

Grandpa Ouellette's Story

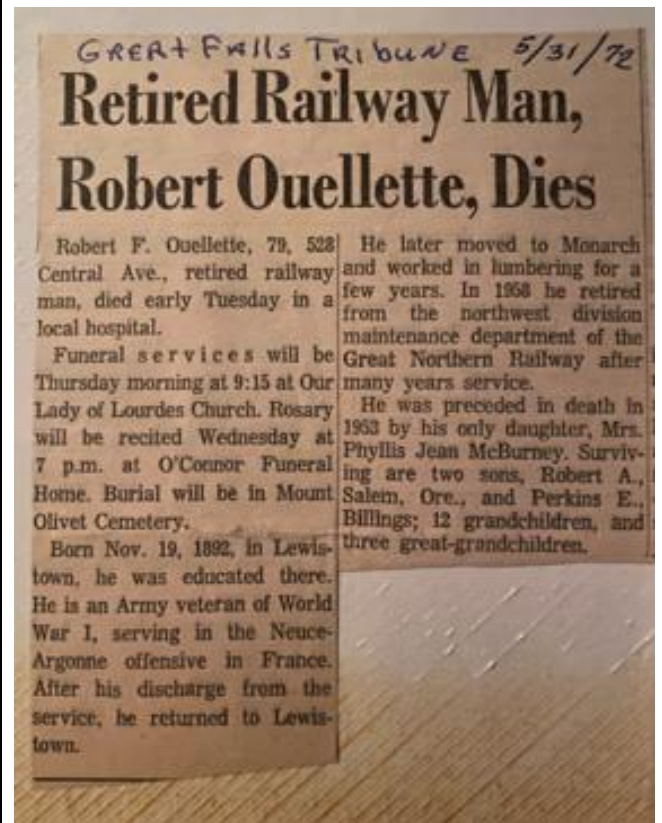
My memory of Grandpa Ouellette is of his infectious laugh, quiet voice and unusual job. He passed away when I was in the first grade. I know from reading his obituary he had a number of jobs in his life: working on the railroad and in the mines and serving in the military. I got a better picture when I read the letter to his mom (below). I only recall his last chapter--he was a "wino" that was the term my folks used to describe what he did.

We would drive north from Billings, Montana to Great Falls, every month or so, 4-6 hours depending on the weather, on a two-lane road that winds through the plains and wheatfields of Montana. There was always lots of wind. Halfway through the trip was "Eddies Corners" and we would stop for gas and the restrooms. There was a truck stop diner too, but we always brought our own snacks--my mom majored in car picnics served while driving to "make good time". Mom would dole out cheese and crackers while Dad drove like a bat out of hell and my brother, and I played in the back seat of several cars--the one I recall him liking the best was a 454 Monte Carlo-Burgundy. When we got to Great Falls we would stay with Grandma Vi. My grandparents were divorced when Dad was in the first grade. Grandma Vi was 14 when they married, not long out of Indian school, and I imagine that may have been part of the issue.

When we would get settled, my dad would go and find Grandpa Ouellette, check him into a hotel for as long as he could afford, and get him cleaned up. We would go visit him and he would play with my brother and me. He asked us questions and he always listened to the answers.

He was very generous. Apparently, that was part of the problem. When one of his checks came in, he was known for buying everyone a round.

There was a sadness behind his eyes that I could see even as a child and I knew he had lived a hard life and that being a wino was not the hardest part . . .



Grass Range Review

EASTERN FERGUS COUNTY'S REPRESENTATIVE NEWSPAPER.

VOLUME 6.

GRASS RANGE, MONTANA, THURSDAY, SEPT. 12, 1918.

NUMBER 34

Letter from Robert Ouellette.

Dear Mother:

Just a few lines to let you know that I am well and hope you are the same. I am in a different camp altogether since I wrote you last. I have been on the road pretty much all the time ever since I left California. I was at Camp Mills, Long Island, when I wrote the last letter. Now I am at Camp Merritt, New Jersey. It is not very far from New York. It is a very pretty camp but I don't like it at all, because I am in a strange bunch now. The company that I was with has gone across already. I was ready to go along with them; in fact I was on the boat a day and a half and we were out on the sea quite a little ways and all at once they called us up for examination and when they came to me the doctor pulled me to one side and told me I had the measles. There were nine of us altogether but they were all strangers to me. I was the only one out of our company. Believe me I felt pretty blue for a while. They took us off the boat right there and put us on a hospital ship and took us back to Hoboken and put us in the hospital. I was there for four days and I did not have the measles either, that was the worst of it. Hoboken is a city just across the river from New York; in fact it is a part of the city. From the hospital they sent us to this camp. I don't know a soul here; they are all strangers to me. I was kind of lonesome for a while but am getting over it now; am getting acquainted with some of the boys again. The most of them are from the south and east. I am about the only western boy here; at least I have not seen any others around my company from the west. After a fellow has been shipped and moved around like I have he gets so he doesn't care much where he goes. That is the way I feel about it anyway. This army life is sure great alright.

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The trip across the states was sure a long old ride. I saw a whole lot of country. The reason why they thought I had the measles was that I got overheated. We had to hike for about two miles with our heavy packs on our backs and it was about ninety in the shade. We sure suffered with the heat. Some of the boys gave out before we got to where we were going. Some got sunstroke. If we had had another hundred yards to go I think I would have been all in to. We do not wear hats anymore; we were issued little caps, what they call overseas caps; they are cute. You would laugh if you saw me with one on. I will try and get a picture taken so you will see what they look like.

Well, how are the crops getting along? Have you had much rain? This is sure a pretty place; green grass and shade trees all over and pretty parks.

The way the Allies are going after the Germans now I don't think it will be long before we will be home again.

But mother I will have to close my letter for this time, with love and best regards to all my friends. Your loving son,

ROBERT F. OUELETTE,
Co. A, 155th Inf., 39th Division,
Camp Merritt, New Jersey.