

# GOWER REMEMBERS

Lydia Gertrude Pitts Ayre  
(1857-1927)



*We regret to have to chronicle the death of Mrs. Chesley Ayre, which occurred at 11:30 last night at her residence, "Brookdale", Circular Road. The deceased had been in ill-health for some time, but it was only recently that her condition became so serious as to cause her relatives anxiety, and her passing comes all the more as a shock to them as a consequence. ... Two of the deceased sons, Eric, who was a Captain in the Nfld. Regiment, and Bernard, a Captain in the Bedfordshires [sic], were both killed on the same day in the first battle of the Somme. She was a life long member of Gower Street Church, and in all philanthropic movements was always very active. (The Evening Telegram, February 5, 1927)*

Lydia Gertrude Pitts was born in St. John's on January 1, 1857, the third of four daughters and sixth of seven children of Ann Cochrane (1825-1875) and William Pitts (1818-1884). Her oldest brother, James Stewart Pitts (1847-1914), was a very prominent St. John's businessman and benefactor of Gower Street Methodist Church and the Methodist College. The auditorium in the school was named in his memory, as was Pitts Memorial Drive. Her oldest sister, Selina (1853-1908), married Gustavas Dickinson, also a prominent local businessman.

William Pitts, in partnership with his father, operated a very successful general commission and ships brokerage establishment in St. John's for many years. An avid supporter and financial backer of both the Wesleyan Methodist Academy, which devolved into the Methodist College, and the St. John's Athanaeum, he was elected to House of Assembly in 1869 as a member of the Anti-Confederate party.

Gertrude received some degree of formal education, probably at the Wesleyan Methodist Academy, but as was common practice for daughters of the upper classes, she did not enter the work force once she finished her schooling. Instead, she would have spent her time espousing her mother's good works and assisting her in her various charitable endeavours. She would eventually follow her sister Selina's and then Julia's examples in entering a state of matrimony.

On August 12, 1880, Gertrude's older sister, Mary Julia, married Frederick William Ayre, the son of Hannah Bray and Charles Robert Ayre, thereby linking two of the major mercantile families in St. John's. That link was further strengthened

when, on May 24, 1885, Gertrude married Frederick's brother, Robert Chesley Ayre. Both ceremonies took place at Gower Street Methodist Church.

Gertrude and Chesley were blessed with three sons: the first, Eric Stanley, was born on October 20, 1888; the second, Bernard Pitts, on November 28, 1892; the third, named Robert Chesley, for his father, was still-born on July 26, 1895.

Following her marriage, Gertrude Ayre continued her charitable work. She was a dedicated and hardworking member of Gower Street Methodist Church, deeply involved in the Ladies Church and Parsonage Aid Society. She took part in the regular social events and fund-raising activities the society sponsored, contributing to the upkeep of the church and the minister's residence. She was also a tireless supporter of the Methodist Orphanage.

Her husband's sudden death on May 5, 1903, at age 46, left her a widow with two young sons to raise alone: Eric, 14, and Bernard, 11. Both boys were attending the Methodist College at the time of their father's death. Eric completed his formal schooling at Leys School in Cambridge, England. He then returned to St. John's, where he assumed a management role in Ayre & Sons Ltd. Bernard's education followed a similar path; however, upon graduation from Leys School, he enrolled in Cambridge University to study medicine.

When war broke out in the late summer of 1914, both Eric, then 25, and Bernard, 21, were quick to enlist, Eric in the Newfoundland Regiment and Bernard in the Norfolk Regiment

in England. Both received commissions as officers, both reaching the rank of Captain by the summer of 1916. Then came the Battle of the Somme! On the opening day of that battle, Eric was killed at Beaumont Hamel, while Bernard met his death further along the line near Albert.

At the time of her sons' deaths, Gertrude Ayre was in London with her daughter-in-law, Janet, Eric's wife. It is not known how she learned of their deaths, but she knew a number of the officers at the Newfoundland Pay and Records Office, especially Captain Hugh Anderson, who would, undoubtedly, have notified her and Janet of any news. The same cannot be said for such knowledge getting back to Newfoundland. As late as July 6, the *Evening Telegram* informed its readers of Bernard's death, and included the following "*For Mrs. Ayre and Captain Eric the sympathy will be great and general. Their sorrow has one consolation in the knowledge that he died a soldier and a man.*"

In addition to her two sons, two of Gertrude Ayre's nephews were also killed on July 1: her sister Julia's son, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Gerald Ayre and her late husband's brother's son, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Wilfrid Ayre, both of the Newfoundland Regiment. Her loss did not end there: on October 26, 1918, her niece, Ethel Dickenson, a former VAD, died in St. John's, a victim of the Spanish flu epidemic, which she had contracted while nursing others who had been afflicted.

Gertrude spent the remainder of the war in England. Janet joined the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD), working in various casualty hospitals in southern England. She also trained

as an ambulance driver. Gertrude was her constant companion, offering moral support as well as assisting in any way she could. She made regular visits to members of the Newfoundland Regiment in hospitals and recuperation facilities, bringing treats and writing letters for them. At one point she visited her niece, Ruby Ayre, who was a VAD at Lady Roberts Convalescent Hospital in Ascot.

Both Ayre women returned to St. John's at the war's end. Janet moved in with Gertrude at the family home, Brookdale, 46 Circular Road. They lived there for the remainder of Gertrude's life, even after Janet's marriage to Andrew H. Murray, on April 30, 1924. Janet and Andrew's only child was named Gertrude in honor of her.

After her return to St. John's, Gertrude continued her philanthropic work, especially at Gower Street Church, where she was a regular attendee at services and frequent contributor to various women's initiatives. She made a number of return visits to England, often in company with Janet.

Gertrude Ayre died at St. John's on February 4, 1927. Three days later, the *Evening Telegram* reported "*The funeral of the late Mrs. Lydia Gertrude Ayre took place from her residence, Circular Road, at 11:30 this morning, and was largely attended by citizens including the employees of Messers Ayre and Sons. The cortege proceeded from the home by way of Rennie's Mill Road, Queen's Road, New Gower Street, Job Street and Water Street West to the General Protestant Cemetery, where interment took place in the family vault. Prior to the cortege leaving the house, a short service was held by*

*Rev. Hammond Johnson, Drs. Darby and Fenwick and concluded with the singing of a hymn, "How Firm a Foundation." A similar service was held at the graveside, in which Revs. C. H. Johnson, J. G. Joyce and Hammond Johnson officiated."*

A life-long supporter of Gower Street Church and the various Methodist (United Church after June 1925) institutions in the city, Gertrude Ayre's philanthropy continued after her death. In her Last Will and Testament, she left: \$5,000 to the Methodist Conference for the benefit of supernumerary ministers and widows of ministers in Newfoundland; \$1,000 to the Trustees of each of Cochrane Street, George Street, Gower Street and Wesley churches to be used for the benefit of these churches; \$500 to each of the Gower Street Women's Missionary Society and the George Street Women's Missionary Society; \$10,000 to the Board of Governors of the Methodist College to be invested, with the annual interest being used for the maintenance and upkeep of the Ayre Memorial Gymnasium at the school. Other benefactors included the Church of England and Roman Catholic Orphanages (\$500 each); the Ladies College Aid Society (\$1,000); the Permanent Marine Disasters Fund (\$500). The remainder of her estate (valued at \$217,795.63<sup>1</sup>), was left to her former daughter-in-law and her various nephews and nieces and their children.

In speaking to the congregation at Gower Street Church on February 6, 1927, two days after Gertrude Ayre's death, the minister, the Rev. Hammond Johnson made the following

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<sup>1</sup> This amount is the equivalent of almost \$3,000,000 in 2016 funds.

remarks in eulogizing her: *“Her life had been an inspiration, her death a falling asleep. The Church had ever been to her a delight. In its behalf she had rendered continuous service. ... For her, service had always been a joy; and though she never repined or complained of her afflictions, her constant regret was that the state of her health made it no longer possible for her to take part in church and philanthropic services.*

*There are few in St. John’s, or indeed, in Newfoundland, who are unaware of the tragedy of her life. Her two sons, ... fell in the Battle of the Somme .... The double blow, following the loss of her husband, came with a suddenness and severity that caused her poignant anguish. Once [a] happy wife and mother, she was bereft of all, and yet, with true Christian resignation and wonderful fortitude, she kept her consuming grief within her gentle bosom, devoting her life to the memory of her loved ones, and continuing these ministrations of mercy which had been her delight in the days gone by. Well may the world thank God for the Rachels who find, if not comfort, yet some success of sorrow, by serving others.”*

Gertrude Ayre would, in all likelihood, have argued that she was just a woman who lived her life according to Christians teachings, steeped in courage, kindness, generosity, and love for others; that she should not be singled out for doing more than the many hundreds of other women of the Gower congregation, of St. John’s and of Newfoundland. She was doing God’s work in a world that desperately needed her special touch.