

Newly discovered artefacts showcased for Vimy 100



By Brock Weir

Taking in newly donated items to Hillary House is almost a common, everyday occurrence for curator Erika Mazanik. Every so often, the Aurora Historical Society receives donations of family artefacts from various far flung members of the Hillary family and the boxes are opened, the items are catalogued, and ideas are brainstormed for how they can be incorporated in future exhibitions.

Her eyes widened, however, when she opened up a recently donated shoebox. Inside was a 100-year-old cardboard box in pristine condition. Now, finding a box like this in mint condition is rare enough, but its contents were priceless.

Inside the box, labeled "Effects of the late R.S. Hillary" were a cigarette case scratched with his initials, a dog tag, a small palm-sized prayer book given to him by his father, and a standard issue belt.

These were the items on 20-year-old Aurora man Robert Stuart Hillary when he was fatally wounded at Vimy Ridge.

These items will be on display to the public for the first time on Wednesday, April 12, as Aurora's cultural partners join forces for a community commemoration marking the centenary of the battle.

"It was actually quite emotional because you read so much of [the Hillary family's] stuff and to have things you know he had with him at the end is...well, I was in shock and amazement," says Ms. Mazanik. "I didn't think curating was going to be such an emotional job. There is shock and amazement that I am here holding his belt."

Also included in the evening will be newly discovered letters written to Hillary from the home front, which were also with him at the end, contrasting what was known here at home about events as they unfolded in France and how they were interpreted.

"There was such a disconnect," says Erika. "The horrors he must have been going through compared to what his family understood. It was such an eye-opening experience."