

RURAL REMEMBRANCE DAY

Honouring The Sacrifices Made

By Sally Smid



The annual Athens Remembrance Day Ceremony takes place at the local cenotaph. Veterans Sir Henry Stevens (sitting at left) and the late Dr. John Hodgkinson, in his Air Force jacket at centre, are in attendance.

Every Remembrance Day it is more apparent that there are fewer living world war veterans. Also perhaps due to the unrest in our volatile world, it is more apparent how precious our freedom is.

Memorial trees on either end of County Rd. 5 from Athens to Mallorytown were planted in 2000 to honour those who died for that freedom. Mallorytown hosts an annual ceremony in co-operation with the local Legion and school. It honours 19 local men who lost their lives in the World Wars, Korea and Afghanistan and is followed by a reception at Legion Branch 848, where a Wall of Honour recognizes local veterans.

It's also interesting to consider that area militiamen served in the War of 1812. There was a nearby look-out near Brown's Bay and a port at Mallorytown Landing.

Athens Township's Memory Road includes 20 trees with labelled crosses honouring those who died in both world wars. The Ministerial Association organizes an annual Remembrance Day ceremony at the cenotaph, involving many organizations and school children. A Joshua Bates Centre reception follows and includes Athens Heritage Society's remembrance displays. The Athens Garden Club also created a Shades of Green Memory Garden, beside the Township Hall, to honour the 11 local soldiers who died in WWI.

A noted veteran, Dr. John Hodgkinson of Athens, recently passed away in July. His absence will be felt at the well attended ceremony. "Dr. John" always loaned his

vintage bugle to local teacher Jim Palmer who played it at each service. It had belonged to his grandfather, an officer in the Northwest Rebellion, at the time of Louis Riel in 1885.

It's interesting to note that some area men fought in the U.S. Civil War. Caintown's David Ferguson was killed and Henry and Edgar Hawkins of Athens also enlisted in the Northern army. Henry later received a small pension from the U.S. government. Arthur Hawkins had the distinction of fighting in WWI and II and later helped build the cenotaph, a project of the Women's Institute.

One of the most noted area veterans, "Sir Henry Stevens", was knighted several years ago by the French government for his role at D-Day. An army tank radio operator, he recalls several near death experiences and the loss of several crew members.

War also had a major effect on life at home. The war took on Red Cross tasks, making bandages, knitting socks, and blankets for soldiers. To aid in the war effort, many collected scrap metal and more. Milkweed pods were gathered for stuffing flotation devices. They also sent parcels to bolster troop moral. Many things were scarce or very costly due to war taxes, and ration stamps were issued. Some served as ground observers, including high school students, who were trained to recognize and report any enemy air craft as a German invasion of Canada was feared. Some farmers and others could be exempted from military service if their jobs were considered essential. Women and youth took on needed jobs due to the worker shortage at home.

Recruits exercised on the lawn of what is now the Athens Library and Cadets trained on the High School grounds. Some enlistees were so desperate to serve that they lied about their age.

Many who served or remember past wars are still affected by the memories of horrific events. Sacrifices go on, as painful memories are recalled, including those in the world wars, Korea, Afghanistan, peacekeeping and more. Remembrance Day really has more significance than ever as we consider the overwhelming price paid by those who served or continue to serve at home or abroad to preserve our freedom. LH



The 156th Battalion marching down Elgin St to Main before heading off to serve in WWI. Some did not return. (Photo courtesy of the Athens Heritage Society)

Please check in your community with your Local Legion where Remembrance Day Services will be held and please honour our vets by attending the service. Also, ask your legion about joining as an associate/ affiliate or non-voting member and help financially to keep your local legion in your community.)