

The Effects of War

how one Illinois farm couple's experience of the First World War inspired a cycle of regionalist poems

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In the weeks following the death in 1974 of farmer and First World War veteran Alpheus Appenheimer, of Stark County, Illinois, a lifetime's accumulation of his personal remains were distributed among his seven children. Among the effects was a trove of items from his service in France in 1918, including a diary, letters, photographs, medals and citations, service papers, a gas mask, mess kit, various booklets and pamphlets, insignia, ammunition clips, a Colt .45 service pistol, and battlefield souvenirs including a German officer's silver-plated flask, dagger, belt buckle and Iron Cross.

Alpheus Appenheimer was my grandfather, and I had always been fascinated with his war stories, so once I learned the extent of his wartime effects, I determined to catalogue every last item, an undertaking which would require many months. At the same time, so that the effects might be as fully contextualized as possible, I began a systematic study of his unit, the 6th Machine Gun Battalion of the 2nd Division, A.E.F. This turned into a 30-year research project involving hundreds of books, documents, unpublished diaries and letters, correspondence with the families of other battalion veterans, interviews with individuals who had known my grandfather, and the creation of an extensive website¹ about the battalion's history.

One result of all this research was the publication of a memoir² of a Marine who had served alongside my grandfather, for which I wrote chapter introductions and extensive annotations. But the most unusual result of the research was a series of regionalist poems situated in the upper Spoon River watershed of Stark County, portraying the effects of war on Alpheus and his family over the years.

The poems were nearly two decades in the making. It took that long for me to study my grandparents' lives to where I felt confident enough to write about them. I interviewed anyone I could find who had known them; studied and contextualized their wartime letters; scoured decades of local newspaper archives for stories relating to them, and worked through boxes of photographs, scrapbooks, documents, memorabilia and farm records.

The lives of Alpheus Appenheimer and America Swango were emblematic of, and literally encapsulated, the frontier history of the nation. America was born in 1897 in a one-room log cabin in Wolfe County, Kentucky, which dated from the days when her family settled there in the early 1780s, shortly after the territory was first opened by Daniel Boone. Alpheus was born in 1891 in a one-room sod dugout on the Kansas frontier during one of the worst blizzards in decades. Both grew up poor, with an unending routine of hard physical work.

America's father moved from Kentucky to Illinois to Montana, and back again to Illinois, from one share-cropping arrangement to another. America left school early to work for several well-to-do families in Toulon, shouldering much of their household and gardening chores, and helping to raise their children.

When an extended drought forced the Appenheimer family to abandon their Kansas homestead in the mid-1890s and return to Illinois in a covered wagon, they dug up the still-unsprouted seeds from their field and carried them back in a Mason jar, to have something with which to start over again. They had moved to Kansas in the first place after losing their farm in Pike County, Illinois, to hog cholera.

Alpheus grew up working on his parents' farm just south of Toulon, and attended a one-room school-house which he left after the eighth grade to work on the farm full-time. As soon as turned 21, he hit the road with \$10 in his pocket, to get off the farm a while and see the country. He made his way unhurriedly through the West, from Mexico to Idaho, stopping to work on farms and ranches along the way for pin money. His correspondence home was famously stingy, such as the postcard from Walla Walla, Washington which read, simply: *"I am not dead or crippled but am awful busy."* It was there that he worked on a large wheat farm to earn some travel money, driving a 30+ mule hitch combine through the harvest season. Already a seasoned muleteer when he set out from the farm, this experience would later make Al one of the most skilled mule-skinners in his battalion. Eventually, after a year on the road, Alpheus returned to

the family farm in Illinois with \$10 still in his pocket. Three years later his father died of a heart attack while he and Alpheus were riding a horse and wagon into town, and full responsibility for running the family farm landed squarely on the young man's shoulders.

When war broke out in April 1917, Alpheus was in the midst of preparing the fields for planting. In spite of being responsible for his mother's farm, he was determined to enlist, a resolve firmly opposed by his mother, who could hardly be expected to run the farm by herself. Al's solution to this obstacle was to make an arrangement with his sister and her husband to take over the farm in his absence. By late June the spring work was completed. On the 26th he shipped some hogs by freight train to Peoria, and rode along in the caboose. As soon as he had concluded his business at the stockyards, Al made his way to the Marine Corps recruiting station and presented himself to the sergeant at the desk, where he was duly sworn in, and told to be in Chicago the following Friday to catch a train to Paris Island.³ This did not go down well at home, where Al's mother was angry and distressed in equal measure. She was certain he could have obtained an agricultural deferment, and feared that her inexperienced son-in-law would never be able to manage the farm adequately, as he had done little farmwork and, moreover, was deathly afraid of horses.

Alpheus's enlistment also complicated his burgeoning courtship with America Swango. From the tentative tone of their first letters, it is evident that they still hardly knew each other, so it must have come as a surprise to everyone--- not least to America herself--- when, toward the end of training, Alpheus proposed to her by mail and she accepted.

The cycle of poems which emerged from my research explores the effects of war from different viewpoints (husband, wife, daughter, grandson), from 1917 to the early 1990s. The blank-verse narrative,⁴ "Nights by a Window, Listening for a Train,"⁵ opens in October, 1917. Alpheus has returned home on furlough after basic training to marry his sweetheart, America. The day after the ceremony they ride together by wagon to the train station, where she will see him off. The following passage is less an accurate portrayal of America's private emotions on that morning--- which are of course unknowable--- as it is a portrayal of emotions which any young woman in such circumstances might plausibly have felt.

Parted by only the width of a hand
as they sat on the wagon's wooden seat,

they composed but a single silhouette,
belying the sense of isolation
that each began to feel in the other.
He urged the mare to a trot, but offered
little in the way of conversation
while she, in the grip of apprehensions
so strange and particular to herself
she could find no way to permit them voice,
sat wrapped in a silence deep as his own.

In the prolonged separation to come, the sense of silence and isolation which she experiences on this morning will grow more pronounced, until his letters, rather than dispelling her isolation, only seem to deepen it.

A lifetime of waiting had passed since then,
and letters received in the interval,
letters in envelopes mottled by rain
and mud from places unknown, each bearing
a censor's stamp and, for postage, a phrase---
each letter held something less of the one
she remembered, as though what kept them apart
had turned to a distance more than miles,
more than the lapse of time. She was helpless
to stay the gradual drifting apart
of something unnameable they had shared,
of a feeling altogether too frail
to survive the prolonged monotonies
and sporadic storms of a soldier's life . . .

The months drag on, and his letters arrive less frequently. Worse, their tone has changed. Her fear that he might be killed is joined by another fear nearly as disturbing, that he is slowly turning into someone unknown to her:

In the months
that followed, the dread she had always known,
the dread that he might be killed, was replaced

by something less understood, by a fear
whose origin she was uncertain of,
unless it began with an unexpected
darkness of phrase in one of his letters
or else with the premonitions that rose
unbidden as birds from out of a field---
a fear that he, in a part of his soul,
had suffered death of a different order,
a death to be nursed in his heart, to be borne
back into life, to the woman he loved,
like a plague-carrying ship into harbor.
And she felt, without the strength to admit
so much as a breath of it to herself,
that the leave her husband had taken of her
the morning after their wedding, had proven
final at last. He would not return.
The soldier who would survive to step down
from the somber train as it hissed to a stop,
who would search the crowd for her face until
he feels the touch of her hand on his arm
and hears his name spoken--- this same soldier
would turn to her with the eyes of a stranger.



The next poem in the series, “The Dark Fields,”⁶ is situated on the Appenheimer farm in the early 1920s, and, like all the poems, is based on a true event. Several neighbors call at the house late one night with disturbing news: a nearby farm couple has been found dead: she in the house by a gunshot wound; he in the barn, hanging by the neck from a rafter. The neighbors are in shock and instinctively, even before calling the sheriff, come to Alpheus to handle the situation because he has been in the war and will know what to do. Alpheus goes off with the neighbors into the night, leaving America alone in the empty house. As she stands by the

window, she finds herself reliving the endless nights she stood at that same window, sick with worry for her husband far away at war.

Too many winter nights she had watched
at this same window, delving the darkness
beyond the reflected face in the glass,
beyond the porch and the yard, throughout
the months that her husband was overseas.
For weeks she had watched an old disfigured
oak on the hilltop, silhouetted
like a shape of anguish against the stars,
a shape nearly human, twisted in pain.

In the end, the reliving of her wartime isolation, combined with the shock of the neighbor woman's murder, and her husband's sudden absence, are too much to bear, and abruptly, irrationally, she runs out into the night.

. . . and now, as she stood alone in the house,
alone but for all the spectral fears
that closed upon her, she grew aware
of something with neither face nor form
against the sky on the hill, something stark.
Abruptly she ran to the kitchen door
and fled out across the yard to the gate,
tripping and stumbling but still running on,
away from the house, the hill, the road,
running until the remotest light
had vanished and there was nothing at all
but a black and indeterminate void
of field and starless sky and the sudden
unendurable pounding of her heart.



In the next poem, "Her Father's War,"⁷ the effects of war are experienced sometime in the early 1930s through the eyes of Alpheus's eldest daughter.

On the very morning that she was born,
he collected and packed them up for good;
a few he consigned to the bottom drawer
of an old bureau--- the rest he stowed
in an iron-bolstered trunk in the barn:
the moth-balled remains of a buried war.
For a dozen years they were sealed away,
interred like a memory long-suppressed,
till she asked him once, on a winter's day,
if he'd been in the war. He looked surprised.
"Come to the barn," he said. When he lifted
the lid of the trunk, she saw a folded
winterfield jacket, an overseas cap,
a compass, canteen, and a battered cup.

When later she asked again of the war,
such innocent things were all he revealed.
If it hadn't been for a door left ajar
one night, as her father sat up alone
by the open trunk, she would never have known
of the other objects he kept concealed:
a holstered pistol, papers, a medal,
foreign citations unrolled from a tube,
and darker relics retrieved in battle
from the rocks and ravines of Belleau Wood:
Iron Crosses and buckles, a bayonet
with its hilt in the form of an eagle's head---
all torn from bloody tunics of the dead
and then smuggled home in a service kit.

Later that spring, on Memorial Day,
her father and other veterans marched
the length of a cedar-lined path to pay
respects to the local fallen. She thrilled

at how stern he appeared among the men,
at how smartly he bore himself, unmatched
in the curt retort and snap of his drill.
She shuddered to hear the synchronized crack
of volleys fired again and again
from a line of rifles slanted above
the white wooden cross of a soldier's grave.
Observing the set of her father's face,
like statuary, she pondered the lack
of expression, the marble stare into space.

That night, as she huddled asleep in bed,
a spasm of coughing rose from below
to disorient her dream, coughing so
consumptive she woke with a nauseous dread.
She tried to ignore it, turning her head
to stare at the silhouette of the silo
outside her window, surrounded by stars.
But it was impossible not to think
of the deathly noise. She stole downstairs
to the light in the kitchen where, because
he had never spoken of mustard gas,
she was startled and scarcely understood
when he buckled abruptly at the sink
and brightened all its enamel with blood.



In the long meditative poem, “The Tower at the Edge of the Wood,”⁸ which takes place at the Aisne-Marne Cemetery near Belleau, France, Alpheus’s grandson remembers his grandfather’s description of what took place there in 1918:

. . . how every sullen recess of the wood
flickered a vicious flame--- how a mighty

moan arose from the ranks as poppies,
soldiers and grain were cut down together
till not one man or stalk of wheat stood---
how those still breathing cringed behind bodies
crumpled or sprawling--- how raking fire
shredded their haversacks and pinned them
close to the earth--- how strangely, somewhere,
the note of a warbler, piercingly clear,
emerged for a moment above the din---
how the fire hit them again, again,
as curse accompanied prayer--- how cries
of the wounded tore the heart with pity.

Grandfather rarely spoke of such dying
directly--- there were clipped allusions,
disquieting, never intentional---
and, often, there was the lapse of silence
that fell like frost on the otherwise green
and pastoral heart of each reminiscence.
Mostly what he imparted were small
vignettes and stories of commonplace things
reassuring to any farmer's son:
how he stole up into the loft of a barn
with a bottle--- how he hauled ammunition
on a night so dark that he walked his team
by the flare of shells--- how he stole a swim
while washing his lathered mules in the Marne.

One evening he held the porch like a stage
for a crowd of us boys and told of the time
that he turned an all-but-terrified team
straight in the teeth of a rolling barrage---
how he calmed the creatures, holding reins taut
in his left hand, with a watch in his right
and, timing the march of the fiery wall
that bore upon them until the earth shook,
how he barked a brusque command to his mules

and bullied them straight through the coiling smoke.

Later in the poem, the time shifts back to when he asked his grandfather if he had ever wanted to return to where had he fought in France, or might still like to.

For months afterward,
Grandfather talked of a long journey back,
of showing my grandmother what had occurred---
of trying to show what he couldn't tell.
But he gave it up--- with too many rows
of his own to walk, too much acreage, stock,
and too little savings, too little time.

When, long after that, I asked him whether
he might still return, he said, with a frown,
*"That was decades ago. Your grandmother's gone.
Nothing would be the same."* I remember
the way he looked out at the evening sky
as though he might peer through miles and years
to those far-off events, and how I arose
from the sofa and silently left the room.

The poem ends in the early 1990s. Alpheus has been dead nearly 20 years. He never returned to France. Instead, his grandson and wife have made the pilgrimage to Belleau Wood for him.

And now, what a strange, ironic turn
that it should be I and not he who has come,
and my wife rather than his who should see
this place of all places.

Sensing that her husband might want some time alone in such a hallowed place, she leaves him and, going off by herself, climbs a long flight of stairs to disappear into the shadows of Belleau Wood itself.

And now for the first time I am alone,
alone in that place of legends to which

my grandfather always longed to return,
a place of apocalyptic fury,
carnage and devastation... a place
of villages and reclusive pastures
and rivers that haunted him all his days.

He crosses the lawn and climbs the stairs of the austere white tower tucked into the side
of the wood. Entering the doorway, he finds himself in the meditative stillness of the chapel.

The afternoon sun
inclines through narrow, faceted windows
of tintured and leaded glass, muted rays
of colored radiance slanting through air
to hallow, in auras of blue and rose,
names of the missing chiseled on walls.

After a time he steps back outside and watches a single swallow soaring and dipping in
the sunlight. Then he follows the terrace around to the back of the tower and sees the stairway
where his wife disappeared earlier, to explore the wood on her own. Only now, in the deep
shade, the wood begins to seem a more disturbing and haunted place.

The air is less cordial here, with the sun
eclipsed by a circuit of conifers
closing on every side. A residual
atmosphere, haunted and unresolved,
hovers about their boughs and they brood
like portals opening into the night,
into a purgatory of craters,
of trenches and dugouts clouded with fern,
of corroded cartridges, buckles, spoons.

But there are darker ravines in this wood
where more survives than detritus of war,
where memory stains the air and where cries
of huddled and immaterial forms
are like shuddering leaves.

At this point his wife reappears, but he senses that something is not quite right, that she has encountered something in the wood which has disturbed her.

She catches my eye
from the stairway, suddenly stepping forth
from out of the shadows, a strange, uncertain
regard on her face that makes me afraid.
I rush up to meet her. She grasps my arm
and urges me rapidly down the stair
toward the waiting taxi. I pull her near
and ask her to whisper what she has seen---
she turns with a look that is oddly removed---
her eyes are unaccountably grieved

Twenty-one of the Stark County poems were collected in the recent history, *Stark County, Illinois: History and Families*, in 2012.⁹ A larger selection of the Stark County poems appeared later the same year in a privately printed collection, *Stark County Poems: War and the Depression Come to Spoon River*,¹⁰ but it was issued in a very limited run and is now difficult to find. All of the poems discussed in this essay appear in *A River Dark with Rain: Selected Poems, 1985-2015*.¹¹

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NOTES:

1. "History and Lore of the 6th Machine Gun Battalion". monongahelabooks.com/Sonsof6th.html
2. Linn, Louis C., (edited by Laura Jane Linn Wright, with annotations and chapter introductions by B.J. Omanson). *At Belleau Wood with Rifle and Sketchpad: The Memoir of a United States Marine in World War I*. (Jefferson NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2012).
3. "Paris Island", with one "r", was the correct spelling in 1917. It did not become "Parris" until 1919.
4. "Blank verse narrative", a traditional English verse form, was first perfected as a vehicle for rural tales by William Wordsworth in 1800. It was used with great effect around the time of the First World War for rural stories by such regionalist American poets as E.A. Robinson and Robert Frost. Most

recently, blank verse narrative has been used for a series of stories about the small town and rural inhabitants of the Mississinewa River Valley in Indiana by American poet Jared Carter.

5. "Nights by a Window, Listening for a Train," first published in *Sparrow 63: A Yearbook of the Sonnet*, Bordighera Press, 1996.
6. "The Dark Fields", a blank verse narrative, was first published in *Chronicles: A Magazine of American Culture*. The Rockford Institute. November, 1991.
7. "Her Father's War", a narrative composed of four linked sonnets, was first published in *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 100, No. 1 (Winter 1992), University of the South. It was later reprinted in *Sparrow 63: A Yearbook of the Sonnet*, Bordighera Press, 1996.
8. "The Tower at the Edge of the Wood," a meditative poem composed of fourteen irregularly rhymed sonnets, was first published in *Sparrow 63: A Yearbook of the Sonnet*, Bordighera Press, 1996.
9. *Stark County, Illinois: History and Families*. Stark County Genealogical Society, Toulon, Illinois. (Sikeston, MO: Acclaim Press, 2012).
10. Omanson, BJ. *Stark County Poems: War and the Depression come to Spoon River*. (Morgantown, WV: Monongahela Books, 2012).
11. Omanson, BJ. *A River Gray with Rain: Selected Poems, 1985-2015*. (Morgantown, WV: Monongahela Books, 2015). A downloadable PDF available at monongahelabooks.com/RiverGrayWithRain.htm.