

GOWER REMEMBERS

Ruby Edith Ayre, VAD
(1889-1957)



Miss Ruby Ayre, eldest daughter of Mr. F. W. Ayre, who has been giving her services at Lady Roberts' Hospital, at Ascot, England, has volunteered for work at the front and was to leave London for France yesterday. (The Evening Telegram, November 21, 1917)

Ruby Edith Ayre was born in St. John's on October 8, 1889, the fifth of eight children of Mary Julia Pitts (1855-1903) and Frederick William Ayre (1854-1932). She was one of eight grandchildren of Mary Hannah Bray (1821-1911) and Charles Robert Ayre (1819-1889) who participated in World War I. The others, were her two brothers, Charles Robert (1885-1955) and Gerald Walter (1891-1916), and her first cousins Eric Stanley (1888-1916), Bernard Pitts (1892-1916), Dorothy Stevenson (1891-1969), Wilfred Douglas (1895-1916) and Ronald Henderson (1898-1967), all of whom had the surname Ayre.

Ruby attended the Methodist College in St. John's, where, in addition to her studies, she was involved in various sporting activities. This carried over into her adult life, as she was an avid golfer both before and after the war. When a separate Ladies division was established at Bally Haly Golf Club in 1910, Ayre, age 21, became its first Captain, a position she held for two years. She then filled the role of Secretary from 1912 to 1915.

She was also a frequent attendee at garden parties and indoor functions at Government House and, undoubtedly, graced many a ballroom dance floor and dining room table in St. John's in the years leading up to the war. However, these activities and many others soon moved down the scale of priorities once war was declared in 1914. While she did not sign up for overseas service immediately, once the news of the horrendous numbers of casualties and the need for people to care for them reached this side of the Atlantic, and showed no signs of abating, Ayre, along with several of her close friends, decided to join the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD).

The VAD was an organization founded in 1909 by the British Red Cross and the Order of St. John of Jerusalem to train and coordinate volunteers who were to provide nursing support services in various hospitals in England, and, after the war broke out, on the European continent. Ayre and her friend Mary Rendell left St. John's for England on board the SS *Stephano* on October 13, 1915. According to *The St. John's Daily Star*, "A large number of friends were at the pier to see them off. They took with them the best wishes of all."

Two days earlier that same paper gave an indication of what these women would be doing once they arrived in England, where they would be assigned to Lady Roberts' Convalescent Hospital. It wrote:

"This hospital situated in Ascot was founded by Lady Roberts, wife of the Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, and her daughter, and has already cared for hundreds of wounded soldiers.

In this institution are some of England's wealthiest and most accomplished young ladies who are doing whatever is necessary for the Empire's cause. In many instances English girls are doing the work of men so that the latter may be able to volunteer. Clerical work is now very largely done by girls and it is being done well. Work for women has increased a thousand times since the war started. Writing letters for wounded soldiers requires a small army of helpers in itself and this work as well as many others is done by girls of independent means.

At Lady Roberts' hospital everything is done gratuitously. Misses Ayre and Rendell will receive no monetary recompense, but we think the kindly appreciation of their work by the wounded men who fought for the Empire's Cause will well repay them. These young ladies are not nurses, but they are prepared to undertake whatever duties that are assigned them. Miss Ayre has a thorough

knowledge of cooking and may be stationed in the kitchen as cook. Miss Rendell has also considerable experience in that line and is also a fast typist and stenographer. Her work may be in a different line, but whatever it may be, she is ready to undertake it, as is also Miss Ayre.

The culinary work, scrubbing, washing, dusting, as well as nursing is all done by the Volunteer staff. There are no drones there and none are wanted. The work is not easy or light, there is much to be done but it does not frighten the English young ladies and we feel certain it will not [frighten] Misses Rendell and Ayre.”

Ayre began her service at Lady Roberts' Convalescent Hospital on November 22, 1915 and would remain there for almost two years. While her duties entailed a great deal of physical work, she and her fellow VADs were given time off to rest and were able to leave the hospital environs on occasion. One of these occurred in mid-December 1915, shortly after her arrival, when Ayre was able to travel to London, where she was bridesmaid for her dear friend Grace Goodridge of St. John's, who was marrying Lieutenant H. Owen, Commander of the torpedo destroyer HMS *Cherwell*.

Ayre ended her service at Lady Roberts' Convalescent Hospital on November 1, 1917, but that was not the end of her war service. On November 21, 1917 she transferred to the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY), a part of the British Expeditionary Force, which would see her spend the rest of the war in France. There she fulfilled roles as cook, orderly and ambulance driver. In the latter capacity she transported German prisoners-of-war between the front lines and the prisoner-of-war camps. She was repatriated to Newfoundland in April 1919 after more than three and one-half years of overseas service.

Once back in St. John's, Ayre soon adjusted to a slower pace of life. The war did not suddenly go away, however, and she spent several months during the latter half of 1919 taking wounded soldiers on outings in and around St. John's. This was part of a series of planned outings for men who were recuperating from injuries or illnesses acquired during the war and were resident in the Military Hospital, the Empire Barracks, Escasoni, Jensen Camp, the General Hospital and Waterford Hall.

She soon returned to her pre-war loves of dancing and golf. A local paper reports that on September 24, 1919, she "*gave a dance to a number of her friends at the well-known resort of Smithville.*" It went on: "*The Ballroom was tastefully decorated in helio and white. The C. C. C. band under Capt. Bully furnished the latest music, in waltzes, fox trots, etc. The dancing was graceful and highly enjoyed by all who participated. ... Dancing was kept up till an early hour this morning, and was fittingly concluded by singing Auld Lang Syne.*"

By the Spring of 1920 she was serving once again on the executive of the Ladies division at Bally Haly Golf and Tennis Club, the latter sport having been recently added to club's name. She assumed this position on April 24, four days before her marriage to St. John's lawyer Lewis Edward Emerson, which occurred on the 28th. Their only child, a daughter, Mary Edwina, named in part for Lady Edwina Roberts, who had founded the hospital in which Ruby had worked in England, was born in March 1921.

Edward Emerson was not only a well-respected St. John's lawyer. He served in the House of Assembly from 1928 to 1934 and was Newfoundland's last Minister of Justice and Attorney General under Responsible Government. In 1937 he was appointed as one of

the three Newfoundlanders on the Commission of Government. He served as Commissioner for Justice and Attorney General until 1944, and assumed the added responsibility for Defense in 1940. In 1944 he was appointed Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Newfoundland, and held that position when Newfoundland became part of Canada on April 1, 1949. His tenure as the new province's first chief justice was short-lived, however, as he died on May 19, 1949, just seven weeks after Confederation.

As the wife of a lawyer, politician, Cabinet minister, Commissioner and Chief Justice, Ruby Emerson, as she was now known, became a leading figure in St. John's charitable and social circles. She became involved in the Girl Guides when they were introduced to Newfoundland in the mid-1920s and later became Commissioner for Newfoundland. She was also a supporter of various charitable events at St. Bonaventure's College, her husband's *alma mater*. After his knighthood in 1944, she was thereafter referred to as Lady Emerson.

After finishing her schooling in England with the Sisters of the Sacred Heart and in France at the Sorbonne, Edwina Emerson spent time in St. John's working as a cipher clerk during World War II. There she met Robert J. Watson, an officer in the US Army Air Corps. They eventually married and settled in the Hempstead, Long Island, New York. Sometime in the mid-1950s her mother moved to Hempstead, where she died in 1957. She is buried in Greenfield Cemetery, Uniondale, Nassau County, New York.

Ruby Ayre and her friends took a number of photographs during their war service. Some of these photographs, together with other war memorabilia, such as her discharge certificate from the VADs and her Red Cross arm bands, were mounted in an album,

which her daughter Edwina presented to the Archives and Special Collections division of Memorial University's Queen Elizabeth II Library. This album can be viewed online at <http://collections.mun.ca/cdm/ref/collection/archives/id/196>.



Ruby Ayre in her uniform as a member of the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry.

On Sunday, November 16, 2014, Gower Street United Church initiated a program of commemoration that will last for approximately the next four years. On roughly every second Sunday from now through to the end of 2018, a brief write-up on one of these individuals will appear as an insert in the Bulletin and there will be a reference to that person in the service. In this way we hope to recognize their contribution to the war effort, the many sacrifices they made, some with their very lives, and the debt of gratitude we owe to each of them.

We also hope to learn more about them from their descendants or other relatives, thereby fostering a link between our past and our present as we celebrate the 200th anniversary of this congregation. If you know of any relatives of these servicemen and women please contact Bert Riggs at briggs@mun.ca 726-6169/864-8303