

Greene County Gleanings

By Raymond Beecher

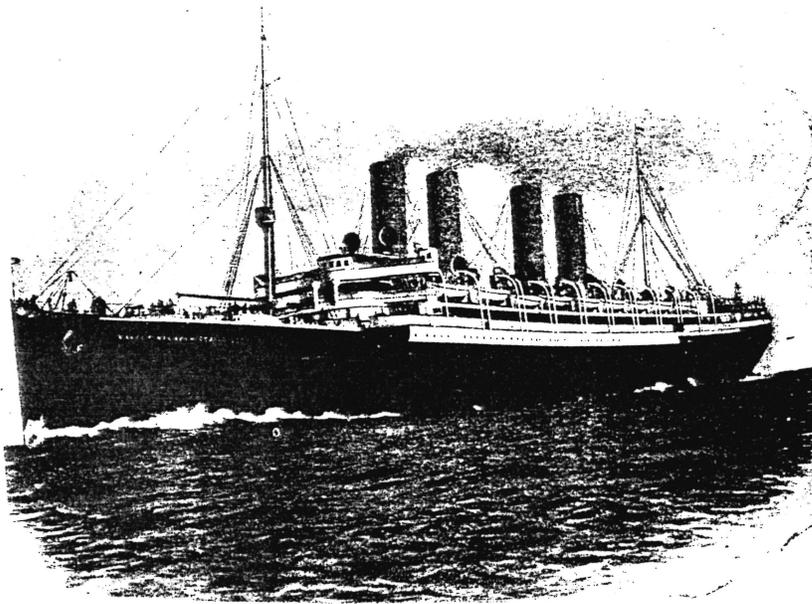
America's involvement in world conflicts has brought about the establishment of national cemeteries on generally friendly soil. One such grave in France contains the remains of Howard William Van Loan (1885-1918) of Coxsackie and Hudson. A grandson, Derek Van Loan, Mill Valley, Calif., recently traveled east to secure genealogical assistance. And because of this interest we have a surviving WWI letter written "On Board Transport, July 9, 1918--U.S.S. Huron.

"Dear Mother...Probably by the time you receive this letter you will have received my overseas card. We left June 30th with a large convoy. The weather was fine. Altogether it has been a very good trip. Accommodations as good as could be expected with about 3000 troops on board besides the crew. Submarines have been reported twice. Once it was real exciting, but as you can see we were well taken care of. The convoy system is just about perfect.

Haven't been seasick at all and we had some very rough weather. One day the waves seemed about as high as a house. Four days were foggy and we lost a lot of time. We make about 12 knots (14 miles) an hour. This ship can do more but the speed of the whole convoy has to be regulated by the shortest ship. This boat was formerly the Fredrick du Grosse. The Kaisers favorite, in which he circled the globe at one time. It is 575 feet long, and before it was remodeled must have been very fine.

Have been eating in one of the Engineers messes, the food is fine, plenty of it and well cooked. No better than the regular mess, but we have a place to sit down and hot water to wash our dishes and no waiting. There is a band on board with the 104th Artillery. We have a concert every day and every thing helps to relieve the monotony. Our company did guard July 4 & 5 — 24 hours it is very interesting at night. You can see the ships. They look like black shadows, not a light to be seen.

We get up and on deck at 4 am, go below again about 5:30 and sleep for an hour or two, breakfast between 7



The North German Lloyd Twin-screw Express Steamship "Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse".

and 8. Stay on deck the greater part of the day. Would like to take this trip again as a civilian. It must be fine. We have sailed about 2700 miles, but don't take a direct route so don't know just how far we are from land. We don't know where we are going. But we're on our way.

It seems strange. No news either from the U.S. or France for ten days now. We don't know whether the war is over or who is gaining. But it won't be long now. As we very likely will land Sat. or Sunday. Will write again soon as we land. This letter will be mailed in the U.S. by a sailor and you will get it sooner than if I mailed it on shore.

Write me soon and don't worry. Just remember that we are doing our duty and I know you wouldn't have me do less than that. Will add a few lines later.

Your loving son
/s/Howard

July 11...Will have to give this letter to the friend who is going to mail it for me. So won't be able to write much more. We picked up our convoy this am and will reach port probably Sat. Am feeling fine, never better, really I believe I'm getting fat. Remember me to every one, am sending a letter to B [sister] through censor, so couldn't say much.

As ever

Your loving son
/s/Howard

This eighth-generation descendant from Jan Van Loon landed at Brest on July 13, 1918. He then served at Rouen and Calais and Oudezeele and Remy Siding in Belgium. Eventually he was involved in the 27th Division's attack on the Hindenburg Line, and the engagement at Vierstadt Ridge. With his medical background, he also served in the main and advanced dressing stations. His last service was given during the battle of the Saint Maurice River on October 20th. Although ill with influenza, Van Loan continued his efforts for the sick and wounded. On October 25, 1918, Sergeant Van Loan died in Base Hospital No. 6, Rouen, France. He was buried with military honors in the cemetery of Saint Sever, France, a few weeks before the armistice. He would never cross the Atlantic as a civilian but left a legacy of patriotism to his descendants.

Greene County News May 27, 1993