Write that Letter Home: Senders, Recipients, and the Content of World War I Correspondence

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Envelopes, letters, and postcards sent by United States soldiers, sailors, marines, nurses, auxiliary personnel, and their families during World War I are a unique archive of wartime service and family life at home. Within the limits of military postal censorship, service members wrote about their experience of war, life in camp, and seeing the world, as well as mail, newspapers, war souvenirs, immunizations, influenza, and tobacco. Family members wrote about crops, animals, automobiles, and how movies influenced their feelings about the war. Nearly all correspondence that has the name of the sender and the recipient can be linked to a family and their descendants. Key documents used to identify service members and link them to their family include World War I draft registration cards, military service summaries compiled by states and localities, national and state military headstone and burial applications, and United States censuses. For most service members, a draft registration card has their signature to compare with the writing on envelopes, letters, and postcards to help confirm the sender’s identity. Published regimental and other military histories provide context for understanding soldiers’ and civilians’ written statements. Old envelopes, letters, and postcards are one-of-a-kind, typically handwritten documents that supplement official records of their service. Their text mirrors and at times adds vivid detail to official histories. Some correspondence pinpoints where a service member was on a specific day and at an exact location. Descendants of military and auxiliary service members are usually unaware that a family member’s envelope, letter, or postcard has survived in a postal history collection outside their family, and can be quite moved upon seeing their wartime writing. Upon seeing their family member’s correspondence, descendants find World War I postal history to be “exciting,” “fascinating,” “amazing.” One genealogist wrote that seeing a handwritten envelope “makes the people of the past more real instead of just a name.” Some families have saved wartime correspondence written by a family member and have not yet shared it outside their family. They may be unaware that postal, military, and social historians are interested in the correspondence they have saved.

This paper will focus on actual wartime correspondence and will show content for the principal topics written in their texts. Examples will be shown on how a sender can be identified and linked to his or her family and descendants. The value of using official histories in combination with the written word will be presented. The author’s experience in contacting descendants will be summarized and include descendants’ reactions upon first seeing postal history related to their family. How to care for envelopes, letters, and postcards; how to contribute them to national, state, and local collections; and wartime correspondence in other countries will be briefly presented. Suggestions will be made on what data fields used in organizing a collection of wartime correspondence will be most helpful to searchers in finding material that interests them, as well as how suggested revisions to transcriptions of the original text can be managed.