

My Grandpa Goes to War

By Rod Fraser



Soldiers moving Supplies to the Front

In early 1915, my grandfather, William George Garfield Armstrong, found himself without a family to call his own. Confronted with the most exciting adventure he was likely to see in his lifetime, he enlisted in the 7th Regiment of the Canadian Mounted Rifles.

Will was born on April 15, 1882 to Joseph Armstrong and Margaret Arnott, a young married couple from Northern Ireland. They arrived in Toronto two years earlier. Will was the eldest of their seven children.

Joseph Armstrong earned his living as a porter at various companies, his most long-lived employer being the Robert Simpson Company. Joseph's earnings, coupled with the income Margaret earned from taking in the odd boarder, enabled them to support themselves and their children, however imperfectly, over their long working lives.

We know very little about Will's childhood, but we do know he married Hattie Middleton, a pretty young woman, five years his junior, in early 1905. They had three children in the next five years and it is safe to say this was not a happy marriage.

I don't know the details of their life together from firsthand accounts, but I have studied all the documents related to their marriage and subsequent lives. I expect I can tell you their story and get it largely right, although I may have to stretch things from time to time.

Looking at their marriage from Hattie's point of view, I can understand why she was unhappy and disappointed. She was just short of seventeen years of age when she married, had her first baby within eight months, and then had two more in short order.

While many women have their children close together without serious emotional upset, Hattie faced two additional calamities during this time. Her second son, Garfield, born in 1907, became quite ill

when he was a little more than two years of age.

After a few days, he was taken to Riverdale Isolation Hospital with diphtheria. After five days of care, little Garfield died — at a time when Hattie was pregnant with my mother.

Unfortunately, while Hattie was coping with her pregnancy and grieving over the death of Garfield, her step-mother, Jane Middleton, was diagnosed with bowel cancer. Hattie became her caregiver.

Over the next two years, she watched Jane die a painful death, all the while feeling unhappy and emotionally distraught. The stress of it all was too much. Hattie and Will separated in 1911.

Hattie assumed custody of their two children, moved in with her father, continued her caregiver role and coped as best she could. By all measures, this is a sad story, one that shows Hattie in a very sympathetic light.

This was about to change.

After the death of Jane Middleton in early 1912, Hattie took stock of her life. She had no money or independence. She was beholden to her father for her every need. He was approaching retirement and wasn't keen on the responsibility for Hattie and her children. In short, she saw a bleak future for herself and was casting about for options.

After some thought, Hattie decided to move to Detroit and join her sister, Sarah, who had lived there for a number of years. Hattie hoped to find employment and enjoy a new life, unencumbered with family or children.

In order to put her plan in place, she had to find a home for her two children (Gordon and Dorothy). Her father, Enoch Middleton, was fond of her son, who was almost seven years of age and very little trouble. Enoch agreed to provide a home for Gordon.

With that in hand, Hattie approached her mother-in-law, Margaret Armstrong, to ask if she was willing to adopt Dorothy (now just short of two years of age). Margaret was appalled at Hattie's willingness to give up her children, but agreed to talk it over with her husband.

It is reasonable to assume she also discussed the matter with her son, Will. I expect this conversation was unsatisfactory and came to nothing (as later events will show).

Margaret and Joseph took legal advice on the matter, had documents prepared to appoint them as Dorothy's guardian and told Hattie they would agree to the adoption on the condition that Dorothy would be raised as their child. Hattie would not be welcome in their home. Hattie agreed to this arrangement.

So in the fall of 1912, all was settled and Hattie

moved to Detroit to take up her life as a single woman, available for adventure and love. She found both in small measures.

We know Hattie formed at least one long-term relationship with a man, during her years in Detroit, but it didn't last. Sadly, she died alone in her apartment of a heart attack many years later. She was sixty-six years of age.

Hattie remained permanently estranged from Dorothy, who enjoyed a stable and loving childhood under the care of her grandparents. As for her son, Gordon, Hattie saw him frequently after he moved to Detroit at age twenty.



While all this was going on in Hattie's life, Will Armstrong, after separating from his wife, moved to a boarding house in Toronto sometime in 1911.

Then he disappeared for a period of four years. I know this because I consulted the Toronto Street Directory. There is no mention of Will Armstrong living in Toronto from 1911 to 1914. This is a reliable reference book, so I hold with its findings.

I suspect Will relocated to Winnipeg, where his brother Joseph moved in 1905. It seems a reasonable assumption. Will's presence in his parents' home was neither welcome nor helpful, his

brother wanted the company, and Will needed somewhere to live and work. All this explains the key events of Will Armstrong's life up to the start of the Great War.



On February 5, 1915, Will Armstrong joined the Canadian Army and volunteered for overseas duty. In his enlistment papers, Will noted he earned his living as a teamster (i.e. a wagon driver).

These documents show Will Armstrong to be 5' 8" tall, with dark brown hair, blue eyes and a medium complexion. They show his next-of-kin to be his mother and his marital status as unmarried (which of course is untrue; Will was separated at this time).

This was only one of the untruths set out in his enlistment papers. He also told the army recruiter he was three years younger than his actual age.

In total, he lied about his age, failed to mention his two children and misstated his marital status to ensure the army would take him. A married man of thirty-three, with two children and a wife was not a likely recruit.

William joined 'C' Squadron of the 7th Regiment of the Canadian Mounted Rifles. This regiment consisted of three squadrons (i.e. 'A', 'B' and 'C'), of

which 'C' Squadron was recruited from Toronto. 'A' and 'B' were recruited from southwestern Ontario. L/Col. Leonard Ibbitson was the commanding officer.

The idea of the Mounted Rifles was to provide a regiment of highly mobile troops with the expectation they would fight dismounted with rifles and bayonets.

By the time of the First World War, cavalry rarely fought on horseback with sabres and pistols. With accurate rifle fire and machine guns, such troops would be shot from the saddle without ever having raised a hand against the enemy.

Horses were used to provide mobility for mounted troops, and even here, their use would be limited. The largest use of horses in the war years was for the transport of good and supplies. While there was certainly motorized transport during WWI, it was often unreliable.

Horses were used to move artillery, cope with the never ending mud at the front, and assist trucks and other vehicles, where necessary.



After ten weeks of basic training, Will's regiment embarked on the S.S. Megantic in Halifax, arriving in England on or about June 11, 1915. The CMRs

were soon billeted in Canterbury where they underwent further training for three months.

Shortly after, the regiment was sent to France and then disbanded. Most of the CMRs joined the infantry in the trenches. Will was luckier. On September 11, 1915, he was transferred to the 5th Company of the Canadian Army Service Corp.

This likely saved Will's life. And it was probably Will's prewar experience with horses (as a teamster) that accounted for his transfer. That is why I opened this article with a picture of WWI soldiers working with horses. Perhaps Will was among their number?

The 5th Company provided supplies and materials to the soldiers of the 2nd Division. While still subjected to the perils of artillery fire and other hazards of war, Will was relatively safe — spared from months or years in the trenches, desperate conditions, and the high probability of wounding or death.

Will served with the CASC until February 14, 1918, largely unharmed by the war. He was taken to the hospital twice, but only for bronchitis and tonsillitis. This latter illness incapacitated him for six weeks and he never returned to active duty.

On June 2, 1919, Will was sent home on the S.S. Lapland and was discharged from the army on his arrival in Toronto.

After working for two or three years in Toronto (while having only limited contact with his parents or daughter), Will moved to Brooklyn, near New York City. He joined his brother, Richard, who had immigrated to the United States in 1916. There Will worked in a lumber yard for the remainder of his working years.

Will later became a U.S. citizen and married Elizabeth Byrnes in 1927. I don't believe they had children, but Elizabeth's son, James, lived with them at the time of the 1930 census.

We know Will was alive and living in Brooklyn as late as 1944 when Elizabeth died (at age 61). At that point Will's story seems to be lost. I couldn't find any further details of his life (or his death).

My mother, Dorothy Armstrong Fraser, never mentioned him to me. Nor did Will's siblings, two of whom I came to know quite well — at a time, when I was old enough to have asked all the important questions. It seems Will Armstrong was a brief presence in the life of our family and then disappeared forever.



Will's absence from our lives was a topic of spirited discussion for a time — once we found out who he was and how he had lived his life. My brother seemed mildly put off with Will showing little or no

interest in his grandchildren — for never bothering to meet us.

And my cousin, another grandson, expressed similar misgivings. He told me, “It didn’t seem so much that Grandpa was dead, as much as he was missing.”

Quite so. Of course, these feelings all came to light from our recent discovery of Will’s war service record, marital difficulties and relocation to the United States. Prior to this, we never gave him much thought. Be that as it may, our sense of loss is no less real, just because it was recently discovered.

I think about Will quite often, wishing I had his picture or the odd anecdote to give him human form. I see him as a steady man, easy to be with and having a pleasant laugh. I imagine him reading the newspaper at night after work, and perhaps a few books on the weekends or during vacation.

I expect Will wanted to meet and learn about his grandchildren. But he was in Brooklyn and we lived far away. Perhaps he assumed we wouldn’t be interested in meeting an old man — with many flaws. If so, how wrong he would be.

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