



THE FIRST FOUR to enter military service in World War I from Decatur County trained at Camp Funston with the 353rd Infantry Regiment, 89th "Rolling W" Division. They were (from left) Glenn Wookey, Leo Bendon, Frank W. Tacha and George Gardner.



SGT. GEORGE W. GARDNER (above) served with the 353rd Infantry Regiment, 89th Division, during World War I. His daughter, Joyce Martin, wrote a book which tells about his service at Camp Funston, then later in England, France, Belgium and Germany.

Decatur County's first doughboy subject of book

By MARY LOU OLSON

George W. Gardner, the first young man called from Decatur County for service in World War I, is remembered in a book published by his daughter, Joyce M. Martin, of Oberlin.

Ms. Martin said after she retired as an assistant in the kitchen at the Decatur County Hospital, she decided to dig out newspaper clippings from 1917 and other memorabilia about World War I kept by her father and compile it into a book. The result, "George W. Gardner in the Argonne Forest, France, 1917, Germany, 1918-1919," tells his story.

Her father, the son of Jonas and Maryetta Gardner, was born in a sod house northwest of Traer on Nov. 14, 1888. He attended school three to four months out of the year, but was not able to attend high school since he had to help support his family, including nine brothers and sisters. Ms. Martin said his father believed that when you reached the age of 16, you were able to make your own way in life.

On July 20, 1917, Secretary of War Newton Baker, wearing a blindfold, drew the first draft number of the war from a large bowl. The number, 258, meant that the man registered with that number in all 4,557 registration districts was drafted on the first lottery drawing. Mr. Gardner held that number in Decatur County.

Three other men from Decatur County left with Mr. Gardner for training at Camp Funston with the 353rd Infantry Regiment, 89th "Rolling W" Division, Glenn Wookey, draft number 43; Leo Bendon, 46; and Frank W. Tacha, 182.

A story from the Traer News in *The Oberlin Herald* entitled, "Traer Shows Patriotism," tells about Mr. Gardner's send-off:

"George Gardner, the third son of J.R. Gardner of Traer, was one of the first men called under the draft. He was called to report to Fort Riley Saturday of last week and his people gave him a farewell party Wednesday evening which more than 150 people attended and were served ice cream and cake.

"He was escorted to Oberlin Friday by about everybody in Traer. There were 12 autos, all loaded to capacity. Father Walton, the only old soldier left at Traer, took the lead and carried a large American flag.

"George Gardner is one of the good boys of the county and he is deserving of this demonstration of the love and esteem in which he is held by those knowing him best. He left Oberlin Friday evening on the Burlington Booster."

A story in *The Oberlin Herald* that week said, "On Friday evening, the first installment of the men called to the colors came to Oberlin and in the evening left for Fort Riley. A good number of people were in the city to see the boys off. The

McKay Martial Band was present, the school children sang "America," and then led by the band, the boys fell in and marched to the depot. The boys were all in finest spirits and will no doubt give a good account of themselves when they get to the front."

Mr. Gardner trained at Camp Funston before leaving for New York, then overseas to England, France, Belgium and Germany. The 353rd Infantry took part in the Meuse Argonne Offensive and St. Mihiel.

The St. Mihiel campaign began on Sept. 12, 1918, and ended with overwhelming success on Sept. 16. More than a half million Americans were involved, including the 89th. They suffered 7,000 casualties but captured 16,000 prisoners according to the book, "The United States in World War I" by Don Lawson.

"When Dad was fighting in France," Ms. Martin said, "there were times when there was not enough food, so they would eat moldy bread, not realizing it was penicillin.... You would never know what would be in any fox hole. When jumping in one, my dad was shot between the shoulder blades, but would not go back to the Red Cross to be treated.

"When the Armistice was signed on Nov. 11, 1918, my dad was in Stangry, France. From there, he went to Chantemelle, Belgium, Luxembourg and into Germany on Dec. 6, where he spent a year with the Army of Occupation."

For his military service, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and Croix de Guerre medals. He was promoted to sergeant while serving his country and was discharged on June 1, 1919, at Camp Funston.

Sgt. Gardner received a letter from Gen. John J. Pershing, under whom he served, on Feb. 28, 1919, part of which follows:

"Now that your service with the American Expeditionary Forces is about to terminate, I cannot let you go without a personal word. At the call to arms, the patriotic young manhood of America eagerly responded and became the formidable army whose decisive victories testify to its efficiency and its value. With the support of the nation firmly united to defend the cause of liberty, our army has executed the will of the people with resolute purpose. Our democracy has been tested, and the forces of autocracy have been defeated.

To the glory of the citizen-soldier, our troops have faithfully fulfilled their trust, and in a succession of brilliant offensive have overcome the menace to our civilization.... It is with pride in our success that I extend to you my sincere thanks for your splendid service to the army and to the nation." s/John J. Pershing

Mr. Gardner returned to Oberlin, where he was elected sheriff of Decatur County in 1920. On Dec. 8, 1920, he married Margaret Slocum of Dodge City. He served four years as sheriff, four years as undersheriff, followed by 12 years as city marshal.

The Gardners purchased a farmstead a mile southeast of Oberlin, where they farmed and reared their son, Kenneth, and daughter, Joyce. Mr. Gardner died on April 19, 1965, and is buried in the Oberlin Cemetery.

The book, dedicated to Ms. Martin's sons, Rick and Ray Martin, as well as the Honor Roll of the 353rd Infantry, is available at the Oberlin and Decatur Community High school libraries. Ms. Martin said books are also available at the World War I Museum in Kansas City, Mo., and online at amazon.com.



Joyce Martin



BOXING WITH RECRUITS was part of the training after young men were inducted into the military during World War I. Mr. Gardner (right) landed a right to a fellow soldier.



POSING IN HIS MILITARY UNIFORM, Mr. Gardner was stationed at Camp Funston, where horses were used during basic training.