

TIME TRAVELLER'S DIARY: The Threads of Time

By Rachel Dice

Volunteer, Aurora Museum & Archives

Red is a very bright colour. It is the colour pumping through your veins, and it is the colour of the uniform you wear as you dress for duty as a member of the 12th Battalion of Infantry. For Doctor Robert William Hillary, this uniform was his identity as a military man. The bright red coat with gold braid and trim denotes his identity as a member of the Royal Canadian Armored Corps. The dark navy collar and cuffs are stiffly formal, and a small black band keeps the collar closed tight around his throat, so his undershirt does not show through. The uniform was clearly a point of pride. It has been stored with the utmost of care, and over a century after it last saw active duty, the brass buttons still retain some of their shine.

The Queen's York Rangers is an army regiment that is primarily stationed in Toronto and Aurora. In its very beginning, the regiment stationed in Aurora operated under the title of the 12th Battalion of Infantry. It was during the late 19th century, when Dr. Robert William Hillary served and wore his bright red coat with gold braid. There was turmoil in the world near the end of the 19th century, and the 20th century came into being with something unpleasant: war loomed on the horizon, gathering like great black clouds before a violent storm. The 12th Battalion had seen battle before, but the war that was coming was to be more destructive than anything the world had ever seen.

The Great War crested upon Europe like a wave crashing on rocks, and in the face of such devastation, members of the newly named 12th Regiment left for Britain in late August of 1916. They would go on to serve in the 4th, 20th, 35th, 81st, 83rd, 127th and 220th Battalions. Here, Robert William Hillary's descendants, Robert Michael Hillary and his son Robert Stuart Hillary served with the overseas forces. Only Robert Michael returned home; his son was lost at Vimy Ridge. Unlike the bright red coat from the 12th Battalion of Infantry, there are almost no possessions left from Robert Michael Hillary or his son during the time of the Great War. A flag remains, signed by the 127th Battalion and badly damaged, but there are no uniforms, no lovingly stored coats, and only a few photographs. In Aurora, there are no uniforms from the Great War in public collections, yet the town contributed an entire battalion that has remained important both locally and on Canada's national military scene. Why has the textile history of World War I, the first Great War, faded from our historical tapestry? Why did later generations, those who served in World War II, store their uniforms? What is the missing link?

The threads of time work in strange ways, and oftentimes it can unravel in the most unexpected ways. Perhaps those who served in the Great War felt that keeping their uniforms was not important or that they were unpleasant reminders of violence of war. The real question is, which parts of our present lives are worth turning into history? To see Dr. Robert William Hillary's 19th century military coat on display please visit the new exhibition, *The Wardrobes of Aurora: Dressing for Birth, Death and Everything In Between*, on view at the Aurora Museum & Archives ? 22 Church Street.