

*French-American Heritage Foundation of Minnesota*

# ARTICLE TRIMESTRIEL QUARTERLY ARTICLE

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*On the Trail of the Hun, St. Mihiel Drive, by William James Aylward (1875–1956)*

## **WHEN PHILLIP CAME MARCHING HOME A World War I Story**



Mission Statement: To foster a greater understanding of the rich history and heritage of French-speaking people who helped form what is now Minnesota. Website: [fahfminn.org](http://fahfminn.org) YouTube: FAHF Minn



# WHEN PHILLIP CAME MARCHING HOME

## A World War I Story

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Unfortunately, our human history is filled with conflict and war. In the history of the United States, there are few years where our country has not been engaged in some kind of armed conflict. So when you have wars, you end up with war stories.

Growing up in Argyle, Minnesota, I remember with great fondness my Grandpa Phillip. I remember going to his house after church every Sunday and remember listening to him tell stories about his youth and experiences. He was a strong patriot and was an active member of the Argyle American Legion and also active in local politics. Occasionally, he would tell stories about his involvement in World War I. After he passed away in 1968, these stories would be retold by others, and, undoubtedly, they changed a little when those telling the tale embellished it a bit to make it more interesting. The story that stands out the most in my memory went something like this:

*Phillip was a supply sergeant and was stationed in France before going to the front. He was told by his commanding officer to get to the front lines. Transportation to the front was very busy and trucks and trains were not readily available. They went through Paris on their trip and at the train station they began drinking cognac and had so much fun they missed the train. Phillip and his friends then had to catch rides any way they could. On the way to the front they caught a ride in a hay wagon with a French farmer who took a liking to Phillip because they both spoke French. The farmer invited Phillip and his friends to spend the night with his family. They spent that night with this French farmer and drank much wine and cognac and had plenty of good food. The next day they continued their journey to the front, but when they arrived the war was over.*

In these stories told by Phillip and others, there were three basic facts in the tales that always intrigued me. First, Phillip was drinking French whisky or cognac with the local French farmers. Second, Phillip caught a ride on a hay wagon, and third, he got to the front after the war was over. The question is, were these stories true?

After doing research, and discovering diaries written by two other soldiers in Phillip's regiment, I now believe the basic facts in the story to be true. Not exactly true, but they are, in fact, based on actual events that occurred. Here is what I discovered.

My grandfather, Phillip Labine, was born December 29, 1889, on a farm about eight miles west of a small community in northern Minnesota called Argyle. His paternal ancestors were some of the original French settlers of Acadia in the 17th century in what is present-day Nova Scotia, Canada. They resettled in Quebec in 1767 as a result of the great Acadian Expulsion in the French and Indian War. His Grandfather Modeste Guildry dit Labine came to Minnesota in 1879 when the U.S. opened the lands for settlement after the land treaties with the local

Native tribes. His maternal ancestors were early fur traders who had been in the Midwest area going back to the 17th century, and Phillip's Great-grandfather Joseph Labissonière was one of the original settlers of Winnipeg, Canada, in 1818, and St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1838.

Phillip attended parochial schools in Argyle and graduated from the French-speaking St. Boniface College in 1908 with a degree in accounting. Phillip then worked in Arizona for a time with a surveying team that was laying a new railroad in the area. Phillip returned from Arizona in 1916 and began farming with his father Alfred on the family farm of 600 acres.

On April 6, 1917, the United States declared war on Germany. The Selective Service Act of 1917 authorized the United States federal government to raise a national army for service in World War I through conscription. Because Phillip was then a single man, he was selected by the draft board to serve in the Army. Phillip was inducted into the U.S. Army on December 17, 1917. Shortly before he left for Army boot camp, Phillip married Elizabeth Proulx on October 30, 1917. It is said she cried for three days at the loss of her husband, fearing for his going to war.

Seven hundred ninety-nine men from Marshall County would end up serving in the armed forces during this war, with 95 of them coming from Argyle. In the 1920 U.S. Census, there were 19,443 people living in Marshall County and 956 in the city of Argyle. Statistically then, 4.1% of the total population of Marshall County and 9.9% of the Argyle population served in the Armed Services in World War I.

Phillip left Warren, Minnesota, on December 20, 1917, and was transported by train to Fort Winfield Scott at the Presidio in San Francisco, California, where he was assigned as a private in the Coast Artillery section of the National Army. He was in the 36th Company, 2nd Provisional Regiment which was located at the Presidio. The Presidio of San Francisco is a park and former U.S. Army military fort on the northern tip of the San Francisco Peninsula in San Francisco.

After going through basic training, Phillip was promoted to the rank of sergeant in February 1918. On June 1, 1918, Phillip was transferred to the 1st Army Artillery Park, C.A.C. (Coast Artillery Corps) of the A.E.F. (American Expeditionary Forces). This regiment was organized at Fort Winfield Scott on March 1, 1918. Phillip continued in training at Fort Winfield Scott until he was given orders to go to France in August 1918.

The 1st Army Artillery Park consisted of: three batteries, with a strength of five officers and 300 enlisted men; six truck companies, each with a strength of three officers and 150 men; Regimental Headquarters, with one officer and 28 men; Motor Section Headquarters, with one officer and 30 men; a 601st Mobile Ordnance Repair Shop, with two officers and 45 men; a medical detachment, with four officers and 29 men; and, a depot section, with two officers and 12 men. Phillip Labine was assigned to one of the truck companies, namely, "Company D." The entire regiment with a full complement added up to about 2,005 men and 330 vehicles.

The truck companies, to which Phillip Labine was assigned, were composed primarily of truck drivers and mechanics whose job was to deliver arms and ammunition to the front line batteries. Keep in mind that in World War I the use of horses to pull wagons was still very

common and using trucks was still in its infancy stages for military operations. Horses were often used to pull artillery, ambulances, and supply wagons. They were considered superior to trucks in travelling through deep mud and over rough terrain. However, they also contributed to disease and poor sanitation in camps, which were caused by their manure and carcasses when killed.



*Four-Wheel Drive Nash Quad Truck Used by the Army in World War I*

The 1st Army Artillery Park was transported to France in different sections. The Regimental Headquarters and Park Batteries A and B were the first to go over, arriving in France in June 1918. Truck Companies D, E, and F, (Phillip was in Truck Company D), did not leave San Francisco until August 15, 1918. Truck Companies A, B, and C, which included Phillip's first cousin Albert Labine, left San Francisco on June 17, 1918, and reached Bordeaux, France on July 11, 1918.

Phillip's Truck Company D left San Francisco at 2:15 p.m. on August 15, 1918. They traveled through Stockton and Bakersfield, California, then south into Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan, crossing into Canada through the tunnel under the Detroit River. They re-entered the U.S. below Niagara Falls into the state of New York, then across the Hudson River into New Jersey. They transferred from the train to a ferry boat, and took the approximately two-hour ride around New York City up the East River to Long Island. While taking this ferry ride, they could see the Statute of Liberty and other skyscrapers of New York City. After disembarking from the ferry, they took the train to Camp Mills, arriving on August 21, 1918. Camp Mills is located near Hempstead, New York, in what is now the village of Garden City. Hofstra University today occupies some of the land where Camp Mills was located.

Phillip's company remained at Camp Mills for ten days. The mission of Camp Mills during World War I was to accommodate the thousands of troops that arrived from training camps across the U.S. on their way to France. Camp Mills had wooden buildings and tents that could house some 40,000 transients, who would stay there until they were scheduled for embarkation at the overseas piers in Brooklyn or Hoboken.

On August 31, 1918, after taking the train and ferry back to Hoboken, Truck Company D boarded the ship *SS Anchises*<sup>1</sup> that remained in the harbor overnight. They left the harbor on

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<sup>1</sup> The *SS Anchises* was a passenger liner owned by Alfred Holt & Co. It was built in 1911 and was used to ferry troops during World War I. During World War II, it was bombed by German aircraft and 15 lives were lost. Information obtained by the Wreck Report for the Hydrographic Service for the UK.

September 1, 1918, sailing by convoy to protect against German submarine attacks. Conditions aboard these transport ships were crowded, and makeshift bunks had to be installed to accommodate the troops. One soldier's description of these transport ships describes his bunk being a piece of canvas run through each end with poles and strung up to the deck one over the other. When you got into the bunk, the canvas sagged, smothering any unfortunate soldier who might be trying to sleep below you. The food is not recalled with fondness, and the word "rotten" was used by one soldier describing his experience.<sup>2</sup> Many of the passengers became seasick. On September 12, 1918, the troops arrived in Liverpool, England, where they disembarked from the ship. They remained in Knotty Ash, a suburb of Liverpool, until September 18th. They then took a nine-hour train ride to Southampton where they stayed a short time until they again boarded a ship called the *S.S. Harvard* which transported them to Le Havre, France. They arrived in Le Havre on September 20th. After three days in Le Havre, the men boarded the Forty and Eight boxcars, which took them on a two-day rail trip to Angoulême, France, where they arrived on September 25th. (These French boxcars were called "Forty and Eights" ("*quarante et huit*") because they could hold either 40 men or 8 horses.)

The Army O & T (Operations and Training) Center No. 5 was located in Angoulême. After arriving in Angoulême, the men had to hike 11 miles until they were picked up by trucks that took them to a town the men called De Luxe, France. There is no De Luxe, France, listed on any present-day maps for the area around Angoulême. However, there is a small village called Luxé located not far from Angoulême, and this is likely the location where Truck Company D stayed from September 25 until October 23, 1918. They then went back to Angoulême, where they received instructions at the O & T Center in gas defense and prepared for front line duty. They remained in Angoulême until November 10, 1918, and then, along with Truck Companies E and F, they took the Forty and Eights to Récicourt, where they arrived on November 12, 1918.

Phillip, while in the Luxé area, bought a postcard and wrote a letter to his wife. The postcard is dated November 5, 1918, and in the card Phillip states he purchased it the night before. The front of the postcard had a photo of the Château de Rochefoucauld, which is located just to the east of Angoulême. Also nearby was Château de Châlus-Chabrol where England's King Richard I, known as Richard the Lionheart, was killed while trying to besiege the castle in the year 1199.

Based on facts supported by the historical records of the 1st Army Artillery Park, the diary of Ted Porger, and the postcard purchased by Phillip, we can safely conclude that Phillip Labine did not, in fact, arrive at the front until the war was over. Ted Porger's diary entry dated November 12, 1918, states as follows:

*Nothing doing fairly warm. Cold last night in dugout. **Truck Co. D, E, F arrived today at Récicourt.** Reports are they relieve us, and we move somewhere. I hope it is to a seaport. Cold! Ice everywhere. Working in the kitchen.*

Porger's diary confirms the story. Phillip did not arrive at the front until the war was over! Phillip's Truck Company D did not arrive at the front to relieve the other truck companies until November 12, 1918, the day after the Armistice of November 11, 1918 was signed! Unlike

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<sup>2</sup> Information obtained from notes in a diary kept by Private John McClintock, Company E, 101<sup>st</sup> Infantry, 26<sup>th</sup> Division (Yankee Division) American Expeditionary Force, 1917-1919. Augusta, ME, 1960.

Truck Company C, which drove their trucks, Phillip's Truck Company D took the Forty and Eight train boxcars to the front. It is not clear how close to Récicourt the trains went, so it is likely the men had to truck or even walk to Récicourt after they left the train.

Récicourt, France, is located near the Forest of Argonne where the Battle of Argonne Forest (aka the Meuse-Argonne offensive) took place in 1918. This battle involved 1.2 million U.S. soldiers and was the deadliest battle in American History, resulting in over 350,000 casualties including 26,277 American lives. A large World War I memorial is located about 17 kilometers (about ten miles) from Récicourt, at Verdun, where another large battle of World War I took place in 1916.

One can only speculate what emotions Phillip and the other soldiers felt when the Armistice was signed and the war was over. However, relief is one emotion they must have experienced. The anxiety and concern about your safety and exposure to the killing fields could now be put to rest. Porger reports there were French flags flying everywhere and church bells ringing. He writes all France was celebrating and that Frenchmen looked happy for the first time since he arrived. Phillip must have also experienced this exhilaration while he was traveling with his truck company on the Forty and Eight boxcars traveling to Récicourt on November 11th. Another soldier describes how there was terrific artillery fire from both sides at 10 a.m., and then at 11 a.m. all was quiet on the front. Soldiers on both sides describe a stillness that was very strange and unusual. That night trucks ran with their headlights on and bonfires could be seen all over. This had been forbidden during the war due to light giving away your position to the enemy.

When Truck Companies D, E, and F arrived in Récicourt on November 12th, the entire 1st Army Artillery Park regiment was together for the first time since landing in France. All six truck companies were there along with the three batteries and other sections of the regiment. All the men must have wondered what was now going to happen next. Because the war was now officially over, what would they do?

On November 18, nearly all the trucks from the truck companies were turned over to the 54th Ammunition Train. This left the 1st Artillery Regiment temporarily without motor transportation and they simply had to wait until they received orders. Thursday, November 28, 1918, was Thanksgiving. The troops were served a Thanksgiving meal which included corn willie,<sup>3</sup> cigars, and chocolate.<sup>4</sup> Other troops from other divisions did not fare much better. Private John McClintock from the 101st Infantry of the 26th Division stated that his Thanksgiving meal was hamburger steak and potatoes for dinner, and stew with hot biscuits for supper.<sup>5</sup>

On Thanksgiving, Phillip's regiment was told they would be moving out the next day. The only problem with this order was that most of the 1st Army Artillery Park trucks had been turned over to other units. The vehicles remaining were probably the ration and rolling kitchens, but there were no trucks to haul the troops. This meant the only way Phillip's Truck Company D was going to move out was by foot. They were going to have to march!

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<sup>3</sup> Corn willie consisted of corned beef, bacon grease, onions, canned tomatoes, and kernel corn. It was a common food eaten by the soldiers in the trenches of World War 2. It was sometimes called "corn bill."

<sup>4</sup> A lot of the information in this article was obtained from the diary of Private Ted Porger, who was from Two Harbors, Minnesota, and was in Truck Company C of the 1st Army Artillery Park.

<sup>5</sup> Information obtained from notes in a diary kept by Private John McClintock, Company E, 101<sup>st</sup> Infantry, 26<sup>th</sup> Division (Yankee Division) American Expeditionary Force, 1917-1919. Augusta, ME, 1960.

For a regiment used to having trucks, the idea that they were now going to have to march on foot with a full military backpack must have been disheartening. Men from the regiment described the march as the “never-to-be-forgotten hike.” The men’s packs were heavy, and walking with them would be difficult.

On Friday, November 29, 1918, they set out on foot, loaded with their heavy packs, and uncertain how long they would be without motor transportation. The nearest troop train was located near Vignory, over 83 miles away. However, they had no other choice because orders are orders, and they headed south through the French countryside. They set out at 8 a.m. and arrived in Nubécourt, about 18 miles away, at 5 p.m. It must be assumed each truck company stayed together and that the entire regiment stayed near each other.

Walking 18 miles with no packs on your back would be difficult enough, but walking 18 miles with heavy packs is an entirely different story. One description of the men is that they looked like a lot of “pack mules.” This never-to-be-forgotten hike was not something the men were used to because they had their trucks. They were not foot soldiers! Soon, the soldiers started to discard items in their packs to lighten their load. Diaries from men in the regiment describe the men dumping blankets, underwear, military equipment no longer thought necessary, and other “junk.” The men spent much of the day getting rid of items they no longer needed. A long trail of litter was left by the troops that was no doubt picked up by the locals who had suffered so much during the war.

Memories of the march from Récicourt were recited in the poem “That Hike” written by soldiers of the 1st Army Artillery Park. This poem is included in A. L. McEvoy’s 1919 book: *History of the Army Artillery Park First Army A.E.F., France*.

During the first night in Nubécourt, some of the troops ate potatoes that a French lady cooked for the troops. They also had hardtack to eat. These stories are found in other accounts and diaries of soldiers. The French locals interacted frequently with the soldiers and cooked for them, and allowed them to sleep in their barns and even in their homes. Others must have taken similar paths. Phillip spoke French, so it is not erroneous to believe he achieved similar success in obtaining food from the locals.

The next day, Saturday, November 30th, they continued their hike to Naives-Rosières, located another 18 miles further south. It is in these two days of hiking that presented the most likely opportunity for Phillip to hitch a ride on a hay wagon. Because the regiment had food and ration trucks, they must have come together in the same location each night. However, some ate and stayed with the locals and it must be presumed they had permission to do this.

On Sunday, December 1st, the men rested near Naives-Rosières. They laid up about one kilometer from the town center. The men were allowed to go into town, where they bought meat at the local market and then had a French lady cook the meat for them. Phillip Labine undoubtedly interacted with the French locals, and it is likely he was in demand as an interpreter for the men because he spoke French. There is mention of champagne, and it appears the men had access to some. This makes sense because they were just east of the Champagne wine region of France. Reims and Épernay located nearby are considered the



commercial centers of this Champagne region. There is also mention of a “fight” between two soldiers. This mention of conflict and fights between the soldiers comes up a number of times.

That night, some men slept in French homes. The men were obviously mingling with the locals and actually sleeping in their homes. The part of the story that said Phillip stayed overnight with a French family is therefore likely true. At 2 p.m. on Monday, December 2nd, the men from Truck Company C again resumed walking south. At 5 p.m. some soldiers caught a ride on a truck that took them southwest to Billroy. Billroy was located just west of Wassy. The roads were not marked well, and some men were lost for six hours in the forests near Robert-Magny, a little town just to the east of Wassy, and near Billroy.

Phillip’s Truck Company D stayed at Naives-Rosières until December 3rd, and then followed Truck Company C to the area around Wassy. (Wassy, France, was the location of a historic event known as the Massacre of Wassy, which occurred on March 1, 1562, during the religious wars of Europe.) The regiment set up camp and stayed in this area until at least December 10th.

The regiment made several short moves after Billroy. It is not clear why they did this, but they were gradually working their way closer to the A.E.F. Headquarters at Chaumont and the train tracks located near Vignory. One can only speculate about the huge logistical problems associated with trying to house and feed two million soldiers. On December 10th, the men from the regiment were dispersed on trucks to several different areas near Billroy. Truck Company C spent nine days in Champcourt while Truck Company D went to Doulevant-le-Château, located only a few miles to the southeast of Billroy. Three days later, on December 13, 1918, President Wilson arrived in France to take part in the Paris Peace Conference. On December 20th, both Truck Company C and D were transferred to Villiers-sur-Marne. Other sections of the regiment transferred to Donjeux, Sommevoire, and the fields near Vignory.

On December 20th, Truck Company C and D moved to the area near a small town named Villiers-sur-Marne, located just to the south of Donjeux near Gudmont-Villiers. Villiers-sur-Marne, and Donjeux were only about three miles from each other on the Marne River, located just north of Vignory. Battery C of the regiment was camped at Donjeux.

On December 25, 1918, the men enjoyed a Christmas breakfast of steak, oatmeal milk butter applesauce, and later a bacon sandwich for dinner. The troops also received an issue of candies, cigarettes, and a tin of tobacco. The Y.M.C.A., via their canteen networks, gave some troops two bars of chocolate. Sometime around Christmas, some of the men got a pass to go into Sommevoire, located nearby. In Sommevoire, there was a foundry called *la fonderie d’art Durenne et du Val d’Osne*, where small reproductions of the Statute of Liberty were made.

Between December 20, 1918, and February 3, 1919, the men from Truck Company C and D stayed in Villiers-sur-Marne, which was located in the area northwest of Vignory, France. Vignory was located just to the north of Chaumont, where the general headquarters of the American Expeditionary Forces in Europe was located. The A.E.F. Headquarters was in the building called the Caserne Damrémont. The A.E.F. directed the activities of more than two million soldiers at this location from September 1, 1917, until July 11, 1919.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Center of Military History, United States Army, *United States Army in the World War, 1917 to 1919*, Volume 1. (Washington, D.C., 1918.)



While the men waited for their turn to ride the train south, they had a lot of time on their hands. There was a lot of rain and cold weather. Of course, weather in December and January is not expected to be fair. The men would sleep in barns, and, for some, on a feather bed in a French home. The men were interacting with the local French population that undoubtedly had good feelings towards the Americans who had helped chase off the Germans from their soil.

Soldiers received passes to go visit local towns and villages. They stayed in French hotels, and drank cognac in the local restaurants. Men took trips to Neufchâteau, Chaumont, and Dijon, all located near Vignory. The men were paid in francs, and Porger notes he got paid 143.50 francs on January 8th. Using a currency converter, this amounts to about \$25.00 in U.S. currency. French francs lost much of their value during World War I, and, therefore, one could purchase a lot with \$25.00 in 1919.

Diaries from the troops provide details about the regiment's sojourn in Northeastern France in December and January. Some of the facts mentioned in these diaries include:

- Sleeping in barns on more than one occasion.
- Sleeping in a French home.
- Men getting into fights.
- Men getting drunk.
- Lots of rain and cold weather.
- Drinking champagne.
- Buying food in the markets. Foods include pork chops, pork sausage, steak on Christmas day, oatmeal milk butter applesauce, bacon sandwiches, and potatoes.
- Getting wood for fires.
- Staying at a French hotel on January 2nd with breakfast in room with cognac.
- Getting furloughs to Neufchâteau, Villiers-sur-Marne, and Dijon.
- Serving K.P. duty and going on hikes in mornings with rifles, packs, and belts.
- One man broke a leg while unloading cargo.
- Inspections by their commanding officer.

Obviously, there was plenty of time during this period for Phillip to speak in French to local farmers, dine and sleep in their homes, hitch a ride on a hay wagon, and have a drink or two of wine, champagne, or cognac.

Phillip's Truck Company D remained in the countryside near Vignory for over two months before they finally received orders to travel to southern France. On January 27, 1919, orders were given to unload rations onto a train boxcar. Later that day, the first companies of the 1st Army Artillery Park Regiment left by train to go to southern France. On February 2, 1919, Phillips's Truck Company D left by boxcar for Vignory. They arrived in Saint-Émilion (located next to Libourne) on February 4, 1919.

Some of the men traveled in U.S. boxcars called "side-door Pullmans." The U.S. boxcars were wider and roomier than the French boxcars. Others left Vignory in Forty and Eight train boxcars. Straw was spread around on the floors of the cars, and traveling in them was very crowded. Sometimes the Army put more than 40 men in these cars.

Another description of this train experience was written by Private John McClintock in his diary, which he describes as follows:

*At the yards we saw our first of French rolling equipment as we marched along a line of cattle cars. We got the surprise of our lives when orders were given to unhitch our packs, which we were glad to do as they were heavy, and to get aboard these cattle cars. These cars were marked 40 Hommes or 8 Chevaux, (in English 40 men or 8 horses), and were the troop-trains in France. It was some squeeze getting forty men in these cars with large packs but we did it. We are lucky to have straw in these cars... Sleep was impossible on flat wheels, so we sat up singing... At a railroad center some Frenchmen served us coffee which tasted like rum, black of course, but we drank it just the same. Morning came and rations were served out, canned beans, corn willie, hard tack, this was the standard menu on board trains when the boys were in France.<sup>7</sup>*

While traveling, the men would observe the countryside from the middle door, while others played cards, told yarns, or tried their best to sleep.

Pictured in the photo to the right is Minnesota's Forty and Eight boxcar on display at the Military Museum at Fort Ripley, in Little Falls, Minnesota. After World War II, the French government shipped forty-nine of these Forty and Eight boxcars to the United States, one for each state, and one to be shared by Washington, D.C. and the Territory of Hawaii. These were called "Merci Trains" or "French Gratitude Trains," and were filled with gifts. Visiting this boxcar would give you a good idea what it must have been like for Phillip and his fellow soldiers as they made their railway trip from February 3-4, 1919, through France.

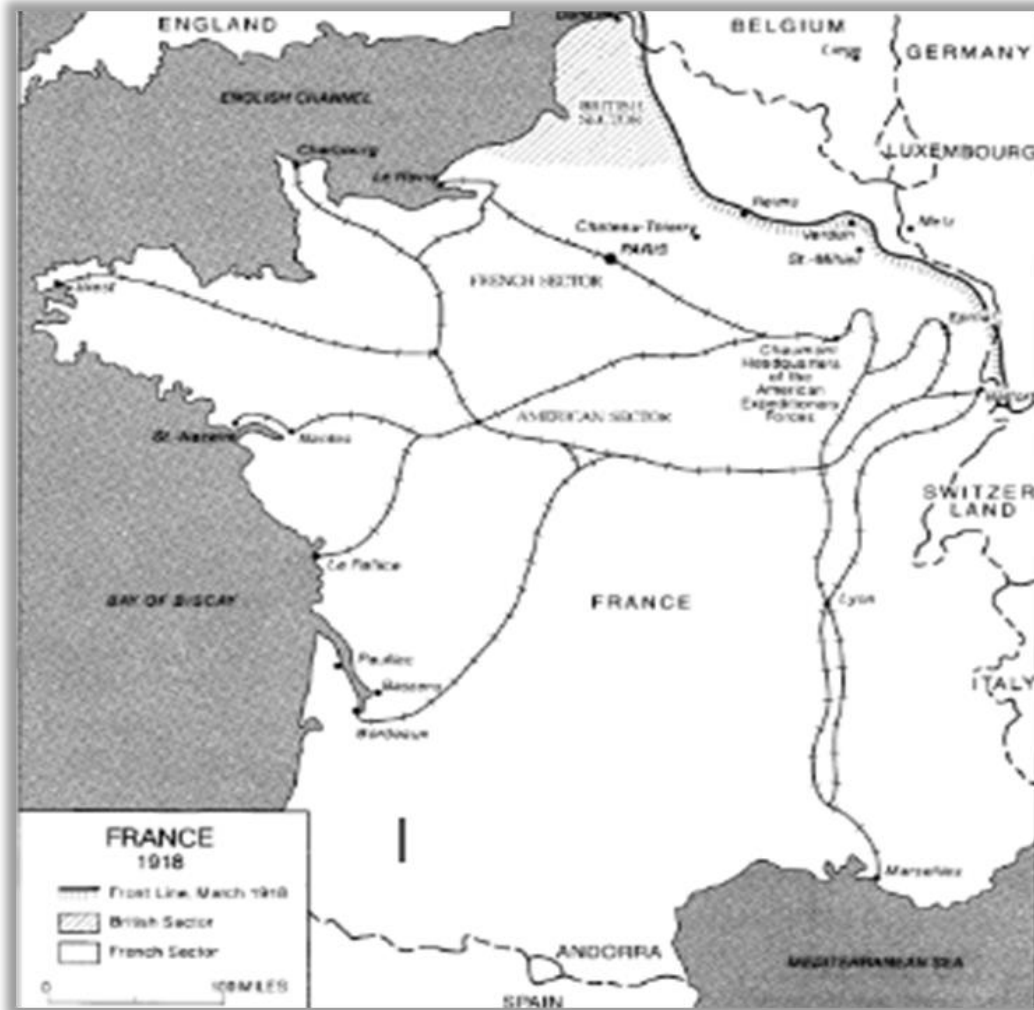


**Merci Train Boxcar, at Camp Ripley, Little Falls, Minnesota**

Phillip's train passed through Bourges, Limoges, Châteauroux, and Nevers on its way to Saint-Émilion, a small town on the outskirts of Libourne, France. Libourne is located just to the northeast of Bordeaux.

Phillip's Truck Company D would remain in Saint-Émilion from February 3rd until February 4th, then was transferred to Saint-Sulpice-de-Faleyrens, where they stayed until April 12, 1919. Saint-Sulpice-de-Faleyrens was only a couple of miles southwest from Saint-Émilion.

<sup>7</sup> Information obtained from notes in a diary kept by Private John McClintock, Company E, 101<sup>st</sup> Infantry, 26<sup>th</sup> Division (Yankee Division) American Expeditionary Force, 1917-1919, for September 29-30, 1917.



**1919 Train Route for Forty and Eight Boxcar Trip Taken by Phillip Labine from Vignory, Just North of A.E.F. Headquarters, to West of Bordeaux (Map from the Center of Military History, United States Army, Washington, D.C.)**

They were assigned to stay in the surrounding villages, in what were called billets. One man from the regiment described his billet, in a town called Neufchâteau, as a two-story building with three stoves located on each of the floors, and bunk beds lined up against the walls and down the middle of each floor. For lights, they had to use candles. The troops got to know the people who lived in the village located nearby, and soldiers in the company that could speak French were in great demand for their interpreting services. The men would hire French women to do their laundry, who were glad to be able to earn some extra cash, and were also glad to get the yellow soap from the army supplies. Soap was a scarce article in France and the women were willing to do the laundry provided they received soap as part of their compensation.

The men stayed in their billets for two months. During their sojourn there, they were allowed passes to go into Libourne. There the men could go dance in local dancehalls, see theatrical performances at a French house, go see a dentist, and meet French women. Men would get into trouble with the locals and for being drunk. They would have to spend time in the brig if caught.

The food given to the men is described by one soldier as coffee without milk or sugar, hardtack instead of bread, bacon, canned tomatoes, rice with Karo syrup, and slumgullion (ground beef, elbow macaroni and green peppers). Of course, corn willie is mentioned often and the men also went to town and paid French women to cook for them. Another soldier mentions bacon and eggs, biscuits, apple sauce or jam, corn meal, cabbage or turnip and sometimes steak.



***Phillip Labine During World War I in France  
(Phillip Pictured in Top Row, Second from Left)***

Some of the men had to stay in a shelter or barn with straw on the floor. There is mention of drills and inspections which is understandable because they were still in the Army. It rained often. The men worked K.P. (kitchen patrol) duty, and did morning hikes. On February 28, 1919, General John J. Pershing came in to review the approximately 1,500 soldiers staying in this area, while they were waiting to go back to the States. They played sports, as is evidenced by the picture to the left of Phillip and friends on what appears to be a field, and the soldier in the front row holds what appears to be a soccer ball.

There were other kinds of entertainment described by the troops. A French magician, a group called the Herring Sisters who were instrumentalists, band concerts, ball games between companies and regiments, and movies. A Red Cross truck would stop by and give the men hot chocolate, biscuits and cigarettes. Religious services were also available for the soldiers on Sundays.

Truck Company D finally received orders on April 12th to go to Libourne, staying overnight in that city. They then had to hike 15 miles before catching a barge to Pauillac, their embarkation point back to the States. They took the barge north to Pauillac, where the U.S. Navy had a base and harbor for boats to haul troops back and forth between the U.S. and France. It was during this time that the Spanish Flu was raging throughout the world and it is reported that 36% of the troops in the Army became ill. The crowded conditions on trains and ships were said to contribute greatly to the spread of this virus. In the end, it is estimated the Spanish Flu caused the deaths of 50 million people worldwide. It started in January 1918 and ended in the summer of 1919. One hypothesis is that the conjunction of soldiers, gas, pigs, ducks, geese, and horses in northern France during the war provided the conditions for the emergence of this deadly flu virus.<sup>8</sup> Despite these dangers, there are no stories about Phillip Labine ever contracting the flu.

Phillip's unit, Truck Company D, boarded the *USS Canandaigua* at Pauillac on April 20, 1919, and arrived in Boston harbor on May 3, 1919. They were then sent to Camp Devens,

<sup>8</sup> J.S. Oxford, R. Lambkin, A. Sefton, R. Daniels, A. Elliot, R. Brown, D. Gill, *A hypothesis: the conjunction of soldiers, gas, pigs, ducks, geese and horses in Northern France during the Great War provided the conditions for the emergence of the "Spanish" influenza pandemic of 1918–1919*, *Vaccine* 23 (2005) 940-945. Robin Lindley, *The Forgotten American Pandemic: Historian Dr. Nancy K. Bristow on the Influenza Epidemic of 1918*, <https://www.hnn.us/article/the-forgotten-american-pandemic-historian-dr-nancy>.

Massachusetts, where a demobilization center was established. They were demobilized at Camp Devens on May 6, 1919. Phillip then took a train to Fort Dodge, Iowa, where he was discharged from service on May 17, 1919.

Phillip arrived home and rejoined his wife in Argyle after his discharge sometime in May 1919. Phillip would take over the family farm from his father and would farm the land until 1950, when he then turned the farm operation over to his son Oliver J. Labine. Phillip and Elizabeth would have seven children. He passed away on Memorial Day in 1968 and is buried next to his wife, in the Fort Snelling National Cemetery in Bloomington, Minnesota.



***Author Mark Labine at Fort Snelling National Cemetery  
Between Phillip and Elizabeth Labine's Grave Markers***

The information in this article supports the tale that Phillip hitched a ride in a hay wagon owned by a French farmer, spent a night or more with a French family, drank their cognac and wine, ate their food, and, yes, arrived at the front the day after the war was over!

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