

World War I Hero: Proctor Gilson  
by Bryan Thompson



*Sigma Kappa Fraternity 1915. Proctor Gilson stands in back row center.*

A hundred years ago this summer De Kalb sacrificed one of its' most out standing youths on the field of battle in France. First Lieutenant Gilson was killed in action on July 18, 1918, while commanding a platoon of Company K, Ninth Infantry, during the Aisne-Marne offensive near the town of Vierzy in France.

Proctor James Calvin Gilson was born July 18, 1891 at the Gilson Homestead on Maple Ridge Road in the Town of De Kalb. He was the son of Jared S. Gilson and Etta M. Williams Gilson. He attended De Kalb School district # 11 and then graduated from Gouverneur High School in 1911.

As Paul Haggett, research technician at SLU archives described Gilson, "He was the whole package 6 foot 5 blonde (tallest in his class) with blue eyes, gregarious personality, super athlete and excellent scholar."

From here we will let St. Lawrence University in the World War tell the story.

If any fellow-student, any member of the faculty was asked, during Proctor's undergraduate days [at St Lawrence University], what manner of man he was, the response was immediately and emphatically favorable. "I love Proc.," wrote Captain Lawrence Iverson, '18 when he heard of Proctor's death, "because he was a great big kind-hearted boy, whose heart would never allow itself to grow up."

Proctor... graduated from St Lawrence University in 1915, with a degree of Bachelor of Science. He was a member of the Phi Sigma Kappa Fraternity. Both in school and college he took part energetically in student activities, especially in athletics, being an excellent field athlete and a football player of prowess. Those who knew him in either of these social settings speak of his popularity with a note of respect, which does not always accompany that commendation. Old men liked him equally. At the memorial service held in Fisher Hall in October 1918, Professor Robert Dale Ford described him as always the kindly, courteous gentleman, the ever-welcome friend



*Proctor Gilson's Birth Place. Gilson Homestead Maple Ridge Rd.*

After graduating from St Lawrence Proctor entered Harvard law School. A letter from William Henry Pascoe remembers him there, "Proctor Gilson- a faded snapshot .....Again we are rambling along Cambridge streets, discussing law, life love, football, and anything else that young men talk about.... if study got monotonous at times, there were ways of relieving the monotony. One undignified method was to sit at our windows with a mirror and flash them at passers-by.... Another was to collect a congenial group after an evening of study and go to a Boston cabaret for an hour or two. Although college graduates, we had not entirely outgrown boyhood and were rather short on dignity but long on enthusiasm. Proctor like the rest of us was still a boy, but a little sounder and more tolerant than the rest of us."

'It was a joyous reunion the next fall... Proctor, with his brows knitted in thought, was bending his head over sideways from his six-feet-five to hear my side of a legal argument. We were a little more mature that year and spent considerably more time discussing what we planned to do with ourselves after graduation.'

'Then the war! Naturally we had discussed it often and at length. Proctor, while pro-ally, was never jingoistic, like some of our classmates. As it seems to me now, he always had a very sound, sane and fair view of the conflict.'

The news of the US declaration of war..."I had been away from Cambridge and returned that night to find quite a group of the Gannett House men gathered in 'Baldy's' room. ....As I entered, Proc jokingly remarked, "Well, Bill we're big. We ought to catch bullets easily." Little did he realize the significance of that remark?

Proctor was one of the first to enlist, and was sent to the Plattsburgh training camp in May 1917. ..he was developing fast. Overnight, almost, he matured and

was no longer a boy but a man and a soldier. And what a man and a soldier he was! Perhaps because of his height, he had had a slight stoop or slouch. That disappeared! Instead, he stood- all six foot five of him-straight as an arrow.

His kindly good-nature remained, but it was now accompanied by the incisive and decisive air of a man born to lead and trained to command. He was one of the highest rated soldiers in the Plattsburgh camp. He was chosen for reserve captain but chose instead second lieutenant in the regular army to get to France quicker.”

On August 15, 1917, Proctor Gilson, having finished his period of training at Plattsburgh, was appointed 2d lieutenant of Infantry and assigned to company K of the Ninth U.S. Infantry, then at Syracuse. In the same month he was married to Miss Marjorie Phillips of Carthage, New York. On the 17th of September he sailed for France with a detachment of the Ninth infantry on the S.S. Carmania.

From his letters home:

April 16, 1918

I think you see that I did the only thing a fellow with my education could do and give himself a square deal.... I think you see that, whether commissioned officer or private, it was a case of France sooner or later; and I prefer being among the first and doing my bit for the colors with a vengeance to hanging back and being required to serve, and I think also that is your choice.

April 29, 1918

...I wrote you a while ago that I did not mind the shells much, and one does not pay a great deal of attention to them after getting "shell broke", as they call it in the army. The first few shells make one feel rather funny and wonder just where the devil it is going to hit and then, when the big noise is all over, thank God it wasn't any closer. But now we don't pay any particular attention to them unless they are close enough to cause physical discomforts....



Proctor Gilson in France

Patrolling in No Man's Land is also an interesting pastime, and I have already had charge of a couple of patrols for that purpose. It's fine if Fritz doesn't see you out there, but if he does, then the machine guns, and curtains for the parade.

[An interesting pastime! It was about this time, according to a letter from Captain R.R. Brown, that proctor at the risk of his life brought in a severely wounded man from no Man's Land on his back.]

June 12, 1918

For the last two weeks I have seen everything from little hell up to big hell and back down to just common ordinary hell, with several doses of gas thrown in. I got a little shot of it myself when a gas shell split right in front of a platoon I was leading. Half of it did the scissors stunt on either side of us, and I didn't get enough to do any harm...We were thrown in to stop the German drive on the Marne, and we stopped it cold.

June 27, 1918

...Oh, I realize how awful the suspense there must be and how you are worrying. I realized all that before I came into the game, but what else could I do? What else could any fellow with red blood in him do? Hours and hours of silent thought before I took any step convinced me that the honor of our name called for prompt action, and I think I have done as much for the name now as I could have in years of ordinary straight life; and I'm still above ground and going good. Had a bunch of mighty close calls in the last month, I admit. But you know a miss is as good as a mile.



July 5, 1918

...Did you read about the parade in Paris the 4th of July? Yes, I was there, very much there; had command of the detail that represented our battalion in the parade.... it was a wonderful experience, and it seemed that the vast populace drawn up along the streets couldn't cheer enough or throw enough flowers in our path to show their appreciation of what we have done.... After the parade another officer and I got a taxi and did as many points of interest in the city as we could during the afternoon. It was a wonderful and beautiful city, and as much as I like New York, it has New York simply backed off the map. I stopped at the Grand Hotel, and had dinner at the famous Café de Paris.

(The parade became a newsreel. Among the famous faces of Foch, Pershing and other famous ones—was Lieutenant Gilson. His family didn't see the reel until months after his death.)

After 37 days at Chateau-Thierry, the division was withdrawn for a rest in a patch of woods, within sound of the guns, digging trenches to organize a reserve position in case of a break-through. ..The 17th of July was sweltering hot but we hiked all day in heavy marching order... At Midnight, with French soldiers as

guides, we moved cautiously through gaps in the barbed wire of the front lines to form up in No Man's Land.

Standing waist-deep in wheat fields, firing at German riflemen protected by trenches, the volume of our fire and the momentum of our attack alone carried us through. Proctor Gilson was killed in one of these skirmishes, shot down by machine gun fire while leading his platoon.

"I was not near Proctor when he was killed," wrote Lieutenant Brown, "but one of the men from the company who came here yesterday told me a little. The company on July 18th was in the attack between Soissons and Chateau-Thierry. The attack was started at 4:30 A.M. after a very fatiguing day and night without food. The lines had almost reached their final objective when they were stopped just in front of a large ravine. Here proctor, the company commander (Lieutenant Pilkington), and two or three men were huddled together, lying flat on the ground to avoid the rain of machine gun bullets which were coming from the opposite side of the ravine. Suddenly one of the men was wounded, and a few moments later Lieutenant Pilkington was wounded.

"Proctor then said to the other men there, 'Wait a minute and I'll see what can be done'—or words to that effect. He straightened up, apparently oblivious of the bullets and shells around him, and walked away. I think it must have been then that he was killed."

The place where this occurred was just south of a small town named Vierzy. The American Red Cross report says he was buried on the right side of the road leading into Vierzy...."



In his memory the Phi Sigma Kappa Fraternity at St Lawrence University was renamed Proctor Gilson Hall. His parents paid to have a beautiful fireplace installed in the building. In 1922 The Proctor Gilson Post #949 of the American Legion was founded in De Kalb Junction. Named in honor of one of De Kalb's fallen of the First World War.



Gilson Hall at St. Lawrence University today.

Sources:

Robinson, Nelson Lemuel (1931)

St Lawrence University in the World War, 1917-1918; a Memorial.

Canton, NY.