

# THE CANADIAN SERVICE FLAG

## WAS OUR CANADIAN FLAG BORN OF MOTHERS' GRIEF?



A major mark of grief assumed by Canadian women during the First World War was the service flag, adopted late in the war and based upon an American precursor which had a white centre, red border, and as many blue stripes as there were family members in the war. In the final design, stars replaced the stripes and blue changed to gold when a soldier was killed. The service flag idea was quickly adopted in Canada, where maple leaves were used instead of stars.

In April 1918, Saturday Night magazine announced that homes across the country would be flying these new service flags. By July, the Canadian Service Flag Company of Toronto was advertising in the *Canadian Home Journal*, encouraging women to display the flag in their windows and advising that "the correct design has a red border, white panel, blue maple leaves — red leaves for those who have fallen." Considering the flags only came into use during the last six or seven months of the war, they were quite popular...

A government committee set up in 1919 to study the Canadian coat of arms observed that the maple leaf was a favourite Canadian emblem in part because of its use during the war, on service flags which "scores of thousands of Canadians displayed." Although service flags have disappeared from use, the present Canadian flag is notably similar to the red-leafed service flag flown by bereaved Canadian families.\*



Norman Rockwell's Homecoming displays three American service flags

The feelings expressed by a Toronto newspaper in 1918 must surely have reflected those in Cobourg, Port Hope, and every city, town and village throughout the country.

*These service flags placed in the window of every home entitled to fly them will make the residential streets of this city more companionable places for the mothers and wives of the absent ones to walk along. These little flags will be mute, but eloquent, evidence of the fact that we are to a large extent one people, and that far more homes in Toronto are sharing the hopes and anxieties of the war than anyone had supposed. There is a lonesomeness in the homes of the city these days, and there is need for just such a touch as this to broaden the knowledge and sympathy and fellow feeling of the families up and down every street.*

Percy Climo Tells of the Service Flag being Used in Cobourg:

*A small white silk flag, about nine inches by twelve inches hung in the windows of homes, whose members were in the armed forces overseas. For each soldier absent, a small coloured maple leaf was attached on the surface of the flag.*

*Some homes only showed one maple leaf, some had five, others had any number between one and five or six. My mother's flag had two maple leaves. The families who had sent loved ones overseas were thus identified.\*\**



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