

NO tourist will ever see France as the soldier saw it; no visitor realised the shining courage of the French peasant as did those fighting men who were billeted among them during the years of the war. We were close to the people—the real people of France. We lived in their barns and stables and houses; we sat round their kitchen stoves during the cold weather; we rambled over their farms and swelled the population of their tiny villages. Thus we came to know and understand their intense and enduring love of the soil, which is the very root and soul of the French race.

Many of those tiny villages were not even worthy of a place on a map, but for us they became names to remember as havens of peace where we rested after periods of duty in the line. Colembert, La Wast, Caestre, Doude-lainville, La Motte à Bois, Morbecque, Steenbecque, Estaires, Bac St. Maur are only a few of the names I can recall from memory, but in all of them we were received as friends. Farms surrounding the villages became our billets and soon we were over-running the whole countryside, though in an orderly manner, as becomes a soldier. Nor were there any serious complaints, for the men of the New Zealand Division were conscious of their record for decent behaviour. Only when one or two more enterprising souls decided to help themselves to a fat turkey or fowl was there any trouble, and then due compensation was forthcoming. Once a roving dog revealed the feathers and remnants of the secret meal which had no relation to the army ration, and Madame's wrath was terrible. Fortunately, few of us understood her torrent of words.

Justifiable Grumbling

They grumbled, sometimes, these industrious peasant farmers, but with some justification. Is there a New Zealand farmer who would remain unmoved if a company of lusty soldiers suddenly took possession of his farm buildings, pried into everything with military inquisitiveness, and over-ran his property? But for the most part these people showed us the greatest kindness, despite the barrier of language, adding to their meagre incomes by selling coffee, eggs, butter and bread to the soldiers. Frequently Madame could be persuaded, at a price, to cook a little dinner. However humble the farm-house, that dinner was always delicious, more so after a long period in the trenches.

I remember one shock, however. After a small party of us had complimented Madame on the excellent of her roast beef, she told us that it was roast horse, but it made no difference to the remainder of the meal. That same good soul taught me to make an omelette, explaining that the chives and parsley which flavoured it must be minced to infinitesimal proportions. Another initiated me into the mysteries of a French salad. That was near Morbecque, a hamlet in a beautiful part of northern France near Hazebrouck and the Forest of Nieppe. First of all I went out into the fields with Madame, there to gather succulent young dandelion and sorrel leaves and tender shoots of other weeds. These she mixed with lettuce and other ingredients from the garden plot and



Delville Wood, as the New Zealanders knew it in 1916. This photograph was taken in September, after the New Zealand advance on September 15

BEHIND THE LINES IN FRANCE

(By A. O. GILLESPIE)

produced one of the most delicious salads I have ever tasted. Perhaps months of army rations, flavoured with Flanders mud, had something to do with my enthusiasm.

Family Treasures

Many of those humble farm-houses contained wonderful old furniture, pewter and china. After Passchendaele, where mud and rain defeated us and left us exhausted and numb with fatigue, we journeyed to the little village of Colembert to rest and revive. Our billets were the usual collection of farm buildings, grouped round the "midden," that ripe pit into which goes all rubbish and drainage from the farm buildings. Madame was the usual cheerful soul, plying us with coffee whenever we wished. At one end of the kitchen was a dresser, black with years and polish. Not a nail marred the woodwork, for it was made by hand,

nobody knew how many years ago. And there, in ordered array, was a beautiful collection of old pewter and china. Try as I might I could not persuade Madame to sell me a piece as a souvenir—they were family treasures; and "the family" is the most sacred and important institution in France. Never, in any French farm-house, was there evidence of mass production china or furniture such as we see to-day. Almost without exception those houses were furnished with the utmost simplicity, but that simplicity gave them an atmosphere and a sense of taste.

Washing And Darning

One of the most familiar notices in the war zone windows was "Washing Done Here," for Madame and her daughters were always ready to earn a few francs by doing the washing while we were out of the line; to the delight

of those whom war could not domesticate. They did the darning, too, and for brief periods the holes in our socks were not lumps of material crudely drawn together by an amateur with needle and thread. In return our men helped with the harvest in season, or with the milking if they were able, or with the bedding down of the cattle, which are kept under cover during the winter in northern France.

An Interior

Let me try and picture the interior of a farm kitchen on a winter evening somewhere behind the line. Madame and her daughters are trying to fathom the mystery of English words; our men are vainly attempting to make themselves understood with an atrocious mixture of French and English. They have got near enough to *lait* (milk), *pain* (bread), and *oeufs* (eggs), which have become *lay*, *pang* and *erfs*. But Madame understands, and soon plates of fried eggs, piles of bread and butter and steaming bowls of coffee are on the bare table. The kitchen probably has a stone floor; the chairs would delight a lover of antiques. In the middle of the room is the business part of a stove, from which runs a long, wide pipe to the chimney against the wall. An ingenious method this, for the heat is distributed through the room and there is space for several soldiers to sit on either side of the pipe. One of the soldiers will have a tiny coffee mill on his knees, grinding the roasted beans. A pot of chichory water is always simmering on the stove, along with the inevitable stock-pot into which go vegetable peelings, carrot tops, leeks and onions as a basis for the ever-ready basin of soup. Sugar is scarce, so with each bowl of coffee Madame distributes from her precious tin a simple boiled sweet which is held in the mouth while the coffee is drunk. Bread is plentiful—delicious, unsalted, and full of holes. The loaves are long and thin or flat and round, and Madame slices them by holding the loaf against her body, wielding the knife as though she would injure herself mortally—but she never does. So the evening passes, in the grateful warmth. The men sip their coffee or beer, talking among themselves or by signs, mostly, with Madame.

An Estaminet

Every village had its estaminet, or several of them, according to population. An estaminet is difficult to describe. Its principal reason for existence was the sale of Bock, a particularly innocuous French beer, gallons of which had not the slightest effect on the New Zealand physique, though it was a good thirst quencher. There were always quantities of *vin blanc* and *vin rouge*—cheap red and white wines which are also good on a hot day. Only after payday was there any demand for cognac and champagne which, compared with New Zealand prices, was dirt cheap. Cooked eggs, bread and coffee were always available. The more enterprising estaminets employed girls who, as the years unrolled, gathered together a vocabulary of English slang which they

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Delville Wood in 1938. Many of the woods of the Somme were replanted after the war