

Armistice through a local lens: Cultural groups to mark 100th anniversary with poignant evening

By Brock Weir

The signing of the Armistice nearly 100 years ago was a time of celebration across the country, including here in Aurora.

But, while it was a day to celebrate the fact that the four years of hardship that typified the First World War was now at an end, it was also a time of reflection on the more than 200 local residents, two of whom were nursing sisters, who served.

Next Wednesday, November 7, this double-edged sword of joy and sorrow will be marked with an evening of readings, songs, and important local artefacts at Armistice Day: 100 Years of Remembrance.

A partnership between the Aurora Cultural Centre, the Aurora Museum & Archives, and the Aurora Historical Society, Armistice is billed as a "commemoration of a defining time in Canada's history through a unique local lens."

"With the First World War, even though there has been all this commemoration, it is still less familiar to people than the Second World War, for instance," says Erika Baird, the newly-minted Executive Director of the Aurora Historical Society, who was known as Erika Mazanik prior to her marriage last month. "Different sacrifices were made. People see it as this war that happened over in Europe, but it had such a strong impact everywhere in Canada, and in small towns like Aurora."

Over the past few years, the Aurora Historical Society (AHS) has mounted no less than three exhibitions based on the centenary of the First World War. Ms. Baird's efforts included compiling a master list of just how many locals went off to fight. Her total from Aurora, and surrounding communities that are now part of Aurora, is 260, from a population pool of just over 1,000 at the time.

"It dramatically changed the Town and we have descendants of those families here in Aurora," she says.

Adds Michelle Johnson of the Aurora Museum & Archives: "But I don't think we can really fully capture how much [the Armistice] meant to the people at that time. We were aware when we were brainstorming about this program how, after the war, there was that feeling of elation [and that will be reflected at this event] with higher energy music selections, but then we will also reflect back on the process of memorializing the war and our own local context with our own War Memorial process and how that was built and how those two emotions played off each other at the time."

Armistice Day: 100 Years of Remembrance will be based on a program hosted by the three groups in April 2017 to mark the centenary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge, including readings from local cadets and period music supplied by Suzi Wesson and Doug Balfour.

"When we had our closing meeting after Vimy, we were all really humbled by how successful it was and the overall feeling of the night," says Ms. Johnson. "It wasn't really a question of 'How can we do something?'"

"It was a question of, 'What's next?'" continues Jane Taylor of the Aurora Cultural Centre. "I know from my perspective, the amount of feedback we got afterwards, because we all do so many events, sometimes it is hard to keep up, but just the aggregate amount of feedback we got from the community to say how much they enjoyed and appreciated the event, [and that] bolstered what we wanted to do."

Unlike the Vimy commemorations which, with the exception of primary materials like letters and photographs sent from the front back home by members of the Hillary Family, Armistice will draw on a wealth of primary documents from the museum that will be read aloud. Further building on the community connection, Bill Fleury, a scion of the local industrial family who took a leading role in the local war effort "as well as the way the war was commemorated in Aurora after 1918" will read letters from his forebears.

"We have a very strong Legion in our Town and the Cadet Corps who will be participating that night as well, reading some documents," says Ms. Taylor. "I am reminded of this every day when I drive down Yonge Street and I see the incredible [Remembrance Day] banners the Legion has put up with portraits [of local service personnel] and I just think, this is a Town that actually hasn't forgotten. You will see that in the speed in which they built our Cenotaph, which we will be talking about on Wednesday night. It is completely bred into the bone of this Town and it just makes sense for us, as organizations, to reflect on our community and our strengths."

Armistice Day: 100 Years of Remembrance, will take place at the Aurora Cultural Centre this Wednesday, November 7, at 7 p.m.

Produced in partnership with the Centre, the Aurora Historical Society, and the Aurora Museum & Archives, the event is free thanks to funds from the Town of Aurora's Recreation & Culture Grant.