

Museum Notes

by Kristen Parrott, curator
for the week of October 21 - 27, 2018

How are you feeling these days? Any fever, sore throat, or muscle aches? If you had answered “yes” 100 years ago, you might have been facing a bout with the “Spanish influenza”. Over the course of a year, from early 1918 to early 1919, the Spanish flu killed approximately 20 million people around the world. It hit Vernon County in the autumn of 1918, and it also hit the soldiers who left the county to fight in World War I.

Elmer Guy Harris was one of the many young Vernon County privates who succumbed to the flu a century ago. The son of Marion and Malinda (Hudson) Harris, Elmer was an unmarried farmer who entered military service at Viroqua in July 1918. He trained at Camp Grant, Illinois, and then shipped out with his unit, Company L of the 342nd Infantry Regiment.

After crossing the ocean, they landed in England first, then sailed for the port of Le Havre, France. By the time he landed in France on September 28, Elmer had the flu. The next day, he was sent to the hospital. Apparently he recovered there somewhat, because he was then moved to a convalescent camp, where he stayed for some time.

Then, as with so many other young, healthy people who got the infamous Spanish flu, Elmer took a sudden turn for the worse, developed pneumonia, and died on October 23. He was buried, temporarily, along with many other soldiers, in the Sainte-Marie Cemetery on a hill overlooking Le Havre. A few years after the war ended, his body was returned to Vernon County, and Elmer Harris was given a final resting place in the Viroqua Cemetery.

“Vernon County and the War to End All Wars” will be the subject of the featured presentation at the Vernon County Historical Society’s annual banquet, to be held this year on Sunday, November 11. That date will be the 100th anniversary of Armistice Day, when the war came to an end.

The venue, appropriately enough, will be the American Legion in Viroqua – the Legion was founded by WWI veterans. Social hour begins at 12:30, with dinner at 1PM, followed by local historian Kevin Alderson’s presentation about WWI. Tickets to the banquet are \$15 per person. Please contact the museum by November 2 to make your reservation.

November marks the beginning of the museum’s winter hours. From November 1 through March 31, the museum will be open Tuesdays, Wednesday, and Thursdays, from noon to 4PM. As always, it is also open by appointment – just call 637-7396 to set up a time.