

Le Roy Van Buskirk, U.E. and the Bear River War Memorial

By Brian McConnell, UE *

Some of the names on the Bear River War Memorial are a reminder of the role of United Empire Loyalists in the settlement of Western Nova Scotia. They arrived as refugees to settle in the area of Bear River at the close of the American Revolution in the 1780s. The village is less than 17 kilometers from Digby and 27 kilometers from Annapolis Royal, both of which were entry ports. It is also the location of a cemetery called Loyalist.



Loyalist Cemetery on Lansdowne Road, Bear River

Lieutenant Le Roy Ellsworth Van Buskirk, U.E., the fifth great grandson of a United Empire Loyalist, is remembered with 15 other casualties of World War I on the Memorial. His brother Private Frank Van Buskirk, U.E., is listed among the 114 names of men who served during the conflict. They were direct descendants of Captain Lawrence Van Buskirk, an officer with the King's Orange Rangers during the American Revolution who later settled on a land grant in Annapolis County. The ancestors of the Van Buskirks were among the early settlers from Holland who founded New Amsterdam, later named New York.

The Memorial includes the surnames of others of European background as well as some who were Mi'kmaq and members of the local Bear River First Nation. Among those who served in World War I are three members of the Glode family, Newel, Joseph, and Samuel. Joseph died from illness on May 12, 1916 at age 18 after enlistment in the Canadian Infantry. His grave with headstone is in St. Ann's Church Cemetery on the Bear River First Nation. Another is Joseph Pictou who enlisted in 1916 and served with the 219th Overseas Highland Battalion.



Bear River War Memorial

The Bear River War Memorial was dedicated in November, 1932 to all from the area who served from 1914 to 1918. Among the names of men listed as killed in action or died from wounds the youngest was 17 and the oldest 45. They were buried or remembered in 13 cemeteries and monuments in Belgium and France as well as in Canada. Lieutenant Van Buskirk was the only officer of the 16. There were also ten Privates, two Corporals, and three Sergeants. In 1986 the Memorial was rededicated after adding the names of all veterans from not just World War I, but as well World War II and the Korean War. It was moved from a location at the intersection of the Main Street and the Upper River Road in 2009 to behind Royal Canadian Legion, Branch No. 22, Bear River, on the Wharf Road.

About 35,000 Nova Scotians enlisted in World War I and served mainly in three battalions. These were the Royal Canadian Regiment, 85th Battalion, and 25th Battalion. Of this number some 3,400 died in the war. There was also the No. 2 Construction Battalion, mostly made up of Black men. It mustered 600 men, about 300 from Nova Scotia. In Canada and Newfoundland as a whole more than 650,000 served in the War and greater than 66,000 gave their lives. More than 172,000 were wounded. In WWII some 44,000 Canadians died out of 1,159,000 who served.

The Van Buskirks prior to the American Revolution lived in Bergen County, New Jersey and some took an active part as Loyalists. As well as Captain Lawrence Van Buskirk of the King's Orange Rangers, his brother Abraham was commissioned a Lieutenant - Colonel in the 4th Battalion New Jersey Volunteers. Afterwards he settled at Shelburne, Nova Scotia where he became Mayor. Jacob Van Buskirk, the son of

Abraham was commissioned a Lieutenant in the 4th Battalion New Jersey Volunteers and transferred to the 3rd Battalion. He also settled in Shelburne where he was appointed a Justice of the Peace and elected a member of the House of Assembly in Halifax.

When they arrived in Nova Scotia after the American Revolution, several of the Van Buskirks received large land grants in Annapolis County for their loyalty to the British crown. One of these was Le Roy Van Buskirk's ancestor. His 5th great grandfather Lawrence Van Buskirk was granted 200 acres at Wilmot. Jeremiah Van Buskirk, grandfather of Le Roy occupied lands near Bear River which had been purchased by John, the son of Lawrence.

A newspaper article in the Halifax Evening Mail of February 1918 noted that Lieutenant Le Roy Ellsworth Van Buskirk was killed while flying on December 8, 1917. He was born in Bear River, educated in the village at Oakdene Academy and in Saint John, New Brunswick at Kerr's College. Then he worked for the Royal Bank of Canada in Nova Scotia at Bear River and North Sydney before enlisting with the first Canadian Division and being sent overseas. He was married on January 7, 1915 to Irene Runciman of Toronto. In February he was sent to France with the calvary brigade and wounded. After being treated in a hospital in England, he returned to service with the Fort Garry Horse and saw 14 months of service at the front including at the Battle of the Somme. He went to England in April where he began his flying training.



Lieutenant Le Roy Ellsworth Van Buskirk, U.E.

It was also noted in the newspaper account that brother Frank Van Buskirk had been wounded in France and was admitted to hospital on August 4, 1917 for gunshots to his left arm and eye. His operation was successful. After the war he lived in Bear River with his parents, two sisters, and an aunt. Later he married Eva Fraser and they resided in Pictou, Nova Scotia where a son was born to them who they named Le Roy Fraser VanBuskirk.

On the Bear River War Memorial there are also descendants and relatives of several other United Empire Loyalists including Captain Christopher Benson, originally from England who came from New York, the Purdys from New York, including Captain Gabriel and Anthony with his wife Bethia, all of whom are buried in the cemetery at Old St. Edward's Church at nearby Clementsport, and General Timothy Ruggles, a native of Massachusetts, who made his home near Wilmot in the Annapolis Valley.

The Memorial includes the names of three Bensons who served in World War I, being brothers George and Harry Benson, and Harold Benson. Cecil Jones and Vernon and William are listed. There are also three Ruggles. They are Gordon, Walter, and Joseph. One Purdy, being named Ronald appears.

Lieutenant Le Roy Ellsworth Van Buskirk was buried at Upton Cemetery in Wiltshire, England. On the back of the headstone where his parents, Charles and Irene Van Buskirk, were buried in Mount Hope Cemetery at Bear River it has inscribed: Lieut. Le Roy Ellsworth Van Buskirk / Killed in the Great War / Dec. 8, 1917 Aged 32 Yrs.



Van Buskirk Headstone in Mount Hope Cemetery, Bear River

Note:

- This article was completed on November 5, 2024 by Brian McConnell, UE. He is the Past President of the NS Branch of UELAC and a member of the Royal Canadian Legion. To contact him email brianm564@gmail.com