

# Remembering Plainville and World War I

*by Rosemary Morante*

At about 3 AM on November 11, 1918, Plainville learned that Germany had signed the Armistice ending World War I. In the article "Plainville Celebrates Peace," the *New Britain Herald* reported that church bells rang and factory whistles sounded. Some folks even banged on tin pans or used "other ear splitting, noise making devices." Crowds began to gather and cheer in what the reporter called a "wild and hilarious outbreak of enthusiasm."

The experience of Plainville in World War I had begun in 1917. Although the United States did not enter the war until April of that year, other nations had been fighting since 1914. It had become a war of brutality and destruction beyond what almost anyone could have anticipated. It was also at the point of a stalemate. Ultimately, American military involvement and resources helped to turn the tide and bring about a victory for the Allies.



Sending off the men to Camp Devens from Plainville RR station



Plainville soldier Peter Dalena

Through their military service, about 200 Plainville men and one woman helped to make this victory possible. This number included those who served in either the Army or the Navy.

The group was diverse. There were at least 10 African-Americans in the military and there were at least 40 who had immigrated from Italy, Scotland, Ireland, Canada, or Russia (which then included a large part of Poland). Many had worked in area factories while others had different occupations including a few who listed farming. Plainville men were of different ranks ranging, for example, from Army Privates to at least one Army Colonel, G. Arthur Hadsell who was with the first American company to land on European soil.

Most were new to the military, but others had experience such as those in the Infantry's 26<sup>th</sup> "Yankee Division" who had served on the Mexican border in 1916 during the time of Pancho Villa.

Nine persons from Plainville died in military service during the war. Others were wounded or taken as prisoners by the Germans. Those who lost their lives were:

## **Francis Barnes**

Killed at the Battle of Seicheprey, Francis was the first local soldier who died. He had worked at Trumbull Electric.

## **Arthur Bates**

Wounded during an attack on the Hindenburg Line, Arthur later died from his injuries.

## **Monica Brock**

An Army nurse who had supervised several wards at a military hospital in France, Monica passed away in Washington D. C. after her return from Europe.

## **James Green**

A former worker at Bristol Brass, James died of influenza during the war.

### **James MacIldowie**

A Scottish immigrant and still a citizen of Great Britain, James served in the Canadian Expeditionary Forces and died at the Battle of Blecourt. He had also worked at Bristol Brass.

### **Arthur O'Hara**

Arthur was still another casualty of the 1918 influenza epidemic during the war.

### **Leon Roberts**

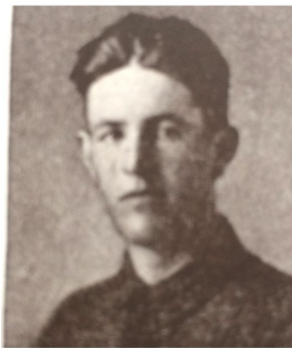
Leon was gassed at the Battle of Chateau Thierry and hospitalized for months in France. He passed away just before his division sailed home in 1919.

### **Frank Saviano**

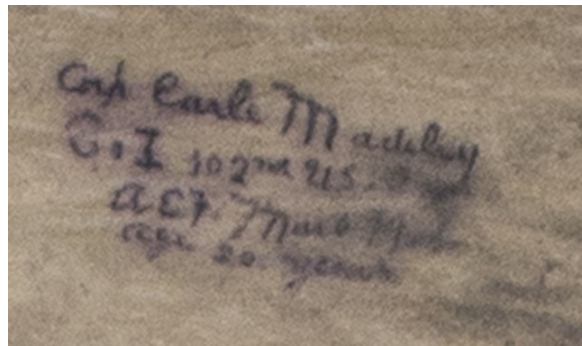
An Italian immigrant who had worked at Sessions Clock in Bristol, Frank was killed in action.

### **Earl Madeley**

Earle died from wounds at the Battle of Chateau Thierry. He had worked at Trumbull Electric. In 2014, a *New York Times* article highlighted Corporal Madeley as one of the Americans who inscribed his name in a quarry that was used as an underground barracks at Chemin Des Dames.



Earle Madeley



Several of the names above may be familiar to many since local VFW and American Legion posts were named in their honor.

The Plainville home front was also instrumental in supporting the war effort. There were drives for Liberty Bonds, War Savings Stamps, and used clothing for the Belgian refugees. Peach stones were collected and used in the production of gas masks. Women made knitted items, dressings, and soldier comfort bags. "One lady in her 80<sup>th</sup> year" knitted 114 pairs of socks! Fuel was rationed, and Home Gardens and canning of produce were promoted. Charles Norton even made 105 plots of his land available for gardens. In addition, there was assistance to military families as well as rallies to support the war and send-offs to the men leaving for camp from the Plainville Railroad Station.

It was also busy at places like Trumbull Electric. Over 2216 electrical switchboards were made for U.S. (and British) war vessels including submarines. Trumbull also noted that female employees grew from 12 to 150. Although the icon of Rosie the Riveter did not exist until World War II, Trumbull Electric emphatically stated that "the women saved the day for us."

Another aspect of life at home was receiving letters from those in the service. Many letters to family were printed in the *Herald*. They are typically upbeat in tone and even humorous at times. Of course, there were rules regarding content. However, the letters still contain references to shell fire, gas warfare, the cold and wet of the trenches, and "going over the top" to attack the enemy. They reflect both the times and the character of our young men. For example, Sailor Willard Cowles calmly describes zig zagging for hours to avoid a German U-Boat while POW Randolph Stewart talks about living on black bread and watery soup but then writes that he looks forward to helping his father on the farm to make up for the time he is missing.

It is especially touching to read the words of Leon Roberts and Earle Madeley who did not make it home to their families. From a hospital in France, Leon writes about the effects of the gas but tells his mother not to worry about him. He also writes proudly about the bravery of his fellow soldiers and says that "the boys are still at them and will never give up until they (the Germans)

quit.” In a letter to Broad Street School which he had attended, Earle Madeley writes about his almost 12,000 miles of military travels from Mexico to France but adds “girls and boys, there is not a town that is better to live in than your own hometown of Plainville.”

In the months following the Armistice, the town gradually got back to normal and the troops came home. On June 25, 1919, Plainville had a grand Welcome Home celebration that started with “Aeroplane Maneuvers” at 1 PM and continued with a parade, speeches, band concert, reception and a “lunch with music.”



Central Square Decorated for Welcome Home



On November 11<sup>th</sup>, we will recognize both Veterans Day 2018 and the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1918 Armistice to end World War I. The booklet done for Plainville’s 1919 Welcome Home celebration has some words that are still timely as we reflect on both. The booklet, which is “affectionately dedicated to those of our men and boys, and to a woman who went forth into the World War” states:

“It is an easy thing to declare for the patriotism of a community, but it is understood that deeds and not words are the sure proof of devotion to any cause. It is in deeds that our beloved town stood forth for all to behold.”

*If you are interested in researching Plainville in World War I or seeing more resources on the topic, please visit the Historic Center. We are open Mondays and Wednesdays 9 AM-Noon. During the summer, we extend Wednesday hours until 2 PM and add Saturday 1-3 PM. Other times can be set up by appointment. It is always a good idea to call in advance so that we are ready to assist you. Please contact us at 860-747-6577 or email [plvhistorical@gmail.com](mailto:plvhistorical@gmail.com).*