

Cross of Christ Chronicles

Badger Brothers in Arms

At one time there were three more farms above our Skree place, in a narrow side valley off the main road in Badger. The uppermost was the old Strand farm, which has been defunct since well before I was born, while the middle farm was occupied up until the early 1970s. It was here that Nels Christianson (Hetterud) and his wife, Ingeborg, made their home after coming from Fyresdal in West Telemark in 1861, and where their only son John, and his wife Aase (Stromme) Nelson raised their family of eight boys and three girls. Following the US entry into World War I, the venerable couple watched, with great trepidation, three of those sons—John, Mentor, and Obert—“march off to war.”

Obert was in service from Feb. 1918 to May 1919 and crossed the sea on the *S.S. Agamemnon*, Mentor went in July 1918, sailed on the *Leviathan*, and was discharged in May 1919. The Armistice of Nov. 11, 1918 was only a cease-fire, so the soldiers had to remain in occupation until the negotiation of an official peace treaty in Versailles in the summer of 1919. Inducted in Sept. 1917, John was the first of the brothers to go in and traveled aboard the *Maleta* to England. Still he was the last to return home (after more than two years in service) in Nov. 1919—a full year after the war had ended!

I was told he was among the many who had to stay behind to tie up loose ends. The chaos of war leaves quite a mess to clean up, both physically and administratively, not the least of which was dealing with all those many thousand who fell in battle—an immense and very often dreadful effort. (John Nelson’s eventual return to Houston is an interesting story in and of itself, which I will share this November.) He came back to live on the home farm in Badger which he operated with his brother, Louie, until their retirement around 1960—typical “Norwegian bachelor farmers.”



Corp. John Nelson 1890-1972

Mentor was in the Tank Corps, which must’ve been quite an experience. Tanks and planes were among the many firsts in World War I. Back home Mentor married Myrtle Benson, a sister of Norman and Joyce, and raised his family in Minneapolis. He now rests in a permanent place of honor at Fort Snelling.



*Pvt. Mentor J. Nelson 1895-1964
Tank Corps*

The one I’ve heard the most about is Obert, probably because he worked full-time for my grandpa Anton in the 1930s and had his own room in our house. My Dad most likely heard his stories at that time, although in reality he rarely talked about his experiences over in France—they were just that terrible! He was in the trenches on the front lines, which were their own version of hell, and told Dad that for many months he only laughed once. Of course, there was mud everywhere and one of the guys who was running along the trench slipped into a deep mudhole. As he sank under the surface all that could be seen was his “soup plate” helmet floating on top of the water. It must have been a welcome relief from the tension, at least for a little while.

Obert’s reticence was not uncommon among those who had *just seen too much*. His youngest sister, Kathryn Weida, told me she never realized just what he went through and how awful it was until she came upon his wartime diary later in life. World War I diaries are of great historical

importance, but unfortunately Obert's has not been preserved. He was plagued by stomach problems for much of his life, but he wouldn't apply for medical disability relief from the government because he felt that he couldn't state with absolute certainty that they were due to his severe war experiences. That level of integrity is not often found, and Dad thought quite a bit of it.

I had no idea of the particulars of Obert's time "in action" until just last month after receiving a copy of his State of Minnesota Military Service Record, a four-page questionnaire used by the Minnesota Historical Society to gather information on each of our state's WWI veterans immediately following the war. (Of course, the best sources of information are the actual military records held at the National Archives in Washington D.C., but I have never dealt with them.)

The Minnesota Military Record, however, does state that Obert participated a very famous battle, the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, Somme Amiens Sector, the biggest and bloodiest battle in American history! More than a million American soldiers took part in this 47-day offensive that began on September 26, 1918 and lasted until the end of the war on November 11. Again, I have to say it's truly amazing that our Stone Church Service Flag has only one Gold Star.



Pvt. Obert Nelson 1893-1981

I only met Obert once in my life at a family gathering up at the old farm, but I've been told he was a nice man, somewhat quiet and very pleasant. Looking at his picture, doesn't he appear to be a happy and contented young man who grew up in a safe, warm and loving community, never dreaming that he would soon be surrounded by the horrors of war. According to the *Houston Signal*, *Badger News*: *All of our young people joined in giving a farewell party on last Sunday evening at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Anton Skree in honor of Obert Nelson and Arvid Swenson. The evening was spent in playing games and at a late hour lunch was served. The boys were each presented with a fountain pen. They will leave next Sunday for Camp Dodge (at Des Moines, Iowa—JAS) where they will join Uncle Sam's National Army.*

Despite the fact that John went in five months earlier, Obert was the first of the brothers to cross the Atlantic in May of 1918, and the June 13th issue of the *Houston Signal*, *Badger News*, reported that: *Word was received here about two weeks ago that Obert Nelson arrived safely in France. He is the first of our boys to get "Over There."*

And wasn't it truly a Blessing that all three Nelson brothers, by the Grace of God and after performing their patriotic duties so diligently, returned home to their family and friends "Over Here."

Form: 905 REGISTRATION CARD No. 7

1 Name in full: John Nelson (Given name) (Family name) Age: 26

2 Home address: Caledonia R.D. #2 (Street) (City) (State) Minn.

3 Date of birth: Dec 17 1891 (Month) (Day) (Year)

4 Are you (1) a natural-born citizen, (2) a naturalized citizen, (3) an alien, (4) or have you declared your intention (specify which)? Natural born

5 Where were you born? Sheldon Minn. U.S.A. (Town) (State) (Country)

6 If not a citizen, of what country are you a citizen or subject?

7 What is your present trade, occupation, or office? Farm Renter

8 By whom employed? John Nelson (Name) Where employed? Sheldon Minn.

9 Have you a father, mother, wife, child under 12, or a sister or brother under 12, solely dependent on you for support (specify which)? No

10 Married or single (which)? Single Race (specify which)? Caucasian

11 What military service have you had? Rank none branch

12 Do you claim exemption from draft (specify grounds)? No

I affirm that I have verified above answers and that they are true.

John Nelson (Signature or mark)

— Jim and Shelley, Cross of Christ Archives, September 2019

REGISTRAR'S REPORT 22-1-9.A

1 Tall, medium, or short (specify which)? Tall Slender, medium, or stout (which)? Slender

2 Color of eyes? Blue Color of hair? Dark Bald? No

3 Has person lost arm, leg, hand, foot, or both eyes, or is he otherwise disabled (specify)? No

I certify that my answers are true, that the person registered has read his own answers, that I have witnessed his signature, and that all of his answers of which I have knowledge are true, except as follows:

Henry Foyce (Signature of registrar)

Precinct Sheldon City or County Houston State Minn. (Date of registration) June 1917

Houston signal. Pub. Date June 5, 1919

County News

BADGER VALLEY

Prt. Obert Nelson returned Saturday from France. He has seen considerable active service and his many friends were glad to see him home again.

Mrs. John Nelson and sons Obert and Mentor and daughter Kathryn spent Sunday with George Foss and family in Yucatan.

