

A Soldier's Letters: Delos Ellis Brown and WWI

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Time has a funny way of playing with one's memories. After a few days, weeks, months, even years, the finer edges of the photographic memory begin to blur and segments of the movie camera in the mind's eye begin to skip scenes. If you are speaking of a grandfather who died nearly forty-five years ago, the memories are even harder to define. This paper is about memory and trying to recount it from a long dead past. To give this lofty goal scope, the paper will focus on one individual, Delos Ellis Brown, of Prophetstown, Illinois, over the span of one year. At the age of twenty-one, Brown went off to serve in the army in the 27th Infantry, and after training was deployed to Siberia. To historians, his great contribution was not war medals or published biographies, but rather a collection of over thirty letters he wrote to his mother, Florenta Bowen Brown.

This work is one of great personal love and affection. To understand Delos Brown, there is only one source beyond the sometimes-vague letters that were locked away in a trunk. This one other source that remains is his granddaughter, Sandra Sodergren-Baar. Aged fifty-four, Sodergren-Baar is the great keeper of her family's history. It is to her that this author owes a great deal of gratitude. However, it also further complicates this story.

Only ten when her grandfather died, Sodergren-Baar is left with a large collection of personal memories of "Grandpa Brown." That being said, time is a threat to these memories. Since Sodergren-Baar had not yet been born when he went off to war, her knowledge of his life between May 1918 to August 1919 is second hand from her maternal grandmother, and Delos's widow, Caroline "Edith" Brown. This tension between physical documents and childhood memories is at the center of this unique study.

"A Soldier's Letters" is hence a story between what can be documented and what one person can remember. To lay out this story, the paper will first focus on a brief history of the events leading up to American intervention in Siberia, which gives background to Brown's story. Here the reader will understand how the American Expeditionary Forces came to be and what it attempted to accomplish. The second part of this paper will focus on the thirty-seven letters left to this historian to capture little over a year of Delos Brown's life in the armed services. The paper will focus on the day-to-day observations of a man who came from Midwest America and saw the world. The last part of the paper will focus on memory. These memories belong largely to Delos's second granddaughter and current teacher of history. Hopefully, this paper will give a unique experience to a little understood history of a man who served in the American Expeditionary Forces, and of a great-grandfather.

The American Expeditionary Force

Historian Betty Miller Unterberger, is convinced President Woodrow Wilson was not impressed with the idea to intervene in Siberia; Unterberger noted, "During the first six months of 1918 President Wilson was besieged with appeals for military intervention in Siberia."¹ The Triple Entente, consisting of Great Britain, France, and the U.S., feared the movement of German troops off the eastern borders. Russia, through the Treaty of Brest-

¹ Betty Miller Unterberger, "Wilson and the Decision to Send American Troops to Siberia," *The Pacific Historical Review* 24, no. 1 (Feb 1955): 63, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3635232> (accessed November 29, 2009).

Litvosk, had recently dropped out of the war and had made a separate peace (under the Bolshevik state), with Germany.² The allies were frantic to avoid Germany diverting all resources to the western front.

Author Robert J. Maddox writes of the critical situation of German troops from the eastern front attacking French and British troops, “the fact that German divisions formerly stationed on the Russian front had taken part in the assault and that more were in transit dramatized the pleas of the British and French that some action be taken in the East.”³ The Entente powers wanted Wilson to send troops to Siberia to force the Germans back to the eastern front. Furthermore, one of the Entente’s many allies, Japan, also had interest in pushing further into Manchuria, toward Siberia.

The president was convinced the Japanese were only interested in Siberia for profit. According to Betty Miller Unterberger in her article “Wilson and the Decision to Send American Troops to Siberia,” “[Wilson] had reason to believe that it was the Japanese who had originated the plan for invading Siberia, and that they wished the expedition to be exclusively Japanese in order to secure control of the maritime provinces.”⁴ Slow to trust the intentions of the Japanese, Wilson resisted sending in forces. While the president went back and forth on the matter, events were quickly unfolding.

The Japanese and the Chinese, under the direction of Admiral Aleksander Kolchak (leader of anti-Bolshevik government) were formalizing a plan for the Japanese to sweep into Manchuria to maintain authority.⁵ The Czechs, in Russia, had fought along with the Tsarist government until the fall of the provisional government. Now they wished to secure assurances from the allies that an independent Czech nation would be formed from the ruins of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire.⁶ However, the Czechs and Bolsheviks were at odds with each other and fighting erupted. Maddox states, “By late May, after a number of incidents and with the legion strung out along the railway, a small war erupted all across Siberia.”⁷ The author concludes, “The outbreak of fighting between Czechs and Bolsheviks seemed a boon to advocates of intervention, particularly the British and French.”⁸ It was true; the Czech problem had opened an opportunity for intervention to become possible. With pressure from the allies, and from his advisors, Wilson could not hold out any longer.

On July 6, 1918, Woodrow Wilson committed U.S. troops to Siberia to bolster the Czechs, along with the Japanese, convinced that the expedition was for the Czechs. Unterberger writes, “Military action in Russia was admissible only to help the “Czecho-slovaks consolidate their forces and get into successful cooperation with their Slavic kinsmen and to steady any efforts at self-government or self-defense in which the Russians themselves may be willing to accept assistance.”⁹ Major General William S. Graves led the command. Graves, head

² Christopher Dobson and John Miller, *The Day They Almost Bombed Moscow: The Allied War in Russia 1918-1920* (New York: Atheneum, 1986), 37.

³ Robert J. Maddox, *The Unknown War With Russia: Wilson’s Siberian Intervention* (San Rafael CA, Presidio Press, 1977), 45.

⁴ Betty Miller Unterberger, “Wilson and the Decision to Send American Troops to Siberia,” *The Pacific Historical Review* 24, no. 1 (Feb 1955): 65, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3635232> (accessed November 29, 2009).

⁵ Ibid., 70.

⁶ Robert J. Maddox, *The Unknown War With Russia: Wilson’s Siberian Intervention* (San Rafael CA, Presidio Press, 1977), 46-7.

⁷ Ibid., 47.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Betty Miller Unterberger, “Wilson and the Decision to Send American Troops to Siberia,” *The Pacific Historical Review* 24, no. 1 (Feb 1955): 72-3, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3635232> (accessed November 29, 2009).

of the Eighth Division, left Camp Fremont in California, and lead his men to Siberia.¹⁰ It was here that Private Delos E. Brown arrived, for he too would follow Graves to Siberia as part of the American Expeditionary Forces.

The Soldier's Letters

"That's it," was my reply to seeing the handful of letters. My first response was excitement and joy. My great-grandfather's letters, often spoken of at family gatherings or on occasional summer evenings, were now sitting before me in a simple manila envelope. Slightly tattered from overuse, the envelope contained no less than thirty letters. Many of the tattered envelopes were no larger than five by three inches. Many of the envelopes, containing the original date and stamp, were in fairly good shape considering they were over ninety-years old. Sandra Sodergren-Baar is the keeper of these letters. However, as their guardian, she was rather forgetful of their importance. The thirty-seven letters (several envelopes contained two or three extra letters placed inside) were stashed in a tattered manila envelope and placed rather haphazardly in a cardboard box and un-ceremoniously shoved in the back of her upstairs crawlspace. It can be inferred they have been in this crawlspace since Sodergren-Baar's mother, Bette Jane Sodergren, had left them to her after her death in 1999. For a brief sojourn out of 921 North Dixon Ave, Dixon IL, where they were kept, they were returned to the house and have sat mostly undisturbed for almost ten years. The knowledge of their location, what the letters looked like, and how many there were was unknown to anyone except Mrs. Sodergren-Baar.

"This isn't it,"¹¹ Sodergren-Baar said upon emptying the letters onto her dining room table. I was astonished. Delos Brown sent over thirty letters home from Siberia; it seemed impossible that there was more. Upon further inquiring, it was discovered that after Sodergren-Baar's mother died, the letters were split between the three children of Bette Sodergren. Mrs. Sodergren-Baar kept a handful of the letters, while her sisters, Mrs. Kristine Florczak and Mrs. Sara Wohrley, took what was left over. Sadly, this author was unable to acquire the letters from either sister. "We simply don't know how many letters there actually were."¹² With Sodergren-Baar being the only living decedent with extensive knowledge of her grandfather, this question may never be answered.

Delos Ellis Brown was born on April 4, 1896 to Samuel and Florentha Brown. He was the youngest of seven children. He had six elder brothers and one sister. Samuel "Grover" Brown is mentioned most often in the letters, as he was closet to his brother in age. His letters often contain mentions of well wishes to his family and there is a sense of closeness in his speaking of them.

Returning to the letters that do exist, they range from May 8th (post marked May 10th), 1918 and end with August 8, 1919. Much of the correspondence is best wishes to family in the states, and hoping to return before major holidays. Delos Brown does not mention how he came to join the army, but due to his rank as Private First Class, he is likely to have enlisted. Brown also does not mention how he came to return to the states. For nearly seventeen months, Delos Brown corresponded with his mother Florentha and father Samuel. It is thus appropriate to begin with Delos's first letter to his mother:

¹⁰ Robert J. Maddox, *The Unknown War With Russia: Wilson's Siberian Intervention* (San Rafael CA, Presidio Press, 1977), 56.

¹¹ Sandra Sodergren-Baar, interviewed by Tristan Sodergren-Baar, Dixon , IL, October 03, 2009.

¹² Ibid.

May 8, 1918

Dear Mother! I have arrived at my camp and I will be under a 10 day quarantine, so my address will be Camp Causal, Camp Fremont Cal. [California]. So write to as often as you can, for I sure will be glad to hear from home. Our camp is at the foot of small mountain. I think I will like it fine. You use this address until you hear different. I thought they told me Cal. was a warm state. It is as cold hear as it was at home when I left. It is cold enough that they have a little stove in every tent. Well mother I will have to tell you a little about my trip out hear. We left Sterling May first, got into St. Louis Mo. Until 8:30 that night. Got out to Jefferson Barracks about 10. It is only ten miles from Saint Louis, so we stay there until Sat. afternoon until about 2 o'clock in the afternoon when we left for Cal. We went [through] eight states. Ill, Mississippi, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, N. Mexico, Arizona, Cal. Went clear through Mo, Kansas, [and] Oklahoma. Across the upper handle of Texas, across N. Mexico, Arizona, and almost across Cal. We crossed a small chain of Rockies. Through tunnels and deserts and a little of everything. I saw my first jack rabbit in N. Mexico. Well mother it is get to work to see to write will write when I have more to time. I am well and hope this finds you the same.

*With love, your Sammie boy.
Delos B.*

*Camp Causal
Camp Fremont
Cal.*

P.S. I send love to all the folks and give them my best regards. D.B. ¹³

Delos continued to close each letter with the same regards to his family. At the time this letter was written his father was already dying. Samuel Brown was in many of the letters, at one time seeming close to death. Even through this, Delos Brown always addressed his letters to his mother. His granddaughter, Sandra, asserted that he had a very close relationship with his mother, "He was her last child...her baby."¹⁴ The letters indicated a strong bond between mother and child, which comes out more as Delos Brown faced further hardships:

*June 12, 1918
Camp Fremont Cal.*

*Dear father and mother:
I am feeling fine now. Drilling every day, and eating three square meals a day. The boys here say I am getting fat. I haven't weighed since I came through J.B. [Jefferson Barracks]. The weather is awful hot. It stood 96 in the shade yesterday. This is Wed. afternoon and it is a holiday for us and also Sat. afternoon until Sunday eve. 12 p.m. I like the army much better since I supper attached to my co. I sure do like to be with the boys. This training is sure going to make a man of us. [Listen] mother. I am a Regular*

¹³ Delos E. Brown, Letter home to his mother, May 8, 1918. The letter is filled with spelling mistakes and fragmented sentences. It has been left largely in its original form.

¹⁴ Sandra Sodergren-Baar, interviewed by Tristan Sodergren-Baar, Dixon, IL, October 03, 2009.

this 13th Inf. Is the only Regular soldiers left in the U.S.A. and when we get trained up we will be counted as Regular and they tell us that they can't leave to go across under ten months. I don't know how much truth there is to it. I also heard that Germany has ten thousand soldiers in Mexico. If that is so we may stay right here or be held here for defense. Mother I am [sending] you and dad a book of post cards of scenes of Camp Fremont. I had a bunch of pictures taken and if they are good I will send you some of them, they are small. I had one taken with my best that I carry shells in and canteen and bayonets, and my rifle. Then I and another fellow had one or two taken, one with my bayonet on the end of my rifle. Did I send you one of my pictures that I had taken at J.B. Tomorrow is pay day for the older men of co. L, but poor Brownie don't get any. It tough but I can't help it. Well mother dear, don't forget you have son in the army that would like to hear from you at least once a week. It seems like ages since I heard from you. Tell Grover and sis to write for when I write I have to write to you all. Well mother I will have to close for it is get close to supper time.

*Your son,
Delos E. Brown
Co. L. 13th Inf.¹⁵*

The letters continue in this way. Brown spoke of the food, the heat, and the soldiers. On July 17th, he spoke kindly of his commanding officer, whom he felt was a nice guy who was very easy on his men. On July 17th, Brown went into detail about rifle training, and July 24th he spoke of using his gas mask. All the time he was stationed at Camp Fremont. By the 31st of July he was made a runner for his company commander and declared he was fighting this war for his parents. August 9th is an important letter because it is the first time he had some idea where he may be going. Brown was convinced they were not going to France, but rather Russia. By September 1, 1918, he was on a ship bound for Siberia. He then made a stop in Japan for coal. Here we see Brown's observations of the "funny Japanese." He was amazed at their hut like houses and cable cars:

*Outari, Japan
September 25, 1918*

Dear Mother,

This makes the sec. City that I have been in. The first one I was in was over 87,000, this place must be about 30,000... These Japs are sure funny people. They do all or most all the work themselves. I saw a Jap pull a load on a cart that I thought no man could move and he walked right off with it. Then the loads they carry on [their] backs is awful I don't see how they can do it. I saw a fellow with a load that looked like a house to me that he was carrying on his back.

And when you go in their houses you have to take your shoes off, did you ever hear the best of it. They have the funniest little two wheeled carts or buggies they ride in, they called Jinnie rickshaws and are pulled by the Japs.

I was surprised when I got up on there main st. and saw street cars running, they are very much like ours in the states.

¹⁵ Delos E. Brown, Letter home to his mother, June 12, 1918. The letter is filled with spelling mistakes and fragmented sentences. It has been left largely in its original form.

There buildings are hardly over two stories high, they look more like huts then houses. I had to laugh at what they call their modern hotels. They have electric light but there beds are a couple of blankets on the floor and a block of wood under the head of it for a pillow. I was in hakadote, that was something I didn't think of seeing...

I am feeling fine and I am alright so don't worry mother. Will close for now, with love to all.

*Your loving son,
Delos E. Brown.¹⁶*

It is likely, from the fact that they were sailing to Siberia, "Outari" and "hakadote" were actually Otaru and Hakodate Japan. In these letters one can glimpse Brown's view of the Japanese and his astonishment that they had electricity and street cars. His racist views came to the surface when he spoke of their homes and their beds. He was amused at taking off his shoes and gave the "Japs" credit for being able to carry such burdens on their backs. This letter is significant because it captures his travels to Siberia. His letters from there are less than favorable. It is sufficient to say he largely hated the place from the moment he landed.

*Verkhni Udinak, Siberia
May 11, [1919]
Private Delos E. Brown
Hqs Co. 27 Inf.
A.E.F. Siberia
To Depot Q.M.
San Francisco Calif.*

Dearest Mother and Father!

We have all been asked by Co. Commander's to write home to our mothers, being mother's day, so I will and write a few lines to let you known I am well and feeling just fine. It took us ten and one half days to make our trip 2250 miles. We crossed the Shan-alin Mts., seen many little mts. Streams and went through several tunnels one was two miles long, and took 16 mins to go through it.

And from the mountains we [saw] down on the plans, there we seen great herds of cattle and flocks of sheep, and places where the ground had been tilled. The country looks much better then that around Khabarovsk.

We crossed through Manchuria China. We stopped about 6 hours Fin Harbiu China, was on train, guard that day so didn't get to see much of it, but what I did see of it was quite interesting. Everything is much cheaper that then any place I have been yet.

We crossed Gobi or Shamo Desert, it took two days to cross it. I saw several bunches of camels and some hitched up to wagon and carts pulling loads, they sure were a sight. I was in Manchuria City, Manchuria from there about three hours, Verkhni Udinak is about 80 miles east of Baikal Lake Siberia and about 250 miles from west of Chita. So if you want to know just where I am located look at the maps and find Baikal Lake and I am 80 miles east of there.

¹⁶ Delos E. Brown, Letter home to his mother, September 25, 1918. The letter is filled with spelling mistakes and fragmented sentences. It has been left largely in its original form.

We are in camps and located in a pine timber, it is going to be a very pretty camp when it is completed.

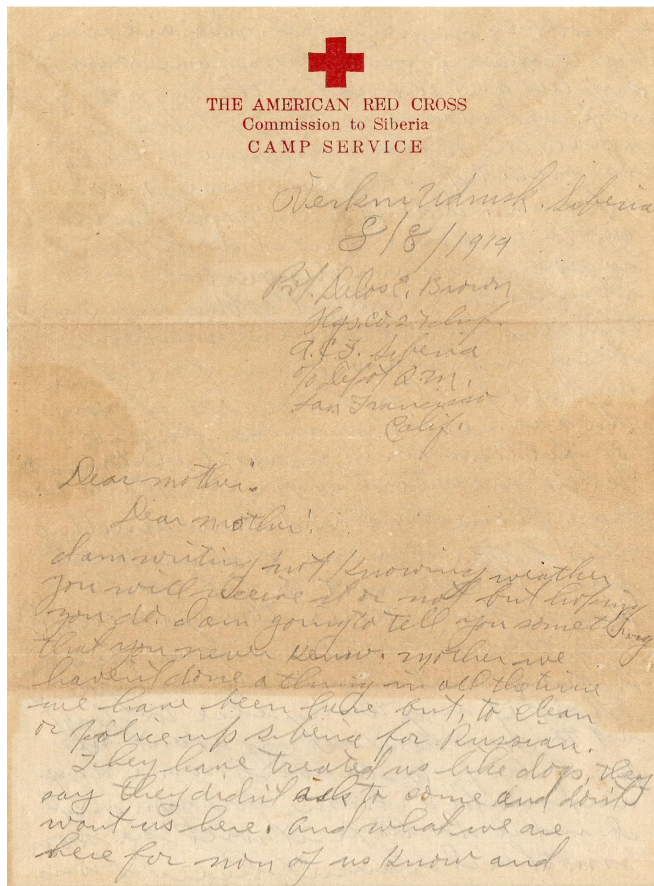
Well mother will close with love and best regards to all

Your loving son

Pvt Delos E. Brown.¹⁷

One of the most important letters found among his correspondence, this letter allows historians to know exactly where he traveled once leaving Khabarovsk, Siberia. The detail, like his letter from Japan, creates a tiny window into which a student of the First World War can examine what a soldier lived through and might have thought.

By September 8, 1919, Brown was disenchanted with Siberia. He complained to his mother, "They have treated us like dogs, they say they didn't ask [us] to come here and don't want us here."¹⁸ Delos hated being away from his home and family. It is unclear whether he wrote after this point, since the known letters stop here. By 1921 he was home again, much thinner then when he went into the army. His granddaughter tells of him contracting dysentery, which would plague him the rest of his life.¹⁹ She is uncertain when exactly he came back to the U.S.



Left: Delos Brown's last known letter from Siberia.

¹⁷ Delos E. Brown, Letter home to his mother, May 11, 1919. The letter is filled with spelling mistakes and fragmented sentences. It has been left largely in its original form.

¹⁸ Delos E. Brown, Letter home to his mother, August 08, 1919. The letter is filled with spelling mistakes and fragmented sentences. It has been left largely in its original form.

¹⁹ Sandra Sodergren-Baar, interviewed by Tristan Sodergren-Baar, Dixon, IL, October 03, 2009.



Above left: Mr. Samuel Brown and Mrs. Florentha Brown (Bowen).

Above right: Private Delos Ellis Brown. Brown mentioned this photograph in his June 8, 1918 letter to his mother.

Below left: Mr. and Mrs. Delos Brown's first home in Sterling, IL.

Bellow right: Mrs. Samuel Brown stands center. On her right are Delos Brown, and his wife "Edith" Brown.





Above left: Delos's three children (left to right: Lois, Bette, and Richard).
Above right: A younger Delos with his wife Edith.

Below left: His eldest daughter's wedding day. His son in law is on leave from his base in California before he is sent to the Philippines.

Bellow right: An older couple. Delos and Edith would not have a happy marriage.





Above left: The Brown Family circa 1953.



Above right: Delos with his grandchildren. Left to right: Delos, Kristine, Sandra, and Sara. Sandra is the grandchild to whom this study is made possible.

Below left: Delos with his granddaughter Kristine. Delos would love to sit in his gardens and tell his grandchildren stories.

Below right: Delos, Edith, and Kristin



The Problem of Memory

Delos Ellis Brown died on February 22, 1965. His granddaughter Sandra, known as “Sandi” to her family, was only ten when her grandfather died of esophageal cancer.²⁰ The memory of her grandfather was thus captured in a few short years before his death and then stories told to her, by her maternal grandmother, Edith, after he was gone. “She was not a very nice woman,”²¹ Sodergren-Baar said, looking at her pictures of her grandmother. Looking down

²⁰ Sandra Sodergren-Baar, interviewed by Tristan Sodergren-Baar, Dixon, IL, October 03, 2009.

²¹ Ibid.

on the table, a rather severe looking woman stared back. Her round, dumpy face and dark eyes are captured in only a handful of color photos, none of which feature her husband.

After Delos's death, Edith Brown remained in her home, looked after by her daughter, Lois. Sodergren-Baar's grandparents lived right next door to her parents' home. Only a thin patch of earth separated the two buildings. In her youth, she said that she would spend time passing between the two houses, trying to capture the stories the older generation was always telling. "My grandmother would sit in her room and sew," Sodergren-Baar said, again looking at her grandmother, "She really was a great seamstress."²² It was here she learned a lot about her grandfather and the life he led after he came home from the war.

According to Sodergren-Baar, Delos returned home with a ring for a girl who had jilted him. "The ring was a simple band, fourteen karat gold...a rosy color."²³ The ring, set with a turquoise colored diamond, suspended on a high setting, was an engagement ring. The ring was instead given to another woman. Caroline Elizabeth Ida Witzleb was the woman Delos married on August 3, 1921.²⁴ Known as "Edith," the two would not have a happy marriage. Their personalities were not suited for each other. "He was a gentle man," Sodergren-Baar said, "he was artistic, and handy, always making toys and telling us jokes and riddles."²⁵ She was less boastful of her grandmother. "She could make beautiful clothes that fit like a glove; but she was a slob and not very nice."²⁶ Sodergren-Baar confided that her grandmother really never liked her, and would watch her play from her bedroom window. "She would sit there and scowl," Sodergren-Baar said expressionless, "Imagine scowling at your own grandchild."²⁷ Years after she died, she said sometimes looks at that back window and can still see her looking back at her.

Delos Brown is very different for Sodergren-Baar. "I have two clear memories of my grandfather,"²⁸ she said, smiling. The first memory, she said, was of her grandfather's green recliner. Placed in Brown's dining room, it faced his garden. "He loved his gardens...you could probably call him a master gardener."²⁹ From that chair, Sandi, her two sisters, and her cousin Mike (son of Lois), would play checkers while her grandfather would tell jokes or read bible verses to them. "I can still see that perfectly combed white hair, and those wire framed glasses,"³⁰ Sodergren-Baar recalled. The second memory was shorter and less detailed. She remembered him sitting under his apple tree, and the grandchildren would again listen to him, as he would tell stories.

Sodergren-Baar dug deeper into her memory. "Grandpa Brown left the First World War with nothing...he didn't come home to a hero's welcome."³¹ She insisted that men who came home from WWI did not receive the attention and respect of their fellow countryman like those who fought in WWII. "He came home, got married and had two daughters."³² She then confided that Richard Brown was not Delos's biological son. "Everyone knew of course," she said, "It was a small town, people talked."³³ When asked what her grandfather thought of

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Obituary of Delos Ellis Brown, Dixon Telegraph, February 1965.

²⁵ Sandra Sodergren-Baar, interviewed by Tristan Sodergren-Baar, Dixon, IL, October 03, 2009.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

Richard living with them, “My grandfather was a proud Southern gentleman, and where he came from that wasn’t respectable.”³⁴ She pressed further; “Richard was my great-aunt’s bastard child she had in Chicago, and then dumped him on her parents...the Witzlebs.”³⁵ The Witzlebs, Edith’s parents, Sodergren-Baar confided, were well off and capable of taking in Richard. It seemed Richard could have lived quite nicely with any of the other Witzlebs, but he ended up with Delos and Edith. Grandpa Brown spent the rest of his adult life floating between jobs. “He worked as a night watchman and a janitor at the theater at one time.”³⁶ It is insisted that his hatred for Richard went deeper than his birth. “He now had an extra mouth to feed, with no job, and a wife who worked all day as a seamstress.”³⁷

“He became an alcoholic...a terrible alcoholic.”³⁸ According to Sodergren-Baar, Delos Brown, who made his own wine, would sit in the basement and drink during the day and then go to work at night. “My mother was always afraid to bring friends around...she never knew what state he would be in.”³⁹ Sodergren-Baar is quick to defend her grandfather. “He was a loving man, but his wife was a bully, and she was bullied by her family...she was really a weak woman.”⁴⁰ As for the children, Sodergren-Baar called them the “first latchkey kids,”⁴¹ due to the fact that both parents were either working or would be gone during most days.

“He was a loving grandfather who loved his grandchildren...he would play with us and joke with us...never dirty jokes...but clever ones.”⁴² She insisted her grandfather was a clever man. She remembered how he was always telling jokes and riddles that made one think. “He was also always clean and tidy.”⁴³ She told of him always being spotless. “His hair was always combed and he either wore a sport’s coat or a suit.”⁴⁴ Sodergren-Baar compared her grandfather with her grandmother. “She was always messy...food always down her front, no makeup, her hair wild.”⁴⁵ She concluded her discussion of her grandfather by saying, “I miss him.”⁴⁶

Sandra Sodergren-Baar, as previously stated above is fifty-four years old. She was ten when cancer took her Grandpa Brown. However, her personal memories, those of which she witnessed, seem clear as day. She never had a problem coming up with the larger details of his life, of which she knew of and what was told to her. Her grandmother, Edith, she confided, told her of the ring and her hatred of it. “It was brought back for another woman...I don’t think I ever saw her wear it.”⁴⁷ Grandma Edith was always the one who explained who Grandpa Brown’s family was. Sandra Sodergren-Baar was the only one who listened to the stories. It was because of this, Sodergren-Baar claimed, that she knows so much about Delos Brown and the rest of her family. “I was the only one who listened...my sisters would be off playing and I stayed and listened to my grandmother talk.”⁴⁸ She admitted, “It’s ironic that I listened to that woman and I don’t think she even liked me.”⁴⁹

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

This comes to the central problem of this paper. In delivering this information, there has been one essential issue to discuss; memory. Sodergren-Baar knows so much about her grandfather because she was “told” that is what happened. To a discerning historian, this seems problematic. The first problem is there is no way to check her stories. Her grandmother has been dead for twenty-five years. Her Aunt Lois died sixteen-years ago. As for her mother, she too is gone. Who is left of the older generation to verifying these events? “Richard didn’t stay around very much,” Sodergren-Baar said, “their relationship was ruined.”⁵⁰ As soon as he could he left his parents’ home, so his memory of his father is only half the story. The second problem being that nothing is written down. Sodergren-Baar recalls all of this information from the recesses of her mind. She alone is able to recall all these events by sheer memory, unlike the letters, which match dates of movements and are tangible pieces of evidence. Sodergren-Baar, it seems, must be left at her word.

How then does one piece this story together? It is clear that Delos Brown was literate and was able to make frank observations of his surroundings. He was present when his troops moved about, but did not write of specific details of what his fellow men were doing. In his last letter he confided that he himself did not know why he was in Siberia. What is clear and can be taken from the letters is what kind of man he was. He loved his mother, which is obvious from the way he wrote to her. However, the letters are only half the story. They are also only half of the correspondence. What of Florentha’s letters to her son? What of the other relatives who wrote to Delos Brown when he was overseas? Sandra Sodergren-Baar has no idea where they could be. This leaves only Delos’s word on the matter. Again, the historian is given only a fragment. How, then, is this important? Brown’s letters home are important because they give the view of a man who served in war. While no battles were recalled, and no medals were won, his personal observations of Camp Fremont, Japan and Siberia give the reader a glimpse of army life between 1918 and 1919. He captured the scenery of the many places he visited and perhaps allowed the twenty-first century to see into the mind of a mid-western boy.

Conclusion

This paper was emotional to write. I never personally knew Delos Brown, and he exists for me only in a handful of dusty letters and black and white photographs. To me, he is a name among many that dot my family tree. He is not alive to me like he is to my mother. Yet, he is important to me. His life is my life and his blood is my blood. We are kin, even though we never met and he never knew of me. His first letter was postmarked May 10, 1918, sixty-six years to the day before I was born. The stories my mother told, the letters I read, the photographs we shared, all affected me more than I could possibly imagine.

Delos Ellis Brown was a Private First Class from the 27th Infantry who served in Siberia during the last days of World War One. His letters are a constant reminder of the soldier’s life. Contained in this correspondence are the memories of a man who loved his mother and loved his country. At times the letters tell of a man who is bored and lonely for home. On the other hand, many finish with great patriotism and determination to push through and crush the enemy. While these letters only give a glimpse of the larger world and the people who dominate its politics, it is yet another angle in which to examine the human spirit. They also leave behind unanswered questions of Delos Brown’s life. What is known today, largely about his life, comes from his wife Edith who told her granddaughter Sandra. One person telling about a life that has long since left the world is difficult. There is no way to know if it’s right or wrong; true or false. It is a constant work that evolves every day and it is the hope of this

⁵⁰ Ibid.

author to continue delving further into his great-grandfather's letters and life to retrieve more of the son, the soldier, and the grandfather.

List of Letters by Date:

May 08, 1918	September 25, 1918
May 15, 1918	September 29, 1918
May 20, 1918	November 07, 1918
May 25, 1918	November 17, 1918
June 03, 1918	December 05, 1918
June 08, 1918	January 03, 1919
June 12, 1918	January 11, 1919
June 16, 1918	January 14, 1919
June 22, 1918	March 11, 1919
July 04, 1918	April 13, 1919
July 17, 1918	April 17, 1919
July 23, 1918	May 11, 1919
July 24, 1918	June 07, 1919
July 31, 1918	June 13, 1919
August 09, 1918	June 24, 1919
August 10, 1918	*June 30, 1919
August 12, 1918	August, 08, 1919
August 18, 1918	
*September 01, 1918	
September 21, 1918	

* Denotes two letters with similar dates