

Expanding Student Understanding of World War I Soldiers' Experiences with Poetry

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The Stars and Stripes: The American Soldiers' Newspaper of World War I, 1918–1919 (www.loc.gov/collections/stars-and-stripes/about-this-collection/) collection at the Library of Congress provides access to the newspaper distributed to military personnel during World War I. The news articles reveal what members of the American Expeditionary Force actually read about military battles and campaigns in the last year of “The Great War.” This newspaper, written by servicemen for servicemen, was created to improve morale and generate unity within the American forces. It included news from the homefront, sports coverage, cartoons, and poetry.

Poetry was part of *The Stars and Stripes* from its first issue. “The Army’s Poets” feature was inaugurated May 3, 1918. According to a review, published February 7, 1919, of the paper’s first year, the feature proved to be the most widely read column in the paper:

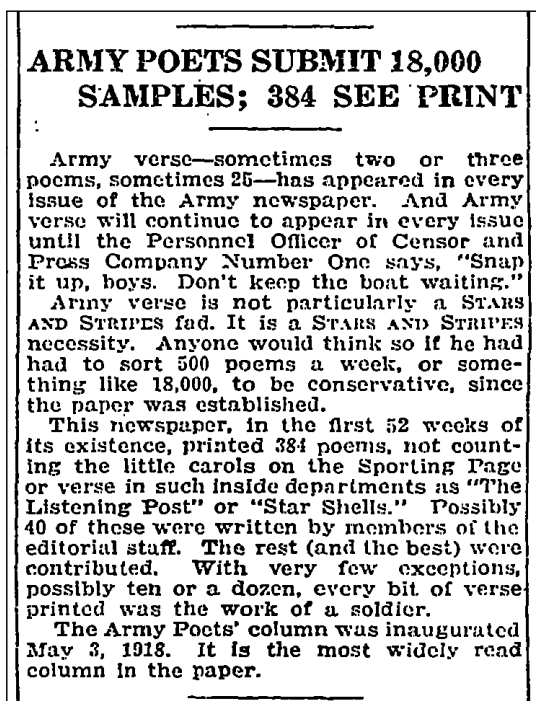
Army verse is not particularly a *Stars and Stripes* fad. It is a *Stars and Stripes* necessity. Anyone would think so if he had had to sort 500 poems a week, or something like 18,000, to be conservative, since the paper was established.

This newspaper, in the first 52 weeks of its existence, printed 381 poems, not counting the little carols on the Sporting Page or verse in such inside departments as “The Listening Post” or “Star Shells.” Possibly 40 of these were written by members of the editorial staff. The rest (and the best) were contributed. With very few exceptions, possibly ten or a dozen, every bit of verse printed was the work of a soldier.

(From “Army Poets Submit 18,000 Samples,” *The Stars and Stripes*, February 7, 1919, page 5, column 4)

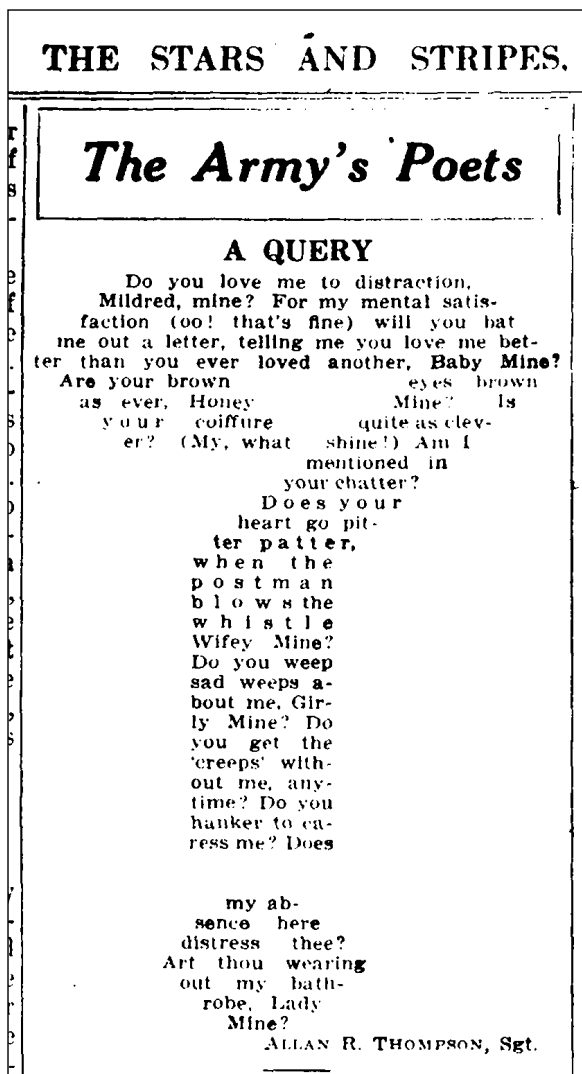
Through their poetry, soldiers commented on life in the trenches, homesickness, patriotism, and the camaraderie essential for wartime success. Reading their work more than a century later can help students understand the interests and concerns of American soldiers during wartime, and offer insights into activities that occupied soldiers’ time abroad and how they responded to news from the homefront.

The article reviewing the successful first year of “The Army Poets” offers multiple starting points for student research that may lead to new understandings about the lives of American



soldiers during World War I. Invite students to begin on the “Collection Items” page of the Stars & Stripes collection (www.loc.gov/collections/stars-and-stripes/) and guide them in selecting the “Advanced Search,” an option available for the Library’s newspaper collections. This opens additional fields for searching. For an initial search, students might try typing “Army’s poets” into the keyword box and limiting the dates covered from May 3, 1918 (the inaugural column’s publication date) to June 13, 1919 (the last publication date available in the collection). This will bring up almost 100 results, fewer than the collection’s total of 659 items.

What next? Consider providing students with various browsing strategies and encourage them to try one or more that appeals to their learning style or academic interest. For instance, students with visual arts backgrounds might prefer to browse the pages of results in gallery mode, which is the default setting, in order to look across pages for any eye-catching illustrations or text patterns. These visual components may or may not relate to the “Army’s Poets” column and yet might result in serendipitous discoveries of poetry sharing space on the same page.



Alternatively, students who prefer words to imagery might opt to view results in “List” (use the dropdown menu in the box labeled “View” to select this option) and see which text captures their interest. Students might look for unfamiliar phrases and unique vocabulary or, alternatively, descriptions that speak to their own emotions or experiences. Reading the full poems or related articles might provide unexpected windows into the everyday struggles common to soldiers then that may be surprisingly funny or meaningful to students today.

A strategy that may appeal to more analytical students might be to sort the search results by selecting “date (oldest first).” Invite students to consult a timeline of the war, such as the one from the Library of Congress exhibition “Echoes of the Great War: American Experiences of World War I” (www.loc.gov/exhibitions/world-war-i-american-experiences/timeline/), and to identify a few key historical events, people or places from the timeline that may have inspired soldiers to write poetry at the time. Ask students how they might search for such poems. They may respond that they could simply browse by corresponding dates after first sorting items chronologically. Next, ask them to consider how quickly soldiers’ poems about an event would have appeared. Within weeks? Months? Students might expand or limit the date ranges for their searches to learn and discover more.

Still another strategy for students uncertain about how to proceed with their research might be to randomly select an item and analyze a single page of the issue in its entirety using the observe-reflect-question process. Further questions to consider might include: how do various topics of featured poems relate to each other, if at all? How do the poems complement or contrast with other content featured on this page? What might you want to learn more about World War I soldiers’ personal stories or their larger historical landscape after analyzing this one page of news from a single day of the war?

Consider as an example a group of students whose research may lead them to the “Army’s Poets” feature page in the October 11, 1918, issue of *The Stars and Stripes*: www.loc.gov/resource/20001931/1918-10-11/ed-1/?sp=4. Perhaps the first poem’s title, “Hommes 40, Chevaux 8,” attracts the attention of students unfamiliar with the French words. After another student in the group translates the phrase, “Men 40, Horses 8,” they might then read the poem for clues about its meaning. In such a scenario, encourage students to highlight or list key words or phrases in each stanza, such as “rails of France,” “flat-wheeled box car,” and “ride by freight.” Ask students: What other clues about soldiers’ lives can you identify in this poem? They might note descriptions of food, including “rations,” “beans and beef and beans,” and “mess kits.” Or students might pick up on sleeping conditions in a line such as “hit the floor for bunk, six hommes to one homme’s place.”

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THE STARS AND STRIPES,

The Army's Poets

"HOMMES 40, CHEVAUX 8"

Roll, roll, roll, over the rails of France,
See the world and its map unfurled, five cen-
times in your pants.
What a noble trip, jolt and jog and jar,
Forty we, with Equipment C, in one flat-
wheeled box-car.

We are packed by hand,
Shoved aboard in 'teens,
Pour a little oil on us
And we would be sardines.

Rations? Oo-la-la! and how we love the man
Who learned how to intern our chow in a cold
and clammy can.
Beans and beef and beans, beef and beans
and beef,
Willie raw, he will win the war, take in your
belt a reef.

Mess kits flown the coop,
Cups gone up the spout;
Use your thumbs for issue forks
And pass the bull about.

Hit the floor for bunk, six hommes to one
homme's place;
It's no fair to the bottom layer to kick 'em in
the face.
Move the corp'ral's feet out of my left ear;
Lay off, surge, you are much too large; I'm
not a bedsack, dear.

Lift my head up, please,
From this bag of bread.
Put it on somebody's chest,
Then I'll sleep like the dead.

Roll, roll, roll, yammer and snore and fight,
Traveling zoo the whole day through and bed-
lam all the night.
Four days in the cage, going from hither hence,
Ain't it great to ride by freight at good old
Unc's expense?

Steuart M. Emery, A.E.F.

Help students develop questions to guide further research based on these discoveries. They might consider geography: where in France did American soldiers travel to and from on the rail system? Or transportation: how frequently did soldiers travel by rail compared to other modes of transport, such as on foot, by truck or boat? Also, logistics: what challenges did the U.S. Army overcome to provide food, shelter, medical care, and supplies for millions of soldiers fighting overseas?

Students might also compare and contrast the titles, content and styles of the other five poems featured in this edition to discover additional insights or questions for research. For instance, what might students infer from the tone and phrasing of the poem, "Until—"? Students might wonder about the writer's use and meaning of unfamiliar terminology relating to the fighting, such as the acronym, "H.E.'s," or "the Hun," a derogatory nickname for German soldiers. Ask students: How might American soldiers' poetry reflect their shared vernacular, emotions, and biases in addition to their experiences?

Off the battlefield, American soldiers witnessed the war's impact on civilians of all ages and backgrounds in Europe. The titles of two poems in this issue hint at this subject matter: "To the Children of France" and "The Return of the Refugees" (www.loc.gov/resource/20001931/1918-10-11/ed-1/?sp=4). Poems like these may offer students an accessible entry point for researching historical, economic, and social trends with global repercussions that did not end with the conflict itself. For example, after students read "The Return of the Refugees," encourage them to identify any words or phrases in the poem that describe the refugees and their situation. Ask students: how might the soldier who wrote this poem have learned this information? Why might he have written about these refugees? Examining the poem again, invite students to search for clues to the soldier's attitude on this subject. What larger story or historical trend might have influenced the soldier in writing this poem? Further investigation might lead students to statistics relating to the refugee crisis in Europe during and in the aftermath of the Great War, such as the response of governments (or lack thereof), the economic impact of millions of displaced people, and the cultural significance of an unprecedented exchange of ideas, customs, and new artistic expressions in the face of lives and nations transformed in unprecedented ways.

After collectively analyzing all five poems, students might zoom out to scan the full page. Ask students: What do you notice first? What are the various elements? For example, a political cartoon in the page's upper right corner may capture students' attention first. Examining its title, caption and details of the drawn figures, such as clothing, students might infer the cartoon's subject. What might they wonder about its meaning?

Invite students or groups of students to look at each section of the page for column and article headlines. What connections do they see among the articles? For instance, students may discover common themes, such as an article about regulations relating to the size of Christmas packages, entitled "9 x 4 x 3," a topic that is revisited in a letter to the editor published under the heading, "Packages Again." How does the article's reporting of an official policy affecting all soldiers overseas compare to a soldier's perspective? What more might students learn by reading the editor's note in response to this letter? Ask students: What else might we learn about the attitudes and concerns of American soldiers stationed overseas based on this and other articles?

Students might make some surprising discoveries about civic life in post-war America as well. For instance, an Internet search of the phrase "Hommes 40, Chevaux 8," may lead students to information about the founding of the American Legion in 1919 by returning soldiers, including an honor society within that organization named for the beloved boxcars of France. This group later became a separate veterans' organization, "The Forty and Eight," which is still in service today. Students might search *Chronicling America* (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc>).

gov/) for historical newspapers to learn more about the role in society played by these and other veterans' groups immediately following the war and in the decades after. Furthermore, they might research who was considered eligible to join such organizations during this time period and who was not, and how such segregationist policies reflected American society at large between the world wars. The possibilities for research and discovery are limited only by time and curiosity. 🌐



If you try these suggestions, or a variation of them, with your students, tell us about your experience! During the last week of June, the Teaching with the Library of Congress Blog at blogs.loc.gov/teachers/ will feature a post tied to this article and we invite you to comment and share your teaching strategies.



STACIE MOATS and CHERYL LEDERLE are Educational Resources Specialists at the Library of Congress. For more information on the education programs of the Library of Congress, please visit www.loc.gov/teachers/.

Poetry at the Library of Congress



Throughout the 17 months of its publication, *The Stars and Stripes* dedicated a significant amount of space to soldier-authored material. Poetry appeared in every issue of *The Stars and Stripes*, and the soldiers themselves wrote most of the poems. Soldiers submitted more than 75,000 poems for possible printing in *The Stars and Stripes*. Many of the poems not selected for publication by the newspaper were published after the war. The prevalence of poetry as a core experience for so many of the soldiers underscores its value in understanding historical events and experiences. The Library's collections offer many entry points to finding poetry that reflects the particular time and place in which it was written.

An obvious starting point is the Poetry and Literature Program (www.loc.gov/programs/poetry-and-literature/about-this-program/) at the Library of Congress. The Library promotes poetry and literature through a variety of online and in person opportunities, including these notable projects:

- The Living Nations, Living Words (www.loc.gov/programs/poetry-and-literature/poet-laureate/poet-laureate-projects/living-nations-living-words/) project features a sampling of work by 47 Native Nations poets through an interactive ArcGIS Story Map and a newly developed Library of Congress audio collection. Joy Harjo, the first Native U.S. Poet Laureate, launched her signature project to introduce the country to the many Native poets who live in these lands.
- The PALABRA Archive (www.loc.gov/programs/poetry-and-literature/audio-recordings/the-palabra-archive/) at the Library of Congress dates back to 1943, and contains nearly 800 recordings of poets and prose writers participating in sessions at the Library's Recording Laboratory and at other locations around Spain and Latin America. To date, writers from 32 countries are represented in this collection.
- Poetry of America (www.loc.gov/programs/poetry-and-literature/audio-recordings/poetry-of-america/) contains field recordings by a wide range of award-winning contemporary poets. Each poet reads a singular American poem of his or her choosing, and also speaks to how the poem connects to, deepens, or re-imagines our sense of American identity.

Interested in ideas, strategies and resources for exploring poetry and literature with students? Register for upcoming webinars or watch recordings of recent events by searching "poetry" on the Library's list of webinars and workshops for teachers (www.loc.gov/programs/teachers/professional-development/webinar/).