

A country comes of age and a life comes full circle in new exhibition

By Brock Weir

Many historians cite the Battle of Vimy Ridge as the time Canada came of age as a nation.

For the thousands of young men who took up arms to fight for King and Country it was the time they too came of age.

Aurora's own Robert Stuart Hillary was one such young man and as Canadians marked the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge this month, his life came full circle as the Aurora Historical Society launched their new exhibition WW1: Road to Vimy and the Middle Years.

Formally opened at Hillary House on April 4, putting the finishing touches on the second of their three-part series on the Great War was an emotional experience for Erika Mazanik, Curator for the Aurora Historical Society.

“It is always exciting after working for so long to have it finally come together and have it physically in front of you, but it was very emotional as I physically put together some of Stuart's items in his childhood bedroom, including the cross from his grave and baby pictures,” says Ms. Mazanik of the eldest son in the Hillary family who lost his life at Vimy Ridge just days before the height of the battle.

Robert Stuart Hillary's childhood bedroom pays a very personal tribute to the scion of the family who once called Aurora's only National Historical Site Home, showcasing his letters home, letters received from his family, his passion for photography, and even his interest in beekeeping, which once made the Hillary's western property line a hive of activity.

Stuart's legacy is not the only one showcased, however, as the Society casts a wider lens on what was once dubbed “the war to end all wars.”

“A lot of times people tend to just see the numbers of the battle, the military statistics, that this is what happened and this is how much land was taken, a lot of dates, numbers and places, and it gets lost that every single one of those men who died in that horrible war was a part of somebody's family, someone's friend, and to give that close-up on what they were really like and what they were like as real people is really important to us.”

The Hillary House ballroom focuses on the Battle of Vimy Ridge itself. Ms. Mazanik says she wanted to convey the sheer amount of effort that went not just into the four days of battle, but the groundwork beforehand and the legacy it left behind

“For Canadians, it was the first time all divisions worked together at once,” she says. “We really wanted the Canadian nationalism to come out and be seen in that,” she says. “In all three phases of our exhibition, we will be taking the stories of individual soldiers and following the threads in all the different stories. We want the mood of the exhibits to follow through from one to the other, so that you feel the moods and emotions that were experienced by people living through the war and the feelings felt back at home.

“At the start of our first exhibition, we have this very triumphant spirit of, “We're at war and we get to go on this grand adventure! Look at our uniforms! Look at our weapons! Look at the places we will get to go and see. By the end of the first exhibit you get to a more sombre tone with the first Auroran who passed away, then you go through to the Second Battle of Ypres, mustard gas and trench warfare. You see the setting in of reality from what they first thought. Now, in the second exhibition you're in the reality. We're in the trenches, we're in the mud, we're at the Battle of Vimy Ridge.

“Then, our third exhibit will continue that thread towards victory, so we will have the mixture of that triumphant victory, this is done, we won, but also the sadness of how many men we lost in the war.”

WW1: Road to Vimy and the Middle Years is on now through November to admission by donation. For times, associated programming, and special prices for tours, visit www.aurorahs.com or call 905-727-8991.