

Oral History Project: Leonard Braithwaite WWII Veteran

By: Matthew Petrei





City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 207, f0207_s1251_jt0114

Leonard was born in the Kensington Market Area of Toronto (around Eglington Street).



City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 2130, 1000_01019

Leonard grew up in the area surrounding Kensington Market that was home to many Canadian immigrants. The living quarters were very small and his entire family occupied one small space.



Leonard spent the formative years of his education attending Harbord Colligate Institute in Toronto.

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MONDAY MORNING MARCH 25 1918—SIXTEEN PAGES

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BRITISH LINE STILL HOLDS

Withdrawals Made By British to Positions Prepared Long Ago—Fighting Becomes More Severe, Never Ceasing for a Moment—More Than a Million Germans Engaged—Paris Bombarded By Monster Cannon Located 76 Miles Away—Canadians Make Biggest Gas Attack in History.

THE withdrawal of the British forces along the battle front in France was long ago planned in the event of the German attacking in great force. This announcement comes from the British front thro the Associated Press correspondent, who describes the operation of the British army as a masterly withdrawal, made possible by gallant shock troops on the front lines, who checked the advance of the Germans, while artillery, machine gun and rifle fire worked appalling slaughter among the masses of German infantry as they were sent forward, thus enabling the main body of the British to fall back deliberately and without confusion.

This army, it is declared, has been converted, and up to the present few counter-attacks have been made against the Germans. Where the British have stormed the Germans' newly-seized positions they have driven them back. But each time of advance makes the bringing up of supplies to the German artillery and infantry more and more difficult, and unquestionably the British strategy, as demonstrated since the beginning of the great attack, is to let the enemy, so far as he may, wear himself out against a powerful defence.

Both British and French forces, where their lines meet south of St. Quentin, are watching events with optimistic eyes.

Chassy Taken By Germans.

The town of Chassy, southwest of St. Quentin, situated on the road to Compiègne, the gateway to Paris, has been occupied by the Germans and, according to the Berlin official communication, everywhere between the Somme and the Oise rivers, the Germans are pressing their advantage.

Big Gun That Bombards Paris is Now Located Canadians Launch War's Record Gas Attack

In addition to the news from the front, the French have discovered it is a monster gun which has been raining projectiles on Paris at intervals of 25 minutes. This cannon is sited in the forest of St. Gobain, west of Laon, 74 miles from the Paris city hall.

From their headquarters in France comes the news that the Canadians carried out the greatest projector gas bombardment

struggle and were holding strongly the whole new front in which they had withdrawn.

Fighting of a most desperate nature has been continuous since the initial attack, but so far the British have used few troops other than those which were holding the front lines.

Those shock troops have been making as gallant a defence as was ever recorded in the annals of the British army and, as a result, they have enabled the main body of the forces to fall back deliberately and without confusion and occupy positions which had been prepared long before the German offensive began.

Enemy Disregard for Life.

The Germans, on the other hand, operating under the eyes of the enemy, have been hurling vast

in history against the enemy between Lens and Hill 70. Five thousand drums were released simultaneously from projectors and cast into the German line from the outskirts of Lens to Cite St. Auguste and Bois de Dix-Huit. Nine minutes afterwards the Canadian guns opened up a creeping bombardment, searching the enemy positions for forty minutes.

(Full particulars page two.)

terrible fire, but all held out during the first day of the attack until late in the afternoon.

"The Germans suffered most from the machine gun fire. Their mode of attack in crossing No Man's Land consisted of a first wave of two companies, marching almost shoulder to shoulder, with light machine guns. A hundred yards behind came two more companies, closely followed by a number of machine guns. Next, after an interval of two or three hundred yards, came the light trench mortars and the battalion staff. Again there was a space of two hundred yards, and then across prepared exits from the German trenches, the field artillery drove out into the open in columns, forming into line of battle as soon as possible."

Anxiety in London.

the battle front during the night, with further fighting has taken place at a number of points.

"Our troops are holding the line of the Somme River in Peronne. Small parties of the enemy, which endeavored to cross in the neighborhood of Fargoy, were driven back.

"On our right we are in touch with the French, and to the north of the River Somme at Peronne our troops hold their positions, after beating off a number of attacks on different portions of this front during the early part of the night.

"Heavy fighting is still to be expected."

Fifty-four Enemy Planes Brought Down.

An official report on the aerial operations says that fifty-four enemy aeroplanes have been brought down.

The text of the statement reads:

"The enemy's low-flying airplanes were most persistent in their attacks on our infantry in the forward areas. Many of these machines were attacked and brought down by our pilots. A total of twenty-nine hostile machines were brought down and twenty-five others were driven down out of control. Two enemy balloons also were destroyed. Nine of our machines are missing.

"Our machines on Saturday carried out another most successful raid on factories in Luxembourg. Nearly one and a half tons of bombs were dropped, and bombs were seen on a soda factory, the railway and docks.

"Several fires were started, one of which was of great size, with flames reaching to a height of two hundred feet and smoke to five thousand feet. The conflagration was visible for 15

Leonard supplemented his families income by selling papers after school.



Growing up, Leonard did not witness much of the racial persecution of the time.



During the 1930's Leonard chose to pursue work in the Royal Canadian Air Force. Unfortunately he faced persecution and adversity when trying to enlist because of his race.



Undeterred Leonard was finally able to enlist and was sent off to train as an airplane mechanic.



Although he was one of the only people of color throughout his air force experience Leonard faced little persecution and was welcomed by his fellow cadets.



When Leonard returned to Canada he chose to pursue a higher education and studied finance at the University of Toronto.



Unable to find employment in Canada Leonard chose to get his degree in Finance from Harvard University.



Leonard, having lost interest in finance, chose to enrol in the Osgood Hall Law School to become a Lawyer.



After graduating Leonard opened a small law practice in Etobicoke Ontario.



In 1960 Leonard decided to run for the government position of School Trustee for Ward 4 in Etobicoke.



From that point on Leonard's political career flourished, winning several Municipal and Provincial elections. He eventually went on to become the first African American elected to Canadian Parliament.



Leonard had been honoured greatly over the years and has been awarded such prestigious honours as the Order of Ontario and the Order of Canada



Today Leonard is a Living legend and still practices Law. However, he does take time out to educate others and tell the next generation his amazing life story.

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT WRITTEN ESSAY: TORONTO DURING THE 1920S AND 1930S

During the interview Leonard touched upon what life was like during the twenties and thirties. Looking at the city today it is amazing to see the contrast to what life was like during that period, especially for the poor and newly immigrated, and how the city transformed over time. The twenties were a marvelous time for art culture and society in general. They are looked back upon with a romantic spirit that draws upon images of flappers and speakeasies, throughout major cities like New York and Montreal. While still a major city at the time, Toronto served a different purpose during this time of rebirth in the modern era. However, Toronto has a vivid history all its own. The early nineteen twenties saw a newfound optimism that was lost in the aftermath of the first world war and Toronto's citizens started to indulge more. New industries such as the Toronto Transit Commission were created to help citizens and transform the city into the buzzing metropolis that it is today. Toronto experienced an eruption of culture as new movie theatres were built to facilitate the fast growing interest in motion pictures. It was also during this period that a scientist by the name of Charles Best discovered penicillin. It was an exciting time for Toronto as it began to transform into the city it is today.

However, unlike the Toronto of today, Toronto in the nineteen twenties was predominantly Anglo-Saxon protestant, and although immigration was encouraged it was feared. The poorer residents of the city as well as recent immigrants were allocated to an area of Toronto called "The Ward", located on the West side of Bay Street, North of Queen Street. Outside the divisions of "The Ward" immigrants could do little to survive as housing costs as the cost of living anywhere else was astronomical and any attempt to secure a steady job and residence was met with extreme racism and prejudice. Within the encampment there was a sense of community and kinship among between the residence. Mostly comprised of newly arrived Jewish, Chinese and Italian immigrants, there were no social political or financial divisions among the people of the ward, which aided in the profound sense of community. The most dominant ethnicity throughout "The Ward" in the nineteen twenties was Jewish. The concentration of Jewish immigrants was so high throughout the nineteen twenties that "The Ward" began to expand and develop through College Street and into Kensington Market. Living conditions within "The Ward" were deplorable, with many landlords cutting the size of apartments in half to accommodate more immigrant families. The apartments themselves were extremely small and were kept in horrible condition as no city officials would undergo proper inspections of the buildings. Many families lived in squalor and while the Anglo-Saxon families in the city surrounding them basked in the glow of the roaring twenties, the inhabitants of "The Ward" ached with poverty.

The economic division between the immigrants and the established Torontonians was shattered in nineteen twenty-nine with the onset of the Great Depression. The Great Depression had similar effects all over the world and like people in cities across the globe many Torontonians lost their jobs as well as their life savings. The city struggled to support the growing twenty five percent of the population that relied on government assistance as well as continue providing municipal services. It was nearly impossible for adults to find jobs and many children went to work to help support their families. It was common for children to attain odd jobs such as selling news papers and factory work. However, these efforts produced minimal results and many families still lived from one day to the next wondering when they would get food. Around the nineteen thirties things began to look up financially for Torontonians as the world began to emerge from the depths of the financial crisis.

The nineteen twenties were an exciting time in history, from their optimistic beginnings to their bitter endings. The city grew exponentially, both socially and culturally, and took shape of the modern city we see today. Toronto's history is also a history of the many immigrant families that struggled to survive in the city both, before and during the depression. The horrible living conditions of the ward along with hardships that followed in the years of the Great Depression demonstrates the variety of lifestyles that existed with in this diverse and exciting city.

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