

PMM BLOG ARCHIVE

June 16, 2020

German Soldier Returns American Diary

(Pennsylvania Military Museum, J. Gleim, Museum Curator)

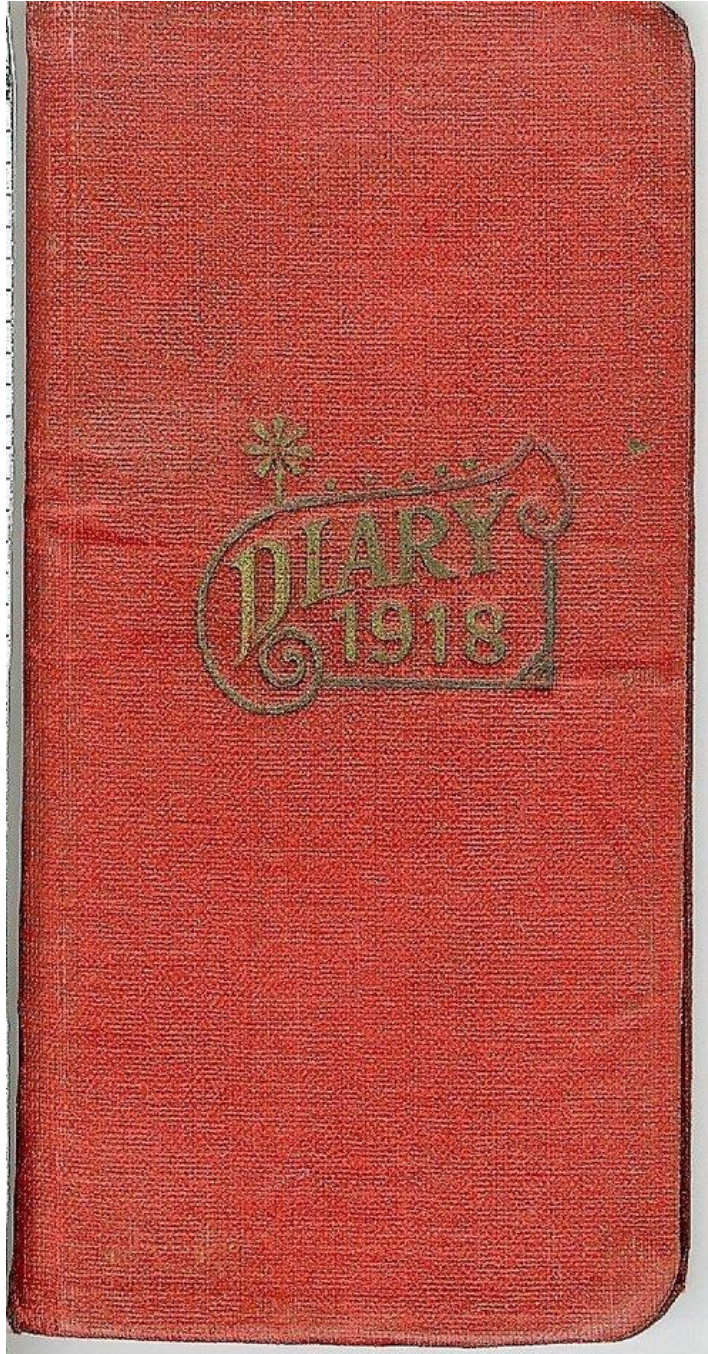


Photo of Watson's pocket diary.

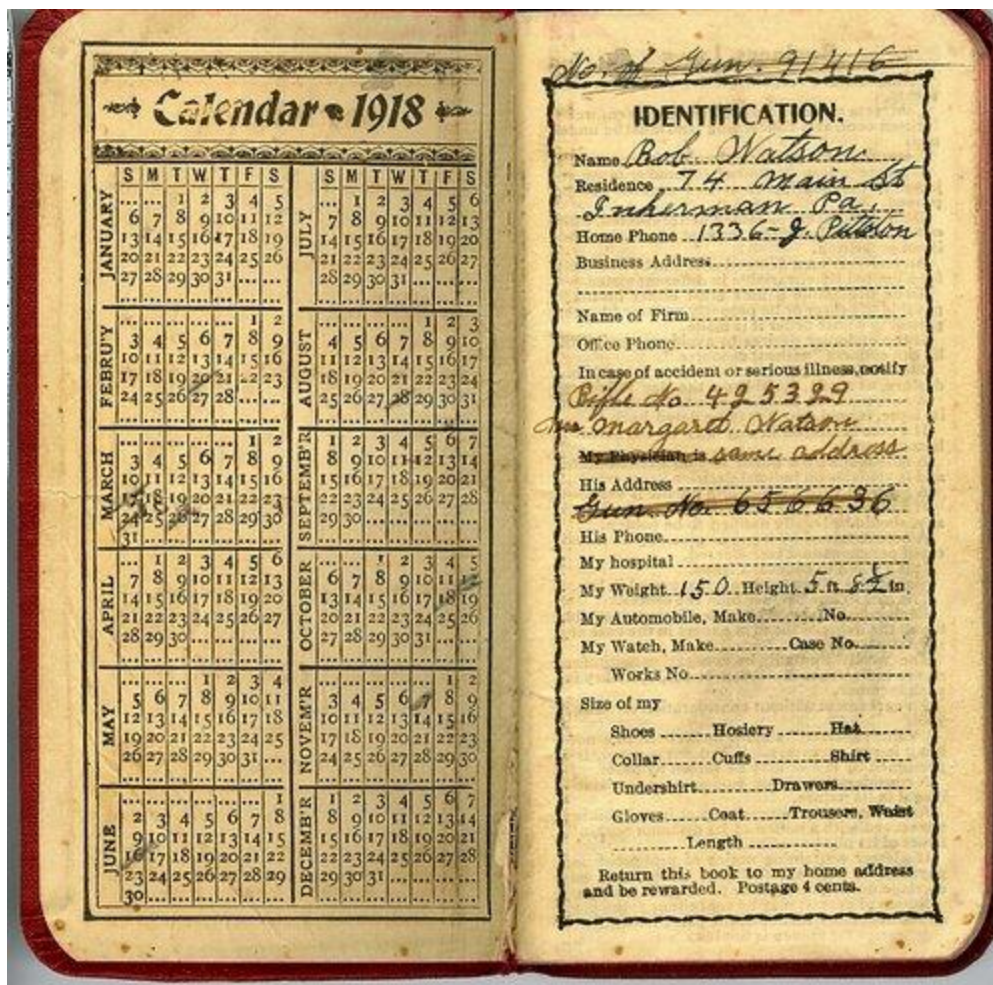


Photo of Watson's pocket diary, interior.

This 1918 pocket diary belonged to Robert Watson of Inkerman, Luzerne County, PA. Watson, a coal miner with the Pennsylvania Coal Company, was drafted in April 1918 at age 31. He left home with a small contingent of men from the region and was shipped to France in May with Company E of the 128th Infantry Division.

Private Watson was killed when his company was caught in heavy fighting on November 10, 1918 in the Argonne Forest, six days after his birthday, and one day before the Armistice formally ending the war was signed. His mother, Margaret Watson, was notified by telegram but received no details regarding how he was killed.

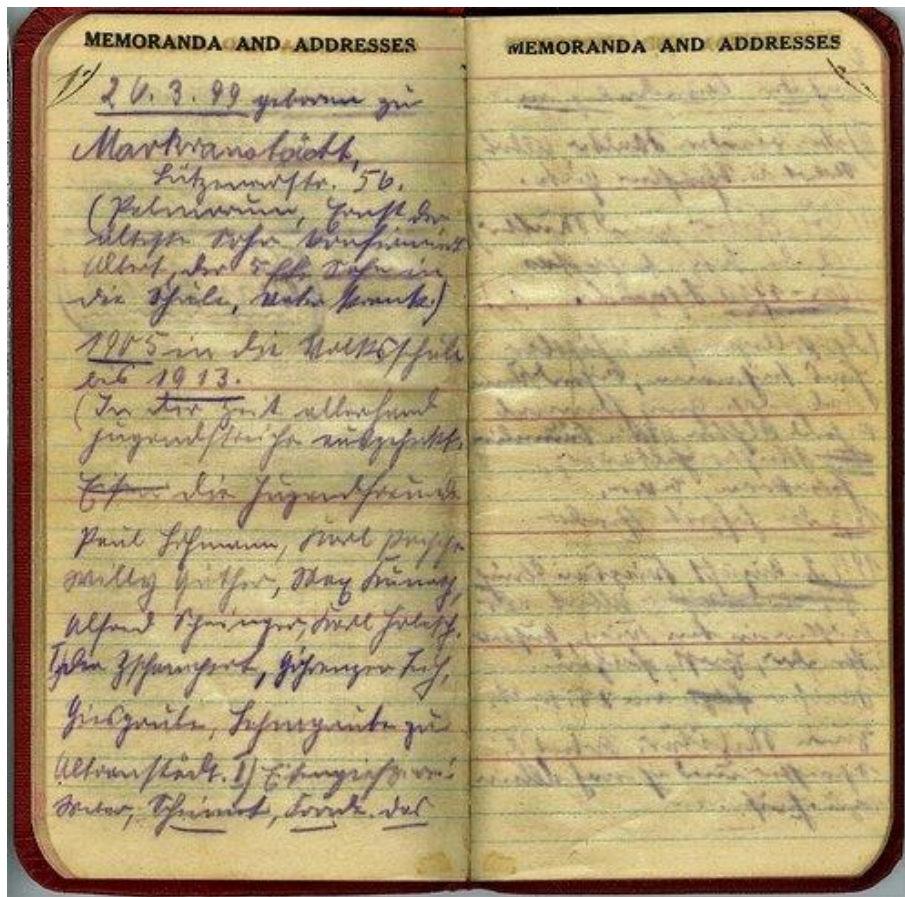


Photo of pocket diary entry, Bernach entry.

In December 1919, Mrs. Watson received a package from a young German soldier named Fritz Bernach. Contained within the package was her son's diary and a letter. In the letter, Bernach explains how he encountered Private Watson, after a German attack had annihilated Watson's unit, leaving all killed, wounded, or captured. He recalls: "Having had a brother killed in the war, I closed the eyes of every dead soldier I met both friends and foes. Doing this I arrived at Robert Watson. His head lay on a knapsack. In the hand he held a diary. A new testament lay aside of him. He had received a shot in the abdomen which had been the direct cause of his death. His helmet I placed upon his face and the new testament I pressed into his hand."

Bernach collected Private Watson's diary, which ended on November 5, 1918 with an entry stating, "I'm spending my birthday in the woods.". He resumed making entries in the diary in German beginning with November 10 and continued to do so until he was sent home. In the letter to Mrs. Watson, Bernach lamented, "How can mankind be so stupid as to unlawfully injure each other who have never seen or harmed each other.". He sent several letters to the Watson family, including Christmas cards.

Robert Watson was the only man from Inkerman killed during World War I. He is buried in the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery in France.