

## Social Media, 1918

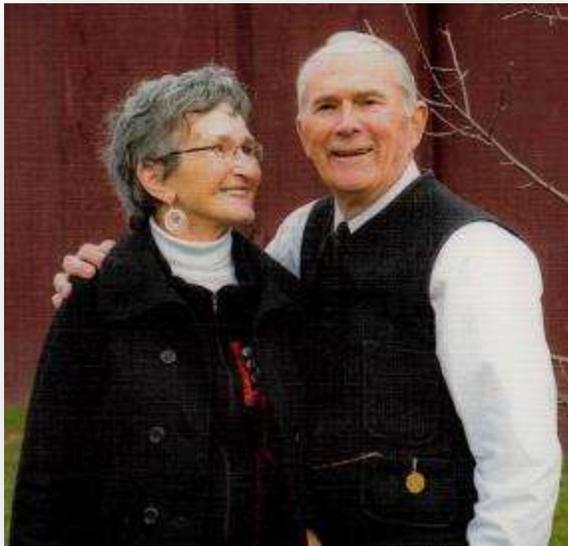
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Every community, especially small communities, has one of those people who are actively involved in every single thing that is in one way or another community-oriented. In our town that person is Bill Skiff. Bill is the Grand Marshall at the annual Fourth of July parade; he is the judge at the annual frog jumping contest; he's a deacon in one of the churches; and he writes an article every

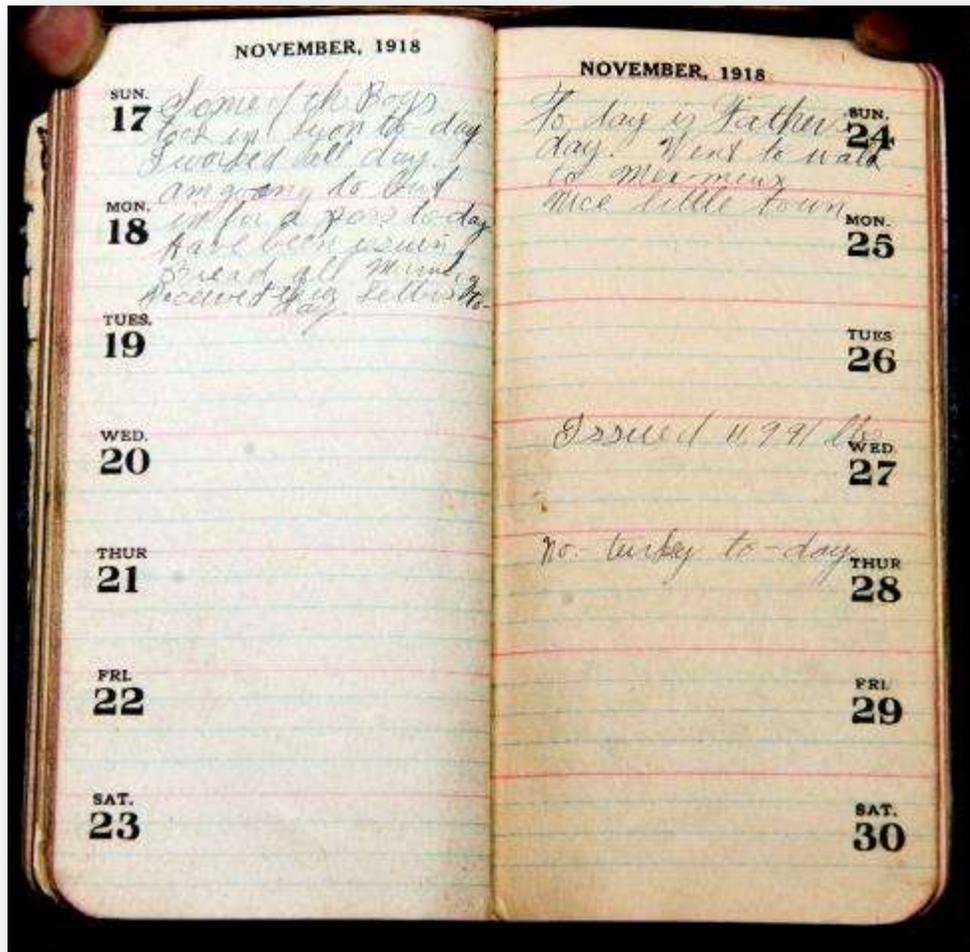


month in the local newspaper about what life was like in rural Vermont when he was a young man (he's somewhere north of 70 now). As near as I can tell he is a standing and active member of every committee, past and present, that has ever existed in our town, and is active on some committees that haven't even been formed yet; he's the town greeter, historian, Justice of the Peace, teacher, administrator, and one of the kindest human beings I have ever had the pleasure to know. *And he's just an interesting guy.* Bill is a tremendous storyteller (that's him on the left with his wife, Ruth); I have spent hours just listening to him talk.

Recently Bill called me and asked for my help with a personal project. While digging through a box of family history a few months before he ran across a collection of notebooks that belonged to his Uncle Cecil. It seems that his Uncle Cecil, a baker, was stationed in France during the final year of World War I. Cecil was an amateur artist, and during his time overseas he kept copious notes about his experiences. Equally important, he took the time to sketch the things he saw during his time in Europe. Bill found his sketchbooks along with his induction and discharge papers, a calendar he kept during his time there, a personal letter from General John Pershing thanking him for his service at the end of the war and cards he wrote to his wife while he was deployed.

The paper in the notebooks, almost 100 years old, had become brittle and fragile, so Bill and I undertook the task of putting each page on a copy stand and photographing them to preserve the stories and history they contained.

As I went through the painstaking task of arranging, lighting and shooting each page, I began to get a sense of place, and time, personality and responsibility, of hopes and dreams and wishes that Cecil Grattan had while he was away. The drawings are remarkable, not because they are artistically perfect but because they capture a moment in time, a feeling, a sense of the place. They evoke feelings and questions because every single drawing tells a story.



Consider the photograph above, an image of Cecil's calendar showing the period from November 17<sup>th</sup> to November 30<sup>th</sup>, 1918. November 17<sup>th</sup>: "Some of the boys took in Lyon today. I worked all day. Am going to put in for a pass today. Have been issuing bread all day."

November 24<sup>th</sup>: "Today is Father's Day. Went to walk to Mermeaux. Nice little town."

November 27<sup>th</sup>: "Issued 11,991 pounds (of bread, presumably)."

Perhaps the most telling statement this week is Thursday, November 28<sup>th</sup>. He doesn't say it, but that was Thanksgiving. His only comment: "No turkey to-day."

As I went through all of the drawings I saw a story emerging of a man who made the most of his time in Europe under what must have been less-than-pleasant circumstances. He drew houses and churches, trains and tents, people and places. He captured the smiles on children's



faces, details of his encampments, bridges, animals, industrial processes. At one point he

sketched what appears to be a public urinal, marked 'NOT FOR U.S.

SOLDIERS.'

His pay book shows that he

was paid, like clockwork, \$36.60 every

month - standard salary for an enlisted

man at the time. Another sketch, shown

below, is of a cart of some kind that

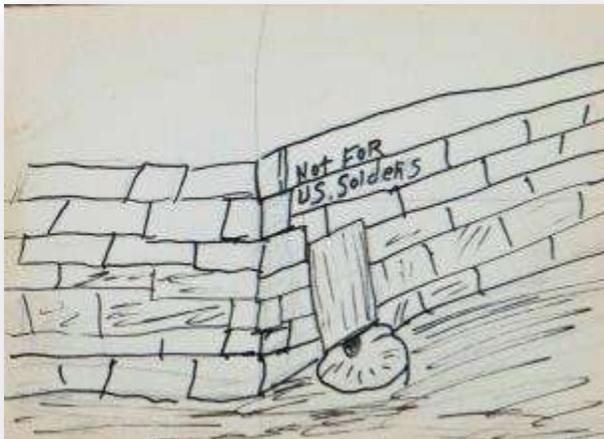
resembles a gypsy wagon. Cecil is

careful to label it, "Not a hot dog cart."

Beside the cart, on the opposite page, is

the drawn equivalent of a snapshot of

three soldiers sitting on a bench.



As I went through these drawings and read his journal entries, a thought struck me. Cecil's sketches capture a moment in time, a snapshot of history taken long before cameras were common. His diary and journal entries captured moments in time as well, mostly about the daily life that he and his fellow soldiers lived. It's interesting that he took the time to write down what he saw, and planned, and experienced. Over and over, throughout the pictures and notes, he displays his life in real-time for whomever chose to read the notebooks. And this is when it struck me. Cecil's drawings and notes and inner thoughts were 1918's answer to Facebook, and Twitter, and LinkedIn. He tells us what was going on, who he was with, what he was doing, how work was progressing ("Baked 6,100 pounds this morning"), what was bothering him ("Had to work with pine wood today; uneven heat so bread was poor. Hope for hardwood tomorrow."). His life is laid out here, in a story, shared with the world. It just goes to show: Every picture tells a story. And every person is a rich trove of stories – you only have to dig a bit to find them.



Thanks, Bill, for sharing these with me. And thanks, all of you, for reading.