hopped onto a street car as a means for a relaxing tour. The sight of a "woman conductress and woman motoress" who knew "how to handle the cars" was such a novel sight that Holl had to relate it to his brother.<sup>67</sup>

Another local man also noted major differences between his position in France and his hometown. Redick Marten of the same 149<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery as William Holl, told his mother that "In walking about [France] one is struck by the difference between the modes of farming here and at home. There are no large fields, most of them less than an acre. A great deal of the ground is taken up in hedges." He further reported that "while two-horse teams are common" unlike at home they "are generally placed one in front of the other instead of abreast. The drivers walk and lead the horses instead of riding." Marten was further impressed that the roads these teams traveled did not have a single dirt road.<sup>68</sup> William Holl noted a more confusing difference in the roads. "The roads here," Holl told his brother, "are not so square with the world as ours and a person is liable to come back to where he started unless he is familiar with the country." The houses were also strange as they were built "wholly of stone" with "no lumber being used unless absolutely necessary." Like Marten, Holl reported that the "Farms are small" and further noted that "villages like Pesotum can be found in any direction and at an average of about a mile apart. Stoves here are as rare as snowballs in Hades. The fireplace answers all purposes."<sup>69</sup>

Such differences served to remind these men of home. At the same time, care packages, newspapers, and letters all served to break up the excitement and monotony of their lives in camp and Europe. The mail system was a tangible link to a place they well understood and to those they loved. Undoubtedly, at one point or another on their travels in Europe, men wished they were back home. At least one man, Guy Gauman, would have taken the first boat back immediately after arrival his in France and a horrible experience of sea-sickness. Gauman noted that "Everyone seems to think the war will end this summer, but I don't know, I hope it does." "I am ready," he told his wife, "to go back any time."<sup>70</sup>

<sup>65</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, "Corp. P.T. O'Brien Likes England," 4-19-1918.

<sup>66</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, "WM. Holl Describes Battle Front," 4-19-1918.

<sup>67</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, "WM. Holl Writes From France," 2-22-1918.

<sup>68</sup> *Tolono Weekly Herald*, "Marten Brothers, Widely-Separated, Write Home," 2-22-1918.

<sup>69</sup> *The Pesotum Chief*, "WM. Holl Writes From France," 2-22-1918.

<sup>70</sup> *Tolono Weekly Herald*, "Letters From Boys in Khaki," 3-15-1918.

### **Closing Remarks**

Most of these men did make it back home. Throughout my life I have been cognizant of who the older families were in Pesotum. This project has only expanded those horizons and, at the same time, retracted them as I realize recent moves were the last of a line of descent to call Pesotum home. The men who went off to war invariably, if they survived, came back. Some made their lives in the area while others moved away. Many of the soldiers discussed in this essay must have moved away as their family, to my knowledge, no longer exists in Pesotum. Others, though, it is quite evident they are still around and that the apple does not fall too far from the proverbial tree. One example should suffice. Recall C.W. Meneley's editorial about ex-Gunner Waite's speech in which he basically called him reprehensible to the morally upright Christian man. Well, when I found that and read those same passages to my mother her response was "That's certainly a Meneley for you!" Many of the names I ran across whether they be Meneley, Dalton, Miller, Schweighart, Eisenmenger, Hettinger, Gilles, Rund, Zwilling, or many others are all familiar and, even in some cases, family to me. Their descendants have been a number of things to me in my life: cousin, teacher, friend, and girlfriend.<sup>71</sup> Humorously, the most common of these is cousin though cousin and friend overlap nicely; I was the fifth generation after all. All joking aside, investigating the wartime home front of Pesotum and Tolono has brought what I once thought a sleepy town basically doubling as a retirement community to life.

Eighty years ago the present insular community where everybody keeps to themselves was nonexistent. From the home front to the warfront, the residents of Pesotum and Tolono, confronted new challenges that changed their conceptions of the world in which they lived. Those people at home rallied together and called each other out for not coming to the aid of "The Boys Far Away." They joined community and extra-community organizations to support the war effort and their neighborhood boys who were marching off into the unknown. The soldiers flung out far and wide for training in the U.S. and deployment overseas could not help but compare the new world they were experiencing to that of the world from which they came. They missed the creature comforts of their town and marveled at the strange people, climate, and animals around them. And, often struggling with censorship, found it difficult to relate the full details of their many adventures, whether at the frontline or not. Nevertheless the two sides of the war effort coalesced to form extended communities of reciprocation where the soldiers went forth to fight and those who stayed behind made sure they did not do without. Such interconnections between the home front and warfront created extended communities of Pesotum and Tolono that reached as far as the green, and the not so green, fields of France.

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<sup>71</sup> Yes, I checked the family tree before we started dating and no we were not related.