

# Wiping away the dust

## Find at McGee Center reopens story of Captain Ledbetter

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With dust brushed away, a metal box has provided a glimpse of the Conway of a different period, a look at life here nearly 70 years ago.

Secured in the cornerstone of the McGee Center, the box contained, among other items, a roster of Conway's National Guard unit on Oct. 1, 1929. For well over a half-century, the two-story building at the corner of Oak and Locust streets was an Arkansas National Guard armory. It's not being converted into a new Central Fire Station.

A prominent figure in the Conway

of 1929 and especially the area's military or militia activities between the world wars was Arvor M. Ledbetter.

Now deceased, he's more frequently referred to as Captain Ledbetter. That was his rank for many years, from the mid-1920s to retirement time after World War II. Ledbetter's name heads a roster of Conway National Guard members found in the cornerstone box a several days ago.

Conversations about Ledbetter brought forth snippets of the city's history and even some little-known episodes of national history.

Ledbetter was the commanding officer of Company G, 153rd Infantry Regiment, Arkansas National Guard. This

was a part-time job for him, except when the unit was mobilized into federal service just before World War II broke out.

He was a son of an early Conway settler and farmer, Annon Ledbetter. He attended Hendrix College and served as an officer in both World War I and World War II. He had an insurance business, worked at several federal government jobs, worked as a legislative clerk at Little Rock and wound up his public service with two terms in the Arkansas House of Representatives.

But, said his daughter, Emily Led-

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Arvor M. Ledbetter as a World War I lieutenant.

## World War II

The clouds of global conflict gathered. The threats to the United States were the Germans, the Italians who were on the offensive in Africa and the Japanese who were ripping into China.

Mobilization for the U.S. Army began in 1940, and one of the first units called to active service was Company G. Mobilization often tapped the best-prepared and trained units.

Company G went to Alaska. A Guard unit from Russellville did, too.

"After they were in Alaska a while, Dad was made provost marshal, and his job (after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor) was to round up Japanese civilians around Juneau and Ketchikan and other places up there. The Japanese were operating restaurants, laundries and other businesses," Bill Ledbetter said.

"They have made a lot out of rounding up the Japanese people in California and other places, but in Alaska, the Japanese men had a practice of taking 30 days each year for what they called vacation. When Dad and the soldiers rounded them up after the war started, they found maps, charts, weapons and Japanese naval uniforms in their homes. Those 30-day vacations were really navy training periods for the Japanese."

The Ledbetters, father, uncle and two sons, made it through World War II. Edwin transferred to the Army Air Corps, flew in a B-17 heavy bomber but was shot down in Europe and became a prisoner of war.

Arvor Ledbetter was chief clerk of the Arkansas House of Representatives, then ran for a House seat and won terms in 1956 and 1958. He died in 1975.

Nearly all the troops on the muster roll of Oct. 1, 1929, have died, but most of the names are familiar to longtime Faulkner County residents. Company G was part of the 2nd Battalion of the 153rd Infantry Regiment. Battalion commander was Girard S. McHenry, also Conway-connected.

And commanding officer of the 153rd Infantry Regiment in 1929 was Col. (later brigadier general) Heber L. McAlister. He was to become president of Arkansas State Teachers College, now the University of Central Arkansas, where a campus building bears his name.

unit was organized.

The roster dug from the cornerstone lists 69 men, officers, and noncommissioned officers and privates. Nearly all names include enlistment dates of 1927, 1928 or 1929.

The usual length of an enlistment in that time was three years, but a number of the men listed on the 1929 roster were still with Company G when it was called into full-time service a little more than 10 years later.

The National Guard unit of

Conway in 1929 had a slightly different stature from the one in place today and meeting monthly at a new armory in the city's industrial park.

Oct. 1, 1929, was near a pivotal point in American history. It was midway between global wars. The nation was apparently prospering. Automobiles and electricity were leading a sharp upswing in lifestyles. Yet, about three weeks after the Guard roster was sealed into the cornerstone of the new downtown armory, the stock market crash took place, plunging the

nation and the world into the Great Depression.

Company G was an infantry unit, and its drills were held every Tuesday night. The basic weapon was the Model 1903 Springfield rifle, still regarded as perhaps the finest and most dependable firearm ever adopted by the U.S. military.

The U.S. military used this cartridge from 1906, until the Vietnam era of the 1960s.

Capt. Ledbetter's son, Bill Ledbetter of Conway, said, "Dad was really good at teaching his men how to shoot. For years, Company G had shooters who went to the national matches at Camp Perry, Ohio, and placed high up in that competition. One year I think it

was 1938 or 1939, Harry Stevens of Company G tied with a fellow from the Marines for the overall rifle championship."

Company G won the state rifle matches 10 straight years, competing against other Guard

The summer trips to the Camp Perry matches became family events for the Ledbetters. Arvor Ledbetter's brother, Winfred, was also a member of Company G, and all three of his sons served in the unit under their father.

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When Company G was mobilized in 1940, sons Arvor Jr. and Edwin Ledbetter went with it to Alaska, along with Winfred.

Bill Ledbetter, younger than his brothers, said, "We were at the Camp Perry matches in 1939 when the Germans invaded Poland to start World War II. I had gotten a deal selling newspapers, the Toledo Blade and the Cleveland Plain Dealer, while we were up there." (The matches lasted several weeks.)

"On Sept. 1, the papers put out extras, and everybody wanted to read about the invasion. The papers sold for 3 cents apiece, but nearly everyone just gave me a nickel and walked away. I came home with enough money to buy a new bicycle."

Company G, 153rd Infantry Regiment,  
Arkansas National Guard, roster of Oct. 1, 1929:

## Arvor Medbetter

Oliver H. Burke  
 Trett O. Day  
 Steve E. DeJarnatt  
 Austin Griffith  
 James O. Hiltbrand  
 Ulyes D. Johnson  
 Houston E. Jones  
 Edward A. Long  
 John J. McFarley  
 Roy C. New  
 Francis E. Sharrock  
 Harvey E. Smith  
**Privates**  
 Beldon V. Bass  
 Bobby L. Burns  
 Eugene N. Burton  
 Alfred J. Carter  
 Gilbert H. Carter  
 Carroll M. Cato  
 Harold G. Davis  
 Jim D. DeJarnatt  
 Kermi V. Dunn  
 John C. Finch

Roy L. Gentry

Leroy Gill  
 Herman R. Gray  
 Luster L. Gray  
 Jack Henderson  
 Philip C. Howe  
 Archie E. Kelsey  
 Aubrey A. Lane  
 Winfred A. Lebel  
 Charles G. Leverett  
 Jeff D. Moore  
 Marvin M. New  
 Garvin I. Nowell  
 Richard M. Pence  
 David D. Robertson  
 Gray A. Sellers  
 Charles H. Simpson  
 Thomas D. Stapleton  
 John M. Stone  
 Alton H. Thomas  
 Olive A. Ward  
 Everett N. White  
 Louie M. White  
 Tommie E. White

## Ledbetter

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better Montgomery of Conway, "He just lived at the armory."

Ledbetter received a commission as a lieutenant in 1917, when the United States was pulled into World War I. He didn't see overseas duty but was stationed for a while in Ohio, where he met and later married a Red Cross nurse.

After the war, the one that was supposed "to end all wars," the nation's civilian military activities underwent change.

### A trained militia

It was civilians taking up arms that overthrew the British yoke and won independence back there in 1776-81. The need for a militia was written into the nation's constitution. Yet, efforts to create soldiers had to be started from scratch time and again. It happened in the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Civil War on both sides, the Spanish-American War and in World War I.

This wasn't sufficient, the nation's leaders said after Armistice ended World War I on Nov. 11, 1918. A trained local militia was needed. A result was

## Letter shows soldier's respect

When Capt. Arvor M. Ledbetter died in 1975, a former soldier under his command in Conway's National Guard unit wrote this letter to the editor of the Log Cabin Democrat:

*Dear Editor:*

*Pride was his motto. He took pride in himself, his men and their accomplishments. He instilled pride in his men; taught them to present an outstanding appearance and perform a job they would be proud of.*

*He gave his all and expected your best in return. His ideals were high, and his respect was well recognized. He was a leader who was easy to follow and will always be remembered by the men who were associated with him.*

*A true-blue American has given the best example for others to follow. They are few and far between that command more respect than Capt. A.M. Ledbetter. His memory will always be cherished.*

*A former member of old Company G, Arkansas National Guard.*

Royce C. Hall,  
Conway



State Representative Arvor M. Ledbetter, 1957-1961.