

# Clermonters' service in WWI spotlighted in new book 'Over There'

BY BRETT MILAM  
Editor

Gary Knepp, local historian and author, has a new book about one of the most seminal moments of the 20th century, WWI, entitled, "Over There: An Ohio community's experience in the Great War."

*The Sun* had a chance to read the book, and then sit down with Knepp to chat about it.

"Whenever I write, I try to give the common person's experience of what they did in that war, and put it within the context of a larger subject," Knepp said.

To do so, Knepp turns an eye to the people, Clermonters, as they were known then, to make a world-changing event more personal. He elucidates the period via letters and diary entries from soldiers or doughboys, on the frontlines and in the trenches, and with an accounting of the home-front during the war.

And the larger subject is that the Great War was a war of empires in their death throes. Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia, and the Ottoman Turkish empires of the previous century fell by the wayside. Allied countries France and Great Britain were also greatly diminished.

But in their wake, America stepped forth, somewhat reluctantly, as the newest empire, setting a path for what historians have dubbed the, "American Century." Knepp said he thinks had the U.S. not

eventually gotten involved, Germany would likely have won.

Despite that historical momentum and the severity of the war itself — upwards of 19 million military and civilian deaths, of which, there were 53,513 American military deaths and another 63,195 lost to disease; and then the onset of the Spanish flu, which killed an estimated five percent of the world's population — Knepp argues the Great War has been overshadowed by WWII.

Along with the passage of time, the war has "faded from our collective memory," he said.

One way to reconnect is to show the normal Clermonters through the letters, which Knepp said he sees as the core of the book.

It was a war fought by those normal Clermonters, many of whom still had a foot in the agricultural makeup of the 19th century using killing machines of the 20th century. Most were farmers, some with a lurch toward 20th century occupations like truck driver, electrician and oil driller.

As Knepp told *The Sun*, most of whom also had likely never ventured further than Cincinnati, but once serving, found themselves in the foothills of France and along the Rhine in Germany.

Among the letters on offer, most soldiers remarked upon the perpetual rain in France, and the different farming practices. One Bethel soldier, Delmore Sargent with Com-

pany C, Second Regiment Engineers, remarked that one of the French towns was as large as Bethel. He also liked the town's bread better.

"I like this country real well, and I also like the people," he added.

Private Lowell Daugherty worries he's getting too fat in France, telling his mom, "They certainly threw the beans at us though. We have beans and more beans ... I don't think that I will ever be able to cook ... a bean when I get back home."

Weather reports, farming observations, and dinner plates weren't the only bits and pieces of information in the letters — part of why the soldiers focused on those observations is that anything else would have a hard time getting past the military's censors, i.e., anything a foreign spy could use to find where they were — were the details of what war itself was like.

Paris Turner, a member of the U.S. infantry, illustrated that in one letter, saying, "Mother, you can't imagine what an awful thing it is to take the life of another."

But when Turner saw an officer trying to ride away on his horse, he shot him, and remarked how "pretty he rolled off his horse."

Trench warfare marked the war, and still dots the land today, with over 400 miles of trenches etched out of the earth. As Knepp outlines in the book, soldiers lived in the trenches under constant threat of shelling and strafing by planes overhead. Any soldier who put a

head above the trench, could catch a sniper's bullet waiting.

"Add to that the cramped, damp, and unhealthy living conditions, the shelf life of an individual's combat effectiveness was limited," Knepp wrote.

Mud, infectious diseases, and the stench of rotting bodies also kept the soldiers' company.

As one Clermonter, Clyde Terwilliger, a doctor who graduated from Milford High School in 1908, put it, "I was in the trenches, but I am really glad to be out. Conditions in the trenches are awful. Men who do not die of wounds, die of fevers and thirst."

An area Knepp learned the most about the war, and wasn't aware of prior to writing and researching for the book, was the participation of many Americans, including Clermonters, in the French, British and Canadian militaries prior to official U.S. involvement.

One such Clermonter was Alice Stewart, another graduate of MHS (1898), and a surgical nurse, who was a "remarkable woman," Knepp said. Primarily, he said, because it was unusual in that day for a woman to achieve such repute. And she did, earning two medals from the French.

Despite many firsthand accounts available about those who served in the war, one aspect of frustration Knepp highlights is the lack of an official count for how many Clermont County residents served in the war. A 1973 fire in St. Louis,

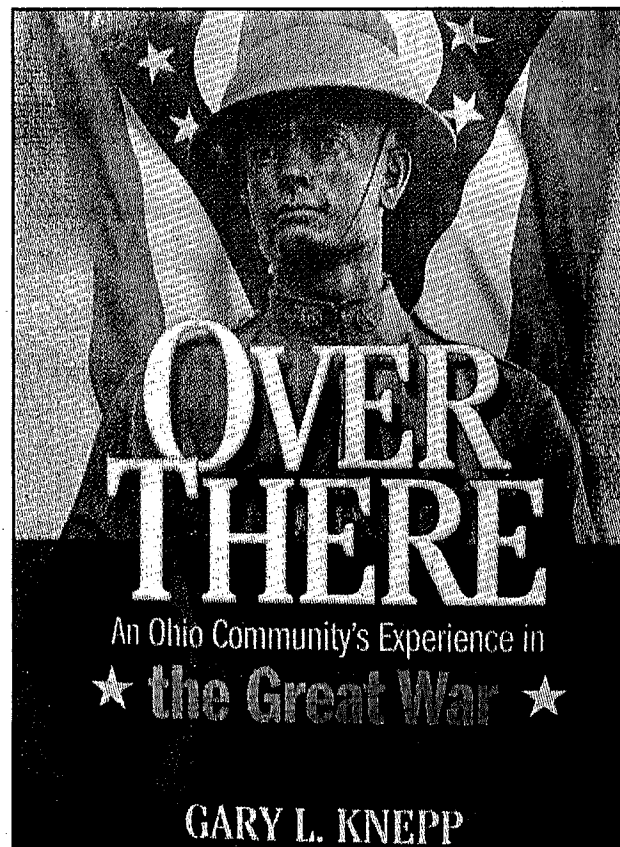


PHOTO / BRETT MILAM

Pictured is the latest book by Gary Knepp, local historian and author, "Over There: An Ohio community's experience in the Great War," about Clermont County residents' experiences in WWI.

which contained many WWI records, didn't help matters.

Knepp said we do know that soldiers came from at least 36 different areas of Clermont, with Batavia the largest among them (although he caveats that some may have selected Batavia since it's the county seat), and then Bethel, Williamsburg, and New Richmond. Milford, Neville, Felicity and so on, are also among them.

Knepp said he wrote the

book about normal Clermonters for, well, other normal people. It's not an academic book, and it's not meant for academia.

"I think the real audience should be the people in the community, and I hope that's what I'm able to accomplish," he said.

For those interested in a copy, they can contact Knepp at [garyknapp@gmail.com](mailto:garylknapp@gmail.com). His website is [garyknapp.com](http://garyknapp.com).