

H. Mitchell's Guns, Medals Tell Story of Military History

By Bill Mykes

About four years ago, Harvey Mitchell of R.R. 6, Milton, wondered if it was possible to acquire any old medals to collect and display along with those he had earned in the Royal Canadian Navy during World War Two. While walking past some second hand stores in Toronto, he noticed Boer War and W.W. I medals for sale. From that point, the collecting bug had him.

Today, his hobby encompasses the whole field of anything pertaining to British and Canadian military history. In his collections are guns, decorations and medals, bullets, cap badges, military buttons, letters and documents, accoutrements of military uniforms and books.

Thrilling Finds

Mr. Mitchell points out that it is practically impossible to have a complete collection of everything, but it is a great thrill to come across some little item to add to it. Each item gives one a glimpse of how people lived, fought and died; how empires were won or lost simply by finding out a little bit about the people who owned the item.

He has often been asked, "This is old, it belonged to a relative, is it valuable?" In some cases, he says, it is hard to value something in terms of money. Value is usually determined by its scarcity, condition and historical value, if it can be authenticated.

Today there is an ever growing number of men and women who have begun to collect one or more of the items he collects. Collecting has begun to become specialized. Collectors in guns often will touch only Colt revolvers, Winchester rifles, Remington revolvers and rifles, Sharps rifles and a host of particular guns.

Split Fine Hairs

Collectors will collect a maker's gun or collect guns of a particular period such as the American Civil War, and then they even split hairs between Union or Confederate side. Some collectors are only interested in guns in condition to shoot, no matter how old.

All over Canada and the U.S.A. the smell of black powder and the whine of minie balls can still be heard. The past is not completely dead. Here Mr. Mitchell tells about one part of his collection.

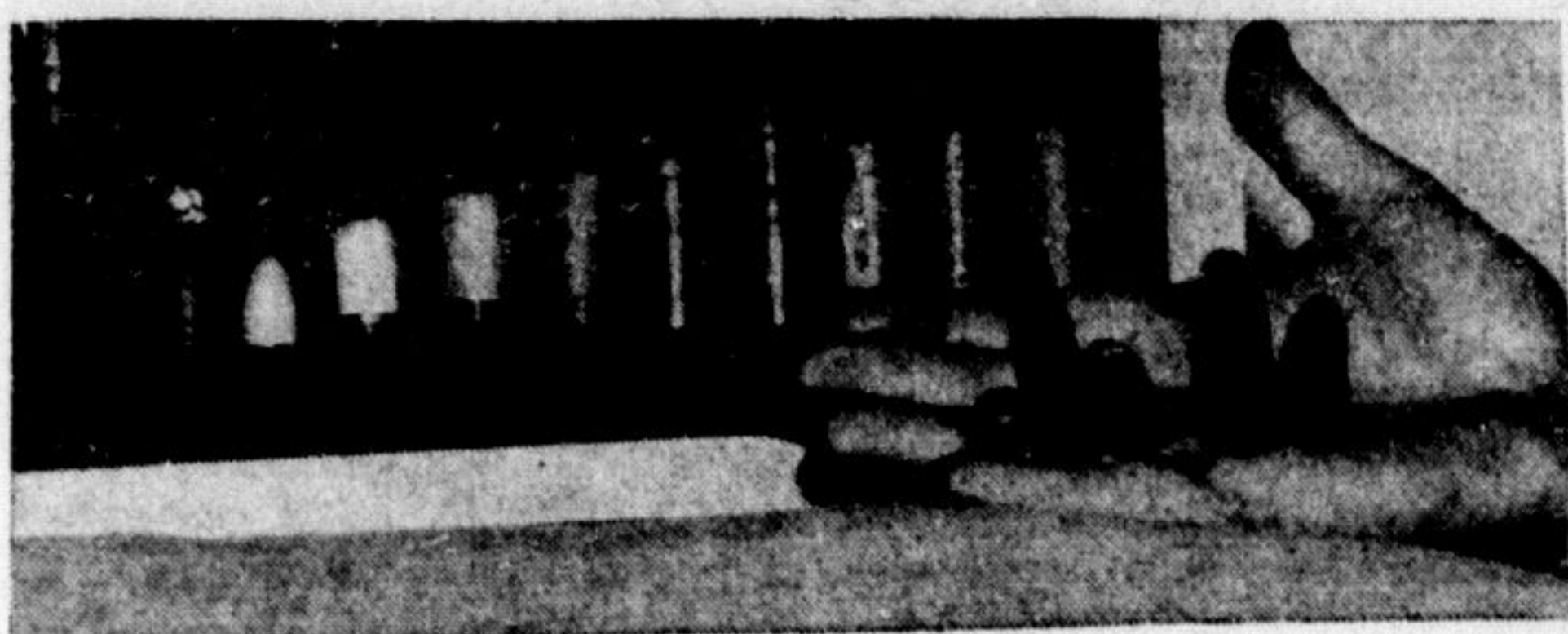
"In my own collection of guns of which all are in shooting condition, I have something which represents each new improvement in the guns of an era.

"The Brown Bess was a gun used by the British Army from 1720 to the 1830's. It is a smooth bore, muzzle-loading flintlock musket varying from .684 to .753 caliber. The effective range is 100 to 200 yards and it was used effectively in volley firing against massed bodies of troops.

Five Rounds a Minute

"It was not accurate in the same sense as modern guns are. The gun weighed approximately 12 lbs. and five rounds per minute could be fired from it. Clive of India at Plassey outthought 50,000 Indians with 3,000 men, only one third of which were Englishmen, but Clive had the Brown Bess.

"This gun saw action at Ticonderoga, Loissburg, Quebec during the war between the English and French in America. The Penin-



AMMUNITION used by these weapons is shown in the hand of Harvey Mitchell. The shells and their specifications are left to right, .62 musket ball, Martini Henry .577-.450, .56 Spencer, .577 Snyder, and .56-.50 Spencer and Peabody Martini. In the background is a grape shot ball (Chateauguay Battlefield 1812), .577 Minie Balls (Gettysburg), .577 blanks and shot, and five variations of the Snyder ranging from modern to 1885.

sular War, Waterloo in Europe saw its use. The American Revolution, the war of 1812 and up to the Papineau and MacKenzie rebellions of 1837, the Brown Bess was the standard arm of the British Army and Canadian Militia.

"In my collection I have an officer's model Brown Bess fusil, the gun carried by the fusilier regiments. It was made in approximately 1775.

"The next refinement in British Arms was due to a Scottish clergyman, Rev. John Forsyth who in 1807 invented the percussion cap. The Brown Bess musket was converted from a flintlock method of ignition to the new and more reliable percussion cap in 1838.

Much to be Desired

"The British had experimented with rifling even as early as the American Revolution with the Baker rifle at the time of the War of 1812. Needless to say these guns used a round ball and left much to be desired as to accuracy. Due to the invention by Col. Claude Minie in 1849 of the "Minie ball" (which was actually shaped like a modern bullet and expanded to fit the rifling when the propellant was fired), new muzzle loading rifles fired by percussion caps were introduced into the British Army in 1853. Ready made, greased cartridges were carried by the troops. It was these greased cartridges which were the cause of the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857 in India, another story.

"In my collection I have an 1862 Tower .577 calibre rifle of this type. It is quite rare, as most of these guns were later converted to the Snyder patent of breach loading. I also have a "Minie ball" rifle of the same calibre which was captured from the Fenians at Fort Erie during the Fenian Raid of 1866. This rifle saw earlier service during the American Civil War in the Confederate Army."

Muzzle Loaders

At the time of the Fenian Raids, the Canadian Militia was armed with the muzzle loading rifle. Because of the shortage of guns, 3,000 Spencer (breach loading repeating carbines) weapons were purchased from the U.S.A. This gun was issued to one company of the Queen's Own Rifles who used it at the Battle of Ridgeway in 1866 against the Fenians. One thousand Peabody-Martini (50-70 calibre rim-fire bullet) were also purchased. I have this gun in my collection.

In 1867 the British paid a large

sum to Major Snyder, a Baltimore Md. resident for his conversion system and over a million muzzle loading .577 calibre rifles were converted.

The Snyder is the gun grandad remembers. It is a breach loading .577 calibre rifle used in Canada to great effect during the Riel Rebellion of 1885. Up to W.W.I it was still the standard arm of Canada's Militia regiments. This gun was used by the British Army on every continent and won battles and played a major role in extending the British Empire because of its superiority over the weapons of any other country.

In Days of Riel

In 1871, another rifle, the Martini-Henry .577-.450 calibre was introduced. It too saw action in the Canadian west during the Riel Rebellion. The cartridges of the Snyder and Martini-Henry in the early days were made of rolled brass and looked like crude brass foil. In time they were eventually made of solid brass.

The Boer War saw the introduction of many new innovations. Better propellants, better steel, and magazine rifles were developed. It was at this time that the Lee-Enfield and Lee Enfield became known. Machine guns of a rapid rate of fire were invented. Warfare changed.

Gone were the days of massed infantry attacks and volley firing. Range of the weapons had increased from 200 yards for the Brown Bess, to 1,200 yards for the muzzle-loading rifles, Snyders and Martini Henry, to 2,800 yards for the Lee-Enfield family of guns.

The Lee-Enfield was the first of the .303 calibre issued to the British Army. It weighed 9 lb. 8 oz. and had a range of 2,800 yards, but still used black powder as a propellant in the bullet. It was issued in 1889 and was the first of the magazine rifles.

Shorter Life

The development of cordite as a propellant was responsible for the short life of the Lee Enfield. The Metford rifling was too shallow and cordite erosion shortened the life of the barrels from 10,000 rounds to 4,200 rounds.

The Lee Enfield No. 1 was issued in 1895 and saw service in the Boer War. Many of the older rifles were converted at this time and Martini Henry were changed to take the .303 bullet.

In 1905, a new rifle, the No. 1 Mk. 3, short magazine Lee Enfield (S.M.L.E.) was issued. This gun was the result of all the modifications and changes suggested due to the lessons learned in the Boer War. This gun saw service in the two World Wars and even today, many hunters have this gun (sporterized) in their gun cabinets.

Familiar to Many

Just prior to the first World War, the Ross rifle was a sporting gun. At the outbreak of the war, this gun in .303 calibre was issued to the Canadian Army. Unfortunately, the mud of the trenches of Ypres, St. Eloi, etc. caused the guns to jam, and they were never too satisfactory for the conditions in France at that time. The S.M.L.E. Mk. 111 Lee Enfield was then exchanged to the Canadians for their Ross rifles.

The year 1939 was the beginning of the second World War and also the Lee Enfield No. 4, Mk. 1, .303. This gun is familiar to most readers who saw action during the second World War and was the result of further modifications.

"The no. 5, Mk. 1, (the jungle carbine) was also introduced during this war (1944) for the peculiar conditions encountered in Burma and jungle fighting. This gun was the last of the .303 Lee Enfields."

Many Countries

"Today, the Canadian Army, as with all countries in the N.A.T.O. alliance, are equipped with the F.N. automatic rifle of 7.62 mm calibre."

"In this brief article, I have attempted to give a rough outline of the guns that won this nation and made the little country of England a leader (out of all proportion to numbers) of nations. The guns mentioned are only the main ones. There were many others. Of each gun, various models were made to suit the needs of specialized branches of the army such as the cavalry etc."



HARVEY MITCHELL of R.R. 6, Milton, has a collection of close to forty British military rifles. The collection includes a complete line of weapons including the Snyder, Ross and Lee Enfield. This particular gun the "Brown Bess" was fired shortly after the picture was taken.

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