

Was World War I

# Company L stood strong during 1916 crisis

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That Was  
Watsonville

**Betty Lewis**

As I once stated in a former column, many things have changed over the years in Watsonville but the dedication and growth of the population to better the community has remained steadfast as has the patriotism during national crisis such as the following:

"President Wilson in his determination to sever relations with Germany in order to protect the lives of a few jackass Americans on the high seas showing the same degree of inconsistency that has marked his administration since the European war commenced." — Editor James Piratsky in the Pajaronian, 1916.

Meanwhile, American soldiers were in Mexico under the leadership of General Pershing trying to track down the Mexican bandit, Pancho Villa. The preparedness fever was sweeping the country, and Watsonville was no exception. In April of 1916, 105 local men signed a petition whereby they agreed to enlist in the state militia if one were allowed in Watsonville. When word came that a company of infantry had been granted, a meeting was called and Julius Hippeli was elected Captain; William Allison, 1st Lieutenant and Stanley Leddey, 2nd Lieutenant.

On May 22, 1916, Company L of the National Guard was mustered in and was to be connected with the 3rd Regiment of the California National Guard. The 58 members gathered at the local auditorium, then located to Second Street and commenced drilling and learning the army way of life. The Company subsequently went over to the T & D Theater to view "The Battle Cry of Peace" as guests of the theater manager.

A reception was held for Company L at the Armory, Main Street, on June 22, with the Watsonville City Band playing patriotic airs and an address given by Attorney J.E. Gardner. Later that night, Company L received its orders to proceed to Sacramento immediately and join the mobilization center. Fire Chief Sandberg sounded the general alarm and the members of the company reported to headquarters for further instructions. The next morning, accompanied by city officials and a throng of local people, the young men marched through town and down to the depot on Walker Street where the Watsonville City Band gave them a rousing send-off along with the St. Francis Orphanage



Courtesy of Betty Lewis

**ABOVE: Company L marches down Main Street in front of the plaza in 1916. In this photo, the company was on its way to Nogales, Ariz., to track down Mexican bandit Pancho Villa. BELOW: Company L is seen marching to the train depot in 1916. BOTTOM: Members of Company L line up near Watsonville Plaza.**



Band who alternately played patriotic selections. The local people were quick to send off packages to the boys in Sacramento, including Lottie Watters' homemade doughnuts plus mending kits made by the local women.

"In several of the city papers we notice that Co. L is credited to Palo Alto, instead of Watsonville. This gets under our skin slightly. We're proud of our boys, and the way they responded to their country's call. We wish our cotems would give Watsonville the credit of being one of the first cities to respond to the call." — James Piratsky, Editor of the Evening Pajaronian

On June 30, Company L left Sacramento by train heading towards Nogales, Ariz. Reaching their destination on July 4, they found out the War Department had ordered all married men relieved of duty, but it was not until Aug. 13 that they were able to return home to their families. While sweating out close order drill in the baking border heat, the married men gave up any rank they held and marched as privates. The company cooks were Frank J. Hill, Joe Hopkins and Mike Nirich. Joseph

Cumming and Fred Miller were the company musicians. The first sergeant was Edward Lorensen who was later killed in France.

"The daily routine is anything but a picnic and some of the boys have temporarily fallen by the wayside. The high altitude (over 4,000 feet) and the terrific heat has forced over half the company at different times to receive medical attention at the field hospital or to remain in their tents ... The Second Infantry, to which we belong, is composed entirely of companies from the Sacramento and San

Joaquin valleys and the heat does not affect those men, but the soldiers from the Pajaro fog belt were not prepared for heat that has been as high as 106 degrees and as a result they have been under the weather." — from Edward Lorensen, Special Correspondent, July 10, 1916.

The army rations were pretty bad for Company L, and when word reached Watsonville of this fact, \$545 was raised in one day and sent to the boys for the company mess fund. Other amounts were raised from time to time and forwarded to Camp Little at Nogales. It wasn't long before the Mexican crisis died down. Villa was not caught at that time but his raids into the United States were stopped, Company L was discharged and sent home, only to face service again a few months later when the nation went to war against Germany and such songs as "Over There" and "It's a Grand Old Flag" became the hits of the day.

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