



# Chapter Six

## The Wests in WWI: Grampa

Several documents have been of great assistance in determining Grampa's war record. Barry had several, including discharge papers from 1915, 1916 and 1918. Grampa's "Attestation form" from his first sign-up with the Canadian forces (May 16th, 1915 ) confirms his regiment as 49th battalion, (Loyal Edmonton) and his regimental number of 433177, and the dates of his first wartime service. It also shows the family's address as 9724 100th St, a location which is clearly on the Edmonton River (Ross) Flats, the house which was flooded (shortly after Grampa signed up) in June of 1915.

### The First War - part 1 (May 16, 1915 – November 10, 1915)



His regiment left for England in May. En route, at a stop in Lestock, Saskatchewan, a young woman presented them with a coyote cub which became their mascot until they departed for France. The pet was named "Lestock" and was ultimately given to a zoo in London. The regiment trained at St. Martin's Plain, near Folkestone in England until Oct. 8, when the bulk of the regiment was sent to France (but not Grampa). During August,

Photo left: Heber and Grampa meet during the First War - ca. 1917

Grampa forfeited 3 days pay (for absence). This was possibly for a visit to his mother and father in nearby Heathfield. According to Grampa's regimental record, "other ranks (were) transferred to the 9th Battalion" (C.E.F. Canadian Expeditionary Forces) and the rest were "struck off the strength of this battalion". This was explained to me as being "held in reserve". According to his war record, he obtained a medical discharge in November (rheumatism in both knees) and returned home, not having served in France. Grampa was shipped back to Canada on the SS Scandinavian on Oct. 26 and discharged at Quebec City on Nov. 6. Given the nature of the war in France at the time, it's entirely possible that his South African infirmities saved his life.

### The First War - part 2 (December 8, 1915 – March 14, 1916)

After his discharge, Grampa, "Private John West", signed up again, this time with the Canadian Active Militia. This seems surprisingly quick given his "not fit" discharge earlier in 1915, but during the war this was probably the best way that he could support his growing family. The "Attestation form" from this second sign-up with the Canadian forces is dated December 8, 1915, and the address as 1971 79th St., a location south of the centre of the city in an area called Strathcona, probably temporary housing for victims of the flood earlier in the year.



He served as an Internment Camp guard in Jasper, Alberta from Jan. 1 to March

14th, 1916, when he was discharged. (A handwritten note in the upper left corner of the certificate says, "Character Very Good".) The camp ran for only 6 months, from February through August. In spite of orders to keep the camp secret, in mid- February, the Edmonton Journal published a story which described the duties as "very hard" and as a result, 3 of the guards from Edmonton who had previously come home from the war had been discharged as unfit. Given Grampa's previous medical discharge, he was possibly one of the three. As in all of the First War internment camps, the prisoners were Canadian residents deemed "enemy aliens", primarily Germans or (as in the case of the Jasper camp) all Austro Hungarians from Brandon, Manitoba. None of them were actual prisoners of war.

### First War - part 3

(April 17, 1916 – 1918)

On April 17, 1916, Grampa signed up with the 218th battalion railway troops, with the regimental number 279533. During this "tour", he was a sapper (builder) whose unit built the narrow gauge railways through the mud of the Western Front, much needed at this point of the war. The battalion didn't leave for England until Feb. 17, 1917. During this time, they were stationed at the Sarcee Camp in southeast Calgary. Uncle Ken's birth in September of 1917 shows that leaves were granted, especially around Christmas of 1916! They were finally called up on February 9th, 1917. The Calgary Herald has articles from the time about men from the battalion rioting along 101st street in Edmonton the night before, after



discovering they would be departing for overseas the next day. On Feb. 17, they sailed from Halifax to Liverpool on the SS Southland, with a brief sojourn, again at Purfleet, east of London (although there is some evidence that they were in Witley Camp south of London.) After disembarking from the ships that carried them across the Atlantic, engineers (sappers, like Grampa), eager for rest after being at sea for two weeks, were instead put to work. They unloaded ships, dug ditches, did construction, and performed other tasks around the camp, at the docks, or in the city. To add insult to injury, it was often raining, turning the field where they camped into a muddy swamp, similar to later experiences in Belgium. In addition to his war record, I also gained knowledge of this part of "Grampa's war" through a visit in Belgium to Messines and Ploegsteert in March of 2019.

It is not difficult to see Grampa as a sapper (builder, engineer) during his last period of the war, since his duties at Venn Mill would have given him much experience as a builder and mechanic. In fact he lists his occupation in all three attestation papers as "machinist". Those of us who have seen the complicated mechanical structure of Venn Mill can't argue this point.

It is striking to look at a map of western Europe and note how geographically close to Heathfield the war was. Auntie Ruth once said that she could hear the guns during the first war. (Passchendale was less than 100 miles away.) In a letter to Gramma, she writes: "many German raiders pass over Broad Oak trying to get to London, but many of them fail". {The German airfield at Dieppe was only 150 miles away}.

The process of putting together a credible time-line for Grampa begins with assembling family stories and continues through two more stages: acquiring his war records, and researching troop-movement records. I have recently received Grampa's complete war records from Ottawa (115 pages) and thus have been able to fill in many of the gaps of my previous knowledge of these years. Although a reported 60 percent of British Army war records were lost in a London air-raid during the second war, a copy of Grampa's Boer War discharge form was filed with his Canadian records prior to that, thereby broadening our knowledge of his South African war participation. The First War records contain: Attestation (sign-up) papers, many medical reports and "separation payment" ledgers (salary

paid entirely to Gramma Emma in Edmonton). The actual movements of his units are less detailed, and I needed to search other online regimental reports and war diaries to fill in gaps between the medical reports. Generally, the documents are readable but sometimes illegible. Here is the chronology from war diaries with entries from other sources:

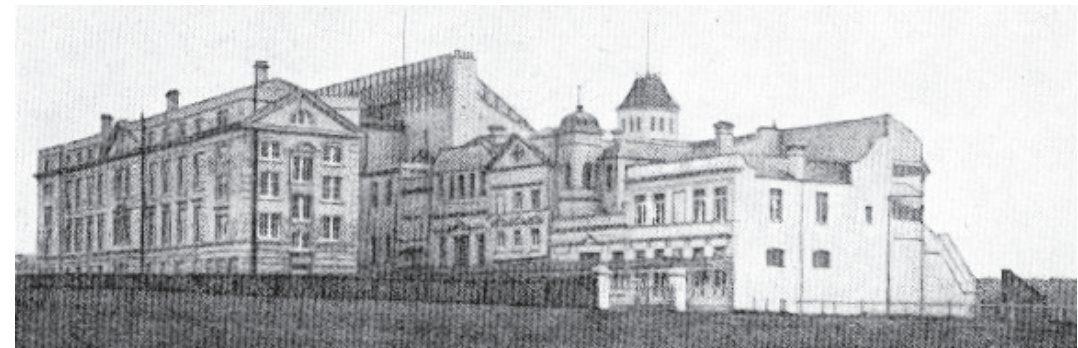
- April 1 several battalions at Purfleet, training (instruction in anti-gas), parades.
- April 16 companies move to Southampton
- April 17-19 embark on SS Archimedis and SS Hunslett
- April 20 - land at Le Havre proceed to Docks Rest Camp
- April 22-24 Troops are transferred by train to Ouderdam, Belgium.
- April 26 Master parade (muster - 38 officers & 945 regular troops)
- April 27 Troops moved to DeSoule (Seule) via Bailleul
- April 28 onward: Unit begins railway construction east toward Ploegsteert, Belgium.  
Although sappers were not as directly targeted as infantrymen, they were regularly put in harm's way, as the railroads needed to go all the way to the front. An advantage of this type of posting is that they would not have to spend so many countless hours sitting around in the trenches.
- May 6 Heavy bombardment, no casualties, warning of gas attack, raining.
- May 18 German air attack by aeroplane and balloon.
- May 31 Strength 37 officers / 943 regulars
- June 1-8 Much shelling and many wounded  
The Battle of Messines June 7, was only 5km from Ploegsteert, with 27,000 British casualties. Apparently the strategy was to plant and detonate explosives under the Germans at Messines Ridge. If we know nothing else of this time and place, we know that Grampa must have felt those explosions, since the virtual "earthquake" was apparently felt as far away as London.
- June 9 - "This battalion now building railways over old battle areas.  
Ground in awful condition, owing to heavy shellfire. Good weather".  
The efforts of Grampa's unit surely contributed to successes at Messines (5km away) and ultimately Paschendale in October (25km) although by this time Grampa had been invalided.
- June 22 - 25 Stormy weather, bad roads
- June 26 First mention of gas poisoning  
"Gassed and posted to Cdn. Railway Troops depot" (the first stage of an injured soldier). Subsequent medical entries list "myalgia" (severe headaches), "trench fever" (a common lice-borne infection, afflicting soldiers in the trenches) and "debility" (a catch-all designation for unknown symptoms).
- July 1-31 Entries are all regarding routine activities, mentions Canadian elections and promotions. Troop transfers and stowaways.
- August 3 First mention of shell shock  
sporadic entries regarding gas injuries. Strength over 1000.
- August -October No mention of troop movements, individual promotions, wounded, transfers etc. (but Gram pa mentioned Oct. 21). It would seem that the entries were sometimes not accurate. For example, from several medical documents,



we know that Grampa was gassed on August 23rd, but he is not listed as "invalided" in the war diary until Oct. 21. It is not clear whether it was chlorine or mustard gas, and since the British were also using gas, it is also possible that it was not from the Germans. Grampa was treated on the following dates & for these symptoms:

WAR DIARY or INTELLIGENCE SUMMARY. <span style="float: right;">SECRET NUMBER FOUR.</span>			
(Erase heading not required.)			
Place	Date	Hour	Summary of Events and Information
			279553 Sapper West, J. _ _ 1 Co. Invalided sick and posted to Canadian Rly. Trps. Depot, 22-10-17

- August 23, 1917 -Gassed & posted to Cdn. Railway Troops depot.  
What we do know is that Grampa spent the next 9 months mostly in hospitals in England, not returning to his family until May of 1918. A soldier who was injured in the field would be treated first at a Regimental Aid Post in the trenches by the Battalion Medical Officer and his orderlies and stretcher bearers, then moved to:
- September 6, 1917 Field Ambulance #25 - **Trench fever\***
- Sept. 10, 1917 Field Ambulance #24 - **Myalgia\*\***  
Advance Dressing Station close to the front line manned by members of The Field Ambulance, RAMC. If further treatment was needed he would be moved to a:
- October 8, 1917 - Casualty clearing station - **Debility\*\*\***  
A tented camp behind the lines. If required, the wounded were moved to one of the base hospitals usually by train. The seriously wounded were taken to
- Oct. 9 Gen Hospital Etaples, France (This hospital is reported to have been the "birthplace" of the 1917 Spanish Flu.)
- Oct. 21, 1917 Horton County of London War Hospital



Epsom, back to Britain by Hospital Ship and onto the relevant hospital for further treatment.

- Jan. 10, 1918 Clarence House, Rockhampton (near Bristol) until March 14, 1918  
Bushy Park, Richmond (The King's Canadian Red Cross Convalescent Hospital)
- Apr 16, 1918 Canadian Red Cross Special Hospital, Buxton
- May 13, 1918 Embarked from Liverpool for Canada

-----  
\* **Trench fever** - a highly contagious rickettsial disease transmitted by lice, infecting soldiers in the trenches in World War I.  
\*\* **Myalgia** severe headaches  
\*\*\* **Debility** a catch-all designation for unknown caused symptoms: shell shock; (post traumatic stress) chronic fatigue syndrome.

Grampa spent a long 7 months in hospitals in England. Although we have no family stories or correspondence to support it, Grampa's return to Britain in October presented real opportunities for him to be visited by his mother, father and sisters, particularly during the three months he was at the Horton

County Hospital in Epsom (50 miles from Heathfield and only 17 miles from Guildford), but there is no correspondence or other recorded evidence of this.

I haven't made any attempt to "analyze" the pay ledgers, but I did notice that the final one gave an address in Grande Prairie. There was another reference which gave Grande Prairie as the place to which Grampa (and family) had intended to settle after his discharge. Although there is no family verbal confirmation of this that I'm aware of, we do know that Heber had settled in "the Peace River area", and perhaps they intended to settle near them initially, until (as family history has it) Grampa was advised by his Calgary doctor to go to a coastal climate because of his medical conditions.

Grampa's medical reports contain references to:

**From South Africa:** Enteric (Typhoid) Fever, Rheumatism in both knees

**First War - part 1:** Rheumatism in both knees - (stated reason for medical discharge, although difficult farm labour in Alberta could also have been a contributor) Trench Fever; Dyspnoea (laboured breathing); Fainting; Weakness; Washed out appearance (Gramma's stories of his appearance on his return in 1918 reflect all of these observations); Loss of 40 pounds weight; Neurasthenia (an ill-defined medical condition characterized by lassitude, fatigue, headache, and irritability, associated chiefly with emotional disturbance); Hand tremor; Heart palpitations; D.A.H. (bleeding in the lungs - from the gas poisoning); Vertigo, Fatigue - due to disease or injury prior to active service (i.e. South Africa) - which active service had aggravated; Arterial Sclerosis, Right Apex. - infection prior to enlistment (South Africa). The seriousness and wide-spread nature of Grampa's ailments at the end of the war are emphasized by a doctor's description of him in June, 1918:

*"He is a well nourished man but looks pale and flabby. Is nervous and easily excited. He tires easily and cannot do a day's work; Extended hands show a very slight tremor. Tongue is tremulous and eyelids flicker when closed. Knee jerks are diminished but station is good and ocular symptoms of tabbies are absent. Heart sounds are normal, no enlargement present, but rate is rapid, pulse sitting 96/108/96. Rate various. He is very short of breath on 1 minute PT on going up one flight of stairs. Becomes dizzy if he stoops over."*

This is not the quiet, thoughtful, calm, loving man that we grew up with. But the bottom line is that we did grow up with him and were blessed with his presence until the ripe old age of 93 ... and that is the miracle...

### The Wests in WW1: Heber

Although they enlisted at essentially the same time and place (Edmonton, Spring & Summer 1915), it is not at all clear that Heber and Grampa's paths crossed during their time on the Western Front. To begin with, Grampa (on his second "tour") was a Sapper (engineer) and Heber was in the machine gun corps. Heber enlisted on July 22, 1915 at Edmonton in the 66th Battalion Canadian Expeditionary Force. On Sept. 11, his unit sailed to England, and on Sept. 23 he was transferred to the 9th reserve Battalion (to relieve soldiers in the field). On April 1, 1916 they went to France, and on April 4, he was drafted into the 3rd Battalion Machine Gun Corps, which was a specialized unit, choosing men who had the particularly keen mathematical minds needed to operate these weapons. During 1916 and

17, there are a half dozen recorded illnesses - always labelled "PUO" (trench fever).

The likely locations where Heber saw action were the Somme Aug. 1 - Nov. 18, 1916, and in 1917 Ypres, possibly including Vimy Ridge and Passchendale. Troop movements and regimental diaries are not available for his unit at this time, but these are the most likely locations, since they are locations where the forces of the British Empire fought.



All told, Heber was in France, in and out of action, for almost three years. During that time, he received 2 leaves of absence to England, 2 weeks each. We know from Mercy Smith's diary that this included visits with her. On his discharge in March of 1919, he returned to his homestead near Grande Prairie, AB, so the record of his marriage to Victoria Lawrence in 1918 seems to conflict with his war record of discharge and return to Canada.

### The Wests in WW1: Cousin Charlie

Charles West (Henry Charles) was born at the East Hanney Mill on Mar. 19, 1885 to Daniel and Catherine. At some point before 1911, he emigrated to Canada, appearing in the 1911 census as a lodger (carpenter) at 1903 Blanshard St. in Victoria. -He signed up with the Canadian Expeditionary Forces in Lindsay, Ontario in May of 1914. His unit sailed on June 24, 1915. He met and married Jessie on October 6, 1915. On Oct. 9, Charles was diagnosed with Gonorrhoea and sent to Newcastle on Tyne Workhouse (converted to hospital) for treatment. On Oct. 30, he was discharged and returned to his unit in France. His wife Jessie lived variously in Folkestone, Wood Lane; Shepherds Bush (London); Middlesboro Yorkshire; and Burbage Buxton during the war. Their daughter Dorothy was born in 1916. On June 11, 1917, he suffered a gunshot wound to his left elbow and was reported missing in action, but reported safe the next day. For the next two years he was moved around England, but he apparently saw no more action until his final discharge. In June of 1918, he was required to make good "articles lost by neglect". On April 28 of 1919 he returned to Canada with his dependents (Jessie and Dorothy). In the 1921 Census, we find him, his wife Jessie (Elesie), age 30 and his daughter Dorothy at age 7 at 1655 Baron Ave. in Victoria. In 1937, father Daniel died, and according to Dan Pepler, shortly thereafter Charles returned to Garlands Farm to collect his inheritance, returning to Canada a short time later.

In October of 1980, I received a letter forwarded to me by Mary Irish from Reg West, "Charlie's" nephew, enquiring after him. Reg had heard from him after the death of his Aunt Katie and Uncle Jethro, but not since. Charlie had been living in a rest home in Victoria. In 1980, I spoke with Allan West, Charlie's son in Port Alberni. He told me that he had a brother Daniel and nephew Norman in Seattle, who had 9 sons. Allan told me that Charlie had owned and/or operated the Bird's Eye Cove Marina in Maple Bay, BC. A search of cemeteries in Victoria revealed that Charlie had died in 1977 and was buried in "God's Acre" veteran cemetery in Esquimalt. He was survived by 5 sons: Norman, Donald, Ronald, Allen and Dan.