

Although November 11th is now called Veterans Day, I always remember it as Armistice Day. There is something haunting about the fact that at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, the horror which was “The War to End All Wars” finally stopped. Nobody used the term World War I in the headlines because nobody knew there would be something to follow called World War II.

Looking at a Carroll County newspaper, “The Times,” published here since 1911 and now called the “Carroll County Times,” there are intriguing stories associated with the last days of the war. Many thanks to the Carroll County Public Library for giving us internet access to that paper via the “Carroll County Times Archives.” We can now search more than 100 years of our hometown paper absolutely free!

What stories did The Times carry on November 15, four days after the armistice was signed? It was just a weekly in those days. In addition to the powerful headline attached to this article, it reported on a Peace Parade with “hundreds of handsomely decorated automobiles and trucks filled with men, women and children shouting, cheering, ringing bells, blowing horns, singing patriotic songs.” The lyrics to Julia Ward Howe’s stirring “Battle Hymn of the Republic” appeared at the bottom of the front page. An article mentioned a meeting at the Armory on Westminster’s Longwell Avenue which had been packed with attendees and ended with everyone singing “The Star-Spangled Banner.” In 1918, that was not yet the official national anthem, but most people regarded it that way.

Just because the war was over didn’t mean that raising funds to support it would also stop. The paper announced an upcoming patriotic public auction to support the United War Work Fund. Everything but the kitchen sink was offered for sale – thoroughbred cattle, wagons, coal, turkeys, quilts, a dog, and a 5-passenger auto. “Preceding the sale a herald will go through the streets [of Westminster] announcing the sale followed by the cow and calf, dog and other donations gaily decorated.” What a hoot! This must have raised thousands of dollars to help cover the huge costs of the war.

While it is interesting to read what the paper reported on November 15, I looked back two weeks at the issue of October 25. What stories filled the pages then? Carroll County, as well as the rest of the country, was in the throes of a pandemic – the infamous Spanish flu. Like COVID in this decade, the Spanish flu closed schools, movie theatres, and meetings during the fall of 1918 and into early 1919. On October 25, 1918, there were 27 obituaries for people of all ages, and the Surgeon General had two full columns of advice under the headline, “Uncle Sam’s Advice on Flu.” An article titled “Men Wanted” indicated that the government still needed mechanics for the Motor Transportation Corps “to aid in the crushing of the German Military machine.” If there was an inkling the war would soon be over, it wasn’t in the headlines.

Each week The Times donated space to letters parents shared from their sons in a column called “With Our Boys ‘Over There.’” All the letters appearing in the October 25th issue were written in mid-September, two months before the surrender, but just before many of those same “boys” would have their first taste of real fighting. It became the final battle – the enormous Meuse-Argonne Offensive – and began September 26. Although the American troops were mainly

“untried and inexperienced,” the Allied commanders hoped they would turn the tables on the Axis powers.

Roy Leister’s letter home mentioned some things which would worry his parents, but others that would not. He hadn’t had a bath in two weeks. However, his family certainly didn’t want to hear, “We have a few casualties. Have been in gas several times.”

Private W.A. Haines said things were “quiet the last few days.” He had started a Bible Class and was able to attend church. Eugene Walsh’s letter home was dated September 18th. “Am at the front now, writing this letter by candle light, with shells going over my head. Everything is lovely and I am feeling fine.” Like Roy Leister, he couldn’t remember what a hot bath felt like. He mentioned the soldiers’ lack of trustworthy information about how the war was going: “Sometimes the war is over, and even that the Allies are in Berlin.”

Wilbur Miller of Bird Hill was in Company C, 112 M.G.B. (Machine Gun Battalion) — part of the famous 29th Division. On the day he wrote his letter in September he had received 10 letters and a card from home. Five of the letters came from his mom. Things must have been pretty quiet if mail was delivered and he had time to write back. He told his mother, “I have been in the trenches twice and had a little gas too, but I am still here all OK. The Germans don’t have my name on any of their shells. We see some very pretty places. France is a beautiful country.” By the time his family received this letter, American newspapers would have covered the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. It began with a tremendous artillery barrage of the German lines. Someone serving in a machine gun battalion must have been in the thick of the action. There is a happy ending to Wilbur’s story. He was back home in Bird Hill by the 1920 census working as a laborer on the “home farm.” By 1930 he was married, and he lived to the age of 75.

Sergeant J. Leland Jordan wrote his father on September 22 saying he was now back “near the front,” after having spent two weeks in a hospital in Paris. Jordan began serving in a machine gun battalion, but ended in an ordnance detachment. He said the army was moving him a lot, but “I have no objections how much they move me around, for at the same time I am seeing quite a little of France.” Like Wilbur Miller, Jordan survived the war and eventually became assistant editor of The Times. Over his lifetime he amassed a huge collection of old newspapers, Civil War manuscripts, historical photographs, booklets, and broadsides which luckily ended up in the hands of the Historical Society of Carroll County after his death in 1955.

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Image 1: Source – Carroll County Times Archives Caption: Headline of The [Carroll County] Times four days after the Axis surrender on November 11, 1918.

Image 2: Source – Historical Society of Carroll County Caption: Lieutenant Harry Gilmore Berwager, member of Company C, 112 Machine Gun Battalion. Horses were widely used to pull machine guns during the war.

Image 3: Source – Historical Society of Carroll County Caption: Sergeant J. Leland Jordan served in an ordnance detachment during the war. This photo was taken in Coblenz, Germany in 1918.

*Image 4: Source – Library of Congress <https://www.loc.gov/resource/anrc.00498/>
Caption: Residents of Paris celebrating the German surrender on November 11, 1918.*