



Francis Kelleher's Great War

"Tell everybody I like it first rate."

WELL MORE THAN 10,000 VERMONTERS WERE officially mobilized to fight in World War I from 1917 to 1919. They included soldiers, sailors, and nurses, and their stories are incredibly diverse.

Francis Edward Kelleher of Montpelier was one such soldier. Born in the capital city on September 19, 1891, he was the youngest of nine children—five boys and four girls—born to Michael and Mary (Duggan) Kelleher. Both of his parents had immi-

grated to the United States from Ireland, and they married in New Hampshire, where their first few children were born. They moved to Vermont in the late 1870s, and by 1880 were living in Berlin, with Michael's occupation listed as "granite worker" on the 1880 census.

By the time Francis was born, the family had moved to Court Street in Montpelier, where they would remain for decades to come. His father passed away when he was a child, but the

Court Street house was home to various members of the Kelleher family through the middle of the 20th century. His siblings worked as bank cashiers, dressmakers, clerks, granite workers, and taxi drivers, and the family as a whole was completely enmeshed in local life, marrying locals and settling in Montpelier and other parts of the state.

Francis attended Montpelier High School and followed in his father's footsteps, taking a job right after graduation with Boutwell, Milne, and Varnum Company in Barre (now known as Rock of Ages). He stayed there for two years and then took a job as a mailroom clerk in the personnel and purchasing department of the National Life Insurance Company. Either in high school or through his first job, he met a young woman named Maizie Rumsey. Maizie was the niece of James Meade Boutwell, part owner of Francis's first employer.



Francis E. Keller at work at the National Life Insurance Company, which he re-joined following his World War I service. He eventually became the company's head of supply for purchasing and personnel.

They quickly became a committed couple.

When he registered for the draft in June 1917, he described himself as “medium” in both height and build, with fair hair and blue eyes. Later Army paperwork gives his height as 5 feet 7 inches. He was not a large or physical man—his talents lay in more cerebral directions. He was inducted into the United States Army on May 16, 1918 at the University of Vermont and trained as part of the mechanic’s detachment there until July 13, when he was moved to what would become his regular assignment through the war: the 312th Supply Train.

The 312th Supply Train was part of the 87th Division, which had been established in August 1917 with initial drafted men from the Deep South. Under the command of Major General Samuel D. Sturgis, the division added troops from the Midwest and Northeast, and moved to Camp Dix in New Jersey to await final embarkation. Francis and members of his training detachment arrived at Camp Dix together, but were quickly split up and assigned to several different companies and regiments to continue training.

Francis wrote more than 150 letters to Maizie Rumsey during the course of his service in the war, starting the day he arrived at UVM for training—that’s a letter roughly every two days. He documented nearly every moment of his service, describing his training at UVM (lots of marching) and his experiences of “city” life while at Camp Dix. (He was horrified to pay 25¢ for a slice of apple pie with a scoop of ice cream; “they charge for everything in the cities.”)

He missed Maizie desperately, even while stationed at UVM. Nearly every single one of his letters home begins in the same way as this one from June 18, 1918:

“Here I am many miles away from you, isn’t bearable. I only wish that I could be near you, it would seem so good. How are you standing it anyway. Pretty lonesome, I suppose. Keep up Maizie, this war is not going to last forever. Someday I hope we can all be happy again. Everybody is having hard times. I mean people that have relations or sweethearts in this war.”

For her part, Maizie kept up work on the home front, writing Francis nearly as frequently as he wrote to her, raising money for the war effort, and spending time with Francis’s sisters and mother to knit socks and sweaters and gather other supplies to send to the front.

Francis was a highly verbal, confessional writer. He did not enjoy being in the army and had no desire to cover himself in martial glory. He wrote of his hopes that most of the fighting would be over before his regiment shipped out. As part of his training, he took endless tests to determine his aptitude for various tasks related to supply train work: oral examinations, equipment tests, and driving tests on a variety of vehicles. “So I guess I am a driver now,” he wrote wryly to Maizie. “It was very tiresome for me because I was so much nervous than any one else, but I did better than a whole lot.”

Perhaps the more common portrait of a soldier is one who is keen to ship out, homesick but patriotic, stoic, and uncommunicative. Francis’s letters certainly contain all of those elements, but when he wrote to Maizie he felt no need to be performative. He trusted her implicitly and had no hesitation about sharing a



Following basic training in July 1918, Francis stopped by to visit his sweetheart Maizie Rumsey in Montpelier, where this picture was taken on Langdon Street, just before he departed for Camp Dix.



A studio portrait of Maizie, whom Francis married in October, 1918, following his return from France in May of that year.

PARIS — Le Louvre L. D.



Postcards of Paris that Francis sent to Maizie in November 1918, shortly after he arrived there the day Armistice was signed; there was great celebration, and he noted: "There is a bar every other door in this city" in his correspondence to her.



complete picture of his life and emotional state, and his hundreds of pages of neatly written letters provide an extraordinary complete picture of one man's more nuanced experience of war:

"Of course it is nice to be patriotic. But it is much nicer to be home and to be your own boss. I am in it so I won't crab. Tell everybody I like it first rate."

From context clues, it seems clear that Maizie wrote back just as frequently as Francis wrote to her, but her letters did not survive—nor did any of the Kelleher family letters, which were also apparently frequent. His writings indicate that he received a letter just about as often as he sent one—every day or every other day, barring delivery complications when his regiment was on the move.

Life at Camp Dix was unlike anything Francis had experienced before. July in New Jersey was considerably hotter than Vermont, for one thing, and for a young man who had not been particularly inclined to physical exertion, the long marches and rifle training were exhausting. He detailed to Maizie how





Maizie Rumsey and Francis E. Keller enjoy a lighthearted moment circa 1917, prior to his induction into the United States Army and service in the 302nd Supply Train, 87th Division.

many miles they traveled each day, how early in the morning they woke up, how many rounds he fired at the range, and the unfamiliar mass-produced camp food.

The 87th Division, including the 312th Supply Train, shipped to France in mid-August 1918, and Francis in particular arrived in France on August 23. Correspondence slowed, but Francis's spirits lifted now that he was in Europe and doing what he had trained for. Days were long—it wasn't unusual for him to travel as many as 18 hours in a day as part of the supply convoy—but he thought the French roads were good and that driving the huge supply trucks "sure is a lot of fun." He also expanded his social circle and made friends with soldiers who were not from Vermont. "There is a bar every other door in this city," he confessed. "Soldiers are allowed to go on in. Things are a whole lot different in these foreign countries."

His new situation on the active front lines meant that his letters were now subject to censorship, and Francis wrote far fewer details back home, talking generally about the roads, the driving, the other soldiers, but giving his location only as "somewhere in France." We know that the 87th Division spent September 1918 getting into position along the front lines, spread largely through central and southern France. The 312th Supply Train headquarters settled into position at Saint-Nazaire, a port town in southern Brittany, and on October 1 Francis was assigned to headquarters as a statistical clerk.

Although now lacking in precise details, his letters continued to be self-reflective and showed a gradually increasing confidence and pride in his new independence and skills. "It makes me laugh sometimes when I am doing my washing. I say to myself, if mother could see me now. It is a lot different when you have to do these things for yourself. It does not hurt anyone to get used to different things. All I had to do at home was to put on my stuff. Everything was always ready for me. It was hard at first but now I am an old veteran at these things. I sure will be worth a lot to anyone. When I am married I will have to do the washing," he boasted to Maizie. He no longer described himself constantly as "lonesome" and did some sightseeing, enclosing postcards of France.

Francis was generally careful to keep details out of his let-

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Francis's wool jerkin (uniform) survives today as a museum exhibition, and reflects changes to uniforms dating back to the Spanish-American War mandated by General Order 81 in 1902 and in place in April 1917 when the United States entered the war.



The acorn is the symbol of the 87th Division, and the wheel with the crossed key and sword indicates the Quartermaster Corps, which oversaw Supply.



ters, but he slipped up occasionally, and in October 1918 he wrote a letter home to Maizie that was clipped by the censor. "You said in your letter that there was a fever raging in the United States, called the Spanish influenza. I sure have heard about it over here." The censor cut his next sentence or two out of the letter, presumably to hide key details about influenza affecting American forces in France.

Opting for an additional two-week training course in logistics put Francis in Paris on November 11, 1918.

"I have just arrived back from school and the happy part of it was, that I was thru with my course in time to make a little run up to Paris and was there on that day of all days, when the Germans threw up the sponge, and was a participate in the great celebration with the Parisians. O! but it was a glorious day, and the way those people put it on is inexpressible, but perhaps the day is not far distant when I may sit and tell you of it all, just as it happened. It was a day to be remembered as long as I live, and one that no person could appreciate without being present. I saw General Pershing pass by in his limousine. You could not hardly get along on the sidewalk or boulevards. I never saw so many people in my life."

The rest of the war seemed to pass quickly for both Francis and Maizie; he was promoted two more times, and mustered out of the Army as a Sergeant, First Class, on June 9, 1919, after shipping back from France the previous month. He returned to Montpelier immediately, and on October 22, 1919, he and Maizie were married. They had one daughter, Patricia, and built a house at 143 Main Street in Montpelier that is still standing today.

He also returned to his previous job at National Life and worked there until his death in 1956. When he passed away, he was head of supply for purchasing and personnel—surely something his war-time experiences in the 312th Supply Train prepared him for. The Vermont Historical Society purchased his letters, photographs, and World War I uniform from the estate of his daughter, Patricia Kelleher, in 2014. ▀

Amanda Kay Gustin is the public program manager at the Vermont Historical Society, where she plans statewide history engagement and programming. She holds degrees in history and museum work from both Tufts University and Middlebury College.