

Bayfield During World War I

By David Gillians

The small village of Bayfield and surrounding farming area felt the effects of the devastating events that were taking place in Europe when Canada entered World War I. Communications were crude and residents only had newspapers and the few telephones in the area for their news but they were drawn into a drama that would change their lives forever.

According to Ethel Poth in the book, 'The Village of Bayfield 1876-1985'; "In Bayfield young men immediately began signing up and the ladies got busy with their knitting needles. Feelings ran high and I can still see the huge bonfire in the Square, burning Kaiser Wilhelm in effigy."

Lucy Woods Diehl remembered what it was like in Bayfield in her Clinton News Record column from September 11, 1967; "In February 1916, a company of the 161st Battalion marched from Clinton to Bayfield and was billeted overnight. There was a recruiting rally in the Town Hall at night at which two of the speakers were Colonel Barry Combe and Medical Officer Major W.J. Shaw, Clinton. In an impromptu program, Jimmy Roualt played the mouth organ and did step dancing.

Two young Lieutenants staying overnight with Dr. Ninian W. Woods and family made a dash from the breakfast table next morning when the call to fall in was sounded. One was Rex Cluff but the other's name eludes Lucy's memory.

Lucy thinks of the little group of Bayfield men who enlisted about that time: Harold Brandon, Allen MacDonald, Wilfred Toms, Malcolm Toms, James Roualt, Peter Clark, Hugh R. MacKay, Walter Westlake, William Boyce, Frank Boyce, Kenneth Currie, William J. Elliott.

The store on Main Street formerly owned and operated by Mrs. Lottie (Martin) Campbell (Walter Johnson's bakery burned down in October 1935) was secured as headquarters for this group. Lucy has been told that Lieutenant Knox Mair was in charge.

They drilled each day on Clan Gregor Square and in the Town Hall when the weather was inclement. About the 24th of May, they went to Clinton, from there to London, and later to Camp Borden.

Arthur Clark, an Englishman who moved his family to Bayfield from Hensall enlisted in the 161st. Also signing up were Leonard Heard in Clinton and Lorne Armstrong, (Goshen Line, Stanley Township) in Seaforth. Abe C. Brandon transferred to the 161 from the 110th Battalion.

William J. Elliott received honourable discharge from Camp Borden being medically unfit for active duty overseas.

How proud the villagers were of the men who were going forth to fight for freedom! And when their insignia changed, how the school girls vied with each other for a discarded Maple Leaf!

Some men had been attracted to join the forces by the pay of \$1.10 a day and everything found. At a time when it was not easy to find work, it was, to say the least, steady employment, as well as the honour of patriotic duty.

The 161st embarked on the troop ship "Lapland" and sailed from Halifax on October 29, 1916. Arriving in England, they were stationed at Lower Dibgate and then went on to Shorecliffe Heights. In December 1916 two drafts of 250 men each were sent to the Western Front and in the fall of 1917 the proud 161st Battalion was broken up at Witley Camp in Surrey, to reinforce Four Divisions of Canadian Expeditionary Force.

The men were all separated. Harold Brandon and Peter Clark were delegated to a Labour Battalion. Peter Clark was not considered physically fit for such heavy work and was sent back to Canada where he received an honourable discharge.

Other volunteers serving overseas connected with Bayfield included Dr. Garnet S. Atkinson, Royal Canadian Army Dental Corps, Roy Dewar, Sauble Line, Stanley Township, Ted Adley, an Englishman working for Donald Galbraith, J. Harold Pollock with the 48th Highlanders, Toronto, Wilbur Erwin with the 142nd Battalion, Harvey Currie, the 33rd Battalion, Lewis H.D. MacLeod with the 91st St. Thomas, Robert MacLeod and Percy Johnston, 71st, Guelph, Walter Johnson with the 4th C.M.R.'s Toronto (he was captured on the Somme and spent 34 months in a German prison camp.)

Nursing Sister, A. Maude Stirling, #4 University Base Hospital from Toronto, (mentioned in dispatches, she was awarded the Royal Red Cross by King George V at Buckingham Palace)

Victor Evans with the R.C.A.F. was killed when hit by the propeller of his plane at Toronto, April 25, 1918.

William R. Elliott, Harold A. King and John Guilford (an Englishman working for William J. Scotchmer) reached England in the summer of 1918.

There aren't many left now to tell the story of those days. Percy Johnston, Harold Pollock and Abe C. Brandon reside in Goderich. And of the little group of the 161st Battalion whose initial drilling commenced in Bayfield, there are but three veterans:

- Frank Boyce on the Goshen Line, Stanley Township, was transferred to the 58th Battalion, 3rd Division. He was hit about the

eye and leg at Vimy Ridge. Later he was gassed at Passchendale, returned to Canada and was repatriated in 1918.

- Malcolm Toms serving with the 18th Battalion in France was wounded at Amiens, August 8, 1918 in the shoulder and back. He was in hospital in Rouen, France, for three weeks, transferred to Aldershot for a month, Bramley for a month and Basingstoke to wait for transportation to Canada. Nursing Sister A.M. Stirling, RRC was on duty in that hospital at the time and visited Malcolm. He came home on a hospital ship, landing on December 23, 1918, and was taken to Victoria Hospital on March 17, 1919-a grand St. Patrick's Day!
- Walter M. Westlake was wounded at Arras, August 28, 1918. The two fingers of his left hand were taken off. He spent four weeks in a British base hospital in France, two weeks of which he was unconscious from Scarlet Fever. He went from it to Shorncliffe Hospital, England, then had leave and was sent to Buxton to await passage home. He arrived here January 27, 1919. Walter served in France with the Second Canadian Mounted Rifles, B.C."

Harry Baker was an 11 year old boy when he watched some of the older boys march off to war. In his book 'My Memoirs', Baker wrote; "A lot of local boys went to join up. Alan MacDonald one of the boys I knew well. Had a very quarrelsome father and one night he and Alan got into a fight and the next day Alan enlisted and was killed August 8th, 1918. Wilfred Toms and Ken Currie were also killed; they were all friends of mine."

"Kenny Currie was just sixteen when he enlisted, Harvey, his brother too was killed and left poor Mrs. Currie with four daughters to raise as her husband had died with pneumonia a few years previous. He had been ice fishing and fell through the ice and instead of coming home, proceeded to set his nets as he needed food, but it cost him his life.. How poor Mrs. Currie raised the children, I will never know, no children's allowance in those days."

The residents of Bayfield didn't just wait complacently for information from Europe. They wanted to take an active role. The Bayfield Patriotic Society was formed to raise money and to send knitting and other comforts to the troops.

From the Clinton New Era 1914, October 5 "Citizens of our town deemed it advisable to form an armed corps called the "Huron Home Guards" and a very enthusiastic meeting was held in the Town Hall on Friday evening last when the following officers were elected by the public: Dr. N.W. Woods, President; Rev. Alfred Macfarlane (Secretary); Robert Bailey, Banker-Treasurer; Lewis Thomson, Captain; Dr. W.G. Manning Smith; George Greenslade, William Mustard, Hugh MacKay, a recruiting

committee. The required number of thirty already have enlisted, while recruits are still coming in so that a corps of fifty is likely to be our enrollment.”

For such a small area, the numbers are surprising. According to Ethel Poth’s article in *The Village of Bayfield History 1876-1985*; “Two nursing sisters- Misses Maud Sterling and Frances Evans and 45 young men from Bayfield and area served overseas of whom 10 lost their lives before the end of the war in 1918.

The Patriotic Society erected a bronze tablet in the Town Hall (now inset in the Memorial C, Clan Gregor Square) bearing the names of those who made the supreme sacrifice in the war 1914-1918

- Harvey Currie
- Kenneth Currie
- Wilfred Toms
- Robert MacLeod
- Allan MacDonald
- Victor Evans
- Edward Adley
- Arthur Clarke

These are the men, together with those lost in the War 1939-45 whose memory we honour especially each year as Remembrance Day comes around.