

Open a door on forgotten chapters of Aurora's history



By Brock Weir

As people with any living memory of it dwindle to a precious few, the First World War is quickly becoming a forgotten chapter of Canada's past, but the Aurora Historical Society aims to make this history come alive again this Saturday at Doors Open Aurora.

Doors Open Aurora, which gets underway at over 15 sites across Aurora on August 20, is an opportunity to see inside some very public institutions as well some more private corners of Aurora's heritage.

While the Hillary House National Historic site is a regular feature on the self-guided tour, this year they are doing something different with the official opening of 'World War One: For King and Country', the first of three exhibitions mounted by the Aurora Historical Society to mark the centenary of what was supposed to be 'The War to End All Wars.'

This inaugural exhibit, which runs from August 20 to Remembrance Day, November 11, covers the prelude to the First World War through to the middle of 1915 when Aurora suffered its first wartime casualty.

'The First World War doesn't seem as thought of as the Second,' says curator Erika Mazanik, who has made this exhibition a wide community event, pulling together artefacts not just from the Aurora Historical Society, but items and photographs from the Aurora Museum and Archives, the King Township Museum, and Newmarket's Elman W. Campbell Museum to make it a reality. 'I hope people come in and realise the impact it had on the local community. It wasn't just something that happened 100 year ago in another country, but people don't seem to really think it really impacted here as it didn't physically happen in Canada. But, it did happen in this community. I really want people to realise it wasn't just something far off and forgettable; it definitely made its impact here strongly.'

The Aurora Historical Society began laying the groundwork for the exhibition last year, aiming to tell stories of people well beyond the Hillary Family that called the Society's base home until the early 1990s.

It charts the stories of hometown boy Major Wilfred Ferrier Petermann, who served in various Highlander regiments before being killed at the Battle of the Somme in 1916, of Edward Malloy, Aurora's first casualty, killed just before the Battle of Ypres, and of the Lloyd Brothers who saw three of their four sons off to fight for king and country, with just two returning home.

Still, the Hillary family figures in the local World War One tapestry, and will be featured more prominently in the second exhibition set to open in April to coincide with the centenary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge.

One of the things that got me the most is a telegram sent to Stewart Hillary's mother when he passed away [at Vimy], says Ms. Mazanik. We received it only last year from a family member and I had to push away the artefacts because I got a little emotional and I didn't want to cry on them. It was really impactful, especially as we have some of his childhood things here as well.

World War One: For King and Country opens at Hillary House National Historic Site this Saturday at 10 a.m., part of a series of ongoing activities hosted by the Aurora Historical Society throughout the day, including tennis on the north lawn and Discovery Days for Kids. For more information, visit www.aurorahs.com.