

The American
LEGION
M A G A Z I N E

JULY, 1939

Ah, those
AMERIKANSKIES

By George T. Armitage



**Russian moujiks, 1918-'19 variety,
giving Yank soldiers a lift back
to camp**

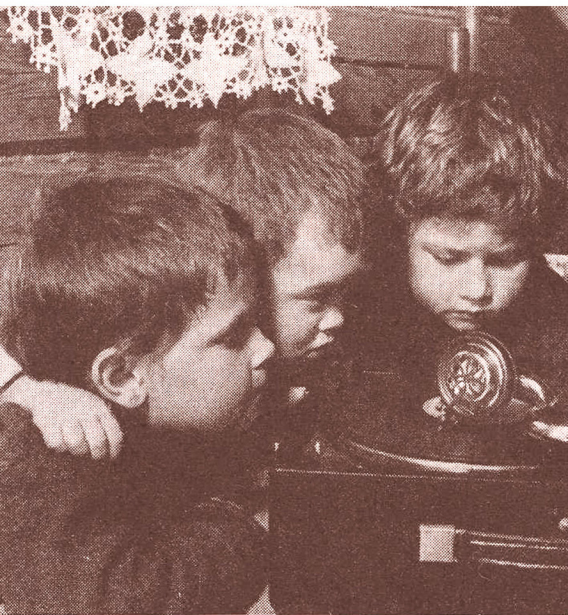
THE straight road to any nation's heart lies through its children. And no one knows this road better than the American doughboy.

I like to think that in every foreign country where our military units have been temporarily stationed many of the populace have an abiding faith in America because of the innate kindness which Uncle Sam's representatives tendered to their young folks. I know in Siberia, where I served with the A. E. F. twenty years ago, the American soldier bombarded the youngsters with chewing gum (not with high explosives dropped sullenly on helpless cities), displayed his Ingersoll for their inspection or allowed them to examine his Springfield.

Occasionally he extended to them the high privilege of driving the mules! He was a pal to them and they liked it; and knowing that the children were happy had a wonderfully thawing effect on the parents. Consequently Mr. Doughboy was *persona grata*, and the American Government was "in right" with the population.

No matter what difficulties our American expedition may have experienced in Siberia with some cut-throat Cossack and guerrilla contingents, the attitude of the common Russian people toward us was unusually cordial, a feeling which no doubt resulted largely from our soldiers' treatment of their children. Of course the soldier didn't make advances to them through design. It came naturally to him, this friendly business, because he is built that way, and the children responded accordingly. Who could resist that broad, bantering Yankee smile, and the big brown fist extended in comradeship?

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The phonograph proved to be a never-ending source of wonder

We weren't in Siberia long before the youngsters began to follow us around, thoroughly enjoying the novelty of our presence. They didn't ask why we came or when we were going—embarrassing, unanswerable questions sometimes put by their politicians—but greeted us uproariously and prepared to monopolize the exciting situation. I often thought, when I saw a gang of them around our barracks or tents, how much it would have meant to us in our own kid-hood days to have had suddenly dropped down in our midst a whole expedition of foreign but friendly soldiers whose pockets were always full of money, and whose every possession was ours to command!

Unfortunately, the educational system following the Russian revolution had suffered in the general disruption of all social, governmental and commercial life in Siberia, and many pupils, especially the boys, would not go to *shkola* unless considerable pressure was exerted. Faced with graver problems of providing life's bare necessities, parents became indifferent, and teachers although competent had little authority.

When a detachment of American soldiers with all their trappings moved into a new location, setting up a camp surrounded with that veil of mystery so appealing to the small boy, no school on earth could have held him. The mechanics of military operation and the rattling of accoutrements was *(Continued on page 44)* better than a circus come to town. And discarded packing cases and bright tin pails emptied by the commissary were coveted highly and fought for. Black

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bread being the children's main diet, there was naturally an awful commotion when occasionally they discovered a tin of jam not entirely empty. And a cup of coffee or a piece of pie from his majesty, the mess sergeant, was a gift from the gods!

Kids are kids the world over. They have similar games; the same imagination, the same enthusiasms. And the American out there had many novel means of entertaining his youthful guests. Baseball, although new to the Siberian boys, was adopted on sight. Having always played with a rubber ball, at the outset the boys stung their hands with our baseball but in a few days they could handle a hot one like a veteran. A husky young pair mixing it up with the boxing gloves was a show in itself. They had little conception of the manly art and lam-basted and grappled like a couple of cub bears.

Our phonograph was also an innovation that never palled. When it was in action the youngsters jammed outside our door, their mouths wide open and literally drinking in every note. At our open-air movies, staged by the Y. M. C. A., the kids arrived early in droves and yelled just as gleefully over the antics of Charlie Chaplin as young America ever did.

The pictures were thrown on a huge sheet some distance from the 'Y' railway car which ran up and down our sector. And inasmuch as the projection showed through the sheet, and the Russians couldn't read English titles anyway, they gathered in a wide circle completely around the screen, those in the back enjoying the feature just as well in reverse. Cookies distributed gratis by the Americans during such entertainments didn't exactly decrease appreciation of the youthful guests.

Probably the children's greatest surprise and treat in Mysovaya, a small inland village on Lake Baikal up in Central Siberia where our infantry company during the summer comprised American troops 'farthest west,' was our fine regimental band which in turn favored each scattered detachment. It was the first time many of the youngsters had ever heard a band and naturally it captivated them. The Pied Piper of Hamelin had nothing on us! At concerts most of them sat immovable and enthralled, but a few stole about among the musicians, timidly touching the big horn or the bass drum to see, perhaps, if it were real!

The Siberian *mahlcheek* like his father effected the military, and almost invariably three parts of his dress were soldier cap, belt with brass plate, and high boots

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—usually several sizes too big and out at the toes. Girls, while not so uniform in costume, sported head scarfs, the richness of which varied in direct proportion to their parents' prosperity. Woolen sweaters and helmets donated by the Red Cross to the especially needy often replaced the scarf. It is a story in itself how popular the Americans became through Red Cross ministrations; caring for the poor and treating the sick children free of charge. The return from Siberia to their parents in Russia proper of 780 refugee children on a specially chartered steamer in charge of Colonel Riley H. Allen of the Red Cross, in normal times editor of the Honolulu *Star-Bulletin*—a trip two-thirds of the way 'round the world across the Pacific and the Atlantic—is an unwritten epic of Uncle Sam's humanitarianism that attains Homeric proportions.

When traveling on troop or Red Cross trains along the trans-Siberian we were invariably greeted at each station by children who had quickly learned of the Americans' generosity. I remember particularly two pretty little girls who, though shy, had a taste for American chocolates which overcame their timidity. A beautiful blonde maiden appeared so often at one station that a Red Cross captain who had traveled the route several times asked the parents if he could adopt her. But from the manner in which mother, or *mamitchka* as we called her, clutched her precious infant it was evident that mother love and pride are common the world over. And speaking of pride, at a concert in camp one night, when we were tossing coins to a crowd of excited urchins, one woman stamped her foot angrily and cried sharply in Russian, "Haven't you any pride? Get up out of the dirt and stop groveling in front of the Amerikanskies!"

Certain organizations in the expedition annexed Russian boys as mascots, and in some cases brought them back to America. Only this year the United States immigration authorities were trying to trace a Russian youth who was thought to have entered America with our Army. Orphans with no semblance of a home or from destitute families were favored, and they rapidly became as loyal to the Stars and Stripes and as amenable to army discipline as the most ambitious lance corporal. At Christmas the Americans arranged special programs for these mascots and friends, showering them with presents and sweets.

One of our best young friends in the village was the barefooted, fur-turbaned messenger who brought our messages telegraphed from regimental headquar-

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ters down the line at Verkhne-Udinsk. He was a handsome, especially likeable erect little fellow, prompt, courteous, and openly an admirer of Americans. He had no objection to posing for his picture, an agreeable trait with most of them, and when we could obtain prints we gave snaps to the subjects, who treasured them highly, never having had their pictures "took" before.

During the summer months, flowers and berries covered the Siberian hills, and the children swamped our men with blueberries, strawberries, raspberries and gooseberries. One afternoon a tiny miss came to the camp entrance to present the sergeant of the guard with a fragrant nosegay of wild flowers which she herself had picked for that purpose in the forest. It was a tender moment for a hard-boiled non-com.

Until the Americans arrived the Russians were not generally addicted to the chewing gum habit, but soon thereafter it rapidly assumed the proportions of a national pastime. At a few inland towns, when we first offered the children chewing gum, its pleasantries had to be demonstrated before they could be inveigled. Then they usually chewed only a moment before swallowing the whole wad with a determined gulp. It was too good to be careless with and apparently safer down than up! But after the initial experiment the children continually demanded it from the soldiers until finally their automatic greeting to an American uniform from buck private to full colonel—they knew no distinction for we were all at least generals to them—was "*Seer dahite*" (Give me gum.) (Continued on page 46) However, they quickly mastered American phraseology, and their "*Spassebo*" shortly turned to "Thank you," which they seldom forgot.

When the soldier went fishing or hunting in Siberia he was often guided by his small friend. And if we officers stepped out for a little pistol practice the kids were on hand to jump at every crack of the .45, just as we did when boys, and to fight for the empty shells. Even if uninvited the children were on hand at every festivity. At a party we gave for the older people of the village, boys and girls gathered during the night and peered so longingly through the windows that at opportune moments we handed out plates of sandwiches and cake, much to their surprised delight. The finest characteristic of Russian children was their frank appreciation and whole-hearted response. The only way we could offend a boy was to call him *dayvachka* (little girl), an insult to the boyhood of any nationality. At this he would flare up

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nationality. At this he would flare up instantly, shouting "*Nyet, nyet!*" (No, no!) at the top of his lungs.

On our last trip down the trans-Siberian we met a Russian hunter who had captured a beautiful faun, which he was carrying home to his family. Seeing how much we admired the baby deer he immediately offered it to us, but we declined with regrets. The faun would have been an appropriate souvenir to take home with our samovars and furs but what a shame to deprive the children of such a pet!

I have no doubt that the bread of human kindness which the Yankee, not only of the Army and Navy but of the Red Cross, the "Y," the railways corps and the diplomatic service, cast upon the waters during those troubled times will return many fold. And I am equally certain that adventurous young Americans who may now be journeying across the Pacific to try their luck in that last great undeveloped land will in turn receive a warm welcome from mature men and women of Siberia who as children were treated with such whole-hearted consideration by their fascinating guests, those amazing Amerikanskies.

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