

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

Carroll's Yesteryears
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1916: Troops, tension on the Mexican border
by Jay Graybeal

The recent return of military personnel involved in the Middle East brings to mind another homecoming that took place seventy-five years ago. Eighty-two members of Co. H, 1st Maryland Infantry, and the twenty-four members who comprised the regimental band, received their orders to return home to Carroll County on Nov. 4, 1916. Co. H was under the command of Capt. John N. Wigle and the Band was led by 1st Sgt. Drum Major Harry M. Kimmey.

These men have been among the more than 3,000 Maryland National Guardsmen mobilized and ordered to the Mexican border by President Woodrow Wilson on June 18, 1916. The guardsmen were sent to bolster 12,000 army regulars during a critical period when war with Mexico seemed imminent. The Mexican government had objected to the so-called Punitive Expedition led by Gen. John J. Pershing in pursuit of the Mexican raider Pancho Villa. Pershing's incursion onto Mexican soil had been prompted by Villa's March 9 nighttime raid on the tiny border town of Columbus, New Mexico.

Preserved in the manuscript collection at the historical society is the original Western Union telegram from Col. Charles A. Little to Sgt. Harry M. Kimmey: "Assemble the band in armory tonight see that the men are properly equipped allow them to return to their homes tonight but reassemble tomorrow morning to hold themselves in readiness to go into camp will notify you later as to exact time of mobilization." A second telegram sent the following day gave the band its travel orders: "The Band will start for camp at Laurel Wednesday morning June 21st between seven and eight o'clock Western Maryland purchase travel rations for trip and one meal in camp and take the usual receipts for the expense there of wagons will be loaded on flat cars and securely propped and tied."

The 1st Maryland entrained for Texas on June 30. The Marylanders spent most of their time encamped at Eagle Pass, Texas. Their daily activities included guard, drill, details, shooting and long marches intended to harden the citizen soldiers and train them in maneuvers should war come. Local newspapers frequently printed letters sent home by the soldiers. The August 25, 1916 issue of the *Times* noted a postcard from Cpl. Ober S. Herr of Co. H, "We are all getting more like soldiers each day, both physically and in a military way, able to stand the work required of us now which would have been practically impossible several weeks ago. Received the *Times* each week, which is very much appreciated."

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The same issue carried a lengthy letter from Band member Charles Bollinger:

"Dear Friend: I received your letter and should have answered you sooner but I am always hard at work to keep from work. I am well. Tell Father Mitten of the Times I received his card and will answer him soon. I cannot tell him about this life as I have not had the hardships to go through with as he did in the Civil War. We all enjoy his paper, the Times, very much. Well your job on the cymbals is still open and if you would come down an hour every day and rehearse with us you might make good. Francis C. Keefer doesn't do anything but eat and sleep and is growing like a horse. Everybody is well but Jerry Loats, he is not so well, but will soon be all right. I am taking the world very easy and when you are in anything make the best of it. We have enough to eat. I have graduated on the saxophone, am nearly through with the trombone and have flunked the violin. Well I will tell you of our job of playing for the Catholic fete. We had some crowd on Sunday evening, they have no Sunday here. Of course the girls were there. Americans were very few. The Mexican girls waited on the tables. All we would get was a pleasant smile. The menu was Hotmollies, Lollolies and sandwiches. This is not the way they spell it but sounds that way to me; ice cream and cake, which was all right. We played for some pretty nice dances. We get supper for our work. We have plenty of sand. If it was not for that would not want to be at a better place. Of course it is not thickly settled outside of the town. We hiked 10 miles and did not see a thing but rattle snakes and horned toads. A fellow said if he owned Hell and Texas, he would rent Texas and live in Hell, but I cannot see it that way, for you could not sleep at a pleasanter place than here. The air is dry and cool. I will tell you lots when I see you. Have no idea when we will get home.

"Give my regards to all. Yours,
Charles Bollinger"

None of the guardsmen entered Mexican territory and tensions between the two governments gradually eased. For most of the guardsmen the experience on the border had been a positive one. Officers and enlisted men alike had gained valuable experience in mobilization, troop movements, maneuvers and camp life. Fortunately, there were no casualties among the 1st Marylanders and the men returned to a thankful county.

Photo credit: Courtesy of the Historical Society of Carroll County

Photo caption: "Takin' a rest on a hike," from left: Paul E. Byers, Sgt. Charles M.A. Frock (standing) Sgt. Uriah H. Heltebridle, Oscar C. Monroe, Andrew M. Himler and Charles E. Brown, Eagle Pass, Texas, 1916.