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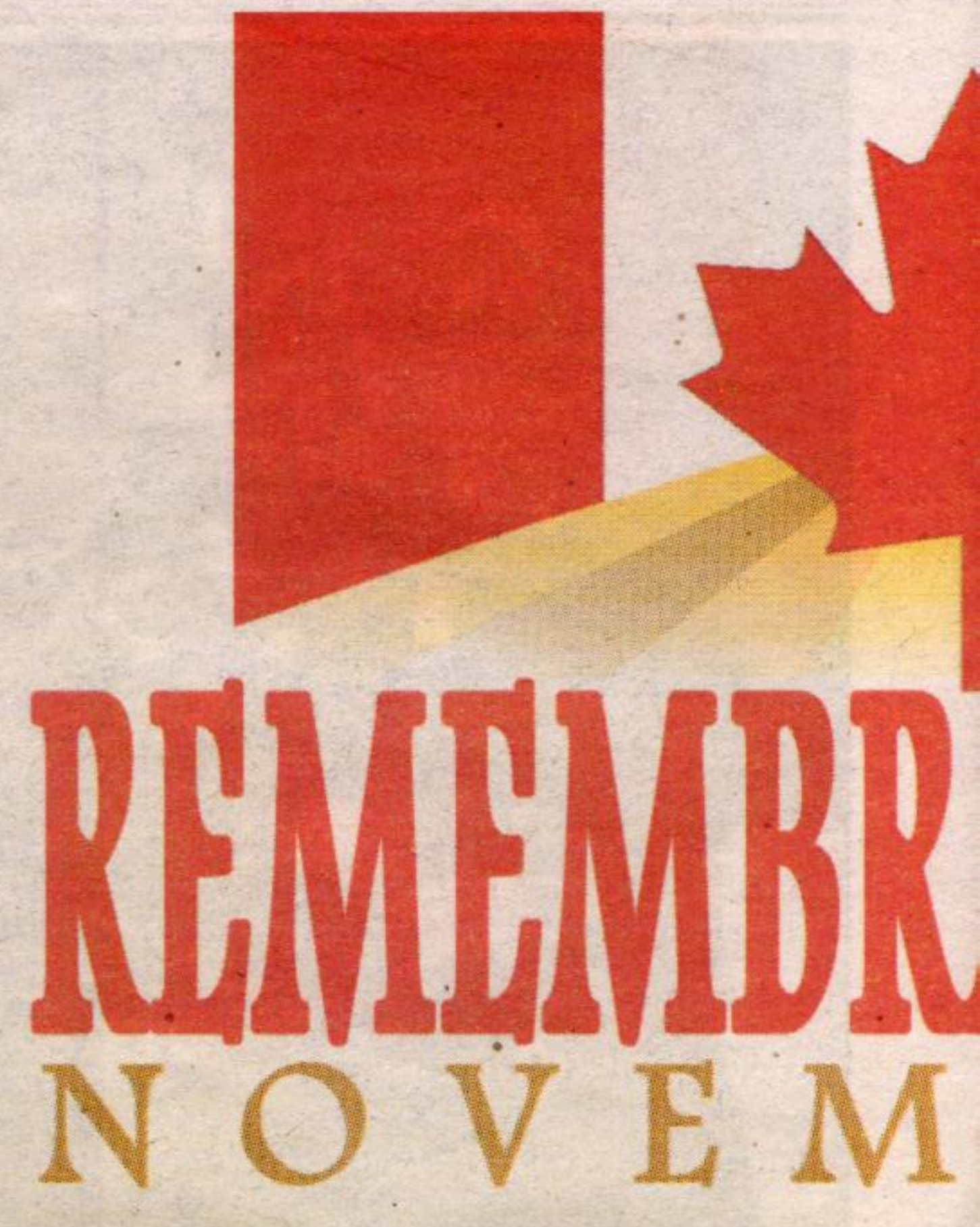
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Looking back

BY DONNA DANIELLI

He was a fresh faced 18 year old defying his staunch pacifist father, when Charles Clarence Laking marched away to war. Now, eighty-seven years later, he is the last surviving Canadian veteran who saw action on the battlefield in World War 1.

"His father told him that he wouldn't do it, and he thought 'I'll show him,'" says friend Mike Nagy, who points out that while overseas, Mr. Laking received no communication at all from his father back home on the farm in Nassagaweya. "Funny enough, guess who was waiting to meet him at the train station after the war?" Mr. Nagy pauses for effect before relaying what is always Mr. Laking's rather dry comment when completing this particular story about his father "Relations were better after that."

Mr. Laking was born in Mountsberg on February 21, 1899. "He's been into three centuries and two millenniums," says an awed Mr. Nagy. "That's really something when you think about it."

Mr. Laking's path crossed with Mr. Nagy's just over a year ago. "I had always identified with World War 1, even as a child," explains Mr. Nagy. "It was my goal all of my life to meet a World War 1 veteran." After reading about Mr. Laking in a Globe and Mail article, Mr. Nagy decided to give him a call, and that was the beginning of a friendship. "I feel a great sense of fulfillment to have gotten to know him," admits Mr. Nagy, who is particularly grateful for the many life lessons that Mr. Laking has passed on. "Obviously, someone who is 106 has a lot more experience than someone who's 43."

Arrangements had been made with Mr. Laking for an interview with the Compass, but unfortunately, a fall the week before left Mr. Laking with broken ribs. Rather than disturb Mr. Laking in his convalescence, Mr. Nagy was more than happy to share some of the many stories he's been told by Mr. Laking with the Compass.

A signalman, Private Laking, Canadian Field Artillery, 27th Battery, 4th Brigade, had one of the more dangerous jobs. He strung wire along the trenches and had to sneak to the front to observe where the first German shell fell and relay this information back to the gunners. He escaped death several times. Once, while in a trench, a shell exploded nearby, knocking him back. Seconds later another shell exploded in the exact place where he had been standing. Another narrow escape when he and his comrades took refuge in an abandoned house. Spying the full garden of vegetables, the men decided to cook themselves a hot meal of vegetable stew. While one soldier remained in the kitchen, the others positioned themselves at windows upstairs, keeping a look out. A single German shell hit the house, leveling one side of it. The soldier in the kitchen, along with his cookstove fell straight through the floor with the explosion, only to emerge moments later, dusty but unharmed. "He says that you didn't need to worry about the sound of the shells," says Mr. Nagy. "It was the shells that you didn't hear that would kill you. He talks about that, and about the sound of the German machine guns."

My Nagy is quick to point out that

many of Mr. Laking's reminiscences have little to do with war, and everything to do with growing up in Mountsberg. He says Mr. Laking is particularly fond of telling the story of a huge snowstorm when he was just a young child. When he and a friend reached Schoolhouse #2, they found themselves alone, as the storm had kept everyone else at home. They fired up the woodstove and not only managed to keep themselves warm, but also aroused the mice in the building as they crept closer to the warmth. Proving that boys were just as mischievous then as they are now, Mr. Laking and his friend caught several mice and imprisoned them in the girls' pencil cases before trudging home once more in the storm. "The next day, the girls

came in to find suffocated mice in their pencil cases," laughs Mr. Nagy. "He has such strong memories of his childhood."

Those memories of growing up in Mountsberg are shared often by Mr. Laking. "He always says to me that the most fond time of his life was on the farm," says Mr. Nagy. "He misses the farmhouse. He talks about having to burn tremendous amounts of wood because the house wasn't insulated very well."

Listening to Mike Nagy, it is clear that Clarence Laking is not a man who has let rounding the century mark slow him down significantly. A huge hockey fan, he held season's tickets for the Toronto Maple Leafs for almost seventy years and was honoured as such at the opening of



Rockwood Mike Nagy poses with Campbellville WWI Veteran Clarence Laking. Mr Laking is holding a portrait of himself painted by renowned Rockwood artist Janet Wilson.

GARY CARR M.P.
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Remembrance Day is a time to thank all of our veterans and peacekeepers for their dedication, commitment and courage. You are all much appreciated.

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