

Central Coast: Past, Present, Future

World War I and the Central Coast



By Mark James Miller, November 11, 2018

When the guns fell silent on the Western Front 100 years ago today, the bloodiest conflict the world had ever endured came to an end.

The “war to end war” was over, and it left in its wake 16 million dead. It touched every corner of the globe, including the Central Coast, which became known as the bean capital of the world, thanks to the fecundity of the region’s farms.

But while the Great War brought prosperity, it also brought heartbreak to the families of the soldiers who did not return when the war ended.

Women whose sons were killed were called Gold Star Mothers, and one such lady from Arroyo Grande, Ellen Tarwater, went to France on a government-sponsored trip in 1930 to visit her son’s grave. Albert Tarwater died on Oct. 29, 1918. His mother described the cemetery where her son was buried as “beautiful and well-kept.” She was reminded of one of the most famous poems to emerge from the war: “In Flanders Fields the poppies
blow/
Between the crosses, row on row.”

The war brought intense patriotic feelings that sometimes led to intolerance. All things German became askance. Central Coast children were forbidden to sing German Christmas songs such as “O Tannenbaum.” A silent film, “To Hell With the Kaiser,” played at El Monterey Theatre in downtown San Luis

Obispo in the summer of 1918, along with a picture that featured Kaiser Wilhelm II adorned with horns and a tail. Across the country the German language was banned from public schools, and sauerkraut became known as “liberty cabbage.”

Along with the war came the worst pandemic since the Black Plague of the 14th century. Spanish flu claimed at least 50 million lives worldwide, and the Central Coast was not spared its ravages.

The war ended Nov. 11, 1918, when Germany agreed to an armistice, and so it became known as Armistice Day, and celebrated as such. After World War II it was decided to change the title to Veterans Day, and so we still observe the end of World War I on Nov. 11 each year.

“Peace!” proclaimed the Morning Tribune on Nov. 11, 1918, in a special edition. “Armistice Is Signed.”

Sadly, the war to end wars did not turn out the way President Woodrow Wilson had hoped. After doing all he could to keep America out of the war, he led us into it with high ideals, desiring a just peace and determined to create a “League of Nations” that would prevent wars in the future. But by the time the war ended, the country had decided it had had enough of saving the world. The Senate rejected the League and the Treaty of Versailles. The United States turned inward, entering a period of isolationism. In 1920 Warren G. Harding was elected president, promising a return to normalcy.

In November 1923, a right-wing extremist group attempted a coup in Bavaria. The revolt failed and the group’s leader, Adolf Hitler, was sentenced to five years in prison for treason. Everyone involved was certain they would never hear of Hitler and his party, the Nazis, ever again.

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