

A Perth Story

The Lone Wooden Cross

Elmwood Cemetery in Perth has several thousand burial markers made of granite, marble and limestone but only one wooden marker in the shape of a cross. I have often wondered about the history of this old, heavily weathered wooden cross and after some research have been able to put together a fairly accurate picture of what it is all about.

We must go back in time to the early 1900s in this town of Perth for our journey to begin. As is the case today, Perth was a vibrant community as one would expect for the county seat of Lanark County. Numerous industrial concerns provided employment for all. One such working lad was Andrew "Andy" Ronald Gamble. Andy was born on July 10, 1898 here in Perth, schooled locally and found work as a pressman for the local Perth Courier in 1915 at the age of 17. World War 1 was in full swing then. Many local boys and young men had joined the Canadian Expeditionary Force at the start of the war. Most figured that they would be home within several months after the evil Hun was shown a thing or two. Unfortunately, the quick return trip from Europe was not to be. By 1917 the grim horrors of WW1 were known to all from coast to coast. Across towns big and small in Canada, including Perth, many thousands of families had received word that their young men would never return. Despite the military censors and the press trying to keep a lid on the calamity that was unfolding, news leaked out. Now everyone knew of the total carnage that was unfolding in the trenches of France and Belgium.

So you can imagine the absolute fear and trepidation that Andy's parents felt when he informed them that he was going to enlist. James and Margaret Gamble would be on one hand very proud of their son but on the other would be literally sick with worry. On September 9, 1916 Andy made his way by train to Renfrew and reported to the recruiting officer. His attestation (enlistment) and medical

papers tell us that he was 5' 7 " tall, weighed 130 lbs., with blue eyes, blond hair and a fair complexion.

And so it was that Andy Gamble found himself as Private #1042119, assigned to 'C 'Company, 2nd Battalion of the 21st Canadian Infantry. On May 14, 1917 he was in France after several months of basic training in Canada and Britain. It should be remembered that Andy, like all his army mates, were civilians just months before. Maybe they worked on the farm, clerked in a store or operated a drill press in some machine shop but soldiers they were not. Now, within the week of landing, Andy was to be introduced to hell on earth.

Andy could not have been assigned to a worse place anywhere and was sent to Passchendaele, Belgium noted for its atrocious conditions, heavy casualty rate and Canadian valor. The Canadians joined up with British and Australian troops in this area. This infamous zone of battle occurred over several months with a casualty total of some 15,600 young Canadian men alone. During the fighting in the Passchendaele area it is estimated that at least 300,000 men died on all sides. How Andy managed to survive for any period is a small miracle but not only did he survive but he earned a promotion to Lance Corporal after several months on the front line. His newly awarded rank didn't last long however, as he was killed in action on Nov 3, 1917. His body, like many thousands of others, was never recovered for formal burial and thus would lie where he fell likely buried in an unmarked shell crater or collapsed trench. Andy was no more!

James and Margaret received news of his death that week and a small notice to this effect was placed in the Courier by his father James. You can imagine the grief his family felt and to add more pain, they would have no grave to visit with their sorrows. Within the month Margaret received, from the Canadian Government, a cheque for \$140 for Andy's owed back pay. It goes without saying that she wanted her son back, not some cheque. Regardless, James and Margaret had an oak wooden cross constructed and placed on the Gamble family burial plot in Section D, plot 057 . Andy's grand-father had purchased the plot for the family in 1875. It is here that the family came to mourn. A short time later they received from the government and had attached to the cross a Passchendaele medallion. This

medallion is commonly known as the 'dead man's penny'. Andy's parents , James and Margaret were buried adjacent to the cross, in 1954 and 1955 respectively.

This memorial cross has stood the test of time for 100 years but is now thoroughly rotted and collapsing. Thanks to the interest and permission of the Gamble family, the generous support from the Canadian Legion Perth Branch 244 and especially wood craftsman Carson Thompson, a new replica cross has been made and installed on the original site.

Submitted by Eric Halpin, Elmwood Cemetery.