

MEMORIAL DAY

WESTON'S OWN WAR HERO

In 1865 in the village of Waterloo, New York, a druggist by the name of Henry C. Welles mentioned at a social gathering that honor should be shown to the patriotic dead of the Civil War by decorating their graves. In the Spring of 1866 the entire town adopted the idea and made wreathes, crosses and bouquets to decorate each veteran's grave. A parade was held and speeches were made and "Decoration Day," as it was originally called, was born.

The country celebrates Memorial Day in many ways. In the nation's Capitol, the President lays a wreath at the tomb of the unknown soldier and a huge concert is held on the Capitol lawn with music and readings honoring the men and women who fought for our freedom and for those who gave their lives. Many small towns, including Weston, hold parades to honor our heroes, and this year the entire country was treated to a blockbuster movie commemorating the 60th year anniversary of Pearl Harbor.

There is also a private ceremony that takes place in the Branchville Cemetery (located off Rt. 102 in Ridgefield), at the grave of Charles Arvid Johnson who was born and raised in the northern corner of Weston on Covenant Lane. Charlie and Jean Howes go to Arvid's grave each and every Memorial Day and Veteran's Day to honor our fallen soldier. Jean and Charlie live in the

house where Mr. Johnson was born and came upon his story in a rather exciting way. We would like to share with you the story that was written by Jean for the Weston Forum in November, 1987. (Because of space considerations, we are going to have to write the story in two parts, as it is a story that should be told.)



War hero, Carl Arvid Johnson

PART 1

"The story of Arvid Johnson came to light a dozen years ago (1977) when my husband Charles, while insulating our attic, discovered a packet of dusty letters tied with a shoestring hidden under a

board in the attic floor of our house on Covenant Lane in Georgetown.

Most of the letters dated from January 10 to March 14, 1918, are from a sweet young lady who lived in Darien to a 23-year old soldier stationed at Camp Upton's officer training school on Long Island. A few, written during those same months are from two of his sisters.

Three go back to 1913 from a high school girl to Arvid, then a freshman at Storrs, Ct. Agricultural College. These letters reveal not only the individual personalities of the writers, but also reflect something of the lifestyle and mood of the period. Also, they offer some personal glimpses of Arvid's experience.

Carl Arvid Johnson was born in the old house where I live on February 5, 1895. He was the sixth of seven children, five sisters and an older brother. His mother was Maria C. Peterson, and his father Charles W. Johnson, who is still remembered in the neighborhood as "Papa Johnson."

There were Johnsons in this corner of Weston as early as 1865, and at the turn of the century there were four different Johnson families all living along what is now Georgetown Road, north of Cobb's Mill.

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MEMORIAL DAY WESTON'S OWN WAR HERO *Continued*

Our house, where Arvid was born was built, or purchased (records are not clear) by his father in 1890. It stood not far from the Swedish Covenant Church on what was then the main road into Weston from the north. Charles W. Johnson, an original founder of that church in 1897, added an extra room to the house where Pastor Anders Nordlund, the first minister could stay until the parsonage on Maple Street was completed.

That was the church where Arvid received his religious training and was confirmed. His early schooling was in a four room building situated on a ledge behind the present A & P (ed. note: now Waldbaums located at the corner of Rt. 107 and Rt. 7). Later, boarding the train each day from the Georgetown station, he attended Norwalk High School. The Town of Weston paid tuition and transportation for all the students going from this end of town.

When Arvid went away to Storrs to study agriculture, letters came to him from a vivacious girl from Ridgefield who still rode the same train to high school. A member of the Junior class, no more than sixteen or seventeen, she seems eager to impress this college fellow with her advanced and daring outlook.

One letter written boldly in a classroom while avoiding 'Miss Dana's darting glances' boasts of a ride in an early automobile. 'Oh such a time! Sunday we went about fifty miles in a car and I ran it all the way! What do you know about that? No more horses for me.'

Having missed the first train to Norwalk one day, she decided to skip school. The next morning she was taken to account by the principal - 'Gummie' she calls him. Her use of the teenager's slang of the day has a breezy charm. 'He lit into me and I felt like saying "rain again, old man, I don't get your patter." But I resisted and absorbed the lecture but I've forgotten what he said now.'

Objecting to a remark of Arvid's calling some Ridgefielders 'similar to pumpkins', she offers this chilling retort: 'snow again, I don't get your drift, I don't get your drift.'

She expresses boredom with



Home of Carl Arvid Johnson, born February 5, 1895 in this house

the school's afternoon dances, 'not enuf fun! I'd rather go to the movies even than dance with the bunch of "enfants" here this year.

Remarking that Arvid has a good command of the French language, she suggests that he write to her from time to time 'en francais. Peut-etre un pen, oui.'

She speaks of exams and an 'awful' course in solid geometry. But social life interests her more - dances, plays, pantomimes, tableaux, movies, school concerts and basketball games. Arvid's high school years could not have been all dull study.

Baseball was one of his real loves, and he probably played on the college team. She complains, 'baseball must be your pastime ... That's all I hear about in your letters'

Arvid liked her well enough to send her a college banner. 'Honestly', she wrote, 'it's perfectly lovely of you to send it.' Their relationship, however, soon ended. Perhaps Arvid's future as a farmer seemed too tame for this high-spirited girl, or he may have thought that a more serene, steadier type would be his ideal.

After completing his courses at Storrs Agricultural College, Arvid found a good position managing a farm for a Darien businessman with several out-of-town properties including a store. Arvid had his room and meals with the family who all became his friends. There were two girls and two boys. The friendship between Arvid and the oldest daughter, the lovely Elsa, *gradually ripened into warmer feelings.*

Some months after America entered World War I, Arvid was called to duty. As the New Year opened, he was a private enrolled in Officer's Training School at Yaphank, Long Island. Back and forth every other day or so letters were exchanged between Arvid and Elsa.

Letters from his sisters praised him for serving his county and am mighty proud of him and his determination to take the grueling challenge of officer's training. One sister, a newly registered nurse, proud of her own certificate with its gold seal, sympathizes and understands the rigors of strict discipline. She brings news of the family in Georgetown and of the dogs Teddy and Jenny.

'Big Sister,' who lives in Darien near Elsa's family, also writes encouragingly. It is to her that Arvid confides his 'secret' love for Elsa. 'Big Sister' approves of the romance and assures him of Elsa's devotion. Although she considers herself a 'haithen', she feels that Elsa, sincere religious faith is a fine quality.

'Big Sister' also, is the one most aware of what Arvid's service to his county may cost. After hearing a lecture at Carnegie Hall by a returned Canadian soldier wounded at Ypres, she recalls his words that each one who enters the service is offering his life and 'whether they get "theirs" or not' this is a sacrifice 'second only to the sacrifice of Christ.'

Both sisters tell of hardships on the home front. New York is in a dreadful state -- no coal and some people even without gas. Country

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people are lucky because they have woodpiles. The nurse says, 'Everyone looks sad.' She is war weary and writes, 'Arvid, I'm afraid if this war continues we will soon starve or freeze to death.' 'Big Sister' his more upbeat, 'Tomorrow is Heatless Monday, Eatless, Wheatless, Meatless, everything, but thank goodness not altogether Hopeless.' She notes that 'Cheer Up' is playing at the Hippodrome, and concludes 'Everyone is willing to stick it out as long as it takes, and confident that we won't be beaten.'

If Elsa was aware of public hardships, she does not mention them. Her letters, touched with a sweet simplicity, portray a protected young lady contented with her family circle, her Bible and her music, but always most eager to hear every detail of Arvid's new experiences as a soldier. She reports the daily events -- Mama's birthday, the return of a lost horse, the train ride to Greenwich for her piano lessons, helping Papa to start the Ford on a frigid morning, going with her parents to a New York banquet to meet friends from 'the old country', memorizing an extra piece of music to play for Arvid, reading a chapter of St. John, arranging to meet Arvid at her aunt's in Freeport, re-arranging schedules for her own piano pupils, knitting and re-knitting a

helmet for his birthday, and always at night the prayers for him and the whispered 'Good night.'

As Arvid's sister noted, Elsa is not a 'gusher' and Arvid's letters, at first, were impersonal enough to share with the family and the fellows at the firehouse. Later, his sister hints, they may have included some 'twiddly parts.' Elsa prefers to call him 'Arvid' rather than his nickname 'Jack' and her first letters close 'Sincerely yours.' Later, she slips in an occasional 'Jackie'. For his birthday she sends 'Lots of lub', and the last letters all close 'Lovingly.'

The letters indicate that Arvid finds it very hard at first; the discipline is tough and he misses Elsa. He aches from many vaccinations and studies hard for difficult exams. Some fellows drop out, but he's sticking. His commanding officer is very strict and he's not allowed any candy or food from home, But he's with a nice bunch of young men, is well supplied with clothes and the food is fairly good.

After his first leave in late January, he misses his train connection and rides back in an open touring car. Arriving late and thoroughly chilled, he faces the Captain's wrath.

There are long drills, long marches carrying a heavy pack, long hours digging trenches. Sometimes he

wishes he could come back to the farm where twenty-four hours of work a day would seem like a rest.

He has a bad cold, some men are sick with scarlet fever. He's required to take the body of a private who died of pneumonia to the train station. He is using the little Bible Elsa gave him before he left.

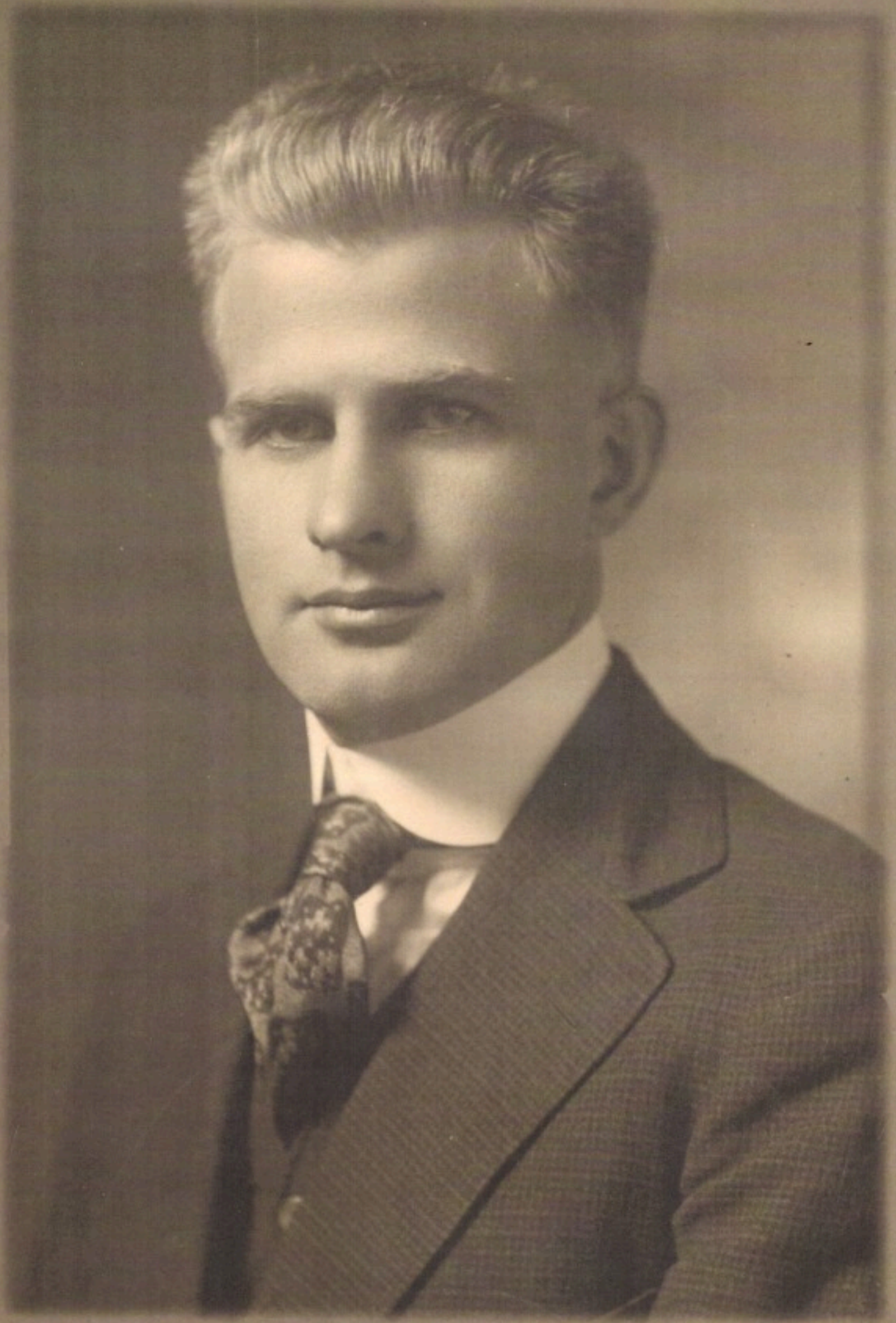
His plans to meet Elsa at her aunt's in Freeport are canceled when his next leave is denied. The Captain chooses Arvid to take command of the company and companies, and he acquits himself well. In late February he gets a leave, meets Elsa in Darien and they go to Georgetown. In early March he manages to meet Elsa in Freeport; the aunt is sympathetic and Arvid's new authoritative voice scares off her chaperoning brother. He returns to camp with a button missing from his uniform -- a token left with Elsa.

Now there are rumors the camp is going to France, but he may get home for Easter.

Here the letters ended, leaving us in great suspense. How did the story end? Did Arvid go to France to fight in the great war? Did he every marry Elsa?"

(Part II of Arvid's Story will appear in the next issue of the Chronicle.)





Walter
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