

African-American World War I Veterans

by Lynne Belluscio

During World War I, Clarence Price from LeRoy served in France and wrote a letter home on July 13, 1918. His mother submitted the letter to the *LeRoy Gazette*. Clarence grew up on East Avenue and was a member of one of LeRoy's African American families.

"My dear Mother:

I am now in my little tent writing to you. Just today I received the letter which Walter wrote for you to me. It found me and "sonny" well. (This is a reference to one of his brothers who must have been serving with Clarence) ... Today it is raining. The people are busy getting in their wheat and hay. I have been over here just about a month now. Our colored band gives a concert every night. You know, I guess that when we have night here you have day there.

I have been living in two towns since I have been here, but I don't know the name of either of one of them. The people I can't understand at all. I have not heard how Archie is getting along. We left him in one of these little towns with the Red Cross people. He got his hand hurt. I was just 13 days and 13 nights on the great ocean. You will remember one time when I was home how we had an argument over it. Some said it took 6 days and some said another thing. It took me 13 days and 13 nights, but we came over quickly enough at that.

We don't get any candy here. We can't buy it. We can get wine and other drinks. You know France is noted for its wines. I am writing by my little candle which the Red Cross gave me when I left LeRoy. The French women do their washing in the creek. They work very hard in the fields and on the railroads with picks and shovels. ... I don't get any more war news over here than you do over there. Only what I get here is more true, I guess ...

Of course we have lots of fun over here. We play ball, race



(Picture courtesy the National Archives and Records Administration)

Famous 93rd Division arrives home on the France. New York's famous 369th Infantry arrive at Hoboken, New Jersey. They are the only regiment which never had one of their men captured and never lost a foot of ground or a trench, also the only unit in the American Expeditionary Force which bore a state name and carried a state flag.

and have boxing matches and other things every night to make it pleasant. I have seen none of the LeRoy boys. Where I am now there is just our company only (I have not been able to trace his military records to know in what company he served.) We have to be in at 10 o'clock with lights out, so I will write more soon ... Give my love to Mrs. Steverson and the rest who ask about me. This leaves me well and wishing to see you all again, if nothing happens. I read my little Bible every night in my tent. I can see lots of apple and peach trees here but nothing on them. ... Your Son Clarence Price."

Most of the black soldiers in World War I served in the 92nd or 93rd Divisions. Clarence's brother, Earl served in the 396th Infantry (pictured above) of the 93rd Division. Both the 92nd and the 93rd were segregated. The 92nd was organized in October 1917 and was known as the "Buffalo Soldiers." They wore a round patch with the silhouette of a buffalo on their

sleeve. The 93rd Division was organized in December 1917 from many units including the New York National Guard.

The 93rd having been rejected by both the American and British forces, fought along side the French forces and became known as the "Blue Helmets." An article that appeared in the *New York Tribune*, written by former Major Lorillard Spencer, related the bravery of the black soldiers. "As one who owes his life to the bravery and faithfulness to duty of colored soldiers ... one of the first officers to be assigned to duty with the old 15th New York Infantry and serving with the organization until evacuated wounded on September 26, 1918, I wish to state that, should there be another call to arms, my choice would be as assignments with just such troops as those with whom I served in 1917 and 1918."

General John J. Pershing talked out of both sides of his mouth about the black soldiers. In a secret note to the French military he was quoted: "We must

not eat with them, must not shake hands with them, seek to talk to them or to meet with them outside the requirements of military service. We must not commend too highly these troops, especially in front of white Americans." But his public statements were to the contrary: "I cannot commend too highly the spirit shown among the colored combat troops, who exhibit fine capacity for quick training and eagerness for the most dangerous work."

Clarence Price was born in 1886 and was one of 14 children. The family lived on the Crusher Road, but after a fire, they moved to York where Clarence attended school. In 1910, the family moved to East Avenue in LeRoy. Some of the family moved to Syracuse and others to Rochester. His nephew, Alonzo Wilson, Jr. lives in LeRoy and is compiling a family genealogy. Clarence died about 1975 and is buried in the family plot on Myrtle Street near his brother Earl who died in 1924, at the age of 30.