

George Simons first of World War I dead returned home

With Veterans Day this Friday, November 11, it's a fitting time to remember the story of George Robert Simons, the first fallen soldier of World War I brought back from France to Bloomington for reburial.

The fact that nearly 21 months separate his death in France and his reinterment in Bloomington speaks to the enormity of the conflict and the logistical and bureaucratic difficulties repatriating tens of thousands of war dead. All told, more than 150 men from McLean County died in service to their country during the "Great War," and like Simons, many were returned home in the hope family and friends would find some measure of peace. This slow, inexorable return of caskets from far away battlefields also occurred during the Civil War, Second World War, Vietnam War, and our past and ongoing wars in the Middle East.

Back nearly a century ago, the Simons home was at 1301 South Main Street in Normal (today, the site of Casey's General Store west of the Advocate BroMenn Medical Center campus and south of Monical's Pizza). Before the U.S. entered the war in 1917, George worked for Pantagraph Printing and Stationery Co., and then James R. Bailey, a local electrical contractor.

Enlisting in the U.S. Army, Simons departed Bloomington in early July 1917. Assigned to the Quartermaster Corps, he was shipped across the Atlantic aboard the USS *Agamemnon*, a converted German luxury liner seized by the U.S. The *Agamemnon* departed on September 18, 1918, and though his parents received customary word of the ship's safe arrival in France, they would never hear from their son again.

Suffering from bronchial pneumonia, Simons soon found himself in a hospital in the French city of Brest. He passed away on October 9, four days after his twentieth birthday, and was buried in the American section of a cemetery overlooking that port city. Although it's not known for certainty, Simons might've fallen to the Influenza Pandemic (or "Spanish Flu") of 1918-1919, believed to be the deadliest epidemic in recorded world history.

Sometime later, perhaps at the conclusion of the war, George M. and Lottie Simons requested that their son George R. be brought back home. As a result, the remains were exhumed and then shipped by steamer to the U.S., arriving in Hoboken, NJ around July 5, 1920. The body was then transported via rail to Bloomington, arriving Sunday evening, July 18, on the Chicago & Alton Railroad's "Hummer" passenger train.

Accompanying the body on the long journey from Hoboken to Bloomington was Sgt. Ralph Denayer, who, while stationed at Camp Upton, NY, found himself on this most melancholic of duties. An American Legion delegation met Denayer at the west side passenger station, and that night Lloyd Orendorff stood guard over Simons' casket at John A. Beck's "undertaking rooms," 116 South Main Street.

On Tuesday morning, July 20, brief services were held at the Simons residence on South Main Street. A long funeral procession accompanied the body to First Baptist Church, Bloomington, and then further south to the cemetery. The boy's band of the Soldiers' Orphans' Home in Normal led the procession with a slow dirge, followed by the bugler, a 100-member American Legion escort, the half-furled Old Glory and color guard, the requisite ceremonial firing squad, the hearse and other autos.

“During the entire line of march ... the funeral procession was given respectful attention,” noted The Pantagraph. “Bared heads and hats over the left breasts marked the servicemen who stood along the way paying silent tribute to their ‘buddy’ who had ‘gone west,’ paying the price of friendship and patriotism.”

Upon reaching First Baptist, located at the southeast corner of Prairie and Jefferson streets (now House of Faith International Church), Rev. John L. Jackson delivered a sermon linking Simons' death with the struggle for freedom around the globe, echoing the narrative favored by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson. “It was not only a war in national self-defense,” Rev. Jackson said, “but it was a struggle for world liberty ... Hence the men who went overseas were indeed the soldiers of humanity.”

The procession reached the end of its journey at Bloomington Cemetery (now part of Evergreen Memorial Cemetery) for an American Legion service led by Chaplain of the Post William Blake Hindman.

Although World War I had ended nearly two years earlier, the job of providing a final resting place for many of its dead was just beginning.