



William J. Phelan Diary (S0837)

Collection Number: S0837

Collection Title: William J. Phelan Diary

Dates: September 1917- May 1919

Creator: Phelan, William James, 1893-1974

Abstract: William James Phelan, a St. Louis native, served as a Regimental Sergeant Major in the 314th Engineer Regiment, 89th Infantry Division during World War I. Phelan trained in Camp Funston, Kansas before being sent overseas on the USS Carpathia. Following the Armistice, Phelan and the 314th were part of the post-war occupation of Germany. Beginning in September 1917, Phelan kept a detailed diary about his experiences during World War I. From shipping out of Union Station, basic training, service near the front line in France and occupation duty in Germany. Scattered throughout the diary's pages are mementos, photographs, and insignia related to Phelan's service in Europe.

Collection Size: 0.2 cubic feet
(1 volume, 7 photographs)

Language: Collection materials are in English.

Repository: The State Historical Society of Missouri

Restrictions on Access: Collection is open for research. This collection is available at [The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis](#). If you would like more information, please contact us at stlouis@shsmo.org. Collections may be viewed at any research center.

Restrictions on Use: Materials in this collection are in the public domain.

Preferred Citation: [Specific item; box number; folder number] *William J. Phelan Diary* (S0837); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis [after first mention may be abbreviated to SHSMO-St. Louis].

Donor Information: The William J. Phelan Diary was donated to the University of Missouri by Frank Neal on January 21, 1992 (Accession No. 3038).

Alternate Forms Available: Digital images of the complete William J. Phelan Diary are available online at <https://digital.shsmo.org/>.

Processed by: Processed by Western Historical Manuscript Collection Staff in 1992. Revised by Claire Marks in August 2019.

Historical Note:

William J. Phelan was born in St. Louis, Missouri on July 12, 1893, to Michael Phelan and Pauline Grate. He worked as a clerk at the American Commissary Company at the time of his enlistment. His diary begins in September, 22 1917 as he departs Union Station, St. Louis and travels to Camp Funston, Kansas, where he is assigned to the 314th Regiment, 89th Division. He lists promotions and assignments, furloughs, and recreation, but discusses little of the day to day life or training at the camp. Phelan then describes his travel via train with his regiment from Camp Funston to Camp Mills, New York.

On June 12th, 1918, Phelan and his regiment set sail aboard the USS Carpathia. Phelan describes the trip in detail, including seasickness, sighting the Irish and Scottish shorelines, and being escorted through the heavily mined 'danger zone' by 16 destroyers and chasers. The regiment disembarks at Liverpool, England on June 24th and travels to Cherbourg, France, where they are given a welcoming ovation by French inhabitants. They then travel through Northern France by train, and the troops have to take turns sitting, standing, sleeping, because it is so cramped. "War is hell" Phelan remarks.

The next several entries, spanning the month of September, include Phelan's descriptions of the Battle of Saint-Mihiel. The battle was the first offensive launched solely by the US during World War I, and included the American Expeditionary Forces and 110,000 French troops under the command of General John J. Pershing. Following the successful battle, Phelan collected souvenirs from the battlefield and sent them home.

In entries spanning late September through November, Phelan discusses the Meuse-Argonne Offensive with tactical detail, including being bombarded daily in the trenches. The deadliest campaign in American history, the Meuse-Argonne Offensive stretched along the entire Western Front and resulted in 26,000 American soldiers being killed and 120,000 casualties.

On November 6th, 1918 Phelan's attention was attracted by flares fired on all sides – he called the message center and was told that German generals had crossed the lines to conclude an armistice. This is the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month

Included in the November 11th entry is a photograph of the official radio orders from Paris to cease hostilities.

Phelan and the 89th Division remained as part of the Army of Occupation for several months following the Armistice. During this time, Phelan's diary entries contain descriptions of his travel through Germany and France, both on duty and on furlough. On January 1919, he encouraged his fellow soldiers to use their influence to pull political strings and write to newspapers for aid in getting the 89th Division back to the United States more quickly. In May of 1919, following a royal sendoff from the French, Phelan boarded the USS Montana and set sail for Hoboken, New Jersey. On May 26, he writes:

"Welcome committee of 8 ships full of civilians met us, drew alongside and put over a barrage of chocolate. Each ship had a band. Our band would play and one of the other

would answer. To try and describe the feeling in seeing God's country cannot be done. Some of the boys cried while others laughed. I had a lump in my throat. Received government salute."

Following his return to the United States, Phelan married Rosalie M. Lenden and they had one child, Elizabeth, who was born in 1926. Phelan died in St. Louis in April 1974.

Arrangement:

The diary has chronological entries, with the exception of the photographs and ephemera, which have been pasted onto the latter pages of the diary.

Scope and Content Note:

The William J. Phelan diary consists of 122 pages of diary entries written by Phelan, describing his experiences as a soldier overseas with the 314th Infantry Regiment, 89th Division. Interspersed throughout the diary are photographs of Phelan and members of the 314th Infantry, including a photo of Phelan on horseback with one of his comrades, Cecil E. Cather (pgs. 78-79). Also included in the diary are citations given to the 89th Division by John J. Pershing (pgs. 93, 95), and a shoulder sleeve insignia patch of the United States Army of Occupation (pg. 96). The diary entries date from September 1917 to May 1919.

Container List:

- f. 1 William J. Phelan Diary, September 1917- May 1919

Index:

Index Term
Argonne, Battle of the, France, 1918
Armistice Day
Barley, John
Bergeus, Harry
Black, Gurdon
Brazill, Matthew
Butler, William J
Byrne, Mark
Calleen, David
Fort Riley (Kan.)
Camp Albert L. Mills (N.Y.)
Carpathia (Ship)
Cather, Cecil E.
Eggers, Arthur
Etter, Jack

Index Term
Ferguson, Ralph A.
Freeman, Orley
Koneuhroek, Paul
Mullholland, Bernard
O'Toole, Phelin
Olson, Emery
Pershing, John J. (John Joseph), 1860-1948
Phelan, William James, 1893-1974
Powlaski, Stanislav
Price, Garden
Saint-Mihiel, Battle of, Saint-Mihiel, France, 1918
Trench warfare--France--Argonne--1910-1920
United States. Army. Engineer Regiment, 314 th
United States. Army. Division, 89 th (1917-1942)
Vaughn, Henry
Walsh, Kennedy
Watkins, Boas
Wissman, Arthur
Wood, Leonard, 1860-1927
World War, 1914-1918
World War, 1914-1918--Campaigns--Western Front--Personal narratives
World War, 1914-1918--Occupied territories