

Community connections, a mother's story highlighted in Armistice anniversary



By Brock Weir

Dressed from head to toe in black bombazine, Jane Campbell struck a lonely figure as she stood over her son's grave. Master Corporal Ken Campbell was one of twenty-four Aurora residents killed in the First World War and Mrs. Campbell was one of the first local mothers able to make the trip overseas to pay tribute to a son who gave his life for King & Country. It is an image that might have receded from Aurora's collective consciousness in the 97 years since the photograph was taken, but it will live on in the memories of many residents who turned out last Wednesday for Armistice: 100 Years of Remembrance. Held at the Aurora Cultural Centre and produced by the Centre, the Aurora Museum & Archives and the Aurora Historical Society, Armistice Day: 100 Years of Remembrance drew community connections through primary documents like letters and postcards sent home from the front to contemporary newspaper articles.

The event was attended by Mayor Geoff Dawe and Mayor-Elect Tom Mrakas, along with Councillor John Abel and Councillor-Elect Rachel Gilliland, and featured these stories brought to life by members of the Queen's York Rangers Army Cadets, live patriotic music performed by Suzi Wesson and Doug Balfour, and artefacts from the Museum and Historical Society's collections.

In addition, Mrs. Campbell's story was highlighted by Bill Fleury, a descendant of one of Aurora's founding families, whose great uncle Herbert Fleury accompanied Jane to Europe ? three years before The Great War broke out.

?In the years just before World War One, Herbert Fleury travelled to Europe every year, specifically for Paris, where his wife Lela and daughter Marguerite lived while Marguerite was studying music,? Bill recalled. ?On May 21, 1911, Herbert was standing at the top of the Eiffel Tower with Lela's cousin Jane Campbell who lived with them in Aurora and had travelled with them. As they were about to return to Aurora, Herbert wrote to his brother's wife in Toronto about these happy times:

?Jane and I are at the summit of the Eiffel Tower. She enjoying the view greatly. Have had cloudy and cold weather for days but just at this minute it is brighter than for days, there being some sunshine. Jane wears her new Navy suit and new hat and is really a swell. My time grows short and there is much to see and do. Last evening, we dined with friends of Lela's and had a delightful time, a good dinner, and most vivacious people. One more Sunday here. The next on the sea and the following at home. Love to you all, Herbert.'?

In July of 1914, Herbert was once again on his way to France to visit his wife and daughter. Shortly after he set sail, his itinerary was reported in the Aurora Banner, which noted the well-known resident wasn't expected to return until October.

That, of course, all changed in August of that year when war was officially declared. The Fleurys heard the news while travelling south together en route to Switzerland and they hastily returned to Paris.

The patriarch was able to secure passage back home to Canada from France by August 28, but his wife and daughter had to take a more circuitous route, first heading to England, travelling northward to Scotland and then catching a ship back to Canada at Glasgow.

At war's end, Mr. Fleury's regular trips across the Atlantic resumed. This time these trips were not merely to see his family or

conduct business; they were also missions on behalf of Aurora residents who lost a loved one in the war who were unable, for whatever reason, to make the arduous journey themselves.

?Early in the 1920s, he served as kind of a personal witness for some Aurora families visiting the graves of their soldier sons buried in the cemeteries of Flanders,? said Bill Fleury. ?A total of 24 men from Aurora, a town of well under 2,000 residents had died.

Tragically, Major Ken Campbell MC, the son of Jane Campbell, who had spent much of his youth in Herbert's own household was one. In 1921, Jane accompanied Herbert to Ken's gravesite. There's a photo of her stricken and dressed in black mourning clothes laying a wreath of flowers at his rough wooden cross, a cross surrounded by many others in the devastated landscape.

?Upon his return to Aurora in the fall of 1921, Herbert gave a personal talk with illustrations on the Flanders battlefields. In 1924 and again in 1925, he visited some of the graves of Aurora boys. To the family of Private Ernest Rose, Herbert brought back some earth, a flower and a photograph from their son's grave.?

The names of both Kenneth Campbell and Ernest Rose are immortalized on the stone cenotaph at which over 1,000 people gathered Sunday morning to pay tribute to the fallen.

