

The man behind the Silver Cross

Former Georgetown resident came up with idea for memorial medal

By Dawn Livingstone

At the Memorial Day service in Ottawa on November 11, one woman will lay a wreath on behalf of all Silver Cross mothers.



A 1923 portrait photo of writer William A. Fraser who came up with the suggestion of awarding a medal to the mothers of soldiers killed in action.

Photo courtesy Glenn Fraser

The suggestion for the creation of this award was made by a much loved, prolific and well-respected writer, who for several years lived on Main Street South in Georgetown, just across from Knox Presbyterian Church.

While not a native of the town, William Alexander Fraser married into the prominent pioneer Barber family, and while here he did much of his writing.

Although William Alexander Fraser was born about 1859 in River John, N.S., it appears that the family lived in the United States, where Fraser received his earliest education.

Returning to Canada as a young teenager, Fraser lived and worked with an uncle in Elgin County, graduating in engineering.

Oil had become a booming industry around the Petrolia area of neighbouring Lambton County, and William was soon employed by the Petrolia Oil Company. While in their employ, he travelled extensively throughout India, Burma and area. He became a personal friend of famed British author and poet Rudyard Kipling, and Kipling would later be godfather to of one of his children. The experiences he had working in this area would feature prominently in many of his later writings.

As an employee of the Government of Canada, he is credited with sinking the first oil well at Pelican Falls, Alberta. Fraser's interest and writings relating to horses no doubt came from his work experiences in western Canada.

Somewhere this world traveller became acquainted with the prominent Barber family of Georgetown, and on July 31, 1889, William Alexander Fraser married Jessie Maud Alison Barber, in Georgetown.

According to the *Acton Free Press*, theirs was a somewhat unique wedding, taking place in the family residence at 8 a.m., following which the bride and groom left on the morning train for



Michigan and elsewhere! The next year the couple spent several months in England and India.

Although Fraser continued to travel extensively, the couple made their home at 115 Main Street South in Georgetown, across from Knox Presbyterian Church. That building, now housing the Malhotra's Restaurant, was built by Jessie's father, Joseph Barber. It had been rented to the Bank of Hamilton when they first set up business in Georgetown in 1885, and until they moved further down the Main Street in 1890. It was in this house that four of the five Fraser children would be born.

Illness eventually prevented Fraser from doing strenuous field work, and so it was that he turned to writing about his adventures.

He turned out 15 novels, hundreds of articles, poems and short stories, and even a song. One of his novels, *Thoroughbreds* (1902) was the basis for the 1925 movie *Million Dollar Handicap*. It is his novel *The Lone Furrow*, published in 1907, that has the most appeal for Georgetown-area readers.

While it is fully a novel, which includes a church fire, its location is recognizable to local residents



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