

Mac Wrote Some Lively Letters A Prolific Local Scribe of WW-I

By Mark Fritz

During the First World War, whenever a letter from one of “our boys over there” would arrive home (over here) in Columbia County, PA, there would be much excitement, and, well, relief—it meant that that boy was still alive (at least when he wrote the letter). A common trend during the war was for parents to share their sons’ letters with the local newspapers. Nothing new, this had also been commonly done during the Civil War. The newspapers loved this practice because it gave them free content, war news fresh from the front, almost like having a professional war correspondent, only better, because they didn’t have to pay anyone. And parents loved the practice too because it gave them bragging rights.

Not all the letters that came to the newspapers went to the families first. Some were sent directly to the newspaper’s editor. And they weren’t formal letters addressed to “The Editor” but, rather, more informal letters addressed to “Percy” or “Paul.” Percy was Percy Brewington, editor of Benton’s weekly newspaper *The Argus*, and Paul was Paul Eyerly, editor of Bloomsburg’s daily newspaper *The Morning Press*. Both newspapers were small town newspapers, and in a small town where everybody knows everybody, these men were not just “editors” but also friends. And yet these letters are different than the ones soldiers sent to their families. The writers were conscious that their missives would be widely read by the newspaper’s patrons, and so they tried harder to make these letters more newsy, more detailed, even entertaining.

One of the most prolific of local letter-writing doughboys was Anthony J. McDonald (aka, Mac). Although he had been born in Centralia, he had spent a lot of his youth in Benton and Bloomsburg, playing on various baseball teams. He was apparently quite good and became widely known and liked. During his service with the 12th Field Artillery, he wrote at least 13 letters, most sent directly to *The Argus*, sometimes addressed “Dear Friend Percy.”

Presented here are his last two letters of the war. While perhaps not as entertaining as his earlier letters, they are crammed with details about the action he saw. Soldiers’ letters that were written following the November 11, 1918 Armistice are almost always the most interesting because, at that point, military censorship of soldiers’ letters had ceased. All restrictions were off and the men could finally open up about what they had seen and experienced.



Every U.S. soldier wanted to capture Kaiser Bill

A preparatory note to the reader regarding slang -- references to “Bill” are references to the German monarch Kaiser Wilhelm, who was roundly hated and demonized by the Allies during the war. In an earlier letter, Mac had bragged to Percy that he was personally going to capture the Kaiser and bring

home his coat as a spoil of war.

McDonald Letter #8...



Portrait of Percy
Brewington, Editor of
The Argus

...from Benton's *The Argus*; Nov. 14, 1918:

INTERESTING SOLDIERS LETTERS

Another Interesting One From McDonald--All of a Cheerful Vein--Make
Good Reading

The following letter was received by the editor from Anthony McDonald.
These interesting letters are awaited anxiously by our readers:

Sept. 20, 1918

Bon Jour! Percy, sorry I could not be home for the big picnic; it must have been a hummer. We have "old home week" here; the show is going on all year, and all the Sammies are having a great old time. The Crown Prince was here for a very short while. Some say the action there was too hot for him. I believe it was; so does every one else who witnessed our barrage which opened up at one a.m., Thursday. The German prisoners and Friche say it had little on any bombardment they had seen in this war. I thought Soissons was a loud one. Here the flashes from the big guns lit up the heavens so you could easily read a newspaper. So thoroughly did the artillery do the job that when the doughboys and marines went over, the Germans who were left, were too badly scared to offer any resistance. The number of casualties were very small; all ours could be counted on your fingers. But a short time after our boys went over, the Huns began to pour back as prisoners; not a bad looking crowd with the exception of one fellow with a wooden leg and another who had crossed the Atlantic in the *Mayflower* with Columbus; ha, some boy! And with those prisoners came a number of civilians who had been held captive since before the war began. They were a grateful crowd. I saw old ladies kiss the boots of many of our boys.

Percy, I often wish you could see...how the huns lived here. Things had been very quiet in this sector and they thought it was going to remain so. Bungaloes were built...in the hills, gardens planted; an electric plant furnished light, and power to run a pump which pumped water...to all parts of the sector. At one place we found an observation post with what looked like one of those large ladders which they use in circuses for the high dive; this placed alongside a tall tree and ...into the branches. We had to get very close to see it.



The Germans made their dugouts as comfortable and "homey" as possible.

The bungaloes were somewhat like those along Fishing Creek only more ornately furnished. Some had pianos, graphonolas, libraries. In an officer's house I found a bed with two...ticks on it. Oh, boy. And I hadn't slept in a feather bed since 1917. Some of us jumped in and spent the afternoon there. The 23rd Infantry captured a complete set of band instruments. We were fortunate enough to get a large cabinet full of band music and a box of music stands. "A" battery captured a light wagon and two horses. The fellows have had great sport.... A German Howitzer and a big pile of gas shells afforded some amusement one morning. We sent the shells back at the Huns as fast as the guns could be loaded. There were a number of "75s"... [text missing here]

....They did not get anyone for all their trouble. Did I get scared? Well, I don't know, but I have noticed lately that my trousers wear out at the knees first. On my way here one night I had to jump across a ditch to escape being run over by a big truck. On the other side I hit a pole and landed back into the ditch, which took the wind out of me. My pal said I asked — who was ahead, how many down? He said,

"Only one." I had a laugh on him later when a horse which he was watering swung round and pushed him head first into the trough.



The "gun" used by most U.S. Field Artillery batteries during the war was the French 75.

One thing that interested me very much was the way in which our engineers went to work rebuilding the roads thru no mans land. No supervisors had to worry about these roads since 1914; in result, they were in bad shape; there were some places where there was little to indicate there had once been a road thru here, with wire, trenches and huge stones that had fallen from houses in small towns; large trees lay across the road in some places; big shells tore up sections as if a ploughman had gone thru. The first day I saw the road, I wondered how our big guns were going to be taken along. Travel thru fields was impossible, as it had rained every day, and the ground was all mud. It took the engineers but two days to clear all the wreckage and make a road better than many of our roads back home.

The Germans had a network of small gauge railroads running thru this section. It took the engineers but two hours to put the lines in running order. This helped considerably.

Coming back to the booty again, at this time the marines saw the Huns towing a wagonload of beer out of a tavern. In less time than it takes to drink it, they went over, captured the Germans and beer. Those fellows seem to have plenty of beer and wine. Women's clothing was found in many dugouts. I found several pairs of women's shoes that had never been worn.

Chapin refused to transfer to our band. He expects to be made a corporal soon. I think he is very foolish; our 3rd class musicians get the same pay as a regular army corporal, 2nd class the same as a sergeant.

Raymond Fought of Millville is here. Karl Hess was in our town but I didn't know it until after he had left.

Chow time, Percy, remember me to my Benton friends and write soon.

Your Old Pal,
Mac.

McDonald Letter #9...

...from *The Argus*; December 1918:

FROM OUR SOLDIERS

Ermsdorf, Luxemburg

November 29, 1918

Hello, old timer! Sit down a few minutes and I will tell you of how the old regular Second Division spent their time in France. Last March we went into our first position on the line a few miles from Verdun. This was a quiet sector.



U.S. Field artillery unit passing through Chateau-Thierry after the battle there

It was the Second who halted the Hun at Chateau Thierry. This was the first real test of the Yankees. You have read of how the Marines (who are part of our division) supported by the 12th did the trick.

July 18th the first and second divisions were first to go over in the big Soisson offensive.

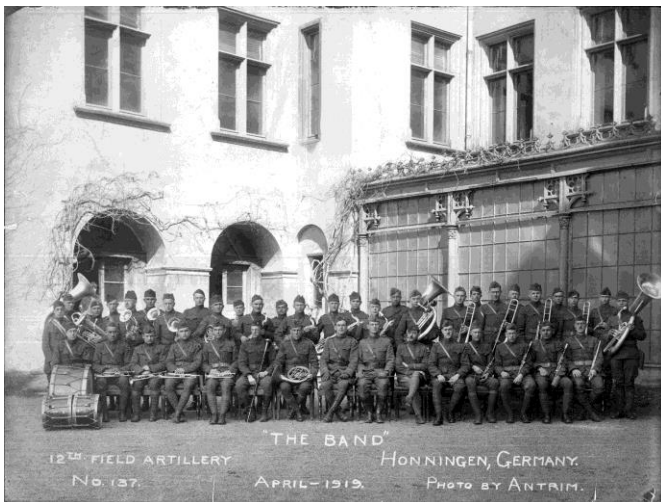
September, the Second was first over in the St.

Mihiel drive. From here we were sent to Mount Blanc on the Champagne front at the request of General Foch. This was the

toughest thing we encountered during the war.

We hiked from the Champaign front to the Argonne front where we joined the American Army. Again the second was first to go over and we were still going when the armistice was signed. Our support was just outside Sedan. Since then we have been on the Hun's heels, bound for somewhere in Germany.

The trip to the border here was made in hikes of from 20 to 25 kilos per day. Talk about receptions, you have to hand it to the Belgians. All the villages sent out delegations to meet us. Some were headed by bands. One band had their instruments hidden in a cellar since the war began. The Germans left town at 9; we came in at 11. In the meantime, the band men took their horns out. The music - well, they meant well. In one town, hundreds of young people formed circles and danced while the band played the Belgium national anthem. At night they gave dances and everyone had to dance, no dodging; they pulled us on the floor. No sleeping in barns here; they took you into their homes and gave you good beds.



12th Field Artillery Band in Honningen, Germany, April 1919.

Across the streets large banners were hung bearing the words, "Welcome to the true freedom."

Those people had hard times during the war. The Huns stopped at nothing. One town, Olizy [Oise?], was burned to the ground because someone fired at a German soldier. One day we met a boy with a bandage around his head. He and three other boys put a tack on an automobile seat. A German sat on it and in his rage, he drew a gun and fired into

the crowd, wounding this boy. In the one town we were told about how they took 130 boys and girls out of church, lined them up against the church wall, then turned a machine gun on them. Drunken Huns killed over one hundred people in this town alone because they would not speak German. An old priest told us about a Hun who put a bayonet through a nun's throat. This may sound fishy to you. Here's what I saw in a small town 3 kilometers above Youcq. The Germans gave civilians two hours to get out. The people did as requested and were a short way away from the town when old Bill's crowd opened fire on them. In a few minutes the road was covered with dead women, men and children.

At one house we came upon a young man carrying a baby in his arms. The mother lay dead on the floor with half a dozen machine gun bullets in her body. This poor fellow fed

the baby with milk from our kitchen. I saw women scrape the milk from discarded cans to feed their babies. Most of those people looked like ghosts rather than human beings.

I'm sorry I cannot send you old Bill's coat as I promised. If his coat is as full of cooties as the German soldier's, you wouldn't want it.

I have been in places where you could not find 10 square feet of ground that had not been turned up by shells or trenches. I spent a few nights in a 3-story dugout. It was about 100 ft. under ground; some place!

The prices of articles may interest you. Butter, 62 marks per pound; eggs [?] per dozen; ham, \$1 per pound; milk, 1 franc per pint; ice cream, never heard of it.

We had a chicken supper a few nights ago; this cost \$2.50 a piece. I did not mind the price so much, but I think the chicken died from Spanish Influenza.

How would you like to awake in the morning and find a big rooster singing on your bed in the hay and to have a quartet of pigs next door singing "Where do we go from here, boys." We do not know where we're going, but we are mighty glad that we are going to Germany instead of Old Bill going up Fishing Creek. By the way, they talk about the magnificent scenery here. Believe me, there is not a place here that has a thing on old Fishing Creek Valley.

Chow time, Percy, let me hear from you. I wish you and all my Benton friends a Merry Christmas

Sincerely,
Corp. Anthony McDonald

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY: Anthony Joseph McDonald was born in Centralia, PA, on Oct. 12, 1885, the son of Alexander and Bridget Dougherty McDonald. He enlisted in the U.S. Army at Fort Slocum, NY, on May 8, 1917, and served until his discharge at Camp Dix, NJ, on Aug. 13, 1919. He was with the 12th Field Artillery, 2nd Division from May 18, 1917 until Aug. 12, 1919. He was also a member of the 12th F. A. Band. He served overseas from January of 1918 until August of 1919. Although a Corporal during most of the war, he left service as a Sergeant. When he filled out a Veteran's Compensation Application in 1934, he listed his military "engagements" as: "Aisne, Aisne-Marne, St. Mihiel, and Meuse-Argonne."



Anthony McDonald's
portrait from the 1921
BSNS yearbook

After returning home from the war, he attended Bloomsburg State Normal School (BSNS), graduating in the class of 1921. On August 21, 1928, McDonald married Margaret Horan, of Centralia.

Anthony and Margaret had three children, Kathryn (born 1929), Margaret (born 1930), and Raymond (born 1933). Mrs. Margaret Horan McDonald died of breast cancer July 23, 1934, leaving Anthony a widower with three young children.

Anthony J. McDonald spent most of his life teaching in the Conyngham schools. He was a member of Centralia Legion Post 608, and he continued his musical pursuits by playing in the Ashland Elks Band. He was 83 years old when he died on August 12, 1970. He was buried in the St. Ignatius church cemetery, Centralia.

NOTE: Nine of Anthony McDonald's letters (including the previous two) are printed in *Some Prolific Letter Writers of WW-I*. Another five of his letters to the *Argus* were printed in *Letters Home (WW-I)*. Those are all post-Armistice letters and depict his activities while serving with the U.S. Army of Occupation in Germany. He was a member of the 12th Field Artillery Band, and many of his duties revolved around the band's concerts. Keeping the troops entertained kept them busy and thus out of trouble, so the Army used its bands for morale purposes frequently throughout the war, and especially throughout the period of occupation.



A banner in Mersch, Luxembourg, welcomes U.S. Occupation Forces as liberators.