



ANNA GILBERTSON

and the Gold Star Mothers and Widows Pilgrimages after World War I



SUSAN L. SCHRADER

War had been raging in Europe for almost three years when the United States entered the Great War, now known as World War I, on April 6, 1917. Over the course of the next 19 months, America sent two million men to war. Among the mothers and young wives who bid their soldiers farewell was Anna Gilbertson of Owatonna. Anna sent two sons to fight—Arthur and Oscar. Oscar survived, but Arthur was stricken by disease aboard ship and died October 10, 1918, upon reaching France.¹ With the death of one soldier-son, Anna became a Gold Star mother.

Years after the armistice on November 11, 1918, following much debate, the US government approved the Gold Star mothers and widows pilgrimages of 1930–33—an all-expenses-paid program to take selected bereaved women to Europe to grieve at a son's or husband's grave. Arthur Gilbertson was one of nearly 31,000 US soldiers and sailors buried in US cemeteries overseas. Anna Gilbertson was one of the 6,654 Gold Star women who traveled to Europe and witnessed the still-visible horrors of World War I. Among the treasures she saved were her travel diary, scrapbook, souvenirs, medallions, and documents. These documents add a personal dimension that deepens our understanding of the planning, execution, purposes, and success—at least for one Minnesota woman—of the government-sponsored Gold Star pilgrimages.²

Anna Mathilda Jackson was born in Arvika, Sweden, in 1873. After the death of her mother, 14-year-old Anna sailed for America to care for her father and

brothers who had already immigrated. She married a Norwegian immigrant blacksmith, Otto Gilbertson. Together they raised seven children, living first in Coon Valley, Wisconsin, and later in Owatonna, Minnesota. According to Anna's granddaughter, Lois Schrader (the author's mother), Otto was a respected blacksmith, said to have been sought out to shoe the famous harness racer Dan Patch. Otto's life, however, was fraught with difficulty—drinking, skirmishes with the law, and fits of rage. Anna's marriage to Otto dissolved in the early 1930s. As a result, Anna was destitute and moved to St. Cloud to live with the family of one of her daughters, Myrtle Gilbertson Prokopec.³

Arthur Selmer Gilbertson was born to Anna and Otto on June 15, 1896, and enjoyed his youth in rural Wisconsin. As a young man, he developed a trade, painting and wallpapering. After being ousted from the family home in Owatonna during one of his father's drunken rages, Arthur returned to Coon Valley to pursue his trade. In an April 7, 1918, letter, Arthur shared his successes and worries about work, family, and war with his mother:

I have been going to write every night, but it seems as though I never get time. I have to go out and show my wallpaper samples nearly every night and Sundays, too!

SUSAN L. SCHRADER, professor of sociology at Augustana University, Sioux Falls, South Dakota, became interested in the Gold Star mothers pilgrimages of 1930–33 upon acquiring the memorabilia of her great-grandmother, Anna Gilbertson, and interviewing her mother, Lois Prokopec Schrader. Schrader will speak on the topic of this article at the Minnesota History Center, Saturday, May 13, 2017.

FACING: Gold Star mother Anna Gilbertson, about 1945. She wore her pilgrimage pendant around her neck for the rest of her life. ABOVE: Anna's pilgrimage name badge, from which the pendant originally hung.



Last Sunday, I went out about 9 o'clock in the morning and didn't get back till nearly midnight. I sold over \$60 with one place! . . . Does Pa keep up his drinking yet? I hope he would soon give it up. Well, anyway that is a thing that don't bother me. I will take a glass of beer once in a while but never too much. . . . Well, the way it looks now, I will have to register in June. That means I will be there, too, I suppose. Well, anyway, I don't care. I would just as soon go as not. I would like to get a whack at that dam Kaiser. Olf, Norton, and Willie are over there already.⁴

A few months after writing this letter, Arthur joined his friends and registered for service through the state of Wisconsin and was inducted into the US Army on August 7, 1918. One week later, younger brother Oscar enlisted and served in the US 75th Field Artillery. Reflecting later on sending two sons to war, Anna was reported to have said, "I thought only one would return." Oscar returned home unscathed on March 31, 1919, but Arthur was not so fortunate. He was overcome by measles while en route to France and died there of pneumonia on October 10, 1918, without firing a shot. He was 22 years old.⁵

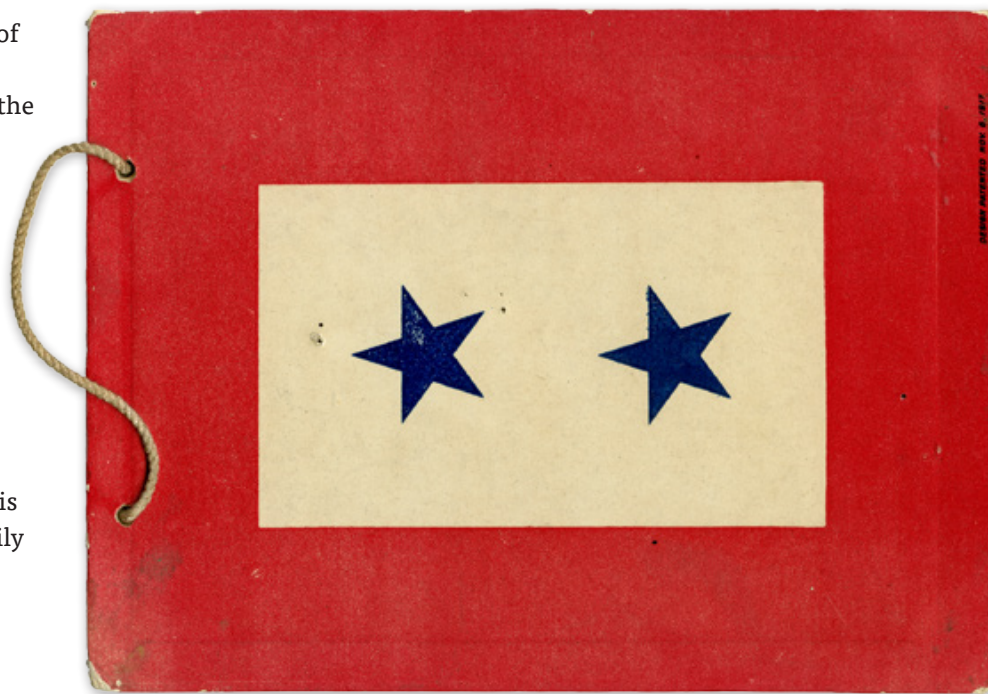
LEFT: Anna, daughter Myrtle Gilbertson Prokopec, and granddaughter Lois Prokopec Schrader, St. Cloud, about 1935. BELOW LEFT: Arthur as a young man. BELOW RIGHT: Arthur as soldier.



Commemorating the sacrifice of families who sent their loved ones to World War I began early in the American war effort. A service flag, framed in red, with a blue star—one for each serviceman in the household—emblazoned in the center, was designed and patented in 1917 by Army Captain Robert L. Queisser of the Fifth Ohio Infantry. If a soldier died, the blue star was converted to gold; hence, the term Gold Star mother or widow. (The service flag is still used today to signal that a family includes an active service member.) President Woodrow Wilson suggested that wearing a gold star could supplant the old mourning tradition of wearing black. By 1918 many affected women had embraced the idea of wearing an armband with a five-pointed gold star.⁶

Mourning rituals and funeral practices serve the function of honoring the dead while also healing the community and paying tribute to the bereaved in its midst. Funeral practices in America served as a mechanism to separate the dead from the living while binding together those who remained behind. A logistical and moral challenge for the fledgling world power was what to do with the tens of thousands of its war dead. Should they be buried where they fell or should they be shipped home? Was the decision to be made by the government or the family? The War Department grappled with these questions, and on October 6, 1919, decided to give families the choice of whether to have their soldier's body repatriated to the United States or have him buried in Europe. According to Gold Star pilgrimage historian John W. Graham, proponents of both sides of the issue waged sophisticated public relations campaigns to champion their own point of view, while the US government maintained a middle ground, assisting families with either decision.⁷

American funeral directors lobbied vociferously to encourage families to bring their boys home, citing the importance of the social solidarity that resulted from a funeral, the convenience of decorating a grave in a hometown cemetery, and the ease of offering tributes to the sacrifices these deaths reflected. Of course funeral directors also recognized the financial boon that returning the soldiers would be to their industry. Ultimately, more than 46,000 bodies, approximately two-thirds of those eligible, were repatriated to the United States.⁸



Cardboard version of the military service flag designed in 1917, meant to be hung in a window. The two blue stars indicated that the Gilbertson family included two active service members. When son Arthur died, his star was covered by a gold star.

Among the American dead was Quentin Roosevelt, youngest son of former president Theodore Roosevelt. In speaking of his son's sacrifice, Roosevelt wrote in the *New York Times*, "Where the tree falls, there let it lie." This philosophy shaped the subsequent debate among Americans faced with the decision of whether to keep a loved one's remains in newly established American cemeteries in France and other parts of Europe or have them transported home. Other arguments for leaving the body in Europe included the symbolic nature of allowing the soldier to continue to do his patriotic duty or the doughboy's own request made in correspondence home. Some families were not even aware they had an option for repatriation. Approximately one-third of families, including the family of Arthur Gilbertson, chose to leave their loved one abroad. Some 30,900 servicemen were buried in American cemeteries overseas.⁹

The letter that notified Anna of Arthur's death also informed her, "You will be comforted in knowing that his body has been recovered, that it lies buried in a spot which is under our care and control, and there will be no danger of its loss or neglect." Initially, Arthur was buried in Lambzellac near Brest, France, one of the 23,000 temporary burial sites scattered throughout western Europe, but as the Graves Registration Service of the US Army Quartermaster Corp worked to establish permanent American

military cemeteries in the major battlefield areas—one in England, one in Belgium, and six in France—Arthur's remains were moved to Oise-Aisne American Cemetery at Fere-en-Tardenois, France. The American Battle Monuments Commission, established in 1923, took over the task of documenting the dead and developing and maintaining the permanent cemeteries and memorials, a charge that continues today.¹⁰

With tens of thousands of America's dead remaining in European cemeteries, however, another question persisted: What was the responsibility of the US government to facilitate the graveside grieving that is so useful for healing? The nation grappled with this question in the decade beyond the close of the war. In 1919 New York congressman Fiorello LaGuardia, himself a decorated war veteran, introduced the first bill that would provide expenses-paid travel to mothers and fathers of the war dead. LaGuardia later acknowledged that the timing of the bill, introduced even before the dispensation of all bodies was determined, was probably premature. It did not receive a hearing.¹¹

Meanwhile, Americans of means financed their own private pilgrimages to Europe, but most Americans could not afford such a trip. Gold Star mothers, who, like all American women, had just gained the right to vote in 1920, met in informal groups throughout the country to support each other and to advocate for government assistance in making journeys to England, Belgium, and France. In 1928 a group of 25 mothers from the Washington, DC, area incorporated as American Gold Star Mothers, with local and regional groups affiliating soon thereafter. Many of the women came forward to testify to Congress as representatives struggled in 1924 and again in 1928 to shape a bill to support the notion of a pilgrimage.¹²

After a decade, Congress finally passed pilgrimage legislation, which President Calvin Coolidge signed into law on March 2, 1929. The aim of the pilgrimages was to honor the war dead, unify the nation, and address individual and collective grief. The stock market crash of 1929 did not deter the plans to provide graveside mourning in Europe. In 1930, \$5,386,367 was appropriated for Gold Star pilgrimages to be conducted between 1930 and 1933.¹³

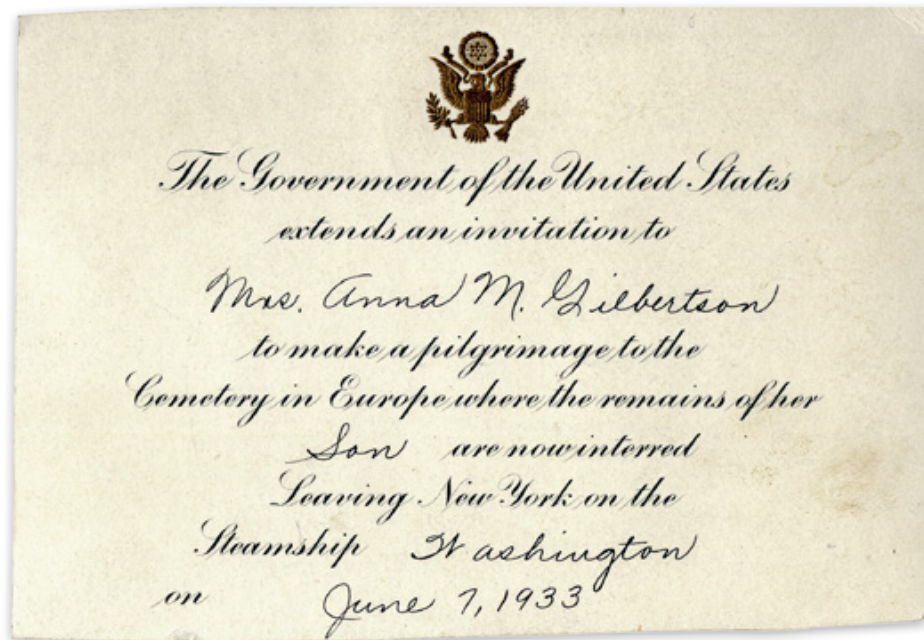
The two-page bill had been the subject of much debate and fine-tuning, but money was not the most significant negotiating point; instead, discussion focused on which entity would facilitate the pilgrimages, how travelers would be transported, and who was eligible to travel. The Red Cross, American Legion, and War Department were considered to facilitate the pilgrimages, but ultimately

What was the responsibility of the US government to facilitate the graveside grieving that is so useful for healing?

the US Army Quartermaster Corps got the job. Would travelers be transported by military or private ships? A private shipping company, the United States Lines, received the contract, putting into service a fleet of eight ships, including the SS *George Washington* that transported Anna Gilbertson from New York City to France in 1933 and the SS *President Harding* that brought her back.

Defining which women were eligible comprised a significant portion of the bill. Both widow (if she had not remarried) and mother of the same soldier were entitled to a pilgrimage, if they each desired to go. LaGuardia's 1919 bill had included fathers as eligible for a pilgrimage, but the final bill excluded them. Fathers did not organize; nor did they lobby Congress. Some men of wealth accompanied their wives at their own expense (in part because it was unseemly for women to travel alone), but most men felt that a public display of grief was not appropriate, given gendered expectations of the time. There was no question that mothers would benefit from the trip, since shouldering the burden of public grief was part of the maternal role. The pilgrimage legislation defined who qualified to go on a pilgrimage: "A mother was a natural mother, step-mother, mother through adoption, or any woman who had stood *in loco parentis* to the deceased member of the armed forces for the year prior to the commencement of such service." A widow was "the wife of a deceased member of the armed forces who had not since remarried after the war." Young widows who remarried were perceived to no longer share the same grief or loss. Historian Graham quotes one woman as saying, "What Congress was essentially saying is that we will honor women's sacrifices to the extent that they have continued to suffer." Furthermore, mothers and widows were eligible only if their soldier fought as part of the US armed forces (that is, did not enter the war prior to US involvement by joining the military of Canada, Britain, or France), did not die at sea, and was buried in one of the eight cemeteries designated by the War Department.¹⁴

The US Army Quartermaster Corps developed a budget to account for spending the almost \$5.4 million appropriated by Congress, predicated on the assumption



Anna Gilbertson's pilgrimage invitation.

that the pilgrimage would cost approximately \$840 per person.¹⁵ Every detail was meticulously planned so that each woman could travel without worry or financial burden. The 27-day trip included rail travel, ocean voyages on splendid liners, lodging, meals, and tips for porters. Further considerations included provisions for nurses to serve as travel companions and expedited passport entry into European nations. At the cemetery, the mothers and widows found restroom amenities, chairs, flowers, and a professional photographer to take a graveside portrait. Expenses for the potentiality of extended stays due to Gold Star mother illness or death (and repatriation of those dead) was also calculated into the budget. Besides the round trip voyage, 10 days were allotted to tour Paris, battlefields, and other points of interest, and four days were designated as time for the woman to spend at the cemetery where her soldier was buried.

Every mother of a dead soldier was informed of the opportunity. The US Army Quartermaster Corps' correspondence began with a brief letter to the soldier's mother asking three questions: Is the deceased survived by a widow? If yes, what is her address? Will you make the pilgrimage to Europe? The next letter was more detailed, asking what year she would prefer to travel, had she made a private pilgrimage already, her age and health (either "good" or "poor"), and whether she spoke English.

Estimates in November 1929 suggested that 11,440 women were eligible. Of those, 6,730 indicated they were interested in going. By 1930, the average age of Gold Star mothers was 70. (Average life expectancy for American babies born in 1900 was 47.3 years.) Many of the mothers

were in ill health or had caregiving responsibilities that made an ocean voyage and pilgrimage impossible. Of the 6,500 pilgrims who ultimately made the voyage, 4,135 went in the first year, 1930, in one of 20 parties. Over the course of four years, 47 parties of pilgrims traveled a total of 3.8 million miles to commemorate America's war dead and to embrace personal loss, grief, and mourning.¹⁶

Arthur Gilbertson was unmarried, so only his mother, Anna, was eligible for a pilgrimage to visit his grave. Initially, Anna had replied that she did not intend to go on a pilgrimage.

Perhaps she changed her mind following her divorce and move from Owatonna to St. Cloud. She likely described herself as in good health and an English speaker. Anna chose 1933, the last year of the pilgrimages, for her travel.¹⁷ When she took the Gold Star pilgrimage, she was 60 years old.

From the US Army Quartermaster Corps Anna received a printed packet of materials and bronze name badge. Hanging from the name badge on a red, white, and blue ribbon was a pendant of irregular shape. Anna wore the pendant from a chain around her neck for the remainder of her life. When she died in 1957, she was buried wearing it, according to her granddaughter. Packing suggestions, travel plans, and luggage tags also arrived. Anna left Minnesota on June 3, 1933, traveling through Chicago, Gary, South Bend, and Cleveland en route to New York City.¹⁸

On June 5 Anna wrote in her travel journal:

Nearing New York along the Hudson River. Just grand. Wish you could see it all. Got to New York around 830 am [June 6]. We're up early. Ate breakfast around 7 am. We're met by officers and nurses and taken to a grand hotel.¹⁹

It was the Hotel McAlpin on 34th and Broadway, which when it opened in 1912 was the largest hotel in the world. She wrote on June 6:

Went sightseeing. Grand places. Later went shopping. You'd be surprised to see me go from one place to another. On our sightseeing we passed the Little Church

around the corner. . . . There are over 150 ladies from all over. Two other ladies and I went shopping, then went up to the roof gardens. Can see such high buildings. 28 stories to get to the roof gardens.²⁰

Anna left New York City on June 7, 1933, aboard the SS *George Washington*, along with 153 other Gold Star mothers designated as Party B by the US Army Quartermaster Corps.²¹ The accommodations were more than the women could have anticipated, and no detail was omitted. Anna's journal depicts the opulence, diversity among pilgrims, and care with which the US Army Quartermaster Corps' staff and nurses attended to them:

Here we are on our way. . . . It is a wonderful place and such waiting on that we will be spoiled, I think. Have been on deck a long time this am. . . . There are so many nice people. Widows and mothers. You should see the gowns here last night. Some class, I'd say! Went to a movie last night again. Was good. They have everything here. You should see our flowers on table. Just grand.²²

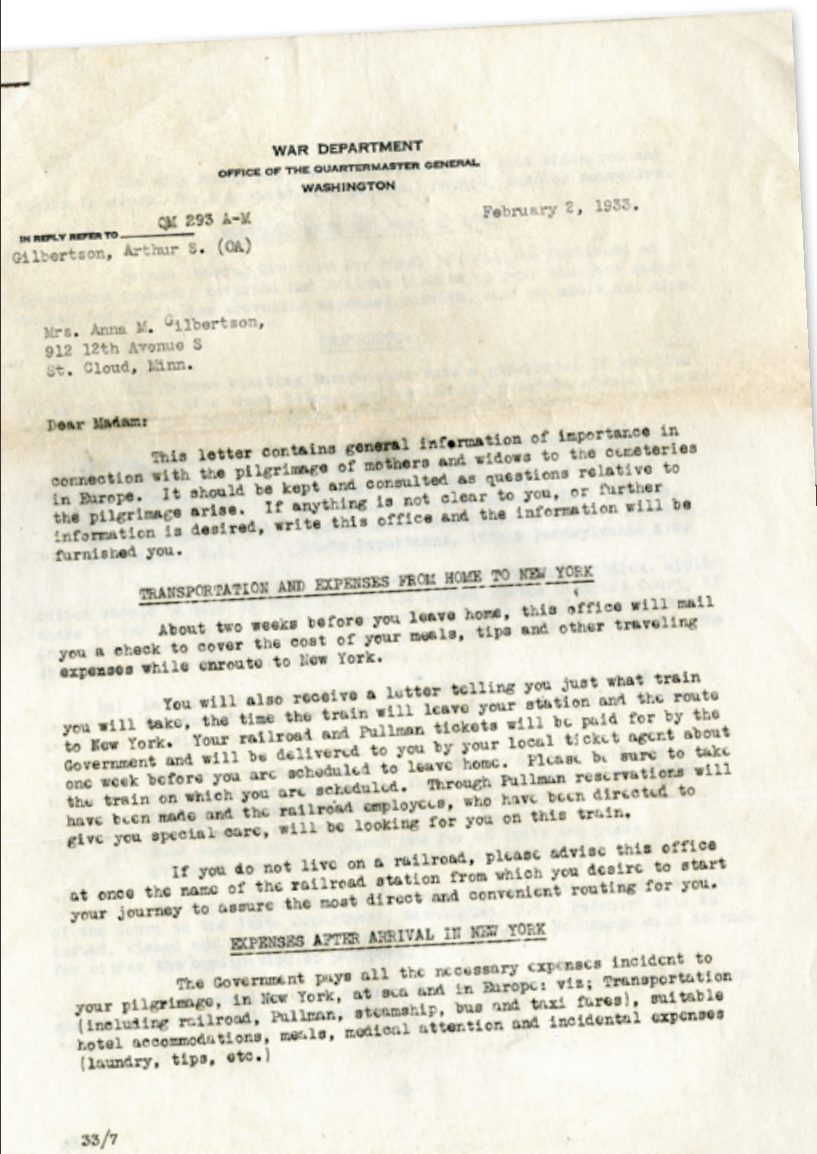
Every detail was meticulously planned so that each woman could travel without worry or financial burden

As was typical for each party, the ship stopped mid-sea to throw a wreath overboard in a ceremony to commemorate American sailors and soldiers who died at sea. Wrote Anna: "Mrs. Solberg gave the wreath which was thrown on the water in memory of soldiers and sailors buried at sea. Taps were sounded followed by a minute of silent prayer. Mrs. Solberg was the oldest mother, 79 years."²³

At this ceremony, the United States Lines gave each mother another medallion of bronze, fashioned by Tiffany & Company. The medallion reads, "Gold Star Pilgrimage to the Battlefields of the World War" and depicts a steamship in open seas, the Statue of Liberty at the stern, and the Eiffel Tower at the bow. It is dated with the first year of voyages, 1930, and has a five-pointed star emblazoned above the ship.²⁴

On June 14, Anna landed in Le Havre, France, and the pilgrimage began in earnest:

Had a three hour ride to Paris. Have lovely rooms. . . . We're staying at Hôtel d' Iéna, one of the best hotels in Paris. Have such a grand room. All overstuffed furniture. Big bedroom, bathroom, maid's room. Have such big closets. There are mirrors on each closet door.²⁵



★

THE MANAGEMENT OF THE HOTEL MCALPIN
EXTENDS TO YOU A CORDIAL WELCOME.

PLEASE WEAR YOUR GOLD STAR BADGE

WE HAVE RESERVED THE BLUE ROOM ON THE FIRST MEZZ.
FLOOR AS HEADQUARTERS.

CAPTAIN A. S. QUINTARD IS IN CHARGE.

MEALS WILL BE SERVED IN MAIN DINING ROOM.
FIRST MEZZANINE FLOOR

BREAKFAST	7:30 TO 9:00 A. M.
LUNCHEON	12:00 TO 1:30 NOON
DINNER	6:00 TO 8:00 P. M.



Sightseeing in New York City and accommodations at what was once the largest hotel in the world, the Hotel McAlpin, were part of Anna's journey.

Exposure to new experiences, people, and cultures was a broadening experience for Anna. She wrote, "Saw a man going past hotel. Thought he had a cane. Here it was a loaf of bread. Have long hard loaves, never wrap them."²⁶

The Quartermaster Corps took the women on trips to Napoleon's tomb, the Arc de Triomphe, the Louvre, the Palace of Versailles, castles, and cathedrals and treated them to evening concerts, garden tearooms, Parisian shopping sprees, wine cellars, and Parisian nightlife. Like most travelers, Anna collected souvenirs, postcards, and gifts for loved ones along the way.

Finally, there was the journey's purpose, visits to the battlefields and cemeteries. Arthur's birthday (June 15) fell during the days that preceded the cemetery journey.

FACING: Every detail of the pilgrimage was meticulously planned by US Army Quartermaster Corps. The Minnesota contingent of Party B, aboard the SS George Washington en route to France, July 1933. Anna is center figure in the back row.

Anna was afforded three separate days to visit the gravesite. After her first visit, on June 19, she recorded her reflections:

Have been to Art's grave—is just a beautiful place. I am sure none could ask for a nicer place. It has been a hard day, but I am glad I have seen it. We go there twice more. . . . The government gave us a wreath to put on Art's grave. Had our picture taken beside the grave. Were given two pictures and negative.²⁷

In a letter to daughter Myrtle sent the next day, June 20, 1933, she wrote, "Here I am, 68 miles from Paris near where Art is buried. Have been to his grave and it is a lovely place he lays and it is kept up so wonderful, I am sure his grave will be taken care of here, as the U.S. has the charge of it."²⁸

The efforts of the US Army Quartermaster Corps were well received. The women felt safe and well cared for.



Midway across the Atlantic Ocean, the SS George Washington held a ceremony to commemorate American sailors and soldiers who had died at sea. Part of the ceremony included presentation of bronze medallions, designed by Tiffany & Company, to each mother or widow.

They were especially impressed with the beauty and care with which the cemeteries were arranged. "Many of the mothers murmured expressions of pleasure that their sons rested in such a beautiful spot," reported the *New York Times* in May 1930.²⁹ American graves were marked with crosses of Carrara marble, while French cemeteries had black wooden crosses, comparable to the German soldiers' graves.

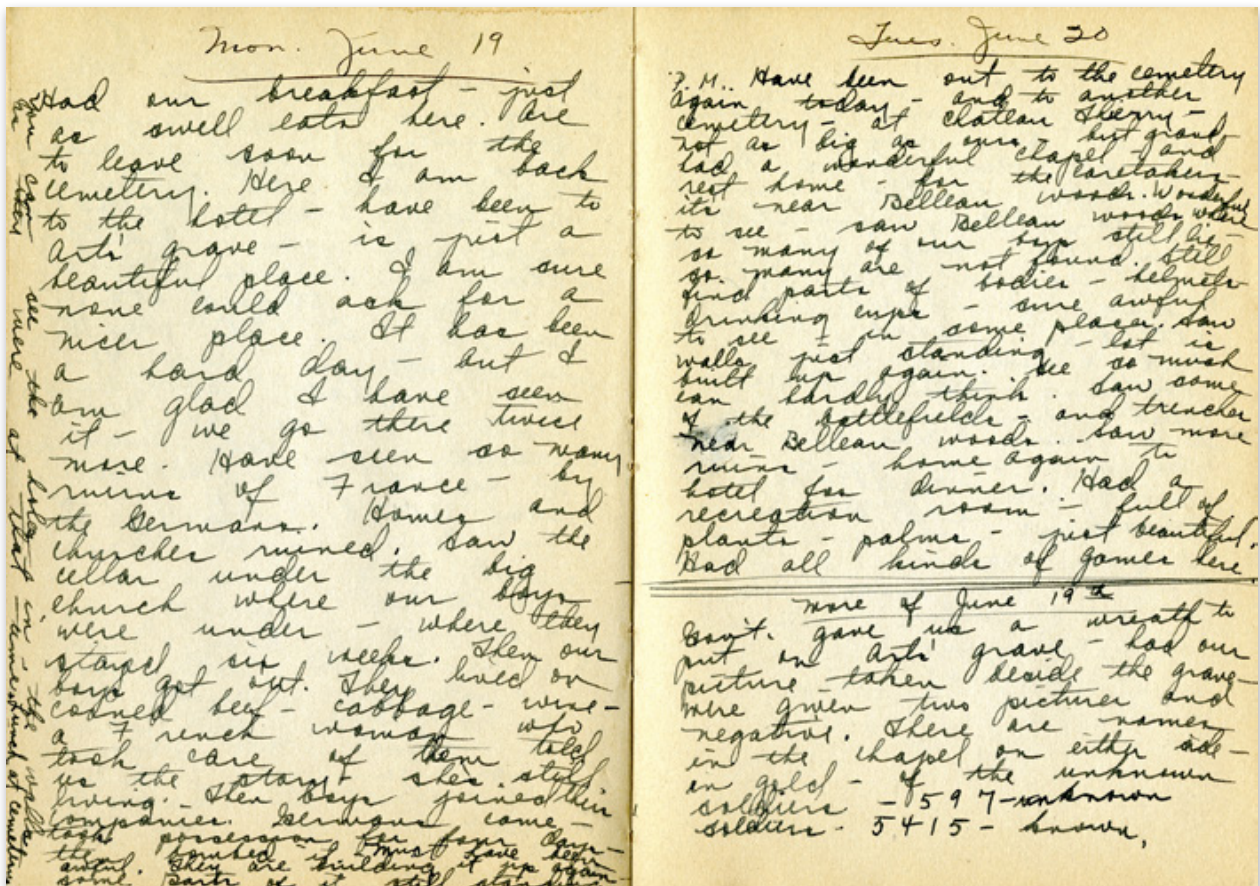
As if grieving at a son's grave were not enough, the pilgrimage also exposed women to other horrors of war. On June 20, Anna wrote of the battlefields and other cemeteries:

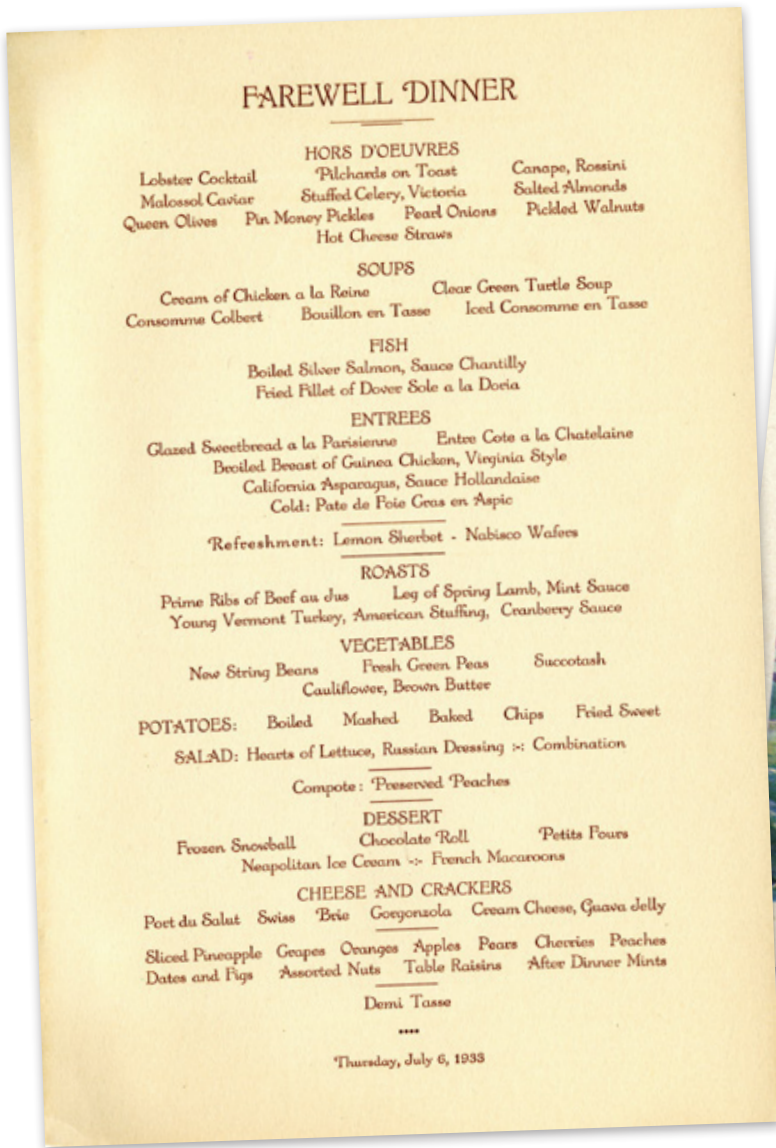
Have seen so many ruins of France by the Germans. Homes and churches ruined. . . . Must have been awful. . . . You can see the holes in the walls. . . . Have been out to the cemetery again today and to another cemetery at Chateau Thierry. Not as big as ours but grand. . . . It's near Belleau Woods. Saw some of the battlefields and trenches near Belleau Woods . . . where so many of our boys still lie—so many are not found. Still find parts of bodies—helmets, drinking cups. Sure awful to see. . . . I have seen so much I can hardly think.³⁰

And on June 22, she wrote:

Was out to the cemetery for the last time. Hated to leave it but such is life. Beautiful place—flowers all over—so it's a grand place where Art is resting. On way back from cemetery, saw 28th Division Bridge. Wherever you go, they try to sell you things. There is such a beautiful rest

Travel diary, June 19 and 20, 1933.





Farewell dinner menu and postcard of SS President Harding, the ship Anna sailed on for the return voyage.

house here—we got real American coffee here. It is all run by Americans. The caretakers' home is right here by the cemetery. In the caretakers' house, there is a lovely big fireplace. Everything is so clean and neat. We picked poppies and leaves here. There are flowers wherever we go. Even the humblest homes are rose-covered.³¹

Party B of the Gold Star pilgrimages to the battlefields of the world war departed France on June 29, 1933. A smaller ship, the SS *President Harding*, was well appointed, but its journey across windy seas made many travelers seasick. Over the next week, Anna wrote briefly:

Not as big a boat but nice cabins. Three of us different women in my cabin. Nice cabin. Seems like home. [The next day,] was taken sick. In bed most of the trip back. Seasick—Oh! Oh! Seasick—and how! Got up on deck. Sat there. Tried to go to meals. Taken sick. Had to go back to cabin.³²

On July 6, aboard the SS *President Harding*, the Gold Star mothers had their farewell dinner, a sumptuous, eight-course meal. Anna kept the elaborate menu safe in her scrapbook. The women arrived in New York City the next day. Bidding farewell to new friends, they scattered by train as they headed to their homes across America. On the train ride west, Anna and four others planned one more side trip—disembarking in Chicago for an evening savoring the “beautiful sights” at the 1933 World’s Fair. And on July 10, 1933—34 days after she had left Minnesota—Anna wrote: “Arrived home. All in. Wonderful trip though. Wouldn’t have missed it for the world. Got into St. Cloud at 10 am.”³³

While Anna’s feelings and thoughts were muted when describing her graveside visits, the outcome was clear. She and the majority of pilgrims were pleased with the opportunity to visit the graves of America’s dead, and for the most part, the nation agreed. Wrote a Gold Star mother to the *New York Times*:

I had mourned the loss of my only child for years and at times was terribly bitter. But when I visited the cemetery at Romagne and saw more than 30,000 crosses in that vast necropolis, I realized that others had suffered as I had and that we must try to comfort each other.³⁴

The pilgrimages were not without detractors, however. Other letters to the *New York Times* throughout the pilgrimage years reflected the negative sentiments of those who were not provided expenses-paid trips, as they had traveled to Europe prior to Congressional authorization of pilgrimage funding; those who received no government support in caring for soldiers who returned wounded or incapacitated; and those suffering the ravages and uncertainty of poverty in the Great Depression who thought the money would be better spent at home.³⁵

Indeed, the death of a soldier signaled more than patriotic and military loss; for many families, his death was a blow to their future economic stability. Accordingly, the United States did recognize this financial hardship. All surviving World War I widows and mothers received a war pension, keeping with protocol in place since the Civil War.³⁶ Arthur Gilbertson had designated Anna as his

beneficiary, and for the remainder of her life she received a monthly stipend—a sum sufficient to support her and make her presence in her daughter’s home an attractive financial contribution in the face of the brutal 1930s economy.

Despite the challenges of the Great Depression, Congress was not dissuaded from the importance of both the beneficiary war pensions and the Gold Star pilgrimages. Ironically, at the same time, 387,000 World War I soldiers were informed by the Veterans Administration that their disability allowances were being cut due to the economy. Since that time, however, while Gold Star Mothers Inc. has continued to embrace women upon the death of a soldier, the government-funded pilgrimages of the 1930s have never been replicated.³⁷

What can be concluded about the Gold Star pilgrimages? Total casualties from World War I numbered 37.5 million people. By one account, the Allies’ dead numbered 5.4 million of 45 million mobilized. US casualties in World War I totaled 320,710, including 114,000 dead in a year of fighting. The words of European cultural historian Jay Winter apply to the United States as well: virtually “every family was in mourning—for relative, friend, colleague,



After arriving home in St. Cloud, Anna wrote on July 10, 1933, "All in. Wonderful trip though. Wouldn't have missed it for the world."

lover, or companion.”³⁸ The one stark reality related to the need for the pilgrimages was that someone—many someones—had died.

The nation, local communities, and families—all thousands of miles from Europe—engaged in the pilgrimages as a way to address collective and individual grief. Drawing from the European experience with war, American planners realized that coming to terms with bereavement

in wartime involved consolation, support, and finally, commemoration.³⁹ For the first time in US history, a government-sponsored program systematically crafted symbols and rituals to temper the brutalization of war, to uplift the acts of sacrifice embodied in the dead, and to rekindle compassion for others in recovery. The Gold Star pilgrimages drew the nation and affected women together in consolation. □

Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 46th Annual Dakota Conference (“The Great War and the Northern Plains 1914–2014”), sponsored by the Center for Western Studies at Augustana University, April 25, 2014, Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Special thanks to the reference librarians at Augustana’s Mikkelsen Library, colleagues Margot Nelson and Margaret Preston, and Anne Kaplan, former editor of *Minnesota History*.

1. Carol R. Byerly, “The U.S. Military and the Influenza Pandemic of 1918–1919,” *Public Health Reports* 125, Suppl 3 (2010): 82–91, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2862337/>. The great influenza pandemic of 1918–19 is estimated to have killed more than 50 million people worldwide, or four times more humans than were killed in World War I. Especially virulent, this influenza preyed on previously healthy young adults and was easily transmitted in close quarters. Both criteria were factors in the extraordinary loss of life among military ranks. At the height of US involvement in the war, Sept. through Nov. 1918, influenza and pneumonia sickened 20 to 40 percent of US Army and Navy personnel. More US soldiers and sailors died from influenza and pneumonia than from combat.

2. Documents cited henceforth are in possession of author.

3. Kate Roberts, “Dan Patch,” *MNopedia*, Minnesota Historical Society, <http://www.mnopedia.org/thing/dan-patch>; Lois Schrader (granddaughter of Anna Gilbertson), interview by author, Sioux Falls, SD, Dec. 14, 2013.

4. Arthur Gilbertson letter to Anna Gilbertson, April 7, 1918.

5. “Registration State: Wisconsin. Registration County: Vernon: Roll 1674996,” *US World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917–1918*, Ancestry.com, 2005; W. M. Haulsee, F. G. Howe, A. C. Doyle, *Soldiers of the Great War* (Washington, DC: Soldiers Record Publishing Association, 1920), 2:119, 3:458, <https://archive.org/details/soldiersgreatwa02doylgoog>; “US Headstone Applications for Military Veterans, 1925–1963,” Ancestry.com; Geoffrey W. Fournier, Supt., Oise-Aisne American Cemetery, American Battle Monuments Commission, e-mail correspondence to author, Jan. 23, 2014; Lois Schrader, interview by author; “A. S. Gilbertson Gives Life

in Old France,” *Owatonna People’s Press*, Nov. 29, 1918, 2.

Haulsee, et al., list Pvt. Arthur Gilbertson as a Minnesota soldier; however, they do recognize Gilbertson as a casualty from Wisconsin. The gravestone in Oise-Aisne American Cemetery in France lists Gilbertson as a Wisconsin soldier. Per Lois Schrader, family lore held that the disease that took Gilbertson’s life was the Spanish influenza.

6. “About the Service Flag,” <http://www.bluestarmothers.org/service-flag>; John W. Graham, *The Gold Star Mother Pilgrimages of the 1930s: Overseas Grave Visitations by Mothers and Widows of Fallen U.S. World War I Soldiers* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005), 12. The service flag is authorized by the Department of Defense; it was approved as a symbol by Woodrow Wilson in 1918.

7. Graham, *Gold Star Mother Pilgrimages*, 35.

8. Graham, *Gold Star Mother Pilgrimages*, 40–41; Lisa M. Budreau, *Bodies of War: World War I and the Politics of Commemoration in America, 1919–1933* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 95.

9. “Roosevelt Objects to Removal of Son,” *New York Times*, Nov. 18, 1918, 11; Graham, *Gold Star Mother Pilgrimages*, 38–39; American Battle Monuments Commission, *American Armies and Battlefields of Europe: A History, Guide and Reference Book*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1938), 9–11, <https://www.abmc.gov/news-events/news/world-war-i-historic-reference-book-now-available-abmcgov#Vlt63L-upWC>, 457–69.

10. Lt. Col. Charles C. Pierce, American Expeditionary Forces, Headquarters Services of Supply, Office of the Chief Quartermaster, AEF, Graves Registration Service to Mrs. Anna M. Gilbertson, undated; letter from Headquarters, American Graves Registration Service in Europe, Paris, France, to Anna Gilbertson, March 1, 1933; Martha Sell (American Battle Monuments Commission, Public Programs) e-mail correspondence to author, Jan. 21, 2014; Leo P. Hirrel, “The beginning of the Quartermaster Graves Registration Service,” *Army Sustainment*, July–August 2014, <http://www.army.mil/article/128693>. The Graves Registration Service of the US Army, authorized by War Department General Order

104, was established in 1917. Over the course of the war, the organization supervised more than 73,000 temporary burials scattered in 23,000 burial sites.

11. Graham, *Gold Star Mother Pilgrimages*, 51, 64. The bill was also the target of organized opposition by the funeral home industry.

12. Budreau, *Bodies of War*, 191–92; Graham, *Gold Star Mother Pilgrimages*, 16; “History,” American Gold Star Mothers Inc., <http://www.goldstarmoms.com>; Budreau notes that although a commemorative voyage was initiated by the American Legion for Legionnaires and their families in 1927, it was not federally financed or congressionally sponsored. The Gold Star website reveals more than 140 chapters active today.

13. Graham, *Gold Star Mother Pilgrimages*, 64–66. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, CPI Inflation Calculator (<https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl>), the 2016 equivalent to \$5.4 million is \$77.6 million. For more details on war commemoration, dealing with the dead, and the efficacy of the pilgrimages in accomplishing these goals, two well-researched pieces offer summaries in stark contrast with each other: (a) Budreau’s book suggests that the pilgrimages were more tourist-oriented than mourning-focused, were a decade late in truly assuaging the grief of loss, and consequently did not satisfactorily address the objectives of the US government; while (b) Graham’s book offers concluding reflections that the pilgrimages did, in fact, address the aims of the nation in helping to unify the country and assist the grieving in making peace with their loss and their decision to leave their soldier on the battlefields of Europe. Anna’s travel diary suggests that, for her, the Gold Star pilgrimage was useful and successful in accomplishing its objectives.

14. Graham, *Gold Star Mother Pilgrimages*, 60, 66; Jenny Hockey, “Changing Death Rituals,” in *Grief, Mourning and Death Ritual*, Jennifer Hockey, Jeanne Katz, and Neil Small, eds. (Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press, 2001), 187. Graham quotes Rebecca Jo Plant, whom he interviewed in Nashville, TN, on Mar. 18, 2002. Hockey observes, “Although men participate in the public display of grieving, women performed the majority of the work across classes in a gendered division of labor of grief. Women complained that ‘the

custom of mourning presses far more heavily on women than men. In fact, so trifling are the alterations made in a man's dress that practically the whole burden of mourning wrappings would seem to have fallen on women. . . . They [men] positively manage to mourn by proxy."

15. *Pilgrimage for the mothers and widows of soldiers, sailors, and marines of the American forces now interred in the cemeteries of Europe as provided by the Act of Congress of March 2, 1929: Letter from the acting secretary of war, transmitting to Congress a report of the number of mothers and widows of the deceased soldiers, sailors, and marines of the American forces now interred in the cemeteries of Europe who desire to make the pilgrimage to these cemeteries during the year 1930 or later, a list of their names and addresses, and the probable cost.* Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1930 (hereafter *Pilgrimage*), iii, <https://searchworks.stanford.edu/view/3144720>.

16. *Pilgrimage*, iii; Elizabeth Arias, "Table 19: Life Expectancy at Birth in Years, by Race, Hispanic Origin and Sex: Death-Registration States, 1900-1928, and United States, 1929-2010," *National Vital Statistics Reports*, 63 no. 7 (Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, 2014), 46; Graham, *Gold Star Mother Pilgrimages*, 202.

17. *Pilgrimage*, 143; "US Federal Census for 1930 and 1940," AncestryLibrary.com, http://interactive.ancestrylibrary.com/7884/4455060_00715/31200927?backurl=http://search. Documentation does not show Anna's change of heart, only that she did, in fact, go.

18. "Guide: American Pilgrimage Gold Star Mothers and Widows in Europe, Oise-Aisne Group, Party 'B' to Anna Gilbertson," 58-page booklet, 1933 (hereafter *Guide*); George S. Cuhaj, "Gold Star Mothers—Their Voyage and Their Medals," *TAMS Journal: Official Organ of the Token and Medal Society* 20, no. 6 (Dec. 1980): para 9, http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~txmatago/gsm_kelly_pil_cuhaj.htm; Lois Schrader, interview by author.

19. Anna Gilbertson, unpublished travel diary, 1933. Anna Gilbertson did not maintain a daily journal of her life, but she kept a diary of her 1933 travels. The diary of approximately 20 pages remains in family possession.

20. Anna Gilbertson travel diary, 1933 (hereafter *Diary*).

21. *Guide*, 1933.

22. *Diary*, 1933.

23. *Diary*, 1933.

24. Cuhaj, "Gold Star Mothers—Their Voyage and Their Medals," paras 11-12.

25. *Diary*, 1933.

26. *Diary*, 1933.

27. *Diary*, 1933.

28. Anna Gilbertson to Myrtle Gilbertson Prokopec, June 20, 1933.

29. "Gold Star Mothers See Graves of Sons," Special Cable to *New York Times*, May 22, 1930, 7.

30. *Diary*, 1933.

31. *Diary*, 1933.

32. *Diary*, 1933.



Arthur Gilbertson's grave in Oise-Aisne American Cemetery at Fere-en-Tardenois, France, 2017. At the time Arthur registered for service, he was living in Wisconsin, his birthplace, but other records list him as a Minnesota soldier.

33. "60,000 at First Day of Chicago World's Fair: Throngs Gasp as Wonder of Science Turns Fair City into Splendor," *Owatonna People's Press*, May 28, 1933, 1; *Diary*, 1933.

34. J. L. DeWitt (Maj. Gen., Qtr. Mr. Gen.) letter to Mrs. Anna M. Gilbertson, Sept. 16, 1933; A Gold Star Mother, letter to the editor, "Gold Star Mothers' Pilgrimage," *New York Times*, Jan. 25, 1933, 16. In typical "Minnesota nice" style, Anna and the other members of Party B wrote a thank-you to the Quartermaster Corps who escorted them on their voyage. Replied Maj. Gen. DeWitt, "It is gratifying to know that your trip was entirely satisfactory, and that the officers of the Army and the nurses rendered such courteous and efficient service. The Quartermaster Corps is proud of the honor bestowed upon it by being charged with the conduct of these pilgrimages, and has expended every effort that those making the journey might have a comfortable and pleasant trip. I feel, however, that the task was materially lightened by the wonderful spirit of cooperation and consideration shown by the mothers and widows. With sincere appreciation of your complimentary remarks regarding the conduct of the pilgrimage, I am very truly yours."

35. *New York Times* letters to the editor: Elsie Lathrop Lewis, "Other Uses for \$5,000,000," Feb. 8, 1930, 8; John A. Sunnit, "The War Mothers' Pil-

grimage," Jan. 17, 1933, 18; and Eveline Alice Cohn, "War Mothers' Pilgrimage," Jan. 22, 1933, E5.

36. Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 85.

37. "400,000 Vets Lose Pay under Economy Ax," *Owatonna People's Press*, July 1, 1933, 1; Graham, *Gold Star Mother Pilgrimages*, 204-5.

38. Charles B. MacDonald, "World War I: The U.S. Army Overseas," *American Military History* (Washington, DC: United States Army Center of Military History, 1989), 403, <http://www.history.army.mil/books/AMH/AMH-18.htm>; Stuart Robson, *The First World War*, 2nd ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007), 103; Winter, *Sites*, 2. MacDonald notes: "Of the men of all nations in uniform, more than 8,500,000 died, and total casualties exceeded 37,500,000, a price that would forever invite criticism of the way commanders on both sides fought the war. American casualties alone totaled 320,710."

39. Winter, *Sites*, 30.

Photo on this page courtesy American Battle Monuments Commission. All other photos and images courtesy of Susan Schrader.

MNHS PRESS BOOK EXCERPT

Alice in France The World War I Letters of Alice M. O'Brien

Edited by Nancy O'Brien Wagner

In March 1918, 26-year-old Alice O'Brien and three close friends set off from New York harbor, bound for wartime France. Unlike the soldiers aboard their ship, they were unpaid volunteers. Alice and her friends joined hundreds of American women serving as nurses, clerks, drivers, and canteen workers for the Red Cross, Salvation Army, and other organizations. Her letters home, full of gossip and telling detail, describe living conditions, attitudes, and actions of French soldiers and civilians and her own efforts near the front.

4 August 1918
[Chantilly]

Dear Mama, Dad, and All—

I couldn't possibly tell you how happy I am this morning. Isn't the War news wonderful! . . .

I have a new job—chauffeur at Canteen No. #2. The last chauffeur went on a bat and was fired and as they are very scarce in France the R.C. [regional coordinator] sent word that it would be some time before they could replace him. In the meantime I was to run the car. Mrs. Church said that everything was so satisfactory that she was going to ask Major Osborn for a permit for me to continue as chauffeur. I was quite willing so everything has been arranged. . . . [Major Osborn] has always been prejudiced against women drivers and everyone said that he would never have them in his department but evidently he has changed his mind. Perhaps has been forced into doing it. . . . My car is a Ford truck, carries a ton, and as I go along the roads with carrots, turnips, raw meat, sacks of coffee, etc., sticking out behind, I feel exactly like an Army supply wagon driver which, of course, indirectly, I am. All the Soldiers on the road salute me and my hand is in the air, waving back

a greeting, almost as often as when I drive out Summit Avenue in the old gray Packard.

Mrs. Church and I drive to a little town nearby to market, about twice a week, and it is an interesting sight. The



Friend Marguerite Davis sketched this image of Alice for a place setting for Alice's 27th birthday, celebrated in France.



square in the old town is packed with people walking from booth to booth and the air is shrill with the cries of the market women advertising their wares. All the Military Cars in the district go there for rations and it is like a huge Quartermaster's department. Then we go to the French Army abbatoir [sic] and after about half an hour's red tape regarding permits, IOUs, military privileges, etc., we get our load of meat, usually five hundred pounds of beef or mutton, and then we come rattling home past Aviation Fields, barb wire entanglements, searchlight divisions, army railroads, temporary telegraph communications, anti-aircraft guns, listening posts, camouflaged [sic] barracks and all sorts of interesting things with always a couple of hospitals thrown in and the road crowded with ambulances and all sorts of military traffic, sometime full regiments of marching men. As we go past they often cry "Les Americanes" [sic] and give us a cheer. It's wonderful and I wouldn't miss it for anything in the world. . . .

Don't worry about my health. On my word of honor I am perfectly well, eat lots and am not thin. Work agrees with me.

Love again,
Alice

WW1AMERICA

APRIL 8-SEPT. 4, 2017
MINNESOTA HISTORY CENTER
MNHS.ORG/WW1AMERICA



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society, and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or users or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission: [contact us](#).

Individuals may print or download articles for personal use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#). Include the author's name and article title in the body of your message. But first--

If you think you may need permission, here are some guidelines:

Students and researchers

- You **do not** need permission to quote or paraphrase portions of an article, as long as your work falls within the fair use provision of copyright law. Using information from an article to develop an argument is fair use. Quoting brief pieces of text in an unpublished paper or thesis is fair use. Even quoting in a work to be published can be fair use, depending on the amount quoted. Read about fair use here: <http://www.copyright.gov/fls/fl102.html>
- You **should**, however, always credit the article as a source for your work.

Teachers

- You **do not** need permission to incorporate parts of an article into a lesson.
- You **do** need permission to assign an article, either by downloading multiple copies or by sending students to the online pdf. There is a small per-copy use fee for assigned reading. [Contact us](#) for more information.

About Illustrations

- **Minnesota History** credits the sources for illustrations at the end of each article. **Minnesota History** itself does not hold copyright on images and therefore cannot grant permission to reproduce them.
- For information on using illustrations owned by the Minnesota Historical Society, see [MHS Library FAQ](#).