

## MERLE HAY AND HIS TOWN

By Joan Muyskens, Editor

*This year Glidden, Iowa, is celebrating its Centennial. In reviewing the history of this town, the name of Merle Hay comes quickly to one's mind for Merle was one of the first boys from Glidden to go to war, and one of the first three United States soldiers to be killed in battle in World War I. This article is a brief history of Glidden and its son, Merle Hay.*

Glidden, Carroll County, Iowa, was named in honor of one of the directors of the Chicago and North Western Railroad, and, the development and early importance of the town was due to the railroad stop of the C&NW Clinton to Council Bluffs line. This 354-mile line which passed through Carroll County served the east-west transportation needs of the communities to both the north and south of what is now Glidden. The line was opened in 1867, the same year the original town plat of Glidden was completed. The Railroad was interested in the expansion of this area and, in 1868, a depot was built and a station fixed at Glidden. The first railroad agent was Lester G. Bangs and both he and his wife were active in the development of the community. The first building to be erected after the railroad station was a store built by A. B. Wattles. A hotel, later known as the Old Lea Hotel, was next built by Martin I. Peters. The same year, a Post Office was established and a two-story frame school house was erected; the school building, which cost \$2,200, was used until 1879.<sup>1</sup>

Glidden, which had already reached a stage of importance because of its location on the railroad, was a contender for the location of the Carroll County government, which was to be moved from Carrollton in 1868. Carroll, another contender, was at that time but a crude settlement consisting of little more than a rough board station surrounded by a few buildings—its only advantage being its central county location.

<sup>1</sup>Glidden Graphic, May 23, 1940.



*Courtesy of Glidden Archives*  
The "Old Lea Hotel," Photo Taken in 1900.

It was believed that the majority of the voters preferred a move to Glidden; however, the county authorities and the Railroad preferred the location of Carroll. By the returns of a canvassing board, Carroll "came in at the poll." Through quick action, the removal of county records and offices was made and, although the people of Glidden claimed that unfair tactics were employed, no opposition was enacted. The officials choice of Carroll for county seat was, later, considered a wise move; however, it has, no doubt, had a large effect on the history of Glidden.<sup>2</sup>

By 1870, Glidden had eight brick business houses on its main street and the population of the town had reached 177. Three years later Glidden was incorporated. The first town officers were: J. O. Havens, Mayor; William H. Stiles, recorder; and Sam Campbell, N. D. Thurman, George Ferguson, D. N. Smith and P. H. Hankins, trustees. Soon after incorporation, a volunteer fire company was organized and, in 1877, the first bank was opened by George Stafford. (This bank later became the First National Bank of Glidden.)

<sup>2</sup>*History of Carroll County, Iowa*, Vol. I, Paul MacLean; The S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., Chicago, 1912; 78-79.

Glidden, as every town, had its share of problems. The destruction of bad weather, tornadoes, floods and fire always threatened a community, as it did Glidden. In December of 1877, fire broke out in the wagon shop of Henry Messersmith, causing a loss of \$2,000. Eaton's furniture store and the hardware store of Anselme & Co. were also destroyed by fire with losses of \$2,000 and \$1,200 consecutively. On Christmas eve of 1882, Glidden fought an even larger fire, with loss estimated at \$35,000. The fire destroyed a long row of wooden business buildings including McVay's drug store, the origin of the flames; Foster Bros.' drug store; Henry Pruss, saloon, billiard hall and meat market; Dave Atkinson, building occupied by the newspaper office and T. A. Cochran's real estate office; John Vaughn, saloon; Waldron's jewelry store; and George Chambers, hardware. The Masonic and Odd Fellows lodges were also damaged.<sup>3</sup> Grasshoppers were also a threat to the farmers of the area—they came by the thousands each year, although the majority flew over Carroll County and the actual damage was minor. (Damage to crops in August, 1876, was estimated at ten percent.)<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 128.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 88.



*Courtesy of Glidden Archives*

**Main Street, Glidden, 1900.**

By 1886, Glidden boasted 35 businesses in the Business Directory. They were as follows:<sup>5</sup>

L. H. Banner—boots and shoes  
 Browning and Browning—general merchandise  
 J. C. Carnell—restaurant  
 Frank Chandler—saloon  
 Dickey and Coder—general store  
 Dunkle and Gabriel—bank  
 Gilbert Eaton—furniture  
 George Ferguson—hardware  
 Jacob Ford—blacksmith  
 W. E. Foster—drugs  
 Mrs. J. O. Havens—millinery  
 William Kuebler—restaurant  
 R. A. Lang—grocery  
 James Lea—hotel  
 Linn and Smith—hardware  
 L. M. Lyons—bank  
 Ben Masker—shoe shop  
 George W. McNaught—groceries  
 John C. Merrings—general store  
 A. H. Mertz—meat market  
 R. P. Meyers—harness  
 Homer Nichols—livery stable  
 G. W. Parsons—barber  
 Potter and Wolcott—agricultural implements  
 Prill Bros.—general merchandise  
 Henry Pruss—grain and cattle buyer  
 W. O. Reed—photographer  
 Thomas Rich—postmaster  
 Schultz and Son—meat market  
 J. C. Scott and Co.—drugs  
 D. N. Smith—lumber and grain  
 H. K. Soper—general store  
 John Vaughn—saloon  
 John Waldron—watch maker  
 W. F. Waldron—blacksmith

Glidden also had several newspapers. The first paper, *The Sentinel*, was started by Ed Taber; this paper was moved to Carroll in the late 1870s. J. C. Holmes published the *Newsboy* and G. W. Bear published the *Glidden Success*, but both lasted only a short time. In 1890, H. C. Ford started the *Glidden Graphic*; this paper received the public support necessary for success and, although it has changed owners a number of times, the *Graphic* is still being published.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>*Glidden Graphic*, May 23, 1940.

<sup>6</sup>*History of Carroll County, Iowa*, Vol. I, 214.

In 1911, the population of Glidden, numbering about 850, added to their community's prosperity by voting favorably for the construction of a steam plant for electricity. The new plant severed the town and for several years also furnished Ralston and Scranton with electricity. (The plant was improved in 1932 and in 1934 a new building was built and an entirely new diesel outfit was installed. The May 23, 1940, *Glidden Graphic* stated: "Glidden can now boast of as fine a municipal plant as can be found anywhere in the country. They supply the Glidden R. E. Co-Op with juice for the 600 farms they serve, as well as the municipality of Glidden." The plant was valued at \$98,000.)



*Courtesy of Glidden Archives*

**Main Street, Glidden, Early 1900s.**

It was on a farm near this small, but thriving community that Merle D. Hay was born on July 30, 1896, the son of Carrie and Harvey Hay. The Hays had moved several times during Merle's childhood; in 1915, the family moved to a farm seven miles southeast of Glidden and it was on this farm, two years later, that Harvey and Carrie Hay learned of their son's death.

Merle was the oldest of the three Hay children, the other children being Basil, about three years younger than Merle, and Opal, whom Merle called his twin born eight years late.

A. A. Hoehling, in his book *The Fierce Lambs*, tells of several incidents in Merle's childhood; one concerns a fist fight between Merle and Basil. The two boys had climbed to

the farmhouse roof to tack on shingles. The event, however, had turned into a fight between the brothers so Mrs. Hay climbed to the roof in an effort to make peace. As she alighted, Merle hastily descended and removed the ladder—leaving his mother atop the house for an hour.<sup>7</sup>



*Courtesy of Glidden Archives*

**Public School, Glidden; Built 1879.**

At the age of 20, Merle was employed as a repairman of farm machinery. On the morning of May 3, 1917, Merle called home to inform his mother that he had quit his job. His mother, who knew that Merle was dissatisfied, was not concerned until she learned his reason for quitting—Merle and some other boys from Glidden were going to Des Moines to enlist in the Coast Artillery. Mrs. Hay did not understand why her son wanted to enlist and she tried to talk him out of going, but Merle had made up his mind.<sup>8</sup>

Merle and the others enlisted and, five short days after he had quit his job, Merle Hay left Glidden for the last time. An article in the *Glidden Graphic*, May 10, 1917, tells of the town's reaction and farewell to its enlisted soldiers:

<sup>7</sup>*The Fierce Lambs*, A. A. Hoehling; Little, Brown and Company, 1960; 61.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 61-62.

Patriotism ran its very highest ebb in Glidden Monday evening. The war was brought home to local people in a most forceful manner—that of seeing eight splendid young men preparing to leave for the training camps to enlist in the coast artillery service, never to return if our country required of them the limit of the sacrifice they were able to give. Besides these eight, honor is due Albert Salisbury, who enlisted in the Boone company I.N.G. several weeks ago, and Levi Chapin, who is now in training for regular army service.

Five of the boys—Walter Brown, Ray Dankle, Joy Dillavou, Henry Dillavou and Merle Hay—had gone to Des Moines last Friday, passed the examination and are now in training. Herman Knute, Charles Simons and Mathew Lammers, the latter from Carroll, had not yet been examined when they left for Des Moines Tuesday morning but no difficulty was expected in this trio of healthy young men getting into the service.

The patriotic meeting Monday evening was necessarily hastily arranged, and the large audience that assembled at the Methodist Church on such short notice totally disproves any notion that might exist that patriotism is lacking here. The building was packed to its utmost capacity. Probably a hundred automobiles brought in people from the surrounding country. The public turned out to give the boys a rousing farewell and they certainly did it. The Glidden band rendered some fine music for the occasion.

The article continues, telling of the patriotic speeches made and the songs sung at the Monday night activities. It then tells of the boys departure Tuesday morning for Des Moines.

The boys left for Des Moines Tuesday morning from whence they went to Fort Logan, Colorado, for training. Several hundred people were at the depot when the 7:24 local train came in, to see the boys off. High school pupils sang "America" and gave the young men some rousing farewell cheers. The occasion was one of solemnity, however, rather than of rejoicing. Mothers cannot easily let their boys go on a mission from which they have no assurance that they will ever return. Tears mingled with cheers as Glidden's contingent left to make their sacrifice for their country.

Merle Hay was first sent to Fort Logan, Colo., to be uniformed and, from there, to Fort Bliss, Tex., where he became a member of the 16th Infantry, Company F. The 16th was sent from Texas to the Atlantic seaboard, from where they were shipped to France, landing on June 27. Merle, in the army for less than two months, was already in a foreign country where he understood neither the language nor the customs. His thoughts were centered on his family and friends in Glidden.

After only four months of training in France, American troops, including Merle Hay, were taken for instruction by veteran French soldiers, to a quiet portion of the long line of French defense which ran from the North Sea to Switzerland. It was during this instruction drill that the first American troops were engaged in battle. In the early morning hours of Nov. 3, 1917, the Germans staged a surprise attack. Through the use of a barrage, they isolated most of Company F. Three Americans were killed, five wounded, and twelve were missing. The three killed were Merle Hay, Bethel Gresham and Tom Enright—the first American troops to fall in battle.

News of the battle and of the lives lost reached the United States on Nov. 5. All accounts of the attack told of the



*Courtesy of Glidden Archives*

**Merle D. Hay**



bravery of the detachment and of individual members in the "fierce hand to hand fighting." The nation suddenly realized the meaning of "At War" and all mourned the deaths of the first three American troops.

When Harvey Hay learned of the tragic death of his son, he said, "If it has been necessary that he lay down his life for his country, I'm proud of the boy. I have another son at home whom I would gladly give up for the same great cause were he old enough. Merle went with my consent and—I'm proud of him." Carrie Hay said that she was glad her son had been killed in action rather than being taken prisoner by the Germans.



*Courtesy of Basil Hay*

**Carrie Hay, Photo Taken in 1953.**

Several letters from Merle to his family and the government telegram sent to inform Harvey and Carrie of their son's death, were published in the local newspaper on Nov. 8, 1917. The *Graphic* wrote:

The large flag on the flagpole in the square of Glidden hung at half-mast last Monday. Merle D. Hay, one of our own boys, had been among the first three Americans to offer up

their lives in the Great War.

The news was brought here by a telegram sent to Harvey D. Hay, father of the boy, by the war department, simply announcing with regret that Private Merle D. Hay had been killed in action in France on November 3rd. No news ever spread more quickly about the town than this important dispatch. People were shocked with the realization that this was a real touch of War, brought very close to home.

Meagre dispatches at the time indicated that the Germans had concentrated fire upon the portion of the trench occupied by Americans. By means of that terrible weapon known as barrage, or a curtain of fire, they had managed to isolate a small detachment of Pershing's men from the main body, and a charge made the rest very simple. Three were killed, five wounded, and twelve reported as missing.

It went on to say:

Merle was not in the draft age and had he chosen to do so he could now be safely at his home. He was 21 years old several months after the draft registration last June. He went voluntarily because he felt his country needed him and needed him quickly. His sacrifice was of the genuine kind.

It was one chance in a hundred thousand that the first blow of the war should fall upon Glidden. Yet it is a great honor to feel that the first Iowa boy and one of the very first Americans to offer up their lives in France is one of our own. Glidden should take a modest pride in the fact. The bereaved family has a heritage more precious than any that could be bestowed upon them.

Of the other seven boys that left Glidden on May 8, 1917, only two returned, Walter Brown and Henry Dillavou.<sup>9</sup> Glidden's youth had sacrificed their lives for their country.

Merle Hay was first buried in Bathelemont, France. In 1921, his body was brought back to the United States and services for him and thousands of other American soldiers were held on Pier 4, Hoboken, New Jersey. General Pershing placed wreaths on three of the coffins, those of Tom Enright, Bethel Gresham and Merle Hay. On July 21, 1921, services in Glidden were held for Merle Hay, and he was buried in Westlawn cemetery.

Years later the Iowa State Legislature passed a bill authorizing the construction of a monument for Merle Hay and his Iowa comrades. A vault was made in the base of the monument and the body of Merle Hay was placed within the vault. The memorial was dedicated May 25, 1930.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 186.



**Memorial to Merle Hay, Glidden.**

The monument, constructed by the Capitol Hill Monument Co. of Des Moines, is of gray Georgia granite. It is 18 feet long and 5 feet wide. The design on the monument is a cartoon by J. N. (Ding) Darling showing Uncle Sam carrying the body of an American soldier. The cartoon had appeared in the *Des Moines Register* the morning after the news of Merle Hay's death.

Harvey Hay died in 1951 and Carrie Hay died this past winter at the age of 93; but the memorial to Merle Hay and all the Iowa soldiers who gave up their lives for their country during World War I, lives on. The people of Glidden and of all Carroll County have made various improvements on the memorial site over the years and they continue to beautify the memorial to their dead son.

This year Glidden, Iowa, is celebrating its Centennial. In reviewing the history of this town, the name of Merle Hay comes quickly to one's mind . . .

My sincerest thanks to Miss Jean McNaught of Glidden who furnished me with much of my information concerning Merle Hay and the Memorial at Glidden.

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