

GOWER REMEMBERS

Corporal Roy Bennett Leseman

(1894-1980)



“The pupils of St. Bonaventure’s College held an entertainment on Saturday [January 16] afternoon. An excellent programme was rendered, including the laughable farce, “Dr. Snowball,” in which Masters Nangle, Power, Hayes and Leseman acquitted themselves well. Besides the choruses rendered by the boys a recitation was given by Master Leseman and solos by Masters Pike, Hagen and Dunn. The financial proceeds will be used to buy pews for the new chapel.” (ET, January 18, 1909)

Roy Bennett Leseman was born in Brooklyn, New York, on July 18, 1894, the son of Bertha Emeline Bowden and Henry George Leseman. Less than four months later, he was baptized by the Rev. A. D. Morton, minister of the Gower Street Methodist Church congregation in St. John's, Newfoundland. The congregation was then worshipping in temporary quarters at the corner of Parade Street and Harvey Road, while awaiting the construction of a new church building, their former church having been destroyed by fire on July 8, 1892.

It does seem rather strange that his parents would bring a three-month old child all the way from Brooklyn, New York, to have him baptized in St. John's, Newfoundland, given that such a voyage sometimes took a week (or more) and the north Atlantic Ocean can be a cruel and exacting taskmaster. However, the child's mother was a native of St. John's and his father was a frequent visitor, who was well-known there. Bertha Leseman had several sisters and brothers living in St. John's and may have wanted them to be part of the celebration and baptism of her first-born.

Henry Leseman was a ship's captain, who had operated his own vessel (the *Miranda* was one) on the St. John's-Halifax-New York freight and provisions run for some years previous to his son's birth. Bertha appears to have been his third wife, even though he was a relatively young man (42)

at the time of their marriage, which took place on July 11, 1892. The presiding minister was the Rev. Dr. Humphrey Cowperthwaite of Gower Street congregation and took place just three days after the fire that had destroyed Gower Street Methodist Church.

Henry had married Bertha's older sister, Marian Isabella, on October 08, 1887, but she had died on May 08, 1891, and their only child, Fred, had died on January 01, 1889. There is one, James, and possibly a second son, Robert, from what appears to be an even earlier marriage.

The Lesemans spent the first two years of Roy's life living in Brooklyn, New York. It appears that the family relocated to St. John's in 1896, where, in addition to continuing to operate his vessel, Henry also worked as a printer at Bowden and Company, which belonged to his wife's family. During part of that time he and his family lived at 25 Bond Street, and later at 33 Temperance Street, which is the second from the bottom of the brick houses known today as the Four Sisters.

Henry Leseman died in New York, probably of cancer, on November 25, 1901; he had gone to New York some weeks previous hoping to improve his health. With his death, Bertha Leseman was left to raise their three small children, Roy and his younger siblings, Walter and Flora, alone. A

fourth child, Eric, had died on April 25, 1902, at the age of nine months, a victim of measles. In addition, her step-son, James, lived with them, although he was old enough to be working as a paper roller with Bowden and Company by 1904. That year, 1904, brought great tragedy to the Leseman family: Bertha died on November 18 of consumption. Now Roy and his siblings were truly orphans.

Bertha Leseman had named two of her brothers-in-law, Mark Chaplin and Henry Y. Mott, both of St. John's, as the executors of her estate and as guardians of her children. Flora, and perhaps Walter, went to live with the Mott family at 92 Barnes Road. Roy may have lived there for a while, but by the beginning of the school year in September 1905, he was a boarding student at St. Bonaventure's College in St. John's.

At the time he enrolled in St. Bon's, as it was commonly known, Roy Leseman was eleven years old. He probably started school at the age of six, and, in all likelihood, went to the Methodist College, which would explain why he is entered in the records of that College as one of its former students who enlisted in the Newfoundland Regiment. He remained a student at St. Bon's until graduation in 1913.

From information contained in the St. Bon's quarterly magazine, *The Adelpian*, Leseman was a first-rate student

academically, finishing very near the top of his class most years. For instance, in 1909 (age 15, roughly the equivalent of Grade X), he received Honours in English and History, with a Pass in Arithmetic, Geometry, French, Latin and Hygiene. He was also a proven athlete: he played on the cricket and hockey teams, and likely others during his time there.

It was as a member of the debating team that he appeared to have excelled. These debates were both internal to the college and in competition with two other colleges: the Methodist and Bishop Feild. On March 13, 1909, he was the lead debater for the sailors on the question of who had the preferred life, soldiers or sailors. That debate was won, narrowly, by the side arguing for the soldiers. However, in a separate debate, Leseman, supporting deafness, led his squad to victory on the question “Which is the greater affliction – deafness or blindness?” on February 25, 1911. He was also on the winning side arguing for Dickens on the question “Which is to be preferred, Dickens or Thackeray?” on February 24, 1912.

These are just three of the many debates in which he demonstrated his powers of persuasion. Given the scope of the questions posed and the fact that the honour of the school was at stake in the friendly rivalry that existed among the three colleges, it is safe to assume that the debaters were well

read, leaving no relevant book unopened in their quest for supremacy.

Leseman was also active in other extracurricular activities at the College. He participated in theatricals, as is evident from the quotation on the front page. On November 11, 1912, he was one of a group of students who completed a First Aid course from Drs. Scully and Macpherson. He was also a member of the Catholic Cadet Corps, a boys' brigade associated with St. Bon's.

Leseman entry into the workforce occurred in 1914 when he went to work for Thomas A. Pippy, who was a machinist and brass worker located at 6 Waldegrave Street. Like so many of his classmates and contemporaries, his life changed dramatically with the declaration of war in the late summer of 1914. Leseman was one of the First Five Hundred, enlisting in the Newfoundland Regiment on September 03, 1914. He was assigned Regimental number 220. At the time, he was living at 55 Patrick Street and he listed his sister Flora, still resident at 92 Barnes Road, as his next of kin. His attestation and other documents indicate that he had black hair and brown eyes, with a mole on his right cheek. He was 5 feet, 11 inches tall, with a dark complexion. He gave his occupation as a marine engineer at \$3.00 per week.

The next year of Leseman's life was typical of that first group of enlistees in the Regiment. He received preliminary training in St. John's before sailing for England on the SS *Florizel*. This was followed by periods of training at Salisbury Plain, England, and at several locations in Scotland, before he shipped out with a little over 1,000 other members of the Regiment for the eastern Mediterranean on August 20, 1915. He was with the main body of the Regiment when it landed at Suvla Bay, on Turkey's Gallipoli Peninsula, on the night of September 19-20.

Leseman did not spend long in Gallipoli, however. On October 12, 1915, he was evacuated and put on board the Hospital Ship *Dongola*, which took him back to England. He arrived there on October 27 and was admitted to the 3rd London General Hospital at Wandsworth the following day, suffering from dysentery. He remained in hospital for almost two months, before being released and granted two weeks furlough on December 21. On January 3, 1916 he joined E Compnay at the Depot at Ayr, Scotland, where he remained until he rejoined the Regiment in the Field on the Western Front on March 22, 1916.

Leseman's service during the months that followed is something of a mystery. His name does not appear on either of the four lists associated with Beaumont Hamel: those killed; those injured; those who answered roll call; those who

were part of the ten percent holdback. Nor is there any indication in his Regimental file of what he was doing between Beaumont Hamel (July 1, 1916) and his return to St. John's on Blue Puttee Leave on July 21, 1918. He was certainly in active service somewhere, as he received a Lance Corporal's stripe on October 27, 1916 and was made acting Corporal three weeks later, on November 16. He was confirmed to that rank on April 27, 1918.

He spent the summer of 1918 in St. John's, returning to the United Kingdom in November. He was demobilized from the Regiment on March 07, 1919, and according to a letter in his file was working in Glasgow at that time. His term of service was recorded as four years, 186 days. He would appear to have been an exemplary soldier, as there is not a single offence on his Conduct Sheet: no missed curfew; no late for tattoo; no drunk and disorderly; no showing disrespect to an officer. That, indeed, was a rarity!

Leseman was in Ayr on April 13, 1917. On that day he married Mary Armstrong Dick, a native of Girvan, in Ayrshire. Their first child, a son named Henry George Patterson Leseman, was born in Ayr on December 11, 1918, and died 17 days later on December 28. Their second child, a daughter named Flora, was also born in Scotland, on February 20, 1920.

It was not long after Flora's birth that the family left Scotland for the United States. On September 25, 1920, Leseman was issued a US passport, to which he was entitled, having been born in the United States. The family sailed from London to New York on board the SS *Caronia* in mid November. A short time later he began working for the Morgan Construction Company in Worcester, Massachusetts. The Leseman family settled there and soon more children were born: Roberta Ethel (b. 1922); William (b. 1924), Gertrude (b. 1927); Mildred Louise (b. 1937).

Leseman continued to work in and around Worcester during the 1920s through to the 1960s. He performed various roles (engineer, foreman, machinist) with Morgan Construction, and later worked for the Hannon Detective Agency in Waterfield. His marriage with Mary broke up some time between the 1940 US Census and 1942 when she married George Crockford (1890-1972). However, Roy and Mary remained friends, sharing a house at 39 Washburn Road, Springfield, Massachusetts, for a number of years after their divorce. Roy died in Springfield on August 18, 1980, at age 86; Mary outlived him by almost 13 years. She died at Milbury, Massachusetts, on July 22, 1993, at age 96.

Roy Leseman may not have had a long connection with Gower Street Church but he was baptized there and was related to a number of its soldiers and seamen. Through his

mother, he was a first cousin of Private Jack Fielding Chaplin and Lieutenant-Surgeon Harold Garrett Chaplin; through his maternal grandmother, Elizabeth Spooner Bowden, he was a cousin of 2nd Lieutenant John Spooner, his brothers Private Francis and Private Arthur Spooner, who served in the Canadian Army, and his cousin Private Albert Spooner of the Newfoundland Regiment. There is no evidence that he ever visited Newfoundland after the summer of 1918. But his name appears on the Memorial Scroll at Gower Street United Church, in the Memorial Book of the Methodist College and on the Memorial Tablet in the foyer of St. Bonaventure's College. Not too many can claim such recognition!

Note: The images on the front page were made available by Leseman's granddaughter, Vicki Nelson Coutu, of Worcester, Massachusetts.

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 through to the end of 2018, a brief write-up on one of these individuals, similar to this one, 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 begin our 202nd year as a faith community.

If you know of any relatives of these servicemen and women please contact Bert Riggs at briggs@mun.ca or at 726-6169.