

## Citizens from Harrison and Lewis Counties Join 1927 Pilgrimage to Paris

Early in 1925 John J. Wicker, national travel director of the American Legion, conceived "in a spirit of reverence to the sacred memory of our dead"<sup>1</sup> the idea of a pilgrimage of Legionnaires to Paris during the year of the tenth anniversary of the entry of the United States into World War I.

For the next two and one-half years officials at the National Headquarters of the American Legion, located in Indianapolis, Indiana, worked on plans for an estimated 20,000 Legionnaires "to cross the sea again to meet a memory separated by ten years and an ocean"<sup>2</sup> for the Ninth Annual Convention of the American Legion to be held in Paris September 18-22, 1927. Contracts were signed with 1392 hotels in Paris for accommodations for as many as 27,989 persons<sup>3</sup>; steamship lines agreed to transport at reduced rates all Legionnaires with an estimated 139-185 travelers from West Virginia to be assigned either to the S.S. Pennland or the S.S. Pittsburgh<sup>4</sup>; U. S. railways agreed to carry Legionnaires at one-half fare from their homes to the site where they would set sail; the U. S. Department of State worked out a plan whereby one passport would be accepted by all European countries and, if lost, would not impede movement of a delegate whose name would be on a master list of pilgrims sent to agencies throughout Europe; the governments of France and the City of Paris offered the Trocadéro, which would be redecorated for the occasion, as a meeting place for the American Legion Convention, the Palace d'Orsay for the Forty and Eight Convention, and the Hotel Continental for the American Legion Auxiliary Convention.<sup>5</sup> Four U. S. welfare agencies volunteered to assist the veterans during the pilgrimage: Commander Evangeline Booth, the only woman scheduled to speak during the American Legion Convention, would take to France with her thirty of her war workers who would help reconstruct wartime huts and during the convention would resume the role of "doughnut girls"<sup>6</sup>; the Red Cross would set up first aid stations; the Knights of Columbus would have secretaries on all ships "to supply creature comforts"; and the American Library Association would open numerous reading rooms in Paris.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the detail, plans were flexible enough that in July 1927, six weeks before time to set sail, Legion posts were informed that it still was not too late for members to join the pilgrimage. At the West Virginia convention held in Fairmont in August 1927, A. E. Haan of Huntington was elected W. Va. Department Commander; Louis A. Johnson of Clarksburg and Jackson Arnold of Weston, two of the thirteen official delegates to the Paris Convention from West Virginia; Avery E. Gaskins and Dr. Edward Davis of Salem, alternate delegates to the Paris Convention. Louis A. Johnson was elected chairman of the West Virginia delegation to Paris.<sup>8</sup> The Blue Ridge Division, the Eightieth, to which "practically every town of size in Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia sent some of its sons to fight" held a tenth reunion in Pittsburgh August 31 - September 4, 1927, "arranged so that those who intend making the trip to France this year will have time to make connections with their boats in New York after attending the 80th Division reunion."<sup>9</sup>

Eligible to attend the convention were veterans of World War I, their wives, children, and the parents of veterans alive or deceased.<sup>10</sup> In Harrison County the Roy E. Parrish Post in Clarksburg and the P. Hale Samples Post in Salem, both formed in 1919 in Paris and the only Legion posts in the county in 1927, signed up a total of twelve persons for the pilgrimage: Dr. C. R. DeForest, Dr. Frank V. Langfitt, Dr. John E. Corbin, Dr. Okey S. Gribble, Louis A. Johnson, James M. Guiher, Charles H. Thompson, Mrs. John E. Corbin, Clarksburg; Avery E. Gaskins, Dr. Edward Davis, Mrs. Edward Davis, Bond Davis, Salem.<sup>11</sup> Dr. Langfitt and Louis Johnson left Clarksburg for New York on Sunday, September 4, 1927. The next afternoon the Salem delegation boarded train No. 11 of the B&O and in Clarksburg were joined by eleven bound for Paris, the Clarksburg delegation having been increased by Harold Kane, John F. Morrison, Michael Mulcahy, Joseph Kraus, and Colonel Jackson Arnold from Weston. In New York the travelers spent Tuesday night at the McAlpin Hotel<sup>12</sup> and early Wednesday morning, September 7, 1927, left New York aboard the S.S. Pennland "tarrying at Newport News long enough for the Virginia, the North Carolina, and the Florida contingents to board" before heading for Antwerp.<sup>13</sup>

John F. Morrison, Weston newspaperman appointed to be correspondent on the pilgrimage for the Sunday Exponent-Telegram, reported three hundred couples dancing on the deck in the evening, a continual string of memorial services each day, and on Sunday, "All kinds of church services on board [the Pennland]: All the ministers are Legionnaires making the pilgrimage." Morrison remarked that the Florida delegates could pull off a parade on board ship at any time because they had with them their band financed by the Florida state legislature: "We believe that it would be a wonderful thing if the West Virginia legislature would do the same thing and send the Bluefield Band to the National Conventions." The group from north central West Virginia gathered in force for the championship game of the shuffleboard tournament they had organized to watch Dr. DeForest play Charles H. Thompson: "Charlie finally defeated Clate [DeForest] by a small margin."

1. Howard Savage in The Commander's Tour, September 24 - October 11, 1927, in Connection with the Sacred Pilgrimage by the American Legion Generally Known as the Second A.E.F., The American Legion, printed by Garrett & Massie, Inc., Richmond, Va.: 1928, p. 9
2. Philip Von Blon and Marquia James, "The A.E.F. Comes Home", The American Legion Monthly, Vol. 3, No. 6, December 1927, p. 29
3. American Legion. Convention, National 1927 (Paris). Committee Files. Housing. National Headquarters, Indianapolis, Indiana.
4. American Legion. Convention, National 1927 (Paris). John J. Wicker Files. Steamship. Minutes. "Meeting of Representatives of Various Lines Interested in the American Legion France Convention, 1927, Held on Board S. S. George Washington 3/5/26." National Headquarters, Indianapolis, Indiana.
5. Sunday Exponent-Telegram, Clarksburg, W. Va., September 4, 1927.
6. Clarksburg Telegram, Clarksburg, W. Va., August 31, 1927
7. Sunday Exponent-Telegram, Clarksburg, W. Va., September 4, 1927
8. American Legion. Department of West Virginia. Handbook, 1928, pp. 6-7.
9. Sunday Exponent-Telegram, Clarksburg, W. Va., August 28, 1927
10. American Legion. Convention. National 1927 (Paris). Committee Files. Eligibility. National Headquarters, Indianapolis, Indiana.
11. Sunday Exponent-Telegram, Clarksburg, W. Va., September 4, 1927. The newspaper listed Dr. Edward Davis with the Clarksburg delegates rather than with the Salem group and omitted the names of A.E. Gaskins, Mrs. Edward Davis, and Bond Davis, all from Salem.
12. C. H. Thompson in an interview January 15, 1977.
13. Sunday Exponent-Telegram, Clarksburg, W. Va., September 4, 1927.

Finding himself on deck one day without cigarettes, Mr. Morrison asked a smoke of Louis Johnson who handed him a full pack and caused Mr. Morrison to write for newspaper readers: "The sea has really affected him. It may be, too, that he is trying to bribe us from saying anything in these letters about him, but if that is a fact he will have to come a little heavier. When DocCorbin heard about it, he said he was going around and ask him for a dollar." Morrison attended a meeting of Rotarians who elected a secretary in order "to get credit for attendance." He wound up his column with the opinion "that this ocean trip has been so good and the delegates have been having such a good time that they will feel as though the convention is over after they arrive [in France] unless something very entertaining happens. Personally [I] would be satisfied if we would have a couple of days on shore and then get back on the same ship with the same gang and have another cruise."<sup>14</sup> The passengers exhausted the ship's store of alcoholic beverages by the time the Pennland had reached mid-ocean largely because on hearing the rumor that the stock of spirits was in short supply, four members purchased and stashed away the ship's store. One person overheard a nurse say as she watched revelers from Iowa roll chamberpots down a flight of stairs: "And they call this a PILGRIMAGE!"<sup>15</sup>

With the West Virginia delegation were two boys, Sam Stutler from Charleston and 14-year-old Bond Davis from Salem. When asked about the voyage, Davis recalled a warning issued to Legionnaires shortly after leaving Newport News that professional gamblers were on board, stacks of money at gaming tables, Iowans interminably singing "Iowa, out where the tall corn grows", and the Leviathan ---flagship of the twenty-seven official Legion ships<sup>16</sup> ---sailing past the Pennland two days out of Antwerp.<sup>17</sup>

The sheet of instructions handed West Virginians before they disembarked at Antwerp at 9 a.m. on September 18, 1927, directed them to the last of four trains at dockside with Colonel Jackson Arnold in charge of train No. 4. Passengers left the trains in Brussels long enough to march to the tomb of the Unknown Soldier where Louis Johnson laid a wreath.<sup>18</sup> "As we did not arrive in Paris until 7:15 Sunday night we were given our dinner on the train...We must admit that the menu does not compare with that of the B&O diners but then we had plenty to eat. As usual it was raining...We are hitting the hay so as to be out early in the morning for the big parade."<sup>19</sup>

When Legionnaires from Clarksburg arrived at the Trocadéro next morning Louis Johnson handed them tickets "practically on the front row"<sup>20</sup>, where they heard addresses of welcome by French officials and the U. S. Ambassador to France before traveling to the Place d'Iéna to assemble for the parade. Thirteen thousand persons, including thirty bands, marched in the parade led by Legion Commander Savage, Marshal Foch, and General Pershing. "There was color and there was sentiment, but nothing of levity in the procession, for the marching column passed under the Arc de Triomphe where the Unknown Soldier lies", the first time in history that civilians had been privileged to march under the arch. Half of Paris gathered to stand along the streets for a parade that took four hours to pass: "They pressed ten deep against the lines of French infantry that formed a stationary guard of honor over the route. They climbed lamp posts, sat on the top of taxicabs, filled every window and perched like sparrows on cornices and roofs...French veterans marched with every delegation and carried their tricolor beside the Stars and Stripes."<sup>21</sup> Young Sam Stutler carrying the West Virginia placard marched in front of the West Virginia contingent followed by the guard of honor, then Louis A. Johnson and A. E. Haan. When C. H. Thompson was asked to identify Harrison countians in the photograph snapped as the West Virginia group marched, he replied: "That won't be hard for Mr. Johnson pulled us out of the seventy-some West Virginia marchers and told us to march behind him."<sup>22</sup> "One of the most impressive things about the Big Parade...was that when the Auxiliary members passed under the Arc de Triomphe and by the Unknown Soldier's Grave, they all tossed a few flowers on the grave. By the time the entire march was over the bits of flowers had grown until they were about three feet thick."<sup>23</sup>

West Virginia ranks thinned out before the end of the six-mile march. Thompson recalled that "Dr. Gribble couldn't hold the pivot, got disgusted, and dropped out."<sup>24</sup> Morrison reported: "When the parade reached the Place de la Concord we dropped out and there viewed the rest of it from the sidelines. We could hardly believe that there were that many Americans in Paris, but on they came, state after state, column after column, with their drum corps and bands...We made a date with Kane and Mulcahy to see them at their hotel at 5:30 and by the time the parade passed the Place de la Concord and we could get a taxi it was 6 o'clock."<sup>25</sup> Bond Davis recalls being, after the parade, the only passenger in a taxicab that ran into a demonstration of radicals against the Massachusetts delegates over the Sacco-Vanzetti case. The driver turned and said, "Kid, can you run?" The kid ran.<sup>26</sup>

The Legion held formal convention sessions during daytime hours on Tuesday, September 20, and Wednesday, September 21, during which time Marshal M. Ferdinand Foch and General John J. Pershing addressed the delegates.<sup>27</sup> After adjournment of the convention on Thursday, September 22, the French government and the municipality of Paris staged a reception at Hotel de Ville and a gala ball at the Opera, events which "attracted so many Legionnaires and their ladies that hundreds were turned away."<sup>28</sup>

Legionnaires had signed up during the week for battlefield tours which most of them took before setting out on trips to European countries advertized in profusion by travel agencies.<sup>29</sup>

14. John F. Morrison, "Letters of a Buck Private with the Second A.E.F.", Sunday Exponent-Telegram, Clarksburg, W. Va., October 2, 1927.

15. C. H. Thompson interview.

16. New York Times, New York, N. Y., October 16, 1927.

17. Bond Davis in an interview, January 17, 1977.

18. C. H. Thompson interview; C. H. Thompson Papers.

19. John F. Morrison, "Weston Legion Banner Is Carried When Americans March in Paris 'Big Parade'", Sunday Exponent-Telegram, Clarksburg, W. V., October 9, 1927.

20. Thompson interview.

21. Von Blon and James, The American Legion Monthly, Vol. 3, No. 6, December 1927, pp. 34-5.

22. Thompson interview.

23. Morrison, Sunday Exponent-Telegram, October 9, 1927, "Three thousand American women marched with husbands, fathers, and sons. French spectators marveled at evidence of the importance of American women in everyday affairs. To the Frenchman and his wife and daughters the American Legion Auxiliary all during the convention in Paris became more and more interesting." The American Legion Monthly, Vol. 3, No. 6, December 1927, p. 78.

24. Thompson interview.

25. Morrison, Sunday Exponent-Telegram, Clarksburg, W. Va., October 9, 1927.

26. Davis interview. "We had been warned to beware of communistic demonstrations against us because of Sacco-Vanzetti hysteria." The Commander's Tour . . . , p. 27.

27. American Legion. Convention. National 1927 (Paris). Official Program and Guide Book, pp. 12-3.

28. Clarksburg Telegram, Clarksburg, W. Va., September 24, 1927.

29. American Express alone offered 28 different American Legion tours. American Express Company. Travel Department. American Legion Post-Convention Tours, 1927.

C. H. Thompson stayed in Paris after the close of the convention spending two days at the Louvre and one in the book stalls, taking two battlefield tours, and in the evenings attending shows, especially Les Folies Bergère where Josephine Baker was the hit.<sup>30</sup> "After the crowds thinned out" Thompson bought a tour that took him to Switzerland and Italy. In Venice he ran into James F. Guiher and Dr. Frank Langfitt.<sup>31</sup>

West Virginians scattered all over Europe. John Morrison had promised Mrs. Bennett of Weston that he would visit the church she had erected near the site where her son Louis had lost his life in August 1918 in the crash of the plane he piloted.<sup>32</sup> Morrison traveled to Lillie in France, took a taxi from there for an 11-kilometer ride to Wavrin. "Arriving there, we found that the Curé was not at home. We were taken to the church by his housekeeper, a very old French woman." At the church they found the assistant priest who, like the housekeeper, could speak no English. "We went on the hunt of the Curé" whom they did not find. "Fearing we would miss some connections, we left a note for the Curé and hurried back to the Hotel to see what arrangements could be made to get to London."<sup>33</sup>

A high percentage of the Legionnaires poured into London the first two weeks in October without ruffling the British: "Although the British government is doing its utmost to honor the veterans, the Legionnaires must have been surprised at the lack of interest displayed by the British public. There were no dense, eager crowds waiting to see the men who came across the ocean to pay their respects at the tomb of the British warrior. There was no colorful bunting or flags adorning public and private buildings. Here and there one could see the Stars and Stripes and the Union Jack hanging from the window of some business house--mostly American of with American connections."<sup>34</sup> On Monday, October 10, King George and Queen Mary shook hands with the 276 members of the Commander's Tour before the group boarded the Leviathan. Queen Mary asked U. S. Ambassador Houghton "who it was had the vision and genius to plan for such a great movement and make things go so smoothly. The Ambassador indicated Mr. Wicker who was standing nearby with Commander Savage...Both the King and Queen congratulated Mr. Wicker: 'I would not have believed one so young could have done such a task', the Queen Said."<sup>35</sup>

The same day Morrison boarded a lighter in London to be carried to the S.S. Cedric which would sail to New York: "We had been informed that there would be at least 950 to get on and were somewhat surprised to see only 245 come up the gangplank...The passenger list contains the following from West Virginia: Ben Borasky, Boyd Stutler and William Stutler of Charleston; Dr. and Mrs. Edward Davis and son Bond and Avery Gaskins of Salem; Joseph M. Kraus, Harold H. Kane, Michael P. Mulcahy and John H. Morrison of Weston and several others are mentioned on the list but we failed to locate them."<sup>36</sup> Approaching New York Morrison worried: "Some of the Legionnaires have a little liquid refreshments with them and they are at a loss to know whether to drink it up before we land...We believe that most of it will have been consumed by the time we hit port and that none of them will try to get anything by the inspectors...Monday, October 17: This morning we got up early and it wasn't long until the fellows had their grips packed...Mike, Joe, and Harold were accused to [of?] having their luggage up on deck before daylight. Avery Gaskins and Boyd Stutler were running them a close second and Ben Borasky just behind them...As we passed the Statue of Liberty the Monahan Band of Sioux City, Iowa, struck up 'The Star Spangled Banner' and we all stood with out hats off while we passed. It was about 4 p.m. before we landed at pier No. 60 at the 23rd Street docks in New York and by the time we all went through the custom offices it was very near 6 o' clock. None of us were held up on any questionable stuff and we were able to get the night train out and arrived in Clarksburg Tuesday evening proud of the fact that we had a small part in the greatest peacetime pilgrimage that the world has ever known, but glad to be back to the land of the free and the home of the good American grub."<sup>37</sup>

Not one of the 18,244 Legionnaires who made the trip was left stranded in Europe. The total number of Legionnaires picked up by the Paris police on charges of disorderly conduct was 221 with the majority of these cases of difficulty over failure to understand the French language. Fewer than 50 arrests were booked and no Legionnaire received a jail sentence. While there were complaints regarding overcharging by the Legion, Mr. Wicker said the Legion included 10% for tipping and 10% for taxes in their fee. European officials of the steamship lines were unanimous in declaring that Mr. Wicker's handling of the Legion transportation was the greatest job of its kind ever done by any individual.<sup>38</sup>

30. So long as James Guiher lived whenever he traveled away from Clarksburg, he sent Thompson a card signed "Josephine Baker." Thompson interview.
31. Louis A. Johnson, Dr. Gribble, James M. Guiher, and Dr. Langfitt were so inseparable on the pilgrimage that others from West Virginia called them "the four horsemen". Thompson interview.
32. For more about Louis Bennett see Otis Lowell Reed, "Who the Heck Was Louis Bennett Jr.?" State of West Virginia. Department of Natural Resources. Wonderful West Virginia, Vol. 38, No. 11-2, January 1975, pp. 2-3, 29; February 1975, pp. 24-7.
33. Morrison, "West Virginia Legionnaires Happy on Return to Home", Sunday Exponent-Telegram, Clarksburg, W. Va., October 23, 1927.
34. New York Times, New York, N. Y., October 6, 1927.
35. Ibid., October 16, 1927. Senator John J. Wicker, Jr., is an octogenarian living in Richmond, Va., in 1977.
36. C. H. Thompson, booked for the S. S. Cedric, canceled reservations while he was in Rome so that he would have additional days in London. He left London on October 12 on S. S. Homeric. Thompson interview; Thompson Papers.
37. Morrison, Sunday Exponent-Telegram, Clarksburg, W. Va., October 23, 1927.
38. New York Times, New York, N. Y., October 16, 1927. C. H. Thompson received a "Final Bill" from the American Legion France Convention Committee on June 22, 1927: S. S. Fare, \$195.00; Paris Housing, \$6.00; Battlefield Tour, \$13.00; Official Identification Certificate, \$1.00; Insurance, \$2.75; Guide Book and Badge, \$2.00; Total: \$219.75. Thompson Papers.

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### Newspapers

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- New York Times, New York, N. Y., October 6, 16, 1927.
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### Periodicals

- The American Legion Monthly, v. 3, no. 6, December 1927.
- Wonderful West Virginia, v. 38, no. 11-2, January, February 1975.

### Unpublished Collection

- Charles H. Thompson Papers.

### Interviews

- J. Bond Davis  
Charles H. Thompson