

LENA GUILBERT BROWN FORD

A silver lining through
dark clouds

By Kelly Anderson Gregg

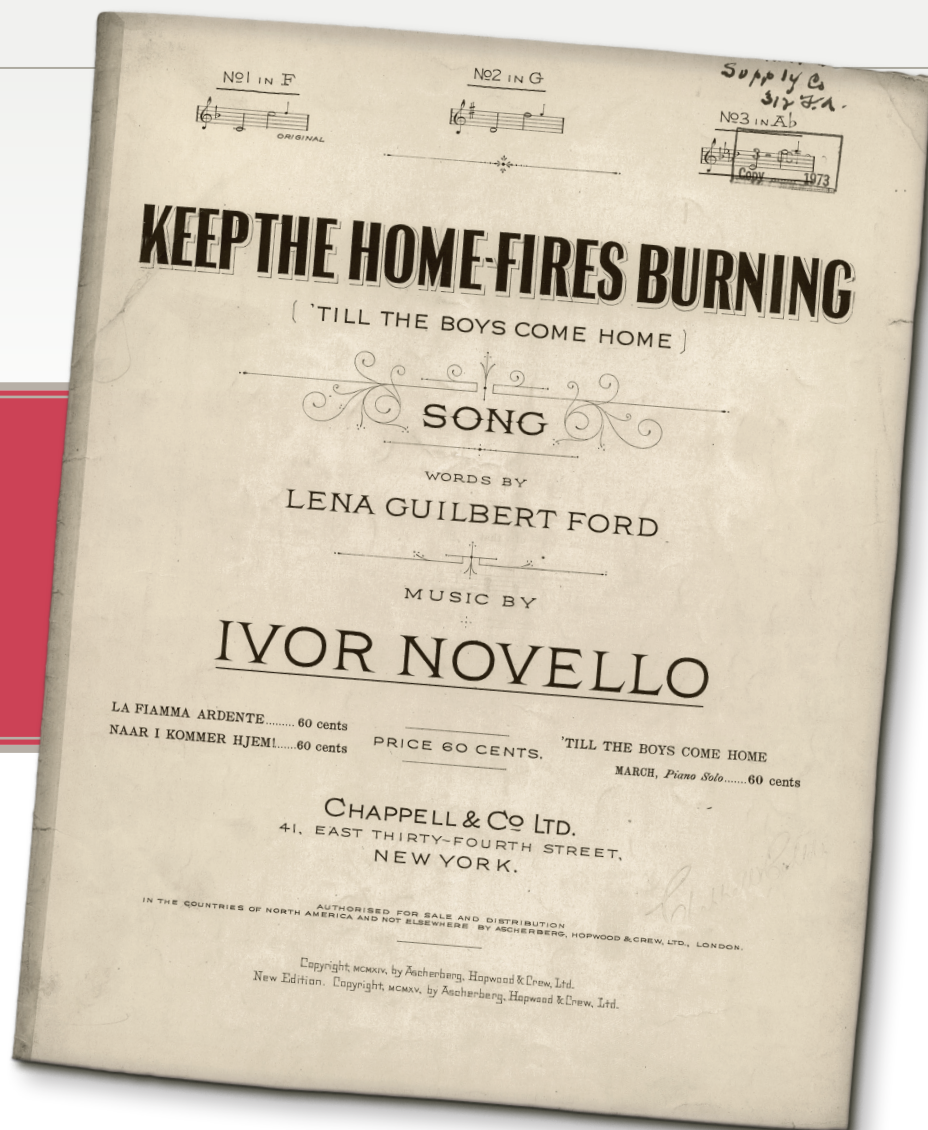
From the oil boom towns of Western Pennsylvania to the sophisticated streets of London, Lena Guilbert Brown Ford's life was marked by poetic extremes. Her legacy is one of triumph and tragedy, from writing one of the most famous songs of the Great War to becoming a victim of its violence. And it all began in Oil Creek Township, Venango County.

In the late 1860s, Titusville and the surrounding area was a forest of oil derricks and drill sites. The initial fervor created by Edwin Drake's first successful commercial well in 1859 was winding down but there was still money to be made. Perhaps this opportunity is what brought oil merchant James Brown and his wife Antoinette to Oil Creek Township, about five miles outside of Titusville. It was there around 1868 that their only daughter, Lena, was born.¹ Her stay was not long; by 1870, the Browns were back in their home state of New York, living in Elmira.² Lena attended Elmira College, where she displayed an aptitude for poetry.³ After completing her studies, she married local doctor Henry Hale Ford, but the marriage was unhappy and the couple divorced.⁴ Lena took their only son to Europe to pursue a new life.

Lena Guilbert Brown Ford, 1888.
Chemung County Historical Society.



Sheet music cover for
"Keep the Home Fires
Burning," 1915.
LoC 100008252.



Lena, her son Walter, and eventually Lena's mother Antoinette settled in London, where Lena quickly entered the literary scene. When war engulfed Europe in 1914, composer Ivor Novello contacted Lena with a song that needed lyrics. Lena's words for the tune captured the tense excitement and patriotism felt by the British at the beginning of the war. "Keep the Home-Fires Burning ('Till the Boys Come Home)" sold over one million copies, and its hopeful spirit made it into one of the war's most enduring songs.⁵

Though her lyrics were bright, Lena's untimely death was bleak. On the evening of March 12, 1918, the poet was visiting a friend when an air raid warning sounded. Though her friend urged her to stay, Lena hurried home to check on her family.⁶ That night, a German bomb struck Lena's house. While their maid was able to pull Antoinette to safety, no one could reach Lena or Walter. Mother and son suffocated under the weight of their own home, the first American casualties to die in a London air raid.⁷ Her contemporaries were shocked at her death and eulogized Lena's writings, along with her efforts to

help wounded soldiers coming home from the front.⁸ As she wrote in her most popular song, "There's a silver lining, through the dark clouds shining."

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¹ Venango County Historical Society, *Venango County 2000: The Changing Scene*, vol. 3 (Franklin, Pa.: Seneca Printing, 2013), 55.

² 1870 U.S. census, Chemung County, N.Y., population schedule, Elmira, pg. 12, dwelling 101, family 101, J.L. and N.A. Brown; digital image, FindMyPast.com, accessed 16 September 2017, <http://findmypast.com>; 1880 U.S. census, Chemung County, N.Y., population schedule, Elmira, pg. 2,

dwelling 19, family 20, James L. and Antoinette Brown; digital image, FindMyPast.com, accessed 16 September 2017, <http://findmypast.com>.

³ Rachel Dworkin, "Keep the Home Fires Burning," Chemung County Historical Society, <http://chemung44.rssing.com/browser.php?indx=53078565&item=1>, accessed 10 September 2017.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Martin Pegler, *Soldiers' Songs and Slang of the Great War* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2014).

⁶ Alice Ziska Snyder and Milton Valentine Snyder, *Paris Days and London Nights* (Boston: E.P. Dutton, 1921), 40-41.

⁷ "Maid Heroine in Bomb Tragedy," *Chicago Tribune*, 13 March 1918.

⁸ Frederick Lents (president, Elmira College), "Letter to the Editor," *The Stars and Stripes*, 21 March 1919.