

OUTING

June, 1917: p. 179

How Buddy Lives in France

An American Soldier Sizes Up the French
Villages Where He Does His Training

By FIRST LIEUTENANT, A. E. F.

Do you know what life is like to our boys in France? We try to picture it, but the memory of what France was before the war helps little to-day. We read the stories of special correspondents and see something, but we know they are outsiders after all and only get the life in flashes. Occasionally some one in the Service finds a voice that helps to show us the inside of things. For example, this letter from a former contributor to OUTING. It is really made up of three or four letters written to his family without thought of publication. The period dealt with is the training time—most of it now weeks and months back, but the truth of the picture remains. These are the villages where our boys are training to-day. This is the life they lead.

WELL, here we are! Landed yesterday. We are in a temporary resting camp from which we shall go on in a few days to our permanent winter quarters. This little town has had over five thousand deaths as a result of the war. Mourning is seen everywhere. One might readily think that black crepe dresses and arm bands was the national costume.

German prisoners are working on the streets and a sorry, woe-begone lot they are, although they seem to be well fed. Such articles as sugar, soap, and tobacco are very hard to get, but grapes, melons, pears, and other fruits are cheap and very delicious.

One thing we note, above everything else, is the absence of water. There is no such thing as a spring or brook or well in all this section. The water we have is brought here in boats and then chemically purified. It is hard to get enough for a bath and almost impossible to drink the stuff. No wonder the universal drink is wine. No such thing as sanitation is known here. . . .



2
FRANCE

We left our temporary camp six days ago and have traveled several hundred miles since then. The trip was wonderful to me as I was viewing for the first time a strange and interesting country. We passed miles and miles of vineyards, then through the most beautiful grazing country I have ever seen. The picture-like country-side was dotted with sad-looking, yellowish-white French cattle all the same color and all looking alike. Through towns and cities of every size; by castles that were old when Napoleon was a lad, past costly walled villas where the rich spend their summers basking in the sunshine, eating the choicest viands, and sipping the rarest wines while the poor live on black bread and drink sour "Vin ordinaire," much like our cider.

The one drawback to our journey was the transportation. The road beds are wonderful. Built of hewn rock, drained and walled in on each side, the right of way is as smooth as a ball room floor and at every crossing there is a little house in which lives the gate keeper whose business it is to open and shut the two iron gates that guard the highway from the track. There are no railroad accidents in France. There cannot be.

But the rolling stock!! Little, cramped-up cars stuck up on wheels that lift the coach high in the air. Pullmans are unknown. Even in the first class cars there is nothing but the seats to sleep on. The officers traveled in the first class cars, from three to six in each compartment, and we were on the road two nights. My long legs have not got the kinks out of them yet.

We were in heaven compared with the privates who were packed in the cattle cars like sardines in a can, but not a single word of complaint did I hear from one of them. That is the spirit of the American soldier.

The train traveled very slow and occasionally stopped at what are known as "Supper stations," run by the French Government. Here the soldiers passing through are furnished with strong, black coffee without sugar or milk but liberally "laced" with "Cognac."

We passed the first of these stations about three in the morning and as the notes of our regimental buglers sounded "assembly," it was a sight to see the men, tousle-headed and sleepy-eyed, tumble out from their cars. The next one we struck was at one thirty in the afternoon and

FRANCE

another at eleven-thirty the next night. Several times a day the train would stop for a half hour, if possible near some stream or stagnant pool, (all streams seem to be sluggish and stagnant here) and in an instant every man was out of his car and out of his uniform in a jiffy and oh! what a splashing and shouting. The American soldier—at least the volunteer—does enjoy keeping clean.

At every station through which we passed French soldiers were drawn up along the track, every officer at salute and every soldier with his gun at salute, and the populace waving their flags and shouting "Vive! vive!" as we passed. Everywhere was the same strange incongruity of smiles and cheers and the all pervading crepe of mourning.

Imagine, if you can, a country of green and gold and all the shades of orange, yellow, and brown, these colors representing fields of growing things. Here and there in scattered patches are woodlands and all steeped in this wonderful sunshine. Winding in and out are dusty, narrow roads of limestone. Each road is enclosed by a wall, not of loose field stone, as in our northern country, but of square hewn limestone set in cement. Every little ravine, through which water may pass after a rain, is paved in its lowest part with hewn stone laid in cement to prevent erosion.

A casual glance at the country would lead one to suppose that it had been almost untouched by the hand of man, so natural and untrammelled it seems. But, in fact, every tree and sprout, every stagnant pool and slow-running stream is where it is because the hand of man willed it to be there; but willed it so long ago that the work of man's hand has been entirely obliterated. Not a tree branch may be removed from a tree, much less a tree or sapling cut down, unless it is directed and superintended by the Forester of the District.

There are no scattered farm houses, as in the States, but the farmers are grouped together in little villages called "Communes," each of which is governed by its mayor, and each called "Communes," each of which is

OldMagazineArticles.com

FRANCE

governed by its mayor, and each village has its communal wash house, grazing ground, and town bull. Passing along the dusty limestone road you come upon a series of story and a half or two story stone buildings covered with a stucco cement that was new when America was a wilderness. Every house is roofed with a picturesque covering of red tile.

The houses are of different size, according to the importance of the owner, but they are all joined together so that the connecting wall furnishes one side of each house. Each house consists of two parts with two doors in the street end. One door leads into the living rooms of the family, the other into the stable where the cow, pigs, and chickens are quartered. The houses are built flush with the narrow, stone-paved street, which is both street and sidewalk. There are no steps, the doorway being on a level with the street.

In the angle between the houses is piled the manure from the stable and this is also the family toilet. A gutter leads from the pile into the street gutter and serves to convey the liquid manure down to the foot of the short street and onto the communal garden. The very word "sanitation," is unknown here.

The officers are quartered in the best rooms the inmates are able to provide, for poor as they are—and they are poor in a sense which is absolutely unknown to the people of the States—they will give all that they have to the "Ameriques." The privates of our force are quartered in the barns of the village. When we first saw the places assigned to them they seemed impossible. The dust of centuries lay on everything. Knapsacks of the Franco-Prussian war were mouldering on the floor by the side of the mould-covered, cast off, wooden shoes of former generations, while the built-in, wooden bunks on the sides were occupied perhaps by a litter of puppies, or a lot of rotting vegetables.

Our men gave vent to about five minutes of lusty cussing when they were shown their quarters, and then off came their blouses, brooms were improvised, and, when night came, the stone flags were swept clean, the

FRANCE

cobwebs and dust removed, windows opened, and peace reigned again in the camp. Water is so scarce that the town pump can, at best, only supply water enough for cooking purposes but the boys discovered a discouraged brook near the village, its channel choked with cat tails and swamp grass. Post haste they went for that brook. In a short time they had a channel cut through to a hastily excavated swimming hole and then what a splashing. The natives looked on in holy horror at such reckless exposure to disease in the use of so much *energizing* water.

The walls of the houses are from one to two feet thick and windows few and closely shut to keep out the "*night air*" of which the people are inordinately afraid. They sleep in great beds of feathers so high that one literally needs a step ladder to climb into them.

The houses are all very old. The last house built in our commune is 175 years old and its occupants are regarded as decidedly new comers. Numerous wayside shrines dot the country side. One near me bears the numerals 1629, the date of its erection. The stone flagging of the village church is worn deep by the tread of many generations of worshippers.

This little village seems to have been forgotten during the passing of the centuries and is as it was three hundred years ago. Cattle and women are the beasts of burden and horses are as uncommon as autos were with us twenty-five years ago. We have only one horse—a very small one—in our village and that is our only means of transportation except on foot. The fireplace furnishes light, but as the people go to bed at dusk there is little use for artificial illumination.

I have five villages—all of a similar character—of about one hundred families each and 1500 soldiers to look after. I have to visit each village daily and the mileage covered is twelve miles which, at present, is done on "Shank's mare." I am in absolute charge here, as I am so far detached from my superior officers that I must, of necessity, be my own boss. In addition to the care of the sick and wounded I have entire oversight of the sanitation, sewerage,

OldMagazineArticles.com

FRANCE

street cleaning, sewage disposal, lice extermination—for the poilus were quartered here before us—bathing arrangements, food supplies, toilets, etc., etc.

There are three cafes, or wine houses, in our commune, each marked with the ancient sign of a green bough suspended over the door. Distilled spirits are unknown here. "Vin ordinaire" red and white wine which is very sour like our American cider, and a home brewed beer are the only drinks. No one drinks water, first because "it is not done" and second because it is unsafe.

Water is so very scarce that every drop is husbanded. For example, we have a communal spring or fountain, as it is called, where water for culinary purposes and for watering the animals is secured. From the trough at this well the overflow is conveyed through underground pipes about three quarters of a mile to the communal wash house. In this wash house is a stone-lined pool about three feet deep by seven and a half feet long, and four feet wide sunk in the stone flagged floor. This is surrounded by a wall of square blocks of stone about two feet square which are used as rubboards or "pounding stones" for the clothes. Something called soap is added to the water in the pool and this is used over and over until it becomes so vile it can no longer be used when the pool is emptied and refilled. A second pool is used for sudsing and rinsing.

The diet of the people is almost exclusively vegetable. They raise a few pigs and chickens, but beef is unheard of. Wild rabbits are snared and kept in captivity to breed and their young are used for food. For dinner to-day, at the house where I am billeted, we had soup, cabbage, potatoes, cauliflower, and salt pork cooked together, a salad of romain, rabbit stew, and for dessert English walnuts picked from a tree in the back yard.

The mayor of our Commune is a venerable gentleman who wears patched trousers and wooden shoes but is as polite and as secure in the sense of his position and dignity as is the mayor of New York. His little commune has an honor roll of twelve killed in battle and every man is

FRANCE

with the colors save those too old or too young.

It is now 5.30 in the morning. I am writing by the light of a candle in the wooden shack or hut built for my infirmary. There are seventeen men sleeping here as I write. As they are lying on the "soft side of a plank" their sleep is at times troubled and they snore in seventeen different varieties. I have a hard day's work before me so will say good morning and good bye.

OUTING