

SOME OBSERVATIONS RELATED TO CHESTER'S MILITARY SERVICE

Casualty numbers for Company G

There were 12 Companies in the 315th Infantry. Four of these Companies (G, H, I, and M) had lower numbers of men killed in action at the Front than the other Companies. And the 2nd Battalion, which included Chester's Company G, had lower numbers of total battle casualties than the other two battalions while at the Front. Does this information provide a clue as to why Chester might have survived the engagements he was in during September-November 1918 and was able to return home even though he was gassed? It is difficult to tell from the 79th Division and 315th Infantry histories just how much front line placement the Battalions and Companies of his Infantry had during the two phases of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, and how often they were held in reserve. Was Chester's Company G a particularly "green" unit that the commanding officers held back? Was there some other reason? We do not know. We do know there were soldiers who were "stragglers" and that there was much confusion on the battlefield, particularly during the first phase of the Offensive, which may have contributed to behaviors that gave some soldiers better odds at survival. Or perhaps he just got lucky.

Applying for Veterans Compensation benefits

The Veterans Administration became a consolidated federal agency in 1930 under the World War Veterans' Act. Legislation and Executive Orders enacted in the early 1930s provided for enhanced benefit programs, including a law providing for compensation paid directly to widows and children of men with WWI military service. The State of Pennsylvania also adopted Act No. 53 in January 1934, which provided for Veterans' compensation in that state. Chester applied for Veterans Compensation benefits for his own family, and for his mother on behalf of his brother Charlie, on March 16, 1934. The compensation approved for each was \$10 per month for 20 months, for a total compensation of \$200.

On the application form, one must fill in a section called "Engagements." Chester's form includes the following: "St. Mihiel * Meuse-Argonne Forest." When I first read this, I was led to believe that he had served in the St. Mihiel Offensive. But he did not. The 79th Division was not used in that Offensive, but it was sent to that area after the Montfaucon engagement. The St. Mihiel assignment was considered a "Defensive" engagement and Chester's form just did not include that reference. He also did not identify that he was gassed in the section called "Wounds or other injuries received, with dates."

Chester had a friend from New Oxford named Chauncey P. Colestock. Chauncey entered the Army in October 1917 and also went to Camp Meade for training. He was assigned to the 314th Infantry, and sailed from Hoboken at the same time as Chester. I was curious to know if the two friends saw each other during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. Based on a letter that Chauncey wrote home in early 1919, published in the *New Oxford Item*, he said he did not see Chester in France after they completed training in the Prauthoy area in early September 1918. I also found it interesting that Chauncey included much more information in his 1934 Veterans Compensation Application about the engagements he was in than Chester did, even though they both participated in the same battles. Chauncey details five engagements by name: "Sector 304 Defense (Sept 13 to 30th, 1918), Montfaucon (9/26 to 9/30/18), Troyon Sector Defense (10/22 to 10/26/18), Grande Montagne (10/28 to 11/11/18), and Meuse-Argonne Offense (no dates given)." His listing of these engagements appears to have had no bearing on the amount of money he received, as it was the same amount as Chester and Charlie. We also do not know if he and Chester stayed in touch after the war. Chauncey lived to be 88; he died and was buried in 1983 in Philadelphia where he had moved to and worked as a pharmacist most of his life.

Keeping in touch with other soldiers

In addition to the large panoramic photograph of Company G from May 1919, my mother had several copies of a postcard photograph of Chester with a smaller group of soldiers from his unit, which appears to have been taken around the same time as the panoramic image. I do not know the names of these men, or if Chester remained in contact with any of them after the war. But I am heartened to see in this photograph that one soldier holds a baseball mitt, another has a corncob pipe in his mouth, still another holds a small dog, most of them are smiling, and Chester holds a cigar in his left hand.



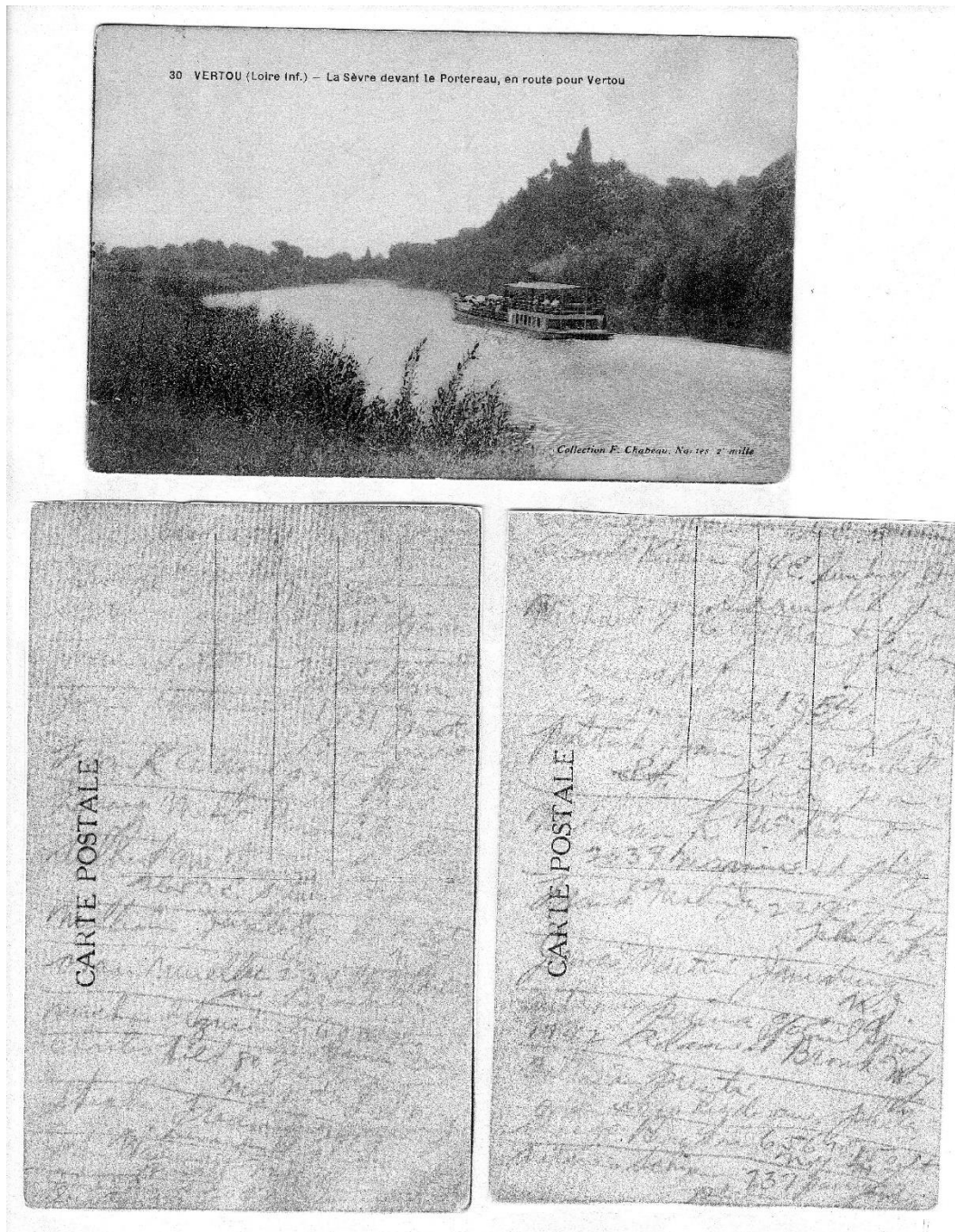
Chester Bower standing far right, Camp Dix New Jersey May 1919

As noted above, my mother kept several postcards of the cities of Vertou and Nantes that Chester bought on his way out of France. On the back side of two identical cards from Vertou, he wrote names and addresses in pencil of men from his Company G; there was a different set of names on each postcard. I was able to figure out who these names represented because there was an original typed list of the surviving members of Company G tucked into the front of the 1922 Foulk and Eichelberger book. I don't know the source of this document; it has the date of 6 May 1919 in the upper right corner, which means it was prepared right before Company G left France. It is titled *Roster of men Co. "G", 315th Inf., carried on rolls this date with address*. There are 158 names on the list. It appears that Chester took the time to jot down names of men he had served and possibly become friends with during the war. Perhaps he did this in Vertou or perhaps on the return voyage home. The combined total of names on both cards is 25, see list below. They hailed from Philadelphia, other Pennsylvania cities, Brooklyn and other New York communities, and places in New Jersey. We do not know how many of these, if any, Chester stayed in touch with after the war.

Albert Williams
Anthony Perina
Anthony Presti
Antonio Schipani
Charles Hild
Charles R. Lacey
Claude Keiser
Constantine Scofes
Frank A. Ward

Frank Molin Jr.
George L. Reardon
George P. Webb
George Thiel
James Martin
John C. Evans
John J. Wainwright
John Titscher
John Underriner

Michael Szuszkewicz
Michael T. Kelly
Oscar W. Mueller
Patrick J. Lynn
Stephen A. Frederick
William K. MacDermott
William T. Zuefle



Postcards from Vertou, with Chester's handwritten lists of fellow soldiers' names, circa 1919

Veterans' organizations activities

Chester was active in two veterans groups after he returned: the American Legion which was formed in March 1919 by members of the AEF, and the Patriotic Order Sons of America which was formed in 1847 in Pennsylvania. The American Legion post in New Oxford was named for George E. Snyder, the first soldier from there to die in WWI. Snyder entered the Marine Corps as a Pharmacist's Mate and served at Chateau Thierry. He died of influenza in September 1918 at the U.S. Navy Base Hospital in Brest.

Chester also assisted with burials in New Oxford when soldiers who had been interred in France began to be repatriated in 1920-21, including the burial of George Snyder when his body was returned in May 1920.

There were 1,086 men from Adams County who served in the Great War, with 53 Gold Star families, including the Bower family for Chester's brother Charlie. Of these 53 soldiers who had died, 16 were killed in action, nine died of wounds, 25 died of disease (influenza), and three were accidental; 21 served in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, with eight in the 79th Division. New Oxford sent 68 men to WWI military service. Of these, one-third were sent overseas and two-thirds remained stateside. Six soldiers from New Oxford died during the Great War.

About nine years after the war, the 315th Infantry collected funds to build a community center in the destroyed village of Nantillois. We do not know if Chester participated in this effort. The building still stands today, with the following words engraved on its front: *"Erected in memory of the glorious dead of the 315th Infantry, USA."*



315th Infantry community center, Nantillois November 2016

Final thoughts

My life has been immeasurably changed by this journey to discover and bring to life this grandfather that I never had the chance to meet. When I studied history in college, what interested me most was ordinary people and everyday life...how normal human beings coped with the big sweep of historical events around them and created unique and productive lives for themselves and their families in the midst of all that was happening. Through this recent research and travel, the ordinary and everyday life of Chester Allen Bower has become **alive** for me, finally, as I know it was to my mother and her family. I am honored to be his granddaughter.

Chester witnessed so many remarkable events during his short time on the planet: the beginning of a new millennium and the assassination of President McKinley, the combustion-powered automobile and the Wright brothers' first flight, the influenza pandemic and the discovery of penicillin, women's right to vote, Prohibition and its repeal, and the Great Depression. And then, a few months before his death, Germany invaded Poland. And the "war to end all wars" that he and so many others had fought in was not really that. War was coming again. He knew it, he saw it, and he felt it.



Goldie and Chester Bower, circa mid-1920s New Oxford

How very fortunate that Chester and Goldie found each other in that small town in Pennsylvania. Both were so deeply affected by the war and the influenza pandemic, as were many in their community. Chester struggled to maintain steady employment the first few years after the war, and Goldie was a single mother raising a child whose father, and most of his family, had been decimated by the flu. After his marriage to Goldie, Chester was continually employed up until his death, in positions of great value to his community, and he was always able to provide for his family. And then Goldie took up his position at the Post Office, and continued that tradition of providing for her family through important community work. Ordinary people living in extraordinary times, creating lives of value and permanence.