

Vimy Centenary to be marked with Community Observance



By Brock Weir

This week, tens of thousands of Canadians will be making the pilgrimage to a few small acres of Canadian soil in France to mark the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge.

The decisive Canadian victory, which left over 3,000 dead and a further 7,000 wounded, has come to be seen as a turning point in forging the Canadian national identity, and the thousands making the trek will be joined by the Prince of Wales, the Governor General, and Princes William and Harry to remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice.

Here at home, a community commemoration with a focus on Aurora's own Vimy Ridge stories will be held Wednesday, April 12, and brought together through the collaboration of the Aurora Historical Society, Aurora Museum and Archives, and host Aurora Cultural Centre.

Featuring songs of the era performed by Doug Balfour and Suzi Weston, readings of letters brought to life by local cadets, and a showcase of newly discovered artefacts from one of the Aurora boys who made the ultimate sacrifice, the evening event is open to all, free of admission, thanks to a community grant from the Town of Aurora.

With the Aurora Cultural Centre bringing in the performers, who have a long-time association with the Sunnybrook Veterans' Hospital, the Aurora Historical Society, which is in the midst of mounting its second of three exhibitions tied into the First World War and the Hillary Family, and the Aurora Museum and Archives, which is bringing to light the Vimy stories of other local boys, the organizers focused on bringing all these components together in a solemn commemoration.

Bringing in a local perspective makes this really meaningful, says the Cultural Centre's Jane Taylor.

As the performers and cadets take the stage, a focal point at the front of the room will be a heavy wooden cross from the Hillary House collection. Before it was replaced with the stone marker now in place in the Canadian War Cemetery in France, it once marked the burial spot of Aurora's Robert Stuart Hillary, who was fatally wounded at Vimy Ridge just days before the main action.

There is a lot of debate about Vimy amongst historians on whether or not the Battle was significant or if we have over-glorified it, says Historical Society curator Erika Mazanik. At the time, I don't think it was seen as this nation-defining moment we see now.

But we have been able to build our national identity around it. It was the first time Canadians from all across the country worked together. People forget we were such a young country at the time. We were only 50 years a country in 1917 and it was still a very different identity.

Ms. Taylor, whose elder daughter will be among the expected 10,000 gathered at Vimy on April 8, says everyone responds to events like these in their own different ways, informed by their own experiences and contexts.

I think we have come up with an event that is going to have touchstones for all kinds of people, whether you love to listen to the spoken word, or whether you're someone who really responds to the visual, or if music is that thing that transports you, I think we have a trifecta here that is going to lend an understanding of what it was like to be a very young person then, she says, noting Robert Stuart Hillary signed up to serve King and Country the day after his 20th birthday and died less than a year later.

?Between those elements, listening, watching, and engaging through word, you might recognize that you know someone who is 20 years old, think of them on the field of battle holding the hand of their chaplain and dying. With families that have such local resonance, I think it really deepens the understanding for our own community about what was given at that time overseas.?

A Reflection on Vimy: 100 Years Later ? A Commemoration of a Defining Moment in Canadian History, Told Through A Unique Local Lens takes place at the Aurora Cultural Centre on Wednesday, April 12 from 7 ? 9 p.m. Admission is free.