



The Rock of the Marne monument across the street from the old Central High School. (Courtesy of The Onondaga Historical Association)

In memory of an almost forgotten soldier of WWI

By Sean Kirst
skirst@syracuse.com

Eileen Mashimo and her family were returning to New Hampshire last summer on the New York State Thruway, on their way back from visiting relatives in Buffalo, when they saw an exit sign that mentioned Solvay. Mashimo had an unexpected chance to end a quest: She'd spent years trying to put flesh and blood on the tale of a lost hero, a cousin killed in World War I.

Who was then forgotten.

The only place he'd been honored, Eileen believed, was on a monument to war dead in an Onondaga County village.

Mashimo made a spontaneous decision. Her family left the Thruway and took Interstate 690 to Solvay, where a police officer gave

them directions to a civic memorial on Woods Road. They looked through the engraved list of names of those killed in action from many wars. They hoped to find a John J. Hourihan.

He was missing, a situation that will soon be remedied.

"Just because it was a long time ago and no one remembers, it doesn't change what they did for us," said Sally Zollo, treasurer of the Solvay-Geddes Veterans, who maintain the monument.

In this week leading up to Memorial Day, at a time when men and women in the military are still dying overseas, Zollo makes this invitation to schools, civic groups and anyone in the larger community:

You're welcome to take part at 10 a.m. on Memorial Day, when local veterans offer their annual reading of names at the Woods Road memorial. The ceremony is built around honoring any person from Solvay or Geddes who died in the service of their nation.

This year, with the help of records obtained from the state archives, the list will include seven new names from World War I. In coming weeks, those men will be added to the monument.

Among them: John J. Hourihan.

"I just don't like it," said Eileen Mashimo, "when people are forgotten."

Hourihan, in many ways, led a solitary life. Even Mashimo didn't know he existed until she started researching family history. Her own grandfather served in France, as a medic, during World War I. Mashimo's curiosity about his service led to a journal kept by a great-uncle in Rhode Island. He provided a few entries on Nov. 12, 1918, that say everything about the extremes of war:

The great-uncle awoke in the early morning. At

2:59 a.m., he joyfully wrote: "Victory Day." He reported people were outside in the middle of the night, celebrating the Armistice ending bloodshed that had claimed millions of lives in Europe.

A few hours later, his jubilation stopped. On that same day, the family received official notification that led the great-uncle to make a simple note: "Jack Hourihan killed, Oct. 12, '18."

Hourihan was a cousin. Mashimo, fascinated, kept digging and learned more details: He was born in County Cork, Ireland, to a family torn apart a few decades earlier by the Great Famine. Like five of his siblings, he eventually came to the United States.

Then he seemed to disappear from existing records, until he turned up dead in the war.

The missing link, Mashimo said, was the Syracuse area — where Hourihan was part of deep World War I history.

A year ago, Mashimo discovered that Hourihan enlisted in 1917, in Solvay. He recorded his address as Harbor Street, now considered part of Syracuse, not far from the Irish enclave on Tipperary Hill. His military records list him as serving with the "9th Machine Gun Battalion."

It is unclear if Hourihan joined the "Fighting Ninth" infantry that trained at the state fairgrounds — one of many World War I units that used greater Syracuse as a base. Indeed, the striking downtown World War I monument, near the old Central Tech, was erected by members of the 38th regiment.

They left the fairgrounds to play a key role in a grim victory at the Marne, where the Americans suffered 12,000 casualties.

After the war, veterans of the 38th commissioned nationally renowned sculptor Roland Hinton Perry to create the likeness of a single soldier atop "the rock of the Marne." It is meant to be emblematic of larger sacrifice

and heroism.

In that sense, it is a reminder of John J. Hourihan.

Alone in a new country, Hourihan found his way to Solvay, where he probably worked in a factory along Onondaga Lake, Mashimo said. Once there, he made the decision to enlist. He was an ocean away from the place where he grew up. He had no wife or children. He joined the Army, went to France and endured the brutality of trench warfare.

Hourihan died. No one has ever found a photograph. For decades, he was all but forgotten.

His name, misspelled as John J. Houlihan, is on the list of dead in the downtown War Memorial — one of more than 300 men from Onondaga County killed in World War I. Zollo, alerted by Mashimo to Hourihan's absence from the Solvay monument, discovered the names of six others who enlisted in Solvay or Geddes, and were also missing.

Among them: Lt. Charles Roby, of Montana. Old newspaper clippings recall he traveled to Syracuse to serve with the Fighting Ninth. He became engaged to one Theresa Webber of Charles Avenue, just before he left for Europe.

Roby died 38 days before the end of the war.

Like Hourihan, if Roby had survived, you wonder if his great-grandchildren might be a familiar presence today in school honor rolls, or box scores. Instead, Roby was killed amid gas warfare and machine gun fire, and the last thing to be lost was his name.

On Memorial Day, they'd welcome you in Solvay, when they read it out loud.

Sean Kirst is a columnist with The Post-Standard. Write to him in care of The Post-Standard, 220 S. Warren St., Syracuse 13202, email him at skirst@syracuse.com, read more of his work at www.syracuse.com/kirst or send him a message on Facebook or Twitter.com

