

Way We Were

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News from the front

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The First World War, described at the time as “the war to end all wars,” officially ended on November 11, 1918, one hundred years ago. It was fought in theaters across the globe, from Africa, to the Middle East, to China. The European continent saw some of the heaviest fighting. The impact was brutal and long-lasting: nine million soldiers and seven million civilians died as a direct result of the fighting; another fifty to 100 million deaths worldwide were from genocide and influenza, of which the war was considered a contributory factor; and there were disastrous political consequences, particularly in Russia and Germany, many of which directly led to the Second World War only twenty years later.

In the midst of the fighting, disease, destruction, and despair, one thing comforted both soldiers and civilians alike: letters.

It is impossible to understate the importance of correspondence over the course of the war. Although distance and censorship impacted what information made it from trench to home front, letters to and from soldiers and their loved ones kept everyone grounded. Letters from family and sweethearts assured the men on the front that they were still loved, missed, and needed when the war was over. And frequent letters from their “soldier boys” assured everyone back home that the men were alive.

The United States entered the war in April 1917. Mobilized to action, hundreds of thousands of American men, and some women, were sent overseas. Letter paper followed. According to contemporary reports in newspapers and by aid organizations like the Red Cross and YMCA, over eight million sheets of letter paper and four million envelopes were shipped to the front per month. Additionally, soldiers had access to “field postcards” containing pre-written messages and postcards acquired locally.

Countless letters from Parkites serving overseas arrived frequently in Park City. Many were published in the local paper. While most of the letters were newsy and filled with generalities, others contained details of harsh life on the front. “We had a taste of the German ‘tear’ gas,” Private Donald Alexander wrote in May 1918. “The ‘mustard’ gas is the worst.”

Sailor Bud Horan traveled back and forth between New York and France regularly with troop transport ships. In a letter published in the Park Record in February 1918, he related a particularly trial-filled crossing. Arriving in France, “we were fired upon...by three submarines and we had an exciting battle for about two hours. The torpedo boats saved us from going to the bottom.”

On the way home, Horan's ship encountered a raging storm. "Some of the waves would go twenty feet in the air," he reported. "Everything was shook to pieces. We couldn't sleep at all." One sailor died and four - including Horan - were injured as a result of the storm.

Despite sometimes bad news, letters served as a way to connect soldiers to the home front and raise both their and their loved ones' morale. They were critical components of wartime life.



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Credit: Park City Historical Society and Museum, Fraser Buck Collection

Caption: Bud Horan, front row, right, served in the Navy during the First World War. He and dozens of other Park City men serving overseas wrote letters home, many of which were published in the local paper.