

Rescuing Forgotten Voices of World War I: Adding Value to Soldiers' Letters Home

By Jodie Steelman Wilson

The Crawfordsville District Public Library places great value on its local history and genealogy collection, which focuses primarily on Montgomery County, Indiana. This collection, part of the Reference Department, is under continual expansion, and it attracts many family researchers and historians to the library.

As the Reference Department continues to develop its collection for patron use, we will occasionally locate an item already in the collection that is in need of further processing. For example, we recently came across a group of World War-I era letters that had been in the library's collection since the early 1960s. The letters had belonged to Mrs. Cordelia (Brenneman) Thompson who lived in Cherry Grove, located about six miles north of Crawfordsville. Mrs. Thompson had two brothers, Amos and Roy Brenneman, who served in the war and wrote to her on occasion. The letters had been catalogued as a group, but were never further examined, and found a home on the shelves where they were essentially forgotten. Other than a copy of an obituary of Mrs. Thompson and her brother Roy, the library had no background information on the letters.

These letters had been stored in archival plastic sleeves but placed on open-access shelving. Although the binder itself was protected with a library security device, the letters were not sealed inside the binder and could easily be removed. Aside from security concerns, the letters had not been prepared for long-term preservation, and to our knowledge, had never been read since their acquisition in the 1960s.

The Reference Department began a project to transcribe these letters, which were difficult to read because of poor penmanship, spelling, and grammar. After the transcription process,

we planned to create a duplicate set of letters for public use in order to place the originals in our secure, climate-controlled archival storage. Although the process seemed to be simple, it became far more comprehensive than we had hoped, yielding the background behind the letters themselves.

The project takes shape

I was assigned the initial task of transcription but soon discovered there was no organization to the letters. Correspondence of both soldiers was included in the binder, and some letters had been separated from envelopes. To begin, I made a chronological list of the letters from each soldier, carefully associating letters with the proper envelopes only if I were completely certain of a match.

During this process, I found a letter, among the others, which was written by James Harley Barton, a soldier from the 150th Indiana Field Artillery. This letter was written in September 1917, and sent from Camp Mills, Long Island, New York — the final stop stateside for troops about to be deployed to France. Although there was no further identifying information about Barton, it was a significant find given the value to Indiana's military history. Clearly, library staff had never examined this letter, as there was no mention of this soldier in the title of the item or metadata for the item record. In addition, I also found several other letters that were sent by the War Department in Washington. The most significant official letter is a notice that Amos Brenneman was severely wounded July 26, 1918.

Following a complete inventory of the letters, I began the transcription process. The poor penmanship of the letters often rendered them illegible, and I hoped that a transcription would suffice — but it soon became evident that the letter writers were very inattentive to normal

grammar and spelling conventions. As a result, we realized that the faithful transcription of the letters would not necessarily make them easy for others to read. For example, in a letter from Amos to his sister (see Figure 1), we read:

We went 10 day on our hight
 from B too here,
 I think we are going too tright
 Too Makling GA 15 of next m
 That is bout 225 mile well it
 not so hard, as people think
 it is.
 On our hight we had about
 50 lb too carry, blanket gun
 half of tent pon show chang
 of close belt and knife and dinner
 But it was all over us.
 I sent \$15 home yesterday.
 I think Pa is going too ARK
 He cant stay out of timber
 Are they conscripting up there

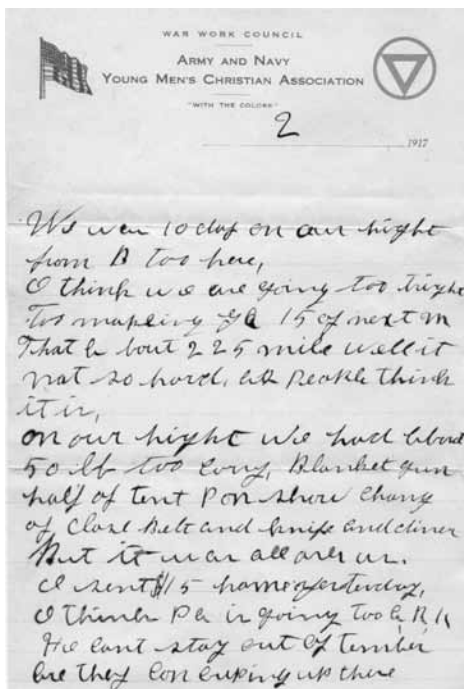


Figure 1: Letter dated July 22, 1917. The writing itself was very clear even if the penmanship itself often made the words difficult to make out.

To assist the reader, I created two separate transcriptions. The first was faithful in spelling and grammar, and merely eliminated the difficulties caused by penmanship. Where I had to guess at any word, I placed it in square

brackets, followed by a question mark. The second transcription attempted to recreate what we felt the soldiers were trying to say. I inserted (in italic) words that were implied by the original, corrected grammatical errors, expanded abbreviations, and — where necessary — inserted explanations. I made both transcriptions follow line breaks found in the original letters to enable readers to easily find the corresponding point in the handwritten letter.

The first transcription thus clarified some of the problems:

We went 10 day on our hight [hike]
 from B too here,
 I think we are going too tright [try]
 Too Makling [Macon?] GA 15 of next
 m[onth?]
 That is bout 225 mile well it
 not so hard, as people think
 it is.
 On our hight [hike] we had about
 50 lb too carry, blanket gun
 half of tent pon show [poncho] chang
 [change]
 of close belt and knife and dinner
 But it was all over us.
 I sent \$15 home yesterday.
 I think Pa is going too ARK
 He cant stay out of timber
 Are they conscripting up there

And the second transcription attempted to level the language without changing the voice of the writer:

We went 10 days on our hike
 from Birmingham to here.
 I think we are going to hike
 to Macon GA, 15th of next month
 That is about 225 miles; well it is
 not so hard as people think
 it is.
 On our hike we had about
 50 lb to carry: blanket, gun,
 half of tent, poncho, change
 of clothes, belt, and knife and dinner.
 But it was all over us.
 I sent \$15 home yesterday.
 I think Pa is going to Arkansas.
 He can't stay out of timber.
 Are they conscripting up there?

At this point in the transcription process, other Reference Department staff read and evaluated all the letters and transcriptions in the hope that they would be able to recognize some words that were still puzzles to me. This strategy was valuable, as demonstrated by a section in one of Roy's letters where a word was especially difficult to make out (see Figure 2). I was certain the text was "level E" given the script, but another reader suggested "back," which fits better "he has gone back with Russell". At the time of the initial transcription, so little was known about the context and writers of these letters, that at times I believed illegible words may have been war-related terms. With further reading and additional context, they are less difficult to recognize. This process may continue for some time, as there are still a few spots in the letters we just can't read because of the poor penmanship.

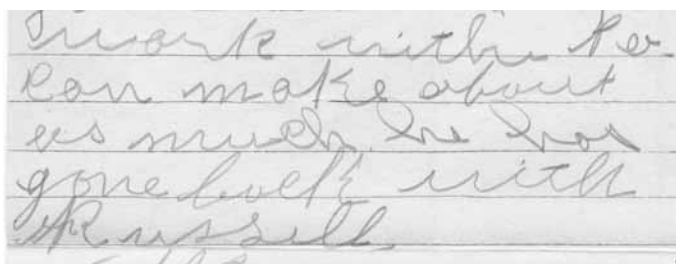


Figure 2: Letter dated November 11, 1917. This sample of Roy's handwriting illustrates the sometimes ambiguous penmanship of the letters.

Research on the letter writers

Learning about the letter writers themselves proved to be more difficult than anticipated. Few pertinent resources were available on the Internet, although I found Amos Brenneman's burial site using various search strategies including truncation and variant spelling. The Indiana War Memorial website listing Indiana's World War I veterans (www.wvets.com) included Harley Barton, but had no further information. Another website directed me to a regimental history of Amos Brenneman's unit, which I was able to request via interlibrary loan. Ancestry.com proved a valuable resource, providing a draft card for Roy Brenneman. The same source also led to a key finding for James Harley Barton: a ledger entry providing his enlistment date and discharge information. Using this information, I was discovered that Barton was from Linden, a local community.

Knowing this fact opened up many possibilities for further research about our Montgomery County veteran.

From various sources I eventually pieced together the soldier's lives, which was important information for the library to add to this set of letters:

Amos D. Brenneman served in Company C, 167th U.S. Infantry, served overseas and was injured in combat at Croix Rouge Farm in France on July 26, 1918. The last letter in the library collection written by Amos is dated January 17, 1919. Amos Brenneman remained in the military after the war, eventually achieving the rank of Master Sergeant. He was born July 13, 1898, died February 9, 1956 and was buried in Oakwood Cemetery in Sheffield, Alabama. Aside from the letters written to his sister who lived in Montgomery County, Amos had no ties to Indiana.

William Roy Brenneman probably spent the entire war at Fort Dade, Florida. He served in the Coastal Artillery Corps, Company 1. The last letter in the library collection written by Roy Brenneman is dated September 2, 1918. Roy Brenneman was born December 12, 1894, died October 8, 1961, in Indianapolis, and is buried in the Crawfordsville Masonic Cemetery. Roy lived for some time with his sister in Montgomery County.

James Harley Barton, a family friend of the Thompsons from Linden wrote one of the letters in the collection. Barton originally enlisted from Crawfordsville's Company C, 2nd Indiana Infantry Regiment, later transferring to the 150th Field Artillery Supply Company. He was born August 30, 1898 in Linden, and died June 7, 1957. He is buried in the Linden Cemetery.

It is significant to note that two of the three letter writers, Amos Brenneman and James Harley Barton, served in the 42nd "Rainbow" Division, one of the first U.S. divisions to engage in fighting in Europe. The division participated in six major battle campaigns and served in occupation duty in Germany after the armistice was signed.

What the transcriptions revealed

The transcription process essentially unlocked the contents of the letters. After I placed the letters in order and deciphered the writing, the thoughts of these three young soldiers came clearly into view. Many passages were very poignant, illustrating the soldiers' concerns over their family's welfare at home, reflections on army life and war, and an appreciation for simple things such as a gift from home. Now current readers can easily identify with the soldiers' situations. For example:

In his first letter, Amos advises his brother on the draft, then brags about how many girls he was writing:

Are they conscripting up there?
[Crawfordsville, Ind.] They got about 300 here the other day. You had better try to cut if you can. Have you got a girl up there yet? I think I am writing to about 100 . . .

- Amos to Roy
— July 22, 1917

Later, a grateful Amos writes home to report:

I got a packet from Corda C. today. I sure did enjoy eating some of that old U.S. candy and smoking some good cigars because that sure is something you don't see in this part of the world – if you do, it takes a rich man to get it.

- Amos to sister Cordelia
— February 2, 1918

Amos reflects on his current situation and looks to the future with hope:

Well, today one year ago I walked out to the fairground to be a soldier. But I did not have the least idea of being in France at this time. But if my good luck continues and I can get back on the dear old U.S. soil once more safe and sound, I mean good times had better hide, because I am going to see my part make up for lost time. I have often heard of war and saw it in movies but I can see the real thing and have it every hour in the day. I have fired many shots, where

I hit or not, I do not know.

- Amos to sister Cordelia
— April 17, 1918

Although the war was over, Amos and his unit remained in Germany for some time. Amos' division is called to recreate a battle for visiting officers, which makes him reflect even more on his condition:

Well I don't know much news; we had some maneuvering, we had a big barrage when we went over the top. Officers from everywhere was here to see us go over. 1 man got killed, 2 got wounded, I think. That is too bad to think they made the war and got killed after everything is over. They *are* taking moving pictures of us maybe you will get to see it. They was about 1500 of us picked out of the 42nd division to pull this off. It sure did seem like the real thing. Well the only thing I want them to do is to talk about taking us back to U.S. – We have been over here 14 months that's just *about* 13 months and 29 days too much for me. I don't believe I would know what to do if I were *where* I could get plenty to eat, and a good place to sleep; also some good clothes to wear. I am almost ashamed to have my picture made in these rags.

- Amos to sister Cordelia
— January 17, 1919

On a topic that today's readers can appreciate, Roy discusses another enemy, influenza, in this brief note:

We haven't any of the flu here yet. We are not allowed to leave the island nor any one to come here. There were about 300 men came in last night so if they don't bring it here, we are not likely to have any of it here.

- Roy to sister Cordelia
— undated

In his only letter in the collection, James Harley Barton tells his friend what obviously

was weighing on his mind as he waited at Camp Mills:

I think we will be across the pond this time next month. I don't care myself where I'm at anymore, tell the truth about it. You're not young but once, *and* when you die, you *are* a long while dead. So you might as well die one place as another."

- Harley to Clyde Thompson
— September 18, 1917

These are just some of the passages that have finally been uncovered for posterity. Without the difficult process of transcription, the thoughts of these young men would have remained hidden and forgotten.

Adding value to the letters

The letters had significance to our collection without our adding further information, but research was necessary to place the letters in context. I began my search with nothing more than the names written on the letters, and two obituaries.

Using the unit information written on the envelopes, I located a published history for Amos' regiment. The timeline given in the book established a more specific location for each letter. Although his letters gave the name of the country he was in, censorship prevented soldiers from providing specific information. Although Amos did not write which battle he was wounded in, the book's timeline and the war department notification of Amos' injury together provided enough specific information to place the injury at the same time as the Croix Rouge farm battle, July 26, 1918.

Knowing that Amos and his father were buried in Sheffield, and that Roy's first letter came from Sheffield, Alabama, I believed that further information would be found there. In hopes of finding more personal information about Amos and Roy, I contacted Betty Dyar, a local history researcher at the Sheffield Public Library. Ms. Dyar located the obituary of Amos and other family information, and then turned her efforts to locating Brenneman family members.

Ms. Dyar's long string of contacts led her to Indianapolis, Indiana, to a relative of Roy

and Amos. He graciously provided some information about the Brenneman family as well as photographs of Roy, Amos, and their brothers and sisters (see Figure 3). With military background information now established and general family history clarified, to find photographs of many of those family members mentioned in the letters was beyond expectation.



Figure 3: *This photograph, believed to be of Amos in 1918, was found in a family scrapbook in Indianapolis.*

Following this discovery, Ms. Dyar found another Brenneman family member in Sheffield, Alabama, who had a small collection of photographs, some unmarked. Among them was a photograph of a WWI soldier, believed to be Roy Brenneman, taken in St. Petersburg, Florida, near Ft. Dade in 1918 (see Figure 4). Roy's letter dated March 1, 1918, mentions he is sending home a poor photograph of himself, and that he is planning to visit St. Petersburg the next week.



Figure 4: *This unmarked photograph, found in Sheffield, Alabama, is likely Roy Brenneman. The reverse side is stamped St. Petersburg, Florida 1918.*

While Ms. Dyar worked on the Alabama angle to the project, I began my research on our local soldier, James Harley Barton. After finding his enlistment and discharge dates, I found corresponding articles in the microfilm of our local newspaper. A ledger we discovered in the library collection showed a handwritten entry indicating Harley had been transferred to the 150th field artillery. Hoping to find a photo of our Montgomery County soldier, I located Harley's obituary using our CDPL vitals database (history.cdpl.lib.in.us/vitals.html), but no children were named in the obituary.

Again using the database, I located the obituaries for his siblings. Without the vital statistics database, prepared by CDPL staff, the discovery of Harley's local relative would not have happened, and we would have concluded our research without proceeding much further. Using the survivor information, I contacted a local family member by phone. Although he did not have any photographs, I thanked him for his time with a follow-up e-mail. That evening, to my immense surprise, I received an e-mail response, with two attachments: two photographs of Harley Barton, one that pictured him in uniform probably before deployment (see Figure 5) and a second photograph taken after the end of the war (see Figure 6).



Figure 5: James Harley Barton, Wagoner, 150th Indiana Field Artillery Supply Company



Figure 6: This portrait of James Harley Barton shows his Victory Medal received at the end of the war. Each brass bar on the medal names a campaign he participated in.

My source had contacted via e-mail another Indiana relative, who provided the photographs. The two family members and I began an e-mail dialogue, carbon copied to other members of the family. Because of this shared conversation, from various sources I eventually received photographs of Clyde and Cordelia (Brenneman) Thompson, the recipients of the war letters, and a number of other items relating to Harley Barton, including copies of his discharge paperwork (see Figure 7), a photo of his medals, and the text of another letter written in 1918.

Although individual phone or mail conversations may also have yielded information, I believe the joint e-mail messages were more effective because the family members' comments helped other family to recall memories and encouraged sharing of family historical photos and documents.

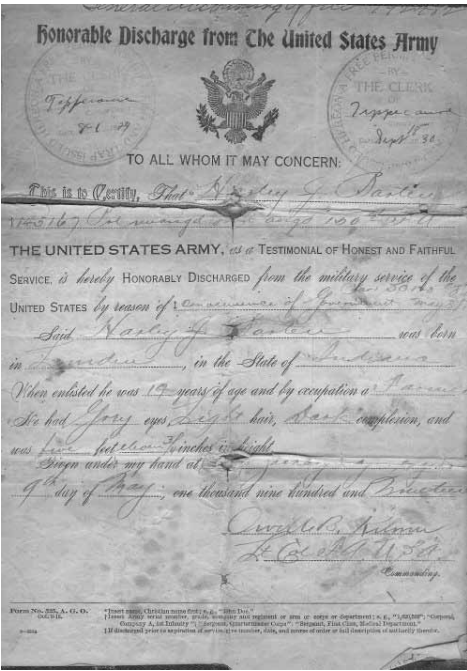


Figure 7: Harley Barton's Army discharge certificate

Another discovery was serendipitous: School ledgers from Harley's grade school appeared one morning on the reference desk after being anonymously donated to the library — there was no mention of Harley, although I did note that his older brother, Frank, was listed in the ledgers. This discovery prompted me to check further, and we soon realized the library actually did own (uncatalogued) other ledgers that contained some of Harley's grades and attendance records, which we have added to the collected research (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Madison Township school ledger showing Harley Barton's attendance from 7th grade

Record of Attendance from		Sept 9 1912, to May 2, 1913																	
Dist.		Room 11																	
NAME		M	T	W	T	F	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S
STUDENT	Barton, Harley																		
GRADE	7																		
AGE	17 1/2																		
PARENT OR GUARDIAN																			
ADDRESS	Indian																		

What began as a simple transcription task soon grew into a full-scale research project. The time I spent collecting further details on the letter writers and the families involved proved to be very worthwhile. In the end, the war letters have been supported with such detailed information that they have much greater appeal than before, and provide a very unique

perspective of the World War I time period in Crawfordsville, Indiana.

Project benefits

As a result of the project, an unusable item in the local history collection was made accessible by the transcriptions and research that provided context to the letters. Following the project, we enhanced the MARC record for the letters to include further access points and updated it to include the overlooked letter of local veteran Harley Barton.

The original documents have now been preserved and placed in secure, climate-controlled archival storage, and a binder replacing the original letters on the patron-accessible shelves contains color copies of all the letters and envelopes as well as background information about the soldiers who wrote them, supporting documentation, and photographs. I have compared the letters of Amos Brenneman to the regimental history of the 167th Infantry Regiment and have noted brief facts to provide a better understanding of individual letters. As an aid to the readers, I have added maps to the binder to illustrate the geographic locations of the soldiers.

The project also created a perceived need for further information about the 150th Indiana field artillery regiment, Harley Barton's unit, so the library added to its collection several books by Elmer Sherwood, a diarist of this regiment, to address this void in our local history collection.

The individual letters are now available as color scans with transcriptions on the web so the information contained within them can be found by even a casual Internet researcher (www.cdpl.lib.in.us/research/brenneman). This online presence will make it possible for extended family members to locate and use this resource without prior knowledge of the existence of the letters. Photographs of the soldiers' families are now accessible on the web as well. As a result of the research surrounding the letters, the library has received over a hundred unrelated historical images to add to our local history image database.

The library has promoted the letters and resulting research (including other findings related to Crawfordsville and World War I) in a

library display in honor of Armistice Day 2009, now called Veterans Day.

Finally, as a result of this project, the Indiana War Memorial Project website has been updated with Harley Barton's service information, which adds detail to the state's historical project relating to World War I.

Conclusion

At the time the letters were rediscovered in our collection in summer of 2009, the two remaining World War I veterans living in the UK had just passed away, underscoring the need for preservation of primary sources relating to WWI. Only one American WWI soldier is still alive at the time of this writing. The project has protected our local heritage, since the writers had a tie to Montgomery County, as well as made available a resource that provides a glimpse into how young men thought and acted in the early years of the 20th century. Finally, it has increased the appeal and utility of these letters to our current patrons and researchers interested in the study of World War I and related subjects.

Postscript: After our local newspaper, the Crawfordsville Journal Review, interviewed me regarding this project, it published an article on the day after Veterans Day. As a result of this publicity, a library patron decided to donate an extensive collection of World War I artifacts that once belonged to his father-in-law, who, like Harley Barton, also served in the 150th Field Artillery (items included helmet, caps, riding boots, gas mask, holster, field manuals and notebooks). The success of this publicity for the library, along with other recent donations we've had recently, may lead to a future article.

Author

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