

# MISSION OF HONOR

AUTHOR RECALLS HIS GRANDFATHER'S STORIES OF WWI



PHOTO BY JEFF LOWDERMILK

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**O**n a cool, misty morning, Jeff Lowdermilk was wandering past rows of white crosses in the Meuse-Argonne Cemetery in France. "I started saying the names out loud," he said of the American soldiers buried there from World War I. "I was wondering, when was the last time someone said their names aloud? "It was very moving ... I had an epiphany. I could feel the strength of

all these wonderful Americans. I told them, out loud, 'I will do everything I can to perpetuate your memory.'" So what had started out as curiosity about his grandfather's experiences in "the war to end all wars" and later became a passion, at that point turned into a mission, the Santa Fe man said. And part of the mission was carried out with the recent publication of a book that combined words from his grandfather's diary written during his slog across France and Germany with Lowdermilk's own adventures in retracing those steps.

He's having a presentation and book-signing for "Honoring the Doughboys: Following My Grandfather's World War I Diary" (George F. Thompson Publishing) at 6 p.m. Wednesday at Collected Works Bookstore, 202 Galisteo St. Next month, he's heading up to Denver for an Armistice Day (now called Veterans Day) talk and another on Nov. 18 at the Colorado History Museum. His grandfather, George A. Carlson, the son of Swedish immigrants,



**ABOVE:** Rows of crosses in the Meuse-Argonne Cemetery in France mark the graves of Americans who died fighting in World War I.

**LEFT:** George A. Carlson, 353rd Infantry Regiment, 89th Division, Denver, Colo.

COURTESY OF JEFF LOWDERMILK

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## HONOR //

AUTHOR RECALLS HIS GRANDFATHER'S STORIES OF FIGHTING IN WORLD WAR I

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lived in Denver, where Lowdermilk grew up and spent many hours listening to his stories. Those stories included meeting "Buffalo Bill" Cody when he was 12 years old and helping unload wagon-delivered crackers at restaurants and stores. Another story involved delivering newspapers to and working in the garden of "the Unsinkable Molly Brown," who survived the Titanic disaster.

"My grandfather loved to tell stories and I loved to listen," said Lowdermilk. "I remember him telling stories since I was a little boy."

Those stories helped pique that little boy's curiosity about the world wars and the Depression.

"Every time he dressed up, he wore his (Army) division pin," Lowdermilk said. Carlson took his grandkids every year to the Veterans Day parade downtown and participated in the Cootie Club — an organization of World War I veterans named after the lice that infested their clothing and bodies on the battlefield.

Lowdermilk was 32 when his grandfather died just short of his 90th birthday. After that, Lowdermilk's mother passed his grandfather's war diary on to him.

It's hard to imagine that a small collection of paper could survive water-filled trenches and long marches. Lowdermilk said family lore has it that his grandfather wrote down where he was and what he was doing in a small notebook he carried with him through combat, but then transcribed it into a new notebook once he was settled with the Occupation Forces.

Many of the names of towns were written down phonetically, and Lowdermilk had to pore over maps and a history of the 89th Division's World War I experiences to find the proper names. The division

was involved in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, the first all-American offensive in World War I, which Carlson called "our first full dress ball" in his diary.

The doughboy tells of shells exploding around them, of eating only once a day, of searching for water because mustard gas had settled on the readily available supplies. He talks about getting his first cooties, and welcome times when he was able to retreat from the front lines and get a bath and fresh underwear.

On Oct. 20, 1918, he wrote, "Well this night my Pal got hurt and had I been sleeping with him, I would have got hurt as I always slept on that side of the dugout. There were a lot of boys wounded and killed this night."

On Oct. 22, he told about coming within 40-50 feet of Germans in thick woods. "This was a hell of a job as we had no barrage to give us some kind of help. A lot of our boys were wounded in this battle. I am here to tell you it was some battle, too, the boys were getting bumped off like flies in the fall. "I sure had a lot to do here, it is a wonder that I wasn't killed at this place as the bullets were sure flying high and low, and the boys were falling all around me. I tell you, our company was sure small after this battle."

If words of this tragedy seem a little dispassionate, Lowdermilk noted, "... although he was a kind, caring person, he was also very stoic." That's something many people have observed as being true of both World War generations, especially those who saw active combat.

In reconstructing his grandfather's experience, Lowdermilk went to Europe many times, where he retraced the 89th Division's path — going on foot over some of the most crucial ground and at the same time of year Carlson was marching. He took photos of the landscape, the cemeteries and the memorials set



PHOTO BY JEFF LOWDERMILK

**ABOVE:** Hay is harvested and rolled in what was once a battlefield of the Saint-Mihiel Offensive in World War I near Nonsard, France.

**LEFT:** Jeff Lowdermilk turned his grandfather's stories into a book about World War I.



### A LOOK AT THE GREAT WAR

**WHAT:** Jeff Lowdermilk's presentation and signing of "Honoring the Doughboys: Following My Grandfather's World War I Diary."

**WHEN:** 6 p.m. Wednesday

**WHERE:** Collected Works Bookstore, 202 Galisteo St., Santa Fe.

up to honor Americans' contributions to pushing the Germans out of France.

And he made a lot of friends along the way, including Helen Patton, granddaughter of Gen. George Patton, who commanded the U.S. Tank Corps in World War I, and Remi Foch, great-grandson of Marshall Ferdinand Foch, commander of the World War I Allied Armies.

In the process, Lowdermilk has tried to keep alive the memory of the more than 4.3 million Americans who were mobilized to fight in World War I and the 2 million who were on the front lines when the cease-fire was called. More than 116,500 died. He wants people to think about the sacrifices made to preserve our freedom.

"I think of my granddad out there in No Man's Land. The things he saw must have been so horrendous," Lowdermilk said. "But he was always a very positive guy, he always looked on the bright side."

"I think that's a tremendous testament to his character."