

# American Indians' service in World War I, 1920

## Introduction

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More than 11,000 American Indians served with the American forces during World War I. Nearly 5,000 Native men enlisted and approximately 6,500 were drafted—despite the fact that almost half of American Indians were not citizens and therefore not eligible for conscription. In all, approximately 25 percent of Native men served in the military.<sup>1</sup> They often volunteered to serve in dangerous roles, including snipers and scouts. Unlike African American soldiers, Native Americans were not restricted to segregated regiments.

Joe High Elk, an American Indian soldier during the War, wrote about his experience saying, “While taking active part in the battle at Chateau Thierry latter part of July 1918 I was gassed and just barely escaped, this world war in which I took part is something that will be in my memory forever, I know I might get killed yet I know that I ought to do something for my country as we Indian’s are the real American’s. so I enlisted, and seen some hard times yet I am glad I have done my duty and I got back safely home, I cannot relate my whole experience there but do hope this be sufficient.”<sup>2</sup>

In order to keep US communications secret, Native American languages were often used for radio transmissions for the American forces. Members of the Choctaw and Cherokee Nations frequently developed special codes for these messages. They were the forerunners of the Code Talkers of World War II. At the same time, Indian children were punished for speaking their native languages in government schools.

After World War I, Joseph K. Dixon set out to document the experiences of Native American veterans through photographs, questionnaires, and written testimonies. He asked respondents to write “any Items of Interest connected to your War experience.” The responses varied widely. Some described their battle experience while others focused on more personal observations.

Dixon also contacted military leaders, including the commander of the American Expeditionary Forces, General John J. Pershing, for their views about Native American soldiers during the war. Pershing praised the American Indian soldiers in Europe, noting that “it was in the World War that the North American Indian took his place beside every other American in offering his life in the great cause, where . . . he fought with the courage and valor of his ancestors.”

Dixon planned to publish his documentation of these veterans as a way to advocate for Indian citizenship. However, Native American veterans were made citizens in 1919 and the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 made all Native people citizens of the United States. Although Dixon’s book was never

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<sup>1</sup>“Code Talkers,” *Native Words, Native Warriors*, National Museum of the American Indian, <https://americanindian.si.edu/education/codetalkers/html/chapter4.html>

<sup>2</sup> [Joe High Elk, Cheyenne River Sioux. La Plant, South Dakota. Ward of the government. Enlisted June 21, 1916 in Rapid City, South Dakota](#), Mathers Museum of World Cultures, Indiana University, Bloomington.

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published, his documentation of the World War I service of more than 2,800 men is vital to the historical record.

### Excerpt

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The presence of the American Indian as a soldier of our army, fighting on foreign fields for liberty and justice, presented a unique example of the development of the American Democracy. . . . it was in the World War that the North American Indian took his place beside every other American in offering his life in the great cause, where as a splendid soldier, he fought with the courage and valor of his ancestors.

### Questions for Discussion

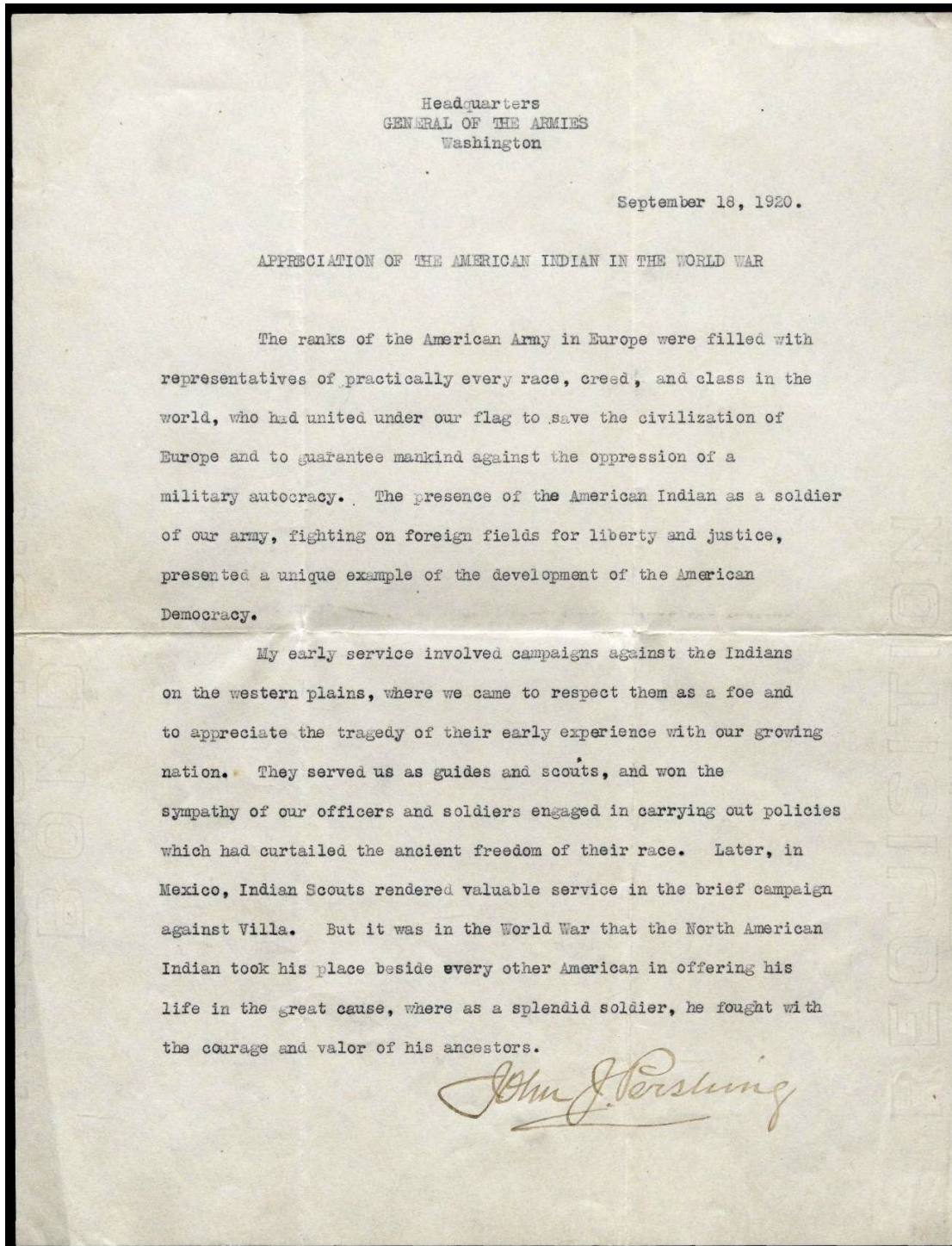
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Answer the following questions based on the introduction about, General Pershing's letter, the letters below written by American Indian veterans of World War I, and your knowledge of American history:

1. General Pershing wrote, "The presence of the American Indian as a soldier of our army, fighting on foreign fields for liberty and justice, presented a unique example of the development of the American Democracy."
  - A. What did he mean by this statement?
  - B. How would you counter this argument? Explain/defend your answer.
2. How and why did General Pershing's views about Native Americans change over time? Explain.
3. What key words/phrases/themes did you consistently find woven throughout the statements by the Native American veterans?
4. What do these key words/phrases/themes reveal about the characters of the Native American soldiers?
5. What were Joseph Northup's thoughts about Americans who did not enlist in the military? Was this a reasonable opinion? Explain.
6. Why would a person (or group of people) who had not been deemed worthy of the full rights of citizenship be willing to risk their lives to protect and defend a country that had consistently treated them poorly? Explain.
7. What unique experiences and expertise did the Native Americans contribute to the war effort? Cite at least two and then explain why each was so important to our war effort.

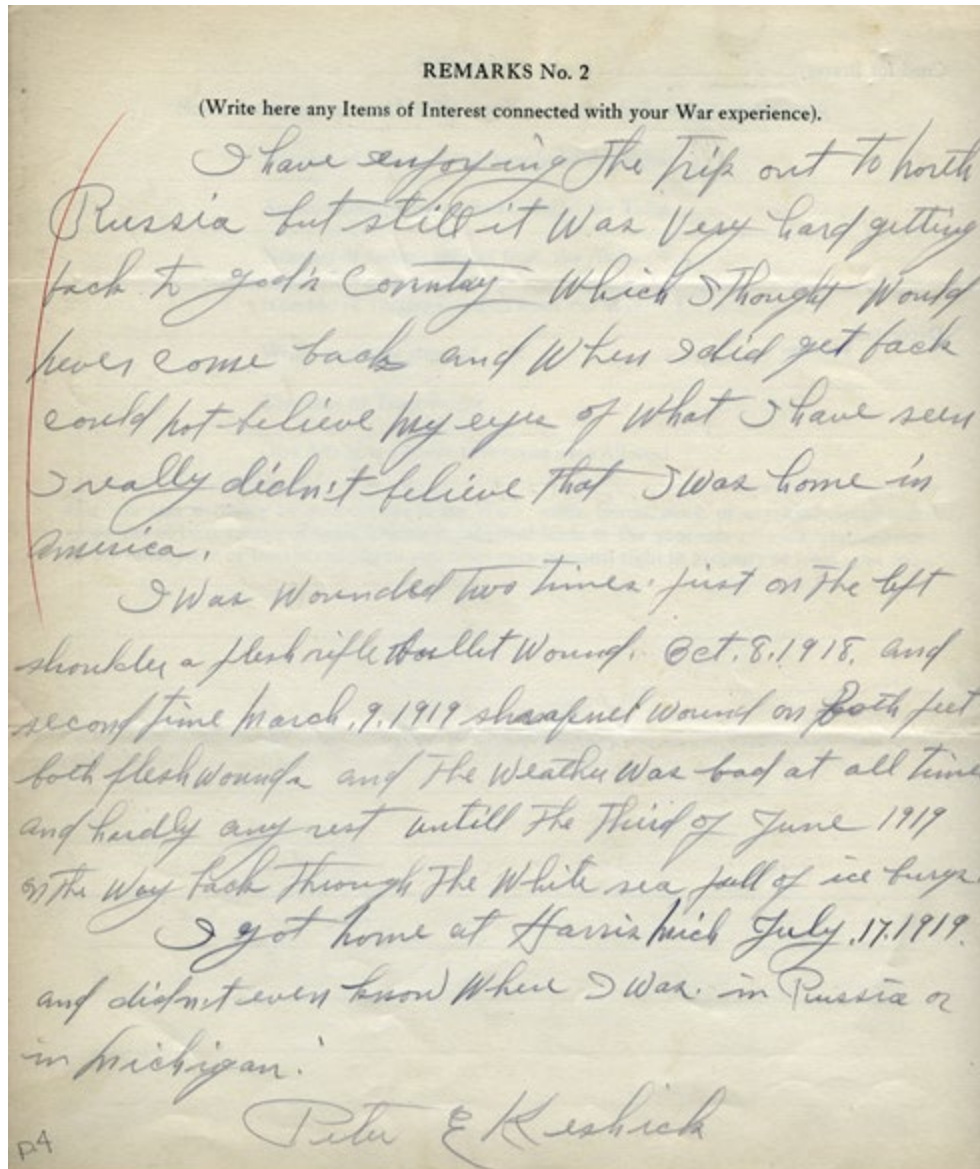
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Image



John J. Pershing to Joseph K. Dixon, September 18, 1920. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC03911.07)

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[Peter E. Keshick, Potawatomi. Harris, Michigan Citizen. Drafted](#), Mathers Museum of World Cultures, Indiana University, Bloomington.

I have enjoying the trip out to North Russia but still it was very hard getting back to god's country which I thought would never come back and where I did get back could not believe my eyes of what I have seen I really didn't believe that I was home in America.

I was wounded two times first on the left shoulder a flesh rifle bullet wound. Oct. 8, 1918. And second time March 9, 1919 shrapnel wound on both feet both flesh wounds and the weather was bad at all times and hardly any rest until the Third of June 1919 on the way back through the White sea full of ice bergs.

I got home at Harris Mich July 17, 1919 and didn't even know where I was. in Russia or in Michigan.

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REMARKS No. 2  
(Write here any Items of Interest connected with your War experience).

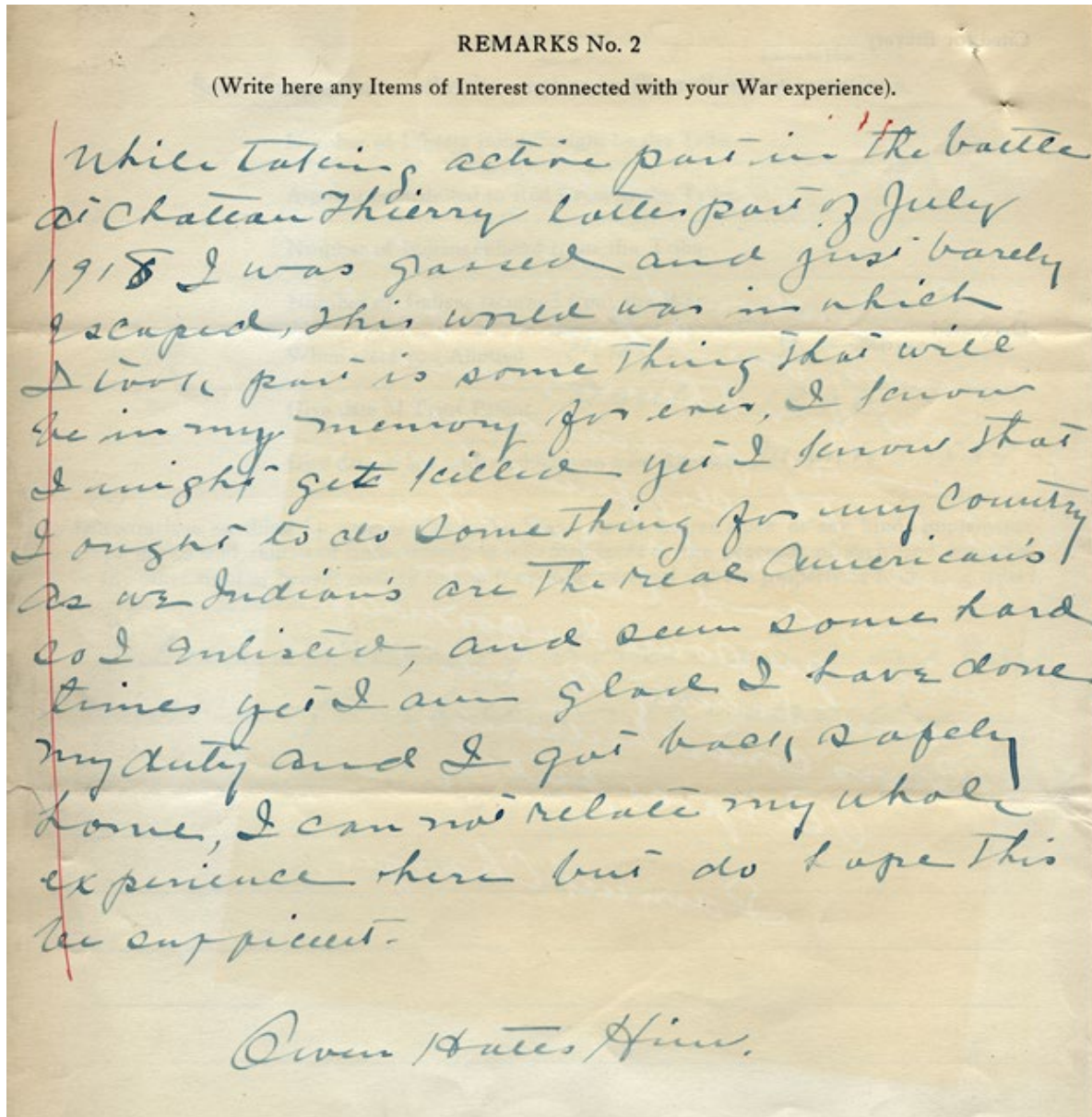
In The Battle at Chateau Thierry July 14 1918 I was a gunner and took active part and also the battle at Argonne Forest in Sept. 1918 and also at St. Mihiel the latter part of Sept. I have seen some hard times and I could not tell the whole story here, but it is something I shall never forget, I am an Indian and never had any experience in a war before, but I realize that I was doing my duty as a patriot and was fighting to save Democracy and do hope that in the future we Indian's may enjoy freedom which we Indian's are always denied.

Joe High Elk.

[Joe High Elk, Cheyenne River Sioux. La Plant, South Dakota. Ward of the government. Enlisted June 21, 1916 in Rapid City, South Dakota](#), Mathers Museum of World Cultures, Indiana University, Bloomington.

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[Owen Hates Him, Cheyenne River Sioux. Promise, South Dakota. Ward of the government. Enlisted April 21, 1917 in Pierre, South Dakota](#), Mathers Museum of World Cultures, Indiana University, Bloomington.

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I have taking some good chances why I was in Argonne woods, and I believe that the Argonne woods is about worst front of all the others front. The Germans have machine Guns, about a few yards apart. It is impossible to hold the line, but we held our line and drove them out from their nest. Capture their guns, and few hun. this was Sept. 27, 1918. the day I remember pretty well. When I face a big tall hun, made him throw up his hand. I intended to shoot him down and scalp him, but my friends said let him go, so I let him go free. We sent them back to our lines. I was wounded, Oct 14, 1918. So I was in hospital five month. So I think I have done my part in this war and the hardship I have been through. There's lots of thing to tell in my war experience, but I just couldn't get start to tell it.

[James H. Crow, Sioux, Pine Ridge Agency, South Dakota. Ward of the government. Drafted](#), Mathers Museum of World Cultures, Indiana University, Bloomington.

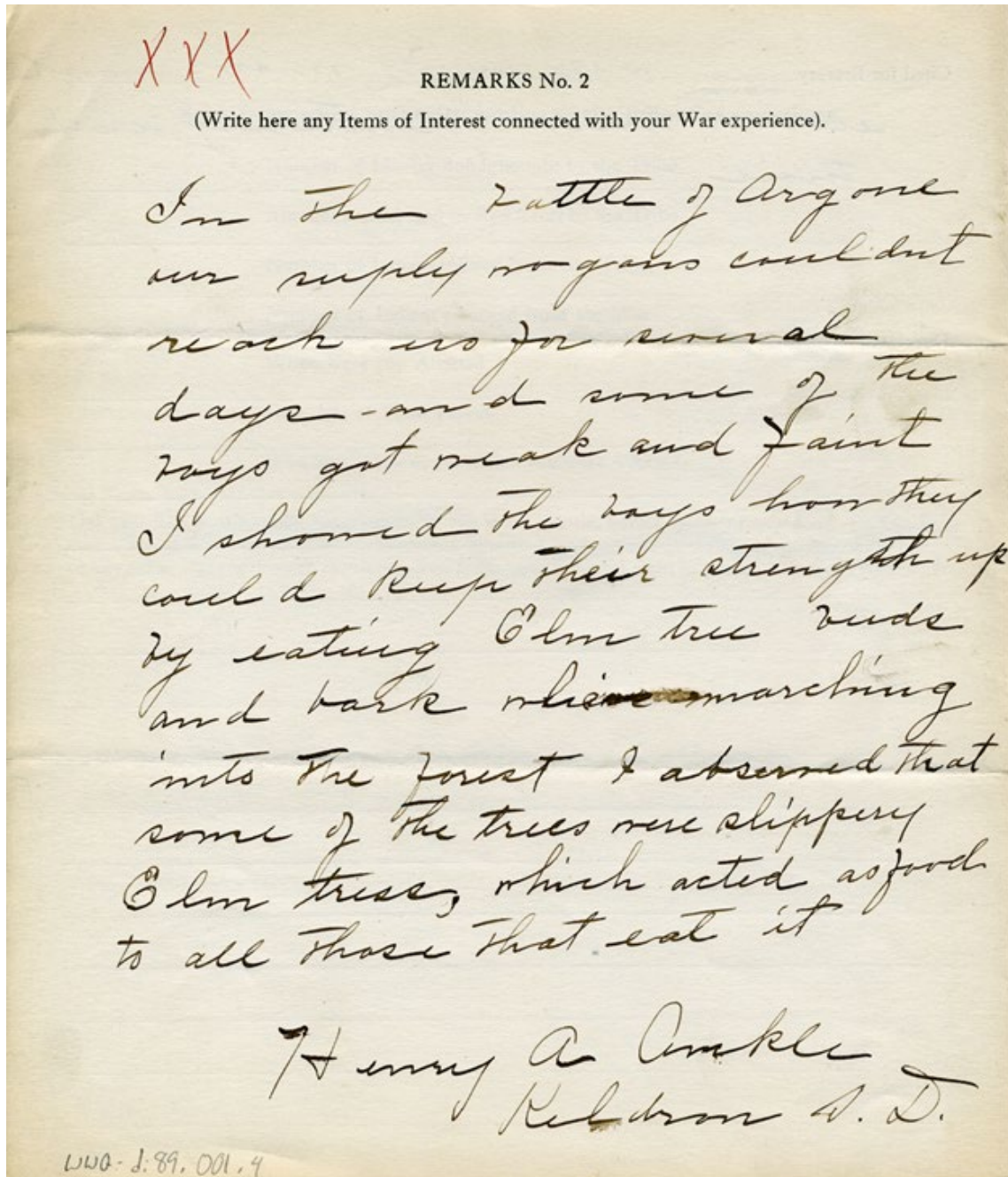
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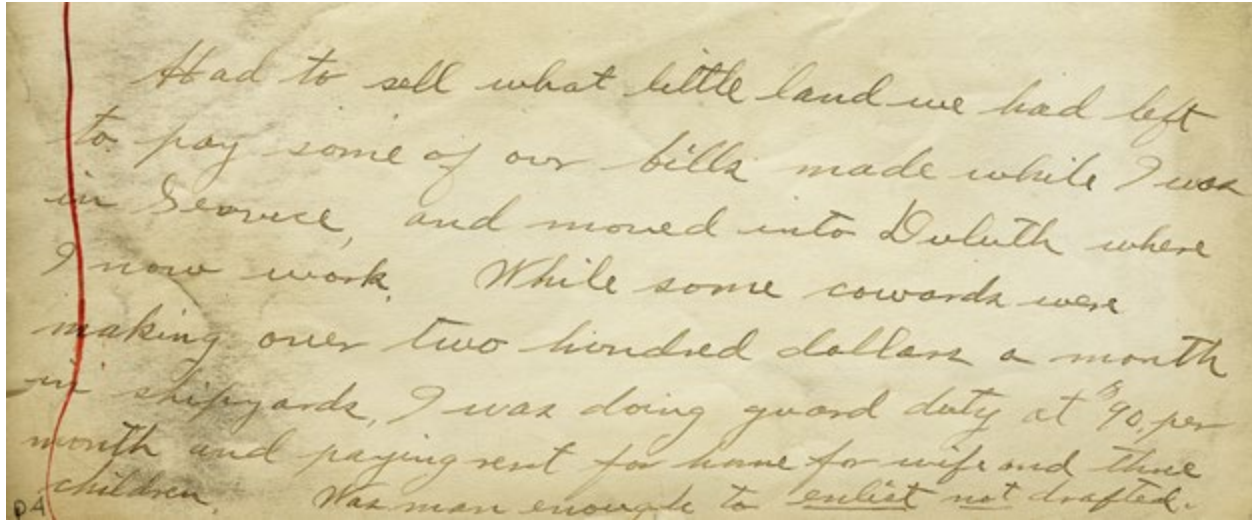


[Henry A. Ankle, Sioux. Keldron, South Dakota. Citizen. Drafted](#), Mathers Museum of World Cultures, Indiana University, Bloomington.

In the Battle of Argonne our supply wagons couldn't reach us for several days- and some of the boys got weak and faint I showed the boys how they could keep their strength up by eating Elm tree buds and bark while marching into the forest I observed that some of the trees were slippery Elm trees, which acted as food to all those that eat it.



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Had to sell what little land we had left  
to pay some of our bills made while I was  
in Service, and moved into Duluth where  
I now work. While some cowards were  
making over two hundred dollars a month  
in shipyards, I was doing guard duty at \$90 per  
month and paying rent for home for wife and three  
children. Was man enough to enlist not drafted.

[Joseph Northup, Chippewa. Duluth, Minnesota. Citizen. Enlisted January 14, 1918 in Duluth, Minnesota,](#)  
Mathers Museum of World Cultures, Indiana University, Bloomington.

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