

Finding Family – August 2017

Finding My Father's 'Old Pal'

By Marie Bowen

After my father's death in 1977, I found among his possessions a fragile, tattered letter dated Sept. 18, 1918, and addressed to "My Old Pal." The accompanying, equally tattered envelope showed a return address that included the words, American Expeditionary Force. In fact, this was correspondence from someone serving in France during World War I. I realized the letter must have meant a great deal to my father and so I tried to learn more about the sender, whose name appeared to be Jack Thorpe.

Using federal censuses and military records at Ancestry and Familysearch, I looked for 'Jack Thorpe' with no success. Only after quite a bit of squinting at the correspondent's unique signature did I realize the man's name actually was Earl Shope. The text of his letter indicated that Earl and my father had been good friends, 'old pals,' when they lived and worked in San Francisco in 1917-1918. In addition to references about family and other mutual friends in San Francisco, Earl reported he was in good health, learning how to operate a caterpillar and looking forward to returning home as "a pretty good gas engine man." The letter concluded with Earl heading off to mess hall.

Based on the many 'military stamps' on the envelope, it was clear my father did not receive the letter until Oct. 26, 1918. Having now found Earl's military records, I learned that on Oct. 17, three weeks after posting his letter and nine days before my father received it, Earl died of Spanish Influenza and its accompanying pneumonia. (The preceding day, Joseph Voss, also a San Francisco friend who served with Earl, died from the same cause.)

I found military records and news clippings which explained that Earl and Joseph had served as wagoners in Battery D, 62nd Artillery, CAC (U.S. Army Coast Artillery Corps), 97th Division, AEF (American Expeditionary Force). Trained at Ft. Winfield Scott in California, they were in or near Libourne, France, at the time of their deaths. They were buried side by side in Libourne and, later, on Jan. 17, 1921, their transported remains were buried, again side by side, at San Francisco Presidio's National Cemetery. I would like to think my father attended the burials, for surely those friends meant much to him.