

---

---

**Florence M. [Sullivan] Larkin,  
“War, at First and Second Hand,”  
1919**

---

---

*Florence M. [Sullivan] Larkin (1889-1976), daughter of Mr. and Mrs. F. D. Sullivan, was from Eau Claire, WI, and served from September 19, 1918 to September 19, 1919, for the Y.M.C.A., Young Men’s Christian Association, in England during WWI. She first arrived in England on October 18, 1918, and on November 1, 1918, she became a temporary assistant in London. On November 11, 1918, she was a secretary and hostess in Plymouth, England; she arrived in France on March 10, 1919, and from March 29, 1919, to August 11, 1919, she served as a secretary in Polch, Germany. Before the war, in 1915, Florence was an English teacher for the Public Schools of Ashland, WI, where she earned \$915 per year. After the war, she continued to teach; she was an English teacher at Riverside High School, Milwaukee (1922-1927, \$2400/year) and later joined the Northwestern Wisconsin Teacher’s Association in 1933. Throughout her lifetime, Florence gained honor and respect by all the individuals she associated with because of her loyal commitment and dedication to the many services she took a part of.*

*Provided below is a story written by Miss Sullivan regarding her many experiences and viewpoints she had of WWI while living in England. Following the story is a letter she wrote to the “Mothers of Boys” upon “the boys” arrival home. –Elizabeth Limburg*

Source: Florence M. Larkin Papers, Eau Claire Area Research Center, Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

---

---

Miss Florence Sullivan  
Iron River, Michigan  
November 20, 1919

War, at First and Second Hand

[1] Our small village in a pocket of the iron range I often think is as remote from the United States as Lilliput. We are like the hillocks which the irrigator’s ditches seldom reach, which must draw their sustenance from afar, yet somehow contribute their share to the production of the whole. Our nourishment comes in condensed drops from the weekly village paper, or filters in thru belated channels by the evening train, seemingly our only link with that world beyond the hills, yet we shake ourselves out of our sluggishness to become a part in that greatest of our growths, Public Sentiment. And we marvel at its strength and loyalty when we realize how remote and unwieldy are its roots! Only one who has shared our isolation know how hard it is to shake off provincialism; how imaginative one must be to visualize from even the most flaring type, world events as realities. Like the small boy whose view of the stage is completely obscured by the head and shoulders of the man in front of him, we grope for a better view only to be counseled; “Ah well, just keep your eye on me and laugh when I do.”

[2] So War found us. The cold print of our evening-paper seemed past history. "Preparedness", "uniforms", "Howitzers", were only words. The stage was far beyond our vision, --yet we laughed! Out came our flags when we read that Fifth Avenue was gorgeous with them: we gave our food conservation show as if we had not always found simple living necessary; and when the tiem came we registered our foreign population and excited enthusiasm for Liberty Loans to further a war we often doubted was taking place at all. Yet we went "over the top" again and again and again! The spirit of our scattered hamlets is miraculous!

[3] It was out of this village turpitude that I was suddenly shot into the zone of war. "To England", said the office, and I must confess I greeted the idea with repugnance. I hoped to get to a place where I could see what things were about. "England"! It seemed as far from the front as the village I had left. 'Twas France needed the help; besides, the thought of the "cold, conservative British" was terrifying. Even our friendly steward on the British transport couldn't win my interest with tales as fascinating as Joseph Conrad's, of the "blue light during the air-ride that bombed my 'ouse in London", or "tiking Thames river steamers to the Heuphrites;---we were fed up with it, Miss; sixteen o'them lost, and the rest, what with the fever and decks 'ot enough to fry bicon on, 'iting this bloody war". Tho I was spellbound by his h's, which flew about in comical fashion like letters in a movie, the cockney seemed foreign and annoying and only accentuated our differences. What racial sympathy could we have with England!

[4] The proverbial fog greeted us, and a dirty port teeming with activity, whose diverse craft, darting near us or bounding out to sea, made the sequestered iron village seem very far away. Doffing our lifebelts as buttoned up bravely to descend into the murky city, and soon rattled over the cobblestones of the narrow, crooked streets to form our first impressions. The shops were small and dark and cluttered, and closed for two hours at midday. There were street markets for the sale of fish and meatshops open to the street with cuts of meat exposed on the ledge next the sidewalk. I passed one labeled curiously, "Butchering Department";--well to avoid in these days of Blood and Iron! Women were dressed after one pattern in rough tweed suits with plain felt hats and large, comfortable shoes. The monotony and severity of the costume grew so irksome that I could well understand our boys' remark, "oh to see an American girl in a street suit again!"

[5] There was a variety of uniforms, most striking of all, the brilliant blue with flashing red tie that distinguished the convalescents from the British military hospitals. Woe to the public house that sold them liquor! We had glimpses of girls lolling on the arms of negroes in our khaki, of frowzy-haired women going with pitchers to the alehouses, and British Tommies spooning with their lassies. (It's "quoit all roight" in public) My picture of the "conservative English" received serious jolts indeed.

[6] Later I found the necessity of uniforms. I had been sent off too quickly to allow one till I reached London, but my friend in hers attracted all Americans. "Hey", our boys would call, and one day as we stood chatting with them, a Bobby, fierce and terrible, and twice my size bore down on us.

"No 'angin' around 'ere!" came in thunderous tones.

Elizabeth advanced staunchly. "We are American welfare-workers," she retorted.

“I know you, allroight”, he said significantly, “but wot”, with a withering glance at me, “wot is she doin”?

Yet afterwards I grew to love the “Bobbies”, huge and kindly always with their “To the top o’ the street and bear to the roight”. “Where is Halwell House?” I would ask, and they would chucklingly make me repeat it, only to reply, “O, you mean “Alwell ‘Ouse! You Hamericans don’t talk Hinglish.”

[7] Beyond the business streets the residence district loomed luxuriously. Stately home of brick arose from mounds of shrubbery and high walls green with moss, each with its name, “Holly Lodge”, “lynhurst,” or the like, gilded about its gate; and tho I laughed then at the Englishman’s walls and his privacy, I later grew to love our walls “Alwell ‘Ouse” and be glad like him that it was our garden and no one else’s. A far cry to the sociability of the iron village where the neighbor’s cow and chickens shared our lot!

Here was an intensity of color in contrast to the grayness that was gorgeous. Nowhere can grass be greener or flowers more vivid than in England. Even the vegetables are lustrous. Yet I often thought with the lovely color of the English cheek a trifle less color and more tooth might give variety, so a trifle more sun and less moisture might make one feel more human and less fish!

[8] People were amazingly cordial. Children followed to talk to “the American” and read my strange brassard. (I took heed and wore one) Women smiled kindly or spoke a welcome. One who asked us to tea, spared her month’s sugar ration to give us cake. And gradually I learned something of what war meant. Women were sweeping the streets, carrying mail, delivering milk. Children were often tending shop alone. Men in mufti were very few. Coal was scarce and lights were ordered out at ten-thirty. Manufacturing had been so curtailed that stocks in every article were sadly depleted. Pleasure cars were not even a rarity. Fruit was prohibitive, matches almost unobtainable. Even the universal “tea” was limited to 6d. and to one service, as I found with embarrassment! How could I know in that iron village! One day I asked for milk. The sullen old waiter turned upon me, flourishing his napkin in scorn.

“Are you over three years old?” he snarled; and when the headwaiter came to reprove his insolence I learned that only infants and invalids had had milk in four years. Same, American!

One-half pound of meat a week was permitted, two ounces of sugar and one of butter and jam. Everything seemed meted out in ration but the rain, - yet these people were sending food to Belgium! And cheerfulness prevailed. I saw little mourning and no overwhelming grief in spite of thousand of lost sons and father and four long years of war. “Cheerio”, said the English, and honor to them!

[9] We bought third class for London. “Only fools and royalty buy first,” we were admonished, and we didn’t wish to qualify. We sent one trunk “by good”, and elaborate proceeding all done in black and white, a part of the “red tape” we found on every turn. We gave the other to the porter to dispose of in the front coach, and since no checks are issued, prayed that someone else might not wish it first. Then to the seclusion of our compartment where a poster above our seat,

conspicuous as English posters go, was almost a spoken welcome. “Less coal for trains at home means more ships to bring the Americans,” I tingled with pride, yet put down a credit to the account of the “cold, conservative English,” It was a concession for Jon Bull!

[10] Our journey took us thru the tranquil English countryside, truly a delectable land; -a great garden divided by well-groomed hedges. In the States the vast areas of untilled land are obstacles enough to foster energy and courage. The rocks alone in Upper Michigan would make the sturdiest heart ache at the thought of the work to be done. Here on settles back into the feeling that all the labor ended generations back and that the landscape is a picture only to enjoy.

[11] London! Think yellow fog; a maze of cruelly dark streets and cluttered vehicles whose drivers called our warningly to each other; street lamps painted black and signaling to air-raid shelters; flutterings and scurryings into the darkness; -- this was war!

A tap on my door when I reached the hotel warned; “Draw the blinds!” and I saw for the first time the flaunting red sign; “WAR! Curtains much NOT be drawn back!” Air-raid were the universal topic Women with staring eyes, living over again the horrors of those nights told of subways jammed and suffocating where the poor had taken refuge with mattresses for their crying babies; or of theatre audiences, terrified suddenly by the Boche, rising with streaming eyes to sing “God Save the King!” I was at the front!

[12] By day London was a riot of uniforms. The Tommies, grizzled and grim from long service, frightened me, until I found in the first cluster I reluctantly approached in our canteen, one Tommy from Wisconsin, and another from Nevada! I began to feel very much at home. I think I should have felt so completely had it not been for the left-handed traffic. (precarious to a creature of right-handed habits!) and, too, the buses. They were all that approximated American speed, and yet after trying vainly for ten minutes to board one, I was astonished to hear the slow-moving Bobby I appealed to , remonstrate, “Get on ‘im now, Miss. ‘E’s not going very fast”.--- This from a people who seem characteristically slow!

[13] My main work in England was at our submarine-chaser base. The benevolent owner of the largest café in the port gave the use of it evenings and Sundays to our boys, as a club. And there in the gloom which the law against outside lighting enforced, I hung out our Y.M.C.A. sign. Multitudes of sailors filed in to seek entertainment during the long months of waiting to be ordered home, and there strangely, in a land with a caste system as rigid as the Hindu, women and girls of all classes flocked to make of our boys, run the canteen, organize games and “dog-trot” to our jazz music. There were a few exceptions to this wartime democracy. A stiff British matron announced dramatically at tea, “I hate the lower class!” necessitating a tactful diversion on the part of our hostess; a club member refused to entertain with a fellow-worker “because I’m Profession and she’s Trade!;” and one so-called “Lady” would not mingle with out “shop-girl members who’re uncertain of their h’s”! Yet before scorning their spirit I thought hard about our American war-worker who “never associated with our sailors unless they came to the back door to shine shoes.” It may be best to start at home to make the world safe for democracy!

[14] Our national characteristics are mutually well-advertised: An American blustered into the café one day announcing, “My name’s Ryan. Salesman. Nebraska. Know that country? Best little corner on earth!” As he passed on , the owner turned to me. “How like you Americans!”

he said. "Do you know that an Englishman has lunched here everyday for twenty years and has never told his name nor said 'Good-morning!'" A prosperous-looking business man after watching our dances several evenings offered to send me some floor-wax, and I was astounded, when I sent a note to thank him, to have him ask me to allow the use of it as advertising on his calendar. He finally sent a proof to me, thinking my name in print would win me over. "Hoho!" said the boys. "That man's no Englishman. He's a Yank!"

[15] The English at first classed our sailors with their own who are ignorant and inferior, (How can one be intelligent and bring up a family on nothing at all?) but they soon realized their manliness, their chivalry, and surprising stock of information, and the volunteer leader of a canteen shift who reproved an assistant for not smiling at the Americans when she handed them tea, was only one of many proofs of how the English loved them. Our boys hated the "limey" sailors, with whom they often fought on the streets. I think their dislike for England was largely due to the provoking insolence of "limey" sneers, "Well, America, you came too late!" Yet I felt quite certain that we didn't always pursue a Laissez Faire policy ourselves. We American are hardly lacking as a nation in arrogance and self-assertion and I rather doubted the ability of a young American to continually pass the "limey" sailor he scorned without berating him.

[16] It was maddening to be made feel that only things English were "quite all right". We often commented on the English newspapers' surprising indifference to the part our army played, and on those English people who disparaged our aid in the war. Yet there was much praise too, for our country and our president, and certainly an openhearted welcome. During the months when the English threw their homes open to our men, and when the Lord Mayor banqueted the entire chaser personnel with a welcome that symbolized the most sincere international good-will. I found the boys' attitude changing, and tho they were loathe to praise the "limeys", or find anything in England that wasn't "better in the States", yet they greatly enjoyed and appreciated the hospitality of her people, and found them, as I found them, delightful, besides being quite human and like ourselves.

[17] The perilous and splendid work of the men on the subchasers and destroyers endeared them to all the thinking people of the port. No greater tribute was possible than the ovation our sailors received when the chasers left for home. Not far from the tablet that makes the point of departure of the "Mayflower", thousands of people gathered to see them for the last time. As the long lines of little craft with homeward-bound pennants flying, drew up before "the Hoe", their sirens shrieked a last salute and "Three cheers for old England," came echoing across the water. Handkerchiefs and flags waved from the shore, rockets soared in varied colors, and ships throughout the harbor bellowed "Bon Voyage". The great concourse of people remained until the last boat disappeared. They were frankly sad. The Americans had meant much to war-worn England in more than one way, and there was something in that parting on that historic setting that seemed like a fond mother's farewell.

Cheerio, England!

Florence Sullivan

[18] *A letter written from Miss Sullivan to the "Mothers of Men," 1919:*

As you think of [your boys] and their home coming I know you are wondering whether or not they have changed since you sent them over here.

Yes, they have, for these boys of yours have gone through shot and shell; they have heard the song of death in the fire of machine guns; they have been alone in the front line trenches at midnight; they have tramped and fought and suffered. So you will see the depths in their eyes—depths which were not there a year ago and which can only come to those who have been face to face with death and hell but through it all have seen and known God.

Some are wearing the insignia of honor for heroic deeds in action; some have no decorations to commemorate their heroism, but each has played a noble part and I am sure that somewhere the just and loving Eternal Father has kept their "service records" and that He, even He, will bestow upon them awards for distinguished service in the day of His Grand Review.

And now a word to the mothers whose sons will not return. I understand something of the unutterable sorrow in your hearts, but I want to help you, if I can, to feel the unspeakable glory of having made a mother's sacrifice for freedom. I know how much harder it has been for you to give him, your son, than to have given your own life.

But let this be your comfort, that he played his part in fullest measure and, whether here or there, his life goes on to bless and brighten and uplift the world.

From a "Y" Mother with the Boys of the A.E.F. [American Expeditionary Force]

---

[This text was created by Elizabeth Limburg as part of the "Documenting Wisconsin History" project, supervised by Professor David Voelker at the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay. This project had support from UWGB's Research Council.]



This electronic text is © 2007 David J. Voelker. Permission is granted to reproduce this text freely for educational, non-commercial purposes only. All users must retain this notice and cite <http://www.historytools.org>.