



After decades of being used as a grazing spot for cattle, the extensive trenches of the former Camp Hughes in southwestern Manitoba are slowly eroding away.

# Distant war marks prairie site

## Manitoba fields bear remnants of trenches where soldiers trained for European conflict

By Kevin Rollason

**I**N a little known spot in southern Manitoba, prairie boys learned how to storm out of trenches to attack the German troops they would be facing in a few short months during the First World War.

They learned what it was going to be like to live in a trench before the one they would live in facing Vimy Ridge. How to throw hand grenades. How to accurately shoot at an enemy closer than any that had ever been faced in history.

Everything that was set up at Camp Hughes, located south of the Trans-Canada Highway about 10 kilometres west of Carberry and about 130 kilometres west of Winnipeg, was set up to look and feel real, to be as accurate to the real thing as they could, from the trenches that were all built to scale, both in depth and width, to the rifle range which was only 400 yards wide, the maximum distance away the German troops were in their trenches.

But the training troops also watched movies in their down time. Used a bank. Swam in a heated pool.

They even used toilets, albeit a large metallic pail known as a latrine bucket — one for every 10 men.

While the site is now grassed over, has trees where some of the trenches were, and has eroded because of cattle and the effects of decades of snow and rain, echoes of what it was can still be seen. And in some cases, rise from the soil itself.

In a glass case tucked away upstairs at the Royal Canadian Legion's Norwood and St. Boniface Branch, some artifacts released from the ground at Camp Hughes and found by the Military History Society of Manitoba are now on display.

The artifacts range from everyday personal items, like a metal mess cup, bowl, plate and spoons, and nickel-plated orthotics for somebody's shoes and boots, to an 18-pounder cannon shell and a training hand grenade. There are also a couple of metres of barbed wire as well as numerous rifle shells.

And, yes, they also have the latrine bucket, far larger than one children



The trenches as they appeared in the old days, when they were used to train troops for the First World War.

use to make sand castles on the beach.

Bruce Tascona, the society's president, said four years before the First World War broke out the military decided it needed a place in Western Canada for its artillery, cavalry and infantry militia troops to train.

More than 1,400 militia soldiers trained at the camp — then called Camp Sewell — the first summer. They continued to train there until the war broke out, a Canadian army was formed, and the camp was expanded.

Camp Sewell's name was changed in 1915 to Camp Hughes, to recognize Major General Sam Hughes, the federal government's Minister of Militia and Defence. Almost 11,000 troops trained there in 1915, with more than 27,000 the next year.

Tascona said while troops had trained at the camp for a few years, it

was in 1916, after the war in Europe had developed into a stalemate with both sides hunkered down in trenches for months, measuring advances in centimetres instead of metres or kilometres, that they began digging trenches at the camp in Manitoba.

Tascona said trench war-hardened veterans were brought to Camp Hughes to develop the trench system and teach trainee soldiers the new style of fighting.

"During the Boer War, soldiers were trained to accurately shoot a target at 1,000 yards," he said.

"This war was different. You only had to qualify at 400 yards because, with the trenches, you didn't need to shoot any further."

Coincidentally, unlike many other First World War-era training camps around the world, areas like the short

shooting range at Camp Hughes ended up being preserved from being overrun by Second World War training because the next war is always fought differently: Shooting an enemy 400 yards away made no sense when facing a Nazi army with fast-moving Blitzkrieg tactics, including massive air support followed by troops.

The trenches constructed at Camp Hughes were fashioned to the same depth and width as the ones in which the soldiers would see action in Europe. They were constructed to the size needed to take 1,000 soldiers.

The troops were able to see how they would march through the trenches, serve as sentries or in listening posts, even graduating to a full frontal assault across no-man's-land to the enemy's trenches.

Tascona said the enemy's trenches,

like the ones in Europe, were built on a rise in the land, forcing the troops to launch their assault uphill.

"There are 10,000 metres of trenches that are relatively intact, from six inches deep to six feet deep," he said.

"Ten kilometres of trenches have been surveyed by us."

Not too far away from these trenches was an area with pits dug out where the troops would be trained on how to throw live grenades.

Training at the camp was put on hold during the last two years of the war because of a drop in volunteers, which caused the federal government to put in place conscription.

The militia began training there again annually during the 1920s before the camp was dismantled and moved to the new Camp Shilo as part of a depression-era work project. The base was moved because while Camp Hughes was on the Canadian Pacific Rail line, troops were forced to march around a swamp to get to it. Camp Shilo was on the Canadian National Rail line with no swamp.

William Galbraith, who now works for the federal government, but a few years ago did his master's thesis on Camp Hughes, said graduates from Camp Hughes went on to play vital roles at not only Vimy Ridge, but the Battle of the Somme and Passchendaele.

Galbraith said battle-hardened trench veterans were brought back from Europe to help construct the trench training system at Camp Hughes.

"The entire trench system was set up with support trenches and communication trenches and jump-off trenches," he said.

"It's still a moving experience when you walk through the trenches today."

But Galbraith said even in some areas where nature is taking over, it actually helps show evidence of the circular white bell tents where the troops were housed when they trained at the camp.

"You can see where the tents were because the junipers grow in circles where they were set up."

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### Before and after



Dugouts used to train troops as they appeared at the time (left) and today, overgrown.



Camp boasted only heated pool west of Winnipeg. Right, the pool as it appears today.

# History crumbling into dust, says heritage group

By Kevin Rollason

A Manitoba spot helped bring about what many say was the birth of our nation, but grazing cattle are slowly destroying the province's physical link to the Battle of Vimy Ridge — the Canadian army's greatest victory.

On about 400 acres of land near and the present-day Canadian Armed Forces base at Camp Shilo, Canadian First World War troops built several kilometres of trenches so they could train for trench warfare to break through the years-long stalemate in battlefield Europe.

They also built what was, with more than 27,000 troops, the province's second-largest city after Winnipeg — complete with shops, the only heated swimming pool between Winnipeg and Vancouver, and six movie theatres.

The buildings were either destroyed or moved to the new Camp Shilo decades ago, but the trenches and nearby grenade and rifle ranges remain decades after the soldiers left.

there, the land went back to the provincial government which for decades has leased it out for cattle farming, even though it was listed as a provincial heritage site in 1993.

For decades, the cattle have done what cattle do — foraging for food, rubbing their bodies and hooves on the ground and, in some cases, even dying, their bones left bleached by the sun.

A local historical group wants to change that and protect for future generations our local link to the war and the historic battle.

But after 20 years of working with the provincial government — five times longer than the entire First World War — the president of the Military History Society of Manitoba can't understand why the government appears to be dragging its feet.

"This is the only site on this side of the

trenches," Bruce Tascona said recently. "... We're letting cattle on it. It's fragile out there because there's only half an inch of topsoil and under that, sand."

Cultural, Heritage and Tourism Minister Eric Robison said last week he plans to have his officials talk to both the farmer and the historical group to see if they can come up with something that will please all sides.

Gary Dickson, manager of the provincial heritage registry in Manitoba's Cultural, Heritage and Tourism Department, said the province recognizes Camp Hughes as a heritage site.

But Dickson said because there is a valid lease on the site, moving the cattle or finding other land for the farmer to lease is a complex issue.

Dickson said that last year, after discussions, the farmer agreed to reduce

But Dickson said during at least 50 years that the site has been leased for cattle, they have also helped preserve the site, their grazing preventing bushes and trees from taking over.

Dickson said the province is waiting for the history society to put together a plan, including their plans for the site and where they would get their funding.

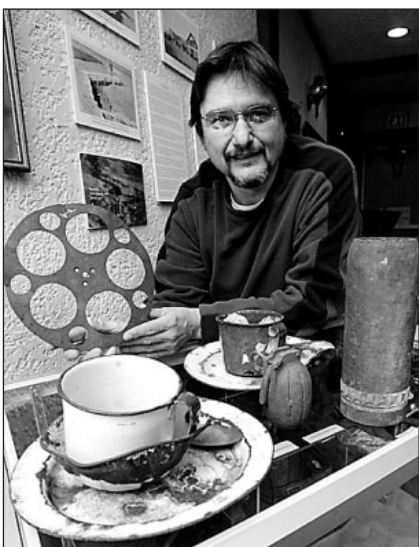
William Galbraith, a Winnipegger who did his master's thesis on Camp Hughes a few years ago and whose great-uncle trained there before being shipped with his fellow soldiers to fight in Europe and die there, said he hopes that after many decades the cattle will be moved off the historically sensitive land.

"If we lose this, we will never get it back," he said.

Galbraith recalled a touching moment a few years ago when his daughter was eight and they visited the site.

"She said, 'You know, this would have been Uncle Albert's last home in Manitoba or Canada'. That is quite poignant and there would be others you could say that about."

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**'This is the only site on this side of the ocean — even Vimy Ridge doesn't have trenches'**

— Bruce Tascona, president of the Military Historical Society of Manitoba