

THE OSWALD WEMP STORY

By Herb Wemp UE with contributions from Doris Wemp UE

United Empire Loyalists Barent and Catherine Wemp endured hardships of the American Revolutionary war and began a new life in the wilderness north of Lake Ontario and where it meets the St. Lawrence River.

Barent and Catherine had remained loyal to the crown of England. They had to flee their home in the Mohawk Valley leaving everything they owned behind. They were with Captain Michael Grass's Company, a group of 17 at Camp Cataraqui in the fall of 1784. In the late winter of 1785, while Barent was monitoring rebel movements south of Lake Ontario, Catherine gave birth to their first child John, who became known as the first child born in the new loyalist community.

By 1803 they settled on Amherst Island on a 200 acre parcel of land. They raised seven children from whom some of today's Island residents are descended. Barent and Catherine both died in 1843 and are buried on the site of their family farm.

Oswald Wemp was born December 27, 1897 and was the great-grandson of Barent and Catherine. He too endured the hardships of war – World War One. Oswald started off as a Private in the 89th Battalion, but because of his strengths he was transferred to Commander Arthur Bell's 31st battalion and sailed to England. After Oswald's battalion crossed the English Channel in the fall of 1916, they fought in Belgium and France, and were often at the forefront of the fighting. At Vimy Ridge between April 9 through 12, 1917 the whole Canadian division far exceeded their objectives. The 31st Battalion became known as "Bell's Bulldogs". Oswald had become a Lance Corporal by this time.

Over the weeks that followed there was a build up to another offensive and on May 2nd and 3rd in a small village outside of Fresnoy, the 31st battalion received orders and prepared to flank the enemy from the north as the main offensive went through Fresnoy. Oswald never made it home.

Oswald had seen seven months of trench warfare ... some routine, some heroic, and some just the brutal reality of war. Oswald made the ultimate sacrifice ... God bless him.

As reported in *The Napanee Beaver* of Thursday, September 14, 2017 (page 6) in a story headlined "Fallen Soldier's Medal Makes 100 year journey home", the rest of Oswald's story took place after his death. The article by Adam Prudhomme explained that a "First World War plaque, colloquially known in the era as the 'dead man's penny', was issued to Wemp's family on Amherst Island after he was killed in action on May 3, 1917. It was the standard practice for the British military to issue the plaque to every fallen soldier's next of kin. Somehow along the way, however, it took a century-long detour" to North Bay, Ontario.

The *Beaver* story quoted Christopher Gauthier of North Bay saying, "About a year ago [July 2016] we were getting all these boxes out of an attic of the ONR (Ontario Northland Railroad), which is an old building in North Bay. ... In the attic of this building there was just a bunch of boxes ... I was there one day lugging boxes all the way downstairs, it was July so I was sweaty, and against the baseboard in the far corner was this medal. I didn't know it was a medal at the time. I thought it looked neat so I picked it up and I put it in my pocket. Part of me felt bad because I technically took it from the building, but it had a cool image on it so I wanted to know more about it."

Some online research led Gauthier to Amherst Island, a place he'd never heard of much less ever been to prior to finding the Wemp heirloom.

"When I found out what the penny was for and what it was about, I figured I had to get it back to its rightful owners or a museum." Once he had a name, he took to social media where he eventually got connected with Herb Wemp, whose great-grandfather was a cousin to the soldier.



Photo of Oswald Wemp supplied by Doris Wemp UE



Herb reports, “Oswald’s family moved off the island to go out west for a short time, but when the family came back to the island, Oswald stayed in Calgary and enlisted in the army on Jan. 3, 1915 at the age of 17.”



Chris Gauthier of North Bay (left) presents Amherst Island’s Herb Wemp and Carol Glenn with the “dead man’s

penny” issued to Oswald Wemp’s family when he died in action in 1917. Both are related to the fallen soldier. Photo, Adam Prudhomme of *The Napanee Beaver*

On September 9, 2017, Lance-Cpl. Oswald Wemp's memorial plaque made its way home to Amherst Island, 100 years after his passing. Christopher Gauthier presented it to members of the Wemp family, who in turn donated it to the Amherst Island Museum and Gallery where it will remain on display. The *Beaver* quoted Mr. Gauthier as saying, “I’m just fascinated by the whole thing and I’m honoured to give it back to where it should be. I would like to know how it got to North Bay in the first place, but maybe we’ll never know.”

Oswald Wemp’s parents were first cousins.

Oswald is a 2nd cousin twice removed to Herb D. Wemp.

We note that Oswald Wemp’s full military record should be available online at Library and Archives Canada some time in 2018: at present the extensive project to digitize all of the First World War Personnel Records has reached the start of “S” surnames. To find a soldier (or nurse)’s record, go to <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/first-world-war/personnel-records/Pages/personnel-records.aspx>

