

Historical society's three-part World War One exhibition wraps with the end and aftermath



By Brock Weir

William John Mugford was probably like so many other Aurora men of his generation when he signed up in the name of King & Country to fight for Canada in the First World War: imbued my patriotism more than a little sense for adventure.

But, again like so many others of his generation, he returned a broken man.

By the diagnosis of the day, the Sisman Shoe Factory employee came back home suffering from shell shock, having to start what was essentially a new life with treatments that only understood the most superficial intricacies of his malady.

His story was one almost lost to the sands of time, but one that is brought to life once again by the Aurora Historical Society in their final look at the First World War.

WW1: Canada, Star of the Empire is on now at Hillary House National Historic Site.

It is the third of the Aurora Historical Society's three-part examination of The Great War, which launched to mark the centenary of the conflict in 2014.

While the first two exhibitions focused on the lead-up to the war and the war itself, the latest show gathers up local artefacts and, perhaps more importantly, very personal local stories to illustrate how Victory was achieved and the lingering aftershocks of the conflict.

?We go through various aspects of the war, including underage soldiers, the effect of shell shock on soldiers, and we dive into that,? explains curator Erika Mazanik. ?William John Mugford basically, for the rest of his life, felt like something was after him. We found his medical records and it was quite sad. He was basically under heavy shelling and artillery fire for two straight years in the trenches, and that is going to have its effect on anybody. Part of the problem was when he returns home, that doesn't just go away. Because they felt shell shock was a physical ailment and literally meant your brain was rattling around inside your head, they couldn't prove that happened to you, they didn't believe you that it was a war problem; they thought you were weak and it was just your problem. They didn't give you pensions or anything for it. He was really not given any support in that area.

?He was originally working at the Sisman Shoe Factory and originally had to go. He became a labourer after the war, but we don't know if that is because Sisman wouldn't hire him just in general or because he couldn't do the skilled work of a machine maker. We know he died in the 1950s and seemed to have never quite recovered after the war. That is a common story after the war with soldiers. That is why in the 1920s, prohibition was such a big deal because they weren't allowed to talk about it, they were told they were weak if they had it and they drank. For me, that was completely understandable for what they had been through, but others tried to shut that down.?

Uncovering the stories of individual soldiers over the course of the last four years is something Ms. Mazanik describes as the ?pinnacle? of her work.

The fruits of her labour are seen not only in the exhibition itself, but in a large chart now on display on the second floor of Hillary House representing her best efforts to make a comprehensive list of every single Auroran who took part in the conflict.

It is as complete as possible, she says, but there is still the possibility that there is a name omitted, or a name misspelled due to inconsistencies in contemporary data ranging from enlistment papers to local media reports.

‘If someone sees a name missing, please tell me, I’d love to know,’ she urges. ‘I think the fact some of them haven’t really been remembered ever or in many years and haven’t had people looking at their personal stories, to be able to take even a little bit of time I had to look at each of them was really meaningful. I really felt a connection to some of them. These were people in our community and I wanted to share their story.’

As the Aurora Historical Society’s look at the First World War is at its conclusion it will, in some ways, carry on next year as the Society launches its new exhibition. Keeping the plight of Mr. Mugford in mind, the Society will devote 2019 to a closer look at the history of Mental Health.

‘I’ve always thought that was an interesting area that can have some modern practical applications,’ says Ms. Mazanik, adding she would love to have community input on the program as well. ‘I have been in contact with people in the mental health field and people who have had personal stories and trying to not only share the history of the institutions, terminology and how far we have come, but current resources for people to use.’

‘I think mental health is always an issue we have to work on to de-stigmatize and have people find the right terminology because sometimes people just don’t know the right words that are acceptable anymore. The first institution for mental health in Ontario was called the Provincial Lunatic Asylum. Before that, anyone who was ill just went to jail because they didn’t know where else to put them. We’ll start in that area and see how far we have come and point out where we have left to go.’

Hillary House National Historic Site is located at 15372 Yonge Street and is open Wednesday to Sunday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.