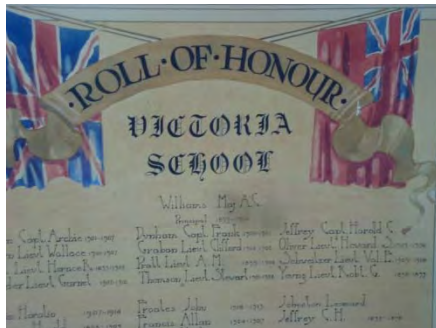


EAST WARD MEN AND THE GREAT WAR

INTRODUCTION

“Word came that the Great War was at an end and although the streets were muddy, a goodly number of children and citizens lined up for a parade in order to celebrate the great day. A bonfire was burned in the middle of Sask. Ave opposite the Post Office in the evening.” (Anonymous Author, Victoria School Journal, Nov. 11, 1918)

Sometime after 1918 the students and staff of Victoria School created a pair of memorial scrolls to honour their former classmates and students. Today, the scrolls still appear in the Portage Collegiate Archiving. This paper is a result of researching those names with a desire to broaden our image of the



young prairie boys that went across seas from Portage la Prairie.

The paper utilizes unpublished manuscripts and photographs collected from several local sources. Most of the photographs were found on the walls of the Fort la Reine Museum.¹¹ The museum has kindly granted permission to scan for inclusion in

this paper.

Before Victoria School existed on Saskatchewan Avenue in Portage la Prairie, a building stood on the same called East Ward School. On December 29th 1915, East Ward School caught ablaze. Joseph Campbell, a former student who enlisted in 1914, later recalled, “My grandfather, Mr. Roxburgh, was the fire chief. I went with him, and we crawled in through a basement window to see what was burning.

We got out fast when the piano fell through the floor right beside us⁷.” This marked the end of the school. Victoria School was constructed two years later.

One hundred forty-three former students and one principal from East Ward School enlisted or were conscripted to serve in the 1914 – 1918 war. Their days spent sitting in wooden desks would have been a world away from the horrors of trench warfare. In contrast to the celebrations and the bonfires, the reality was that many students would not return to the familiar faces in their home town. For those who did, they would never look through the same eyes again. Desmond Morton and J.L. Granastein wrote that the “homecoming proved unexpectedly awkward”⁹ to surviving soldiers. Many veterans would find comfort and understanding only in the company of others who had shared traumatic experiences overseas.



Victoria School Entrance

SUMMARY

East Ward students were archetypes of average prairie-raised young men during a time of poverty and war. The average age of these men was 21.4 years old. Their height averaged at 5'6 ¼". Roughly one-third of the group enlisted in 1916. 127 of the men were volunteers rather than conscripts. Just over half of the students were not born in Portage la Prairie, but had moved here in their youth and eventually attended East Ward. The most common religions of East Ward students were Presbyterian, Church of England, Wesleyan, Roman Catholic, Baptist, and Methodist. Most of the boys were skilled workers. 45.1% of the boys worked as clerks or mechanics. Other occupations included general workers, professionals, students and those of independent means who were able to call themselves a “gentleman”. Most were not married. 35.4% of the men had limited military experience, including the

“Active Militia”, 99th Manitoba Rangers, and the 79th Cameron Highlanders. Finally, 13.9% of the men who fought in the First World War died while serving (see Appendices).

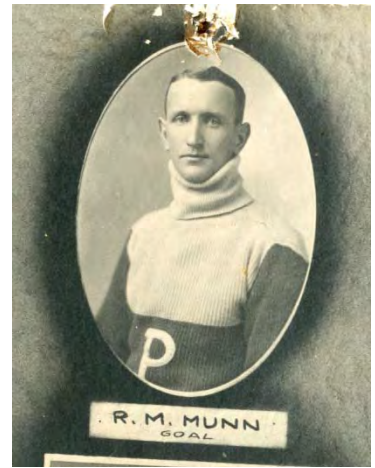
ENLISTMENT

Many of East Ward’s men were small town boys, raised on the prairies of Manitoba. They were used to harsh winters and had survived outbreaks of Small Pox in 1908, and then Scarlet Fever that swept through the town the year after.⁷ Many of the boys were skilled workers such as tin smiths, clerks, firemen, engineers, and mechanics. Several were considered professionals in specific fields that required a large amount of education such as dentistry and doctoring (Appendix C). Captain Harold C. Jeffrey, working as a dental surgeon in Cannington, Ontario, was only twenty-five when he left Brandon, Manitoba to become an officer and later a dentist in the army. Serving as officers was typical of men who had professional jobs with post secondary education in the First World War (Appendix I).

Forty-eight East Ward students had enlisted in 1916 and fourteen more in 1917, when the need for men became desperate. After 1915 it became apparent that the Canadian army would not have enough soldiers based on volunteers alone. More recruits had to be sent away to replace fallen numbers overseas. As the numbers dwindled overseas, the army needed more soldiers to keep our army from growing weak.⁸ Five of the East Ward men who enlisted in 1917 had been conscripted under the Military Service Act. Roy Hannah was a young farmer from Fortier, Manitoba when he was drafted. Conscription had meant terrible things for many farmers around Canada. It might have been slightly more devastating for Roy Hannah though, considering smaller men probably would have been a harder target to hit. Standing at 6’8”, Roy would have been a giant. But as the war progressed more men were needed and the Military Service Act was not picky when it came to keeping the country from growing weak and eventually losing the war. Hannah did survive the war.

According to Morton and Granastein's numbers, only 23.01% of the men who were enlisted in the First World War were actually conscripted, the rest were volunteers. This does not coincide with the statistics taken of East Ward students. Of the one hundred forty-four men to enlist, only five were conscripted. All men who were conscripted between 1917 and 1918 returned home safely. The twenty men who died at Ypres, the Somme, and Amiens were all volunteer recruits.

One recruit was Robert Munn. Munn's regimental number was 1250153. He was a twenty-two year old clerk from Portage la Prairie when he enlisted in 1916 (Appendix I). He was a follower of Christian Science.¹² A single man, Robert had served one month in the 18th Mounted Rifles before enlistment. He was two years older than his brother Gordon Munn, who had enlisted eight and a half months prior.



When imagining the First World War, a common image that pops into one's mind is the archetypical hero who is portrayed in movies, such as *Passchendaele* where Paul Gross plays the veteran soldier who fights with all honour, using his experience and instinct to survive. However, the typical soldier who crossed the ocean between 1914 and 1918 had little military intellect. Statistics taken from the one hundred forty-four enlistees from East Ward School show that most of the men had no prior military experience (Appendix F). The others had had limited training, serving in local militia units. Only 35.4% of East Ward School's former students had any military training. These statistics for Portage la Prairie seem to reflect the Canadian situation in general. Morton and Granastein write, "Only old men could even remember the last European war...or the American Civil War..."⁹ It therefore may be assumed that no man, when signing the various attestation papers, knew quite exactly what awaited him. "Images of war...shaped by peacetime maneuvers, colonial forays, and romantic lithographs⁹" may have been the only thing men expected to find during the early days of the war.

¹² Matt Slick, "Christian Science History", <http://carm.org/christian-science-history>, 2010

Unlike Robert and Gordon Munn, many of the East Ward men who went overseas did not have any military experience to prepare them for what was ahead. Only fifty-one of the one hundred forty-four East Ward boys had had previous military experience. Some served in units such as 18th Mounted Rifles and Canadian Army Service Corps prior to the war. Only one man had already fought in a war before enlisting some fifteen years prior. For the other men that enlisted, war would have been an entirely new experience (Appendix F). Maybe their fathers and grandfathers before them would have been able to pass down unpleasant memories from battles seen in their lifetimes. However, battles such as the Somme and Vimy Ridge could never be fully conveyed in mere words. These battles had new weapons including gas, tanks, and aircraft. Experience would be the only way to fully appreciate the sacrifices men were willing to make in the hope that their homeland would stay safe and secure forever. Had they been more privy to the experiences and atrocities in store, the number of volunteers may have differed greatly, or perhaps courage was more unconditional back then. Canadians have profited from a more secure society, where we need no protect our country and its honour.

There would have been other factors that affected men's decisions to enlist. In *Marching to Armageddon*, Morton and Granastein refer to the circumstances in the beginning of the war when a man had to get his wife's permission before he could enlist. According to personal statistics available from Appendices, this general rule would not have affected the East Ward boys' decision making very much. Only 6.3% of the men who enlisted from East Ward were married. The rest either could not be determined from available records or they declared bachelor status on their attestation papers. Many men had to leave girlfriends or fiancées when they left for war.

However, it is understandable that most of the men would not be tied down by a woman refusing to let her husband go off to war and defend his country like thousands of his single comrades, considering the average age of the East Ward boys at the time of enlistment. Most of the boys seemed to only

attend East Ward for a few years in early 1900, making them roughly in their early twenties when they enlisted.

Many of these men, as Morton and Granastein suggest, joined the war with specific religious affiliations. They record that 8.3% were Methodist and 10% were Catholics.⁹ This does not reflect the statistics taken of the East Ward's students who enlisted; Methodists actually outnumbered the Roman Catholics by 18%. Twenty-nine of the soldiers from East Ward were Methodists.

The most popular religion for East Ward soldiers appears to have been Presbyterian, a religion under-represented on a national level according to Morton and Granastein. 31.3% of the men from East Ward declared on their attestation papers that they were Presbyterians. One Presbyterian, Harry M.



Harry Irwin, 1915

Irwin, was pursuing an education in law when he enlisted on October 2nd, 1916 (Appendix I). Harry was eighteen years old when he joined. He was another young boy with absolutely no military experience and no bride to write home.

WAR EXPERIENCE

Harry Irwin was a small man, similar to most of the East Ward men who joined in World War I. Standing at only 5'4", Harry was among the shortest in the one hundred forty-four men that were researched. But this is not surprising considering the average height recorded for the East Ward men was 5'6 ¼" inches. In pre-war situations the army had had a height restriction of 5'6". Were a man any shorter, he would not meet the physical requirements for enlistment.⁸ When World War I began, the height restrictions were lowered. This was due to the growing need for man power.

Ernest Prout was twenty-four years old when he enlisted in 1916 (Appendix I). His experience in Passchendaele during the harsh days of October 1917 may have been somewhat similar to the movie version. Ernest was only twenty-six when he eventually died due to wounds received in action in

November of 1917. Had he returned home he might have moved forward in his career as a tin smith, eventually extending the family name. Sadly, his legacy is revealed in a certificate bearing his death date, which states that he died from the wounds he received in action.¹³



One might assume that most of the men who did not return from overseas died in highly publicized large scale battles. When imagining the battle of Passchendaele, or perhaps Vimy Ridge, one can picture the large number of massacred and filthy bodies littering the grounds around them. And while this was often the case, the reality is that most men survived. Granted, it was a tragedy to lose the twenty young East Ward men who had gone to war, among them George D. McKay and William Viznaugh, who both died in the Battle of the Somme. Every death was unfortunate, but the casualty losses were surprisingly low considering the appalling experiences of war in Europe.

In *Marching to Armageddon*, Morton and Granastein report the overall numbers of Canadian casualties throughout the war. Of the 619,636 men recorded to have enlisted as volunteers or under the Military Service Act 59544 casualties were reported or assumed when bodies were missing. Only 9.61% of the Canadian men who enlisted died. This is a slightly smaller number than those calculated for the former students of East Ward. Of the 124, twenty actually died in action. Only one man's cause of death could not be determined. Leslie Albert Link died August 18th, 1918. The circumstances and location of his death are a mystery. In civilian life he was an eighteen-year-old student from Bagot, Manitoba. He was part of the Methodist tally in personal statistics and stood at about 5'9 inches. He had had no military experience when he enlisted on January 9th, 1917; he was a typical young volunteer fresh from school.

Major Alman Clare Williams was a former principal of East Ward School. He had worked at East Ward School in the years 1899 – 1900. He had served in the Active Militia and the 18th Mounted Rifles for some time before enlisting on December 29th. Alman Clare was thirty-eight years old when he enlisted in 1914. Unlike most East Ward soldiers, he was married at the time of his enlistment. When he returned from the war he went on to work as a Barrister with the McPherson Law Firm in Portage la Prairie.

Statistics show that only 15.2% of East Ward's 144 soldiers enlisted in 1914. This small number may have had something to do with many young men not meeting the initial physical requirements necessary for the army, such as being too short or having defective teeth. In the beginning, it is reported that most Canadians were eager to go to war. One article reads that 25 000 men initially volunteered in 1914 when Britain announced they were going to war, driving Canada into war as well.⁹ When



A.J. Webb, 1910-1911

considering Canada's census for 1914, which was 7 879 000, that number seems rather tiny.² In a broader perspective, roughly 0.3% of Canadian men enlisted in 1914. Battles of later years, such as the Battle of Ypres in April 1915, or Somme of 1916, may have influenced more men to enlist and more lenient restrictions

on army recruits. But eventually everything would change and more men would be forced to enlist through conscription.

Perhaps the men who were initially eager to enlist had close bonds with relatives they felt that they needed to protect. One does not have to try too hard to imagine the pain soldiers would have felt when they said goodbye to their loved ones. It is a typical thing to imagine: the moment a soldier returned from the battles and his war had ended, and he could finally sink into the arms of the bride he had left at home. At least one of them would be crying, the bride clutching an old letter bearing the news that her husband would soon be home again and they could finally start a family together. While soldiers did

write a lot of letters home, filled with loneliness and best wishes, it was mostly towards mothers and close relatives such as an aunt or sister.

Archie Viznaugh might have been a family man. He was a twenty-one-year-old when he enlisted. Standing at 5'7", he was a laborer from Rossendale, Manitoba where he lived with his father Joseph Viznaugh, his mother, and his younger brother William (Appendix I). Despite his youth, he had spent some time with the Active Militia and 96th Regiment Militia before he enlisted on October 26, 1914. In 1915 the brothers would eventually be reunited when William enlisted at eighteen years old. Like his older brother, William was a laborer at the time of enlistment. He stood a few inches taller than Archie and followed his family in the Presbyterian faith. Archie served in the 27th Battalion and William was in the 1st Battalion of the Canadian Mounted Rifles. On September 15th, 1916, both battalions participated in an attack at the Somme.

At the Battle of Flers-Courcelette, the 1st Battalion's duty was to secure Grove Alley behind the 2nd and 3rd battalions. However, they were hit with heavy machine gun fire which led to a large number of casualties before eleven in the morning. The 27th also suffered heavy losses throughout the day. Unfortunately, that first day of the Battle of Flers-Courcelette on September 15th, 1916 both brothers were killed. Archie was dubbed "missing in action" and is remembered on the Vimy Memorial monument. William's body was recovered and was later buried in Bapaume Post Military Cemetery in France.³ Imagine the blow to the parents the day those two telegrams arrived.

Like Archie and William Viznaugh, the majority of men from East Ward who died, met their end in a major battle. Of the twenty men, their deaths can be split into eight different engagements. Four died in the Battle of the Somme, and another four at Amiens in August 1918. The other battles include Ypres, Vimy, Passchendaele, St. Eloi, Mount Sorrel, and Flers-Courcelette. Each of these battles is notorious for having created major losses for the Canadian army, and it proves true for the East Ward boys.

Just as Archie and William would never return to their home town to their families, most of the men from East Ward who died are buried in foreign countries or simply commemorated as a name on a memorial.³ For some it wouldn't have been foreign grave their lives ended in. While many of East Ward's boys were Canadian-born, some came from other areas outside our country. Six of the men were born in Scotland, and four men born in England, and later travelled to Canada at some point in their youth. For the 86.8% Canadian men born here in Canada, it might have been more difficult for them to say goodbye to their home and the only place they had ever known. But according to Morton and Granastein, the 25000 original recruits were reported as being "eager" to enlist and help to defend their country, perhaps also seeking adventure and a chance for something different.

CONCLUSION

The Great War represents four years of death, unexpected twists, and cataclysmic events. Deaths are tragic but one cannot underestimate the devastating effects of war on those who survived, who witnessed everything and did not have the relief from those horrific memories. Morton and Granastein's book, *Marching to Armageddon*, was a confusing title. For someone who would not really know anything at all about the First World War and who had no great connection to those who fought in it, it may have seemed rather dramatic. But learning of the students of East Ward from a small town as ordinary and plain as ordinary and plain can be, the names of those who fought in this war could be fleshed out and brought to life.

It is possible that the world will never see another war quite as monumental as the First World War. It began a wave of



change that rocked the entire world. It was named the “Great War” and “The War to End All Wars” simply because it was the only war of that era to have ever affected so many people all around the world. At some point it is not all about the numbers that can be calculated and pitied in retrospect. It is about what simple, small town prairie boys can do as the men who helped to win one of the greatest wars in world history and whose legacy remains only a name chiseled in a monument of Victoria School.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

PLACE OF BIRTH

To calculate the place of birth, data was gathered from the attestation papers and entered onto a data table. There were one hundred forty-four names that were researched and only thirteen men of the one hundred forty-four could not be determined. The places of birth were separated into five categories: Portage la Prairie, Ontario, Scotland, Other, and Undetermined. Each category was tallied and then each total was divided by the total number of East Ward's former students. That solution was next multiplied by 100% to get the percentages. The equation looks like this:

$$\frac{71}{144} = 0.49305555555556 \text{ or } 0.493$$

$$0.493 \times 100 = 49.3\%$$

With this percentage it is shown that 49.3% of the East Ward's former students had been born in Portage la Prairie. This equation was repeated with every tally.

APPENDIX B

RELIGIONS

When calculating the percentages for religion, the same data table was used to gather information. From it, a note was made that thirteen men did not declare a religion on their attestation papers. Each man's response was divided into eight categories: Presbyterian, Church of England, Wesleyan, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Other, and Undetermined. Each category was totaled and then divided by the 144 soldiers who attended East Ward School.

$$\frac{13}{144} = 0.09027777777778 \text{ or } 0.090$$

$$0.090 \times 100 = 9.0\%$$

9.0% of the 144 men researched could not be determined. This percentage of unknowns is helpful to identifying accurate probabilities.

APPENDIX C

OCCUPATIONS

The occupations of soldiers were varied. The occupations listed in the data table ranged from theatrical mechanic to laborer. To calculate the probabilities of each type of occupation the same tally system and formula was used again. The occupations were split into six categories: Worker, Skilled Worker, Professional, Student, Other, and Undetermined. Included beneath the completed probabilities, is a list of occupations and each category that they would have fit into. For example Professional included accountant, druggist's apprentice, surveyor, barrister, etc.

$$\frac{10}{144} = 0.06944444444444 \text{ or } 0.069$$

$$0.069 \times 100 = 6.9\%$$

6.9% of the 144 men researched were professionals.

APPENDIX D

DATES OF ENLISTMENT

The dates of enlistment were taken from each soldier's attestation papers and then compiled in the data table. The papers say the day and month, but for time purposes every individual date was lumped into six categories: 1914, 1915, 1916, 1917, 1918 and also Undetermined. The next steps were totaling up each category and repeating the formula to find each probability per date, and for the Undetermined category as well. The formulas appeared as this:

$$\frac{41}{144} = 0.28472222222222 \text{ or } 0.285$$

$$0.285 \times 100 = 28.5\%$$

This shows that 28.5% of the East Ward enlistees enlisted in 1915. With each year it is now possible to tell the percentage of men enlisting from East Ward School.

APPENDIX E

MARITAL STATUS

There was not much uncertainty on which marital status would be most common. Of the 144 men who enlisted from East Ward, 120 declared that they were not married at the time of their enlistment. This bit of calculating was very short. Three categories were made called: Married, Single, and Undetermined. With these categories it became apparent that more men did not fill out their attestation papers than those who declared they were married.

$$\frac{9}{144} = 0.0625 \text{ or } 0.063$$

$$0.063 \times 100 = 6.3\%$$

With this probability, one can infer that 6.3% of the 144 men researched were actually married.

APPENDIX F

MILITARY EXPERIENCE

The military experiences listed on each enlisted man from East Ward School varied greatly. Each man's experience was organized into categories. The various experiences had to be condensed into six categories called, Active Militia, 99th Manitoba Rangers, Active Militia & Other, No Experience, Undetermined, and Other. One category had to be dedicated to men who had both Active Militia and other experiences because many men had both, and in order to produce accurate numbers there had to be a separate category for them. The same formula was used as before to calculate the probabilities.

$$\frac{7}{144} = 0.048611111111111 \text{ or } 0.049$$

$$0.049 \times 100 = 4.9\%$$

This shows that 4.9% of the men that were researched belonged to Active Militia and had previous military experience.

APPENDIX G

DRAFTED vs. VOLUNTEERED

In order to calculate the numbers of conscripted and volunteers each man from the data table had to be separated into three categories. The categories were Drafted, Volunteered, and Undetermined. The attestation papers of men who had been drafted were different from those who had volunteered. Conscripted men's forms said "Drafted under Military Service Act 1917" at the top of the form. The total of undetermined enlistees looks like this:

$$\text{Probability: } \frac{12}{144} = 0.083333333333333 \text{ or } 0.083$$

$$0.083 \times 100 = 8.3\%$$

8.3% of the 144 men researched could not be determined.

APPENDIX H

To find the average height and age of the enlistees from East Ward School, every age and height was copied out onto an excel table. Since the heights are recorded on the attestation papers in feet and inches, the measurements had to be converted into centimeters. The formula for converting heights looks like this:

$$5"4 \text{ would turn into: } 5(30.48) + 4(2.54) = 162.56 \text{ cm}$$

Next the converted heights were added up, and then divided by the total number of men who recorded their height on their attestation papers. The formula looks like this:

$$\frac{21773.55}{127} = 171.45 \text{ cm or } 5'6 \frac{1}{4}$$

Next the average age was calculated. The same process was used as with height. Every age that had been recorded was added up and then divided by the total number of ages listed. The solution shows that the average age of men enlisting from East Ward School was 21.4 years old.

APPENDIX I

This is the data table for which the information from each attestation papers was recorded for the men from East Ward School that we researched. The details that were the focus were Name, Address, Date/Place of Birth, Religion, Medical, Trade, Date of Enlistment, Marital Status, Military Experience, and Other. Date/Place of Birth is where the ages of men at the time of their enlistment were also recorded. Medical is the category in which heights were recorded. The "Other" category was designated for any special details that could be useful such as a vaccination mark or a significant tattoo. The men whose attestation papers could not be found were given a large X beside their names. Below each man's name, and rank if they were an officer, is their regimental numbers. The names of the men researched were provided by the Victoria School Roll of Honour. The Roll of Honour was a list of men who had attended East Ward School and then served for our country.

Appendix J

This shows the 144 names that were chosen to research. Below each name are the years that the student attended East Ward School. Despite the fact the Roll of Honour is for students of Victoria School, none of the honoured men actually attended Victoria School. They had all been students of East Ward School, the building that stood prior to Victoria School's construction.