

Some Place Not Far From Terror – The Journey of a WWI Canadian Diary and the American Who Found It

Prologue: The Diary

At first glance, the diary was rather unremarkable. The leatherette cover was completely gone, leaving naked pages to brown naturally with time. It was short, small, and compact to fit easily in a shirt chest pocket. For having lost its original cover, the binding of the diary kept the pages together with an unwavering discipline, ensuring each page kept its place in line. Housed in a colorful printed box, the diary sat undisturbed in a dresser drawer of my grandmother's Michigan farmhouse for over 40 years. Previously, it had probably been housed in a similar box, and a similar dresser drawer, since the 1920s, when it was in the possession of my grandmother's parents. It may have survived a house fire and an extended stint in both a corncrib and a barn. From its original birthplace in Toronto, across the ocean to England, and to the Western Front of WWI, this little item traveled through hardships, disease, and danger in France and Belgium. Quite by accident, it traveled with a complete stranger through the workshops and repair parks near Paris, before being packed up and taken back to North America – Not to Canada, but to a small rural farm in Litchfield Michigan.

Tough little diary.

After enduring the Great War, and an extended stretch of safe neglect, it was moved again in late September 2000 by sheer necessity. My grandmother had just passed. I was helping my parents clean out the home of a woman who'd accumulated fifty plus years of vintage clothing, mismatched furniture, my father's childhood mementos, and an untold number of junk drawers. All this work, while we were grieving and cleaning up from the remnants of a home break-in on the property just a few days after my grandmother's death.

Had it been any other family, it is entirely possible the diary would have ended its peaceful seclusion in a fire pit, recycle bin, or plastic trash bag. The untold number of historic artifacts or items thrown out after a family death are probably incalculable. Genealogists weep for the sheer number of important papers and items disposed of during the 'house cleaning' process.

By good fortune and the grace of God, my mother opened the box, surmised its contents, and handed it directly to me. It was one of the few items I would inherit from the estate, and it was a peace offering. "This is Grandpa Rhodes' World War I diary," my mother said. "You're keeping the book now, so you should have it."

'Keeping the book' is code for 'the keeper of our family genealogy.' I had inherited the mantle of family genealogist year a year prior, upon the passing of my great-aunt. I was young, twenty-one, and oddly resigned to the obligation when the question of 'book keeper' was raised and all eyes turned to me. Did I have a choice? Some people say yes. I say no. Any genealogist will tell you this is a calling, and the time and place receiving the call differs from person to person.

When I received the diary, I was angry, too lost in grief, and overly absorbed in resolving present circumstances, I did not have time to contemplate the past of such a small object. I wasn't grieving for my great grandfather who had passed well before my birth. I mourned my grandmother, whom I had loved deeply. In that moment, nothing but my loss mattered. I thanked my mother, placed the diary,

still protected by the brightly printed cardboard box, in the car and went back to work. I stored the diary and the remnants of my grandmother's genealogical collection in a box on my bookshelf. Then I took off my family history mantle and walked away. I didn't know if or when I would ever pick up those duties again.

I found work as a journalist, writing and documenting the stories of numerous people in a scattering of small rural communities for three years. Some headlines - Small child wins spelling bee. Circus arrives in town. Car hit by train. Man cultivates 30-headed sunflower. I asked questions, listened to answers, and met a dazzling array of people. I even had a chance to ride in a WWI-era biplane.

Later, grad school called, and with it, I found my love for genealogy again. It had never really gone away, but just as all of nature has a season, the long winter of mourning my grandmother's death had thawed, and I began re-reading and conducting research on my grandmother's maternal family in Scotland.

Newly graduated with a library science degree, I revised the box of materials I'd collected from my grandmother's estate. Comparing the research I'd collected abroad to the papers she owned, I re-read the polished cursive notes my grandmother had written. Examining family records resting in a dusty box can sometime be a surreal trip to the past. In those hours of going through the collection, I was very young again, revisiting to stories and asking questions, my grandmother patiently providing all the answers.

Occasionally, I would take the diary out of its box and read a few pages. I knew I wanted to tackle a digitization and transcription project of the Great War diary and its contents. It was a project fit for the centennial of the First World War, I reasoned. Scan the pages, transcribe the text, find a few pictures and maps, save it as a PDF and send it to everyone in the family via e-mail for Christmas. For the technologically challenged, I'd print off a few copies. It would be a few weeks of work at the most.

Easy peasy lemon squeezy, or so I thought.

So, what do you do when you discover a family heirloom doesn't actually belong to your family? The diary, accustomed to nearly a century of undisturbed secret keeping, had belonged to a completely different man, with a completely different background, in a completely different country.

The diary, was written in 1917 & 1918 by Private Wesley Albert Peever, of Carleton Place, Ontario during his service in the No. 3 Canadian Field Ambulance. And had absolutely no connection to my family. Somewhere in France, where by accident, providence, divine intervention or sheer misfortune, it came into the possession of my great grandfather, George Allen Rhodes, whom I have always known as Grandpa Rhodes. An upright, honest, and truthful man, Grandpa Rhodes was not the type to keep anything which didn't belong to him.

I hoped the truth of how the diary changed hands would appear in the course of my research. While exploring records in two countries, thirty depositories, over twenty interviews, and one family reunion, I picked up some additional voices for this book – the kid brother determined to prove himself by enlisting in the war at a wildly young age, the Canadian hometown war hero celebrated for shooting down the Red Baron, leaving a legacy which is now largely in dispute, the barrage of animals befriended by troops on the Western front, and an American socialite and novelist turned war nurse who pushed back against the sexism of the age to establish a successful mobile hospital on the western front.

The Great War is largely forgotten in the United States, its memory and legacy rarely discussed. It is overshadowed by the immense importance of the second world war in popular culture. The 'Greatest Generation' of WWII veterans are celebrated in movies and countless books. Not much is discussed about the Great War other than the economic hardships, territorial disputes, and the general malcontent which led to the rise of Adolph Hitler. Hitler was a WWI veteran, and some of the men who had experienced the horrors of the Great War would find themselves back in Europe less than twenty years later, this time with their sons, nephews, and extended family in tow. The former war seems to have the function of a spring board toward a bottomless well of WWII and its influence on American pop psychology.

World War I can be interpreted as Europe's war, where America was called in to finish the job and help clean up the mess a long war leaves in its wake. It is a surprise to many of the Americans I meet, how much Canada, Australia, India, and Africa and contributed to the events and efforts of the allied troops during the war. The Great War was a world war, with over 30 countries engaging in skirmishes and battles in a five year period.

Through the magic of the internet, Canada has provided a wealth of material and resources available to WWI researchers, including a huge push to digitize all the Great War military service records of Canadian service men and women. The work and investment into these military resources is amazing.

America's World War I research is largely impeded by an extensive loss of military service records held at the National Archives in St. Louis in 1973, which make the war difficult to research by genealogists and family historians. The US Veterans Administration, which received copies of service files to process medical histories, service dates, headstone applications, and other data cannot account for all the files in its possession. The funding, resources, and staff make it difficult for most hobbyists as well as experienced researchers to uncover their ancestor's wartime service through traditional channels.

I may be one of a handful of researchers with a full military service file for my great grandfather. It's lightly scorched around the edges and areas of paper, and like the diary, it survives intact to lend a voice in the story. I took it as a sign – unlike so many other researchers I had no excuses. I would have to write this book.

A century after the events of the Great War, the experiences and people in that time seem to be the stuff of legend. Taking their place in the pantheon of myth and family lore, the real people seem lost in an ever-encroaching mist. The further we are from the past, the harder it is to distinguish details. It is the job of the genealogist to find those details, piecing together as much information as possible, all the while citing sources and hoping a reading audience will stay awake and engaged to the end.

It is my hope you this book will entertain and surprise you, just as researching and writing it has constantly surprised and entertained me.

Many Thanks,

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