

GENEALOGY TALK BY RTN COLIN COOMBS 1st NOVEMBER 2010

Genealogy – Frank Gerrish

Genealogy is an interest of mine. Adding names to a family tree is fine but sometimes we need to look at the personal stories of the individuals.

This voyage of discovery began last year when a cousin showed me a letter which had been retrieved from the effects of a great-aunt who died in the 1950s.

I can just about remember the great aunt but neither my cousin nor I knew anything about the writer of the letter.

So what did we discover?

Frank Gerrish was born on 14/10/1883 at Priory Lane, Corsham, Chippenham, Wiltshire, the son of William Gerrish and Elizabeth Gerrish, formerly Harding. William Gerrish gave his occupation as Slater. He was my Paternal Great Grandfather.

We don't know if Frank was baptised, but we know that the family used the Baptist Chapel opposite their house.

Frank appears on the 1891 census aged 8 when living at 53 Priory Road, Corsham. His occupation is given as scholar.

He is also on the 1901 census at 10 (something) Cottages, Priory Road, Corsham, occupation Breadmaker.

We established that he signed up to a seven year apprenticeship to A. Bird, Baker, of Corsham (Kelly's Directory 1889 has an entry for Corsham (Bird, Alfred, Confectioner, High Street)).

On 1/3/1906 Frank left Liverpool on the S.S. "Kensington". He was 22 at the time and declared that he had between £7 and £10 cash. He was able to read and write. The ship was bound for Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, and Frank's ultimate destination was shown as Toronto.

His occupation is shown as Confectioner but this has been crossed out and replaced by Farmer.

The columns are stamped "British Bonus Allowed".

Did the alteration in the entry have any significance?

The British Bonus was a commission paid by the Canadian Government's Immigration Branch to steamship booking agents in the U.K. for suitable immigrants. The immigrants themselves did not receive the bonus.

The Bonus was a subtle marketing tool used by the Canadian Government to encourage steamship booking agents to recruit suitable settlers (farmers, domestics, etc.) For most of the passengers on the Passenger List on which Frank Gerrish appears the occupation the passengers have stated has been crossed out and "Farmer" written in. They are all stamped "British Bonus Allowed". Frank arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia on 13/3/1906. He has no distinguishing marks.

On 24/11/1907 he crossed the border from Vancouver to U.S. His occupation is given as "Confectioner"(not farmer). His last permanent residence was Calgary Alberta and his father is shown as Wm. Gerrish, Corsham, Wilts.

Frank is 5'7" in height, Fair Complexion, Brown Hair and Blue Eyes. He is shown as being neither a Polygamist nor an Anarchist.

At some stage he must have crossed the border back from U.S. to Canada because in November 1908 he crosses from Victoria, British Columbia to U.S. again. That this is the same person is verified by reference to his original immigration into Canada and his place of birth.

There is then a gap in the traceable records but on Monday 30/12/1916 he enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force at Show Ground Camp, Sydney N.S.W., Australia. He gives his trade as Landscape Gardener. Oddly he is not on the the 1910 Australia Census, 1910 U.S. census or the 1911 Canadian Census. He has a scar(tattoo) on his left wrist. (? at sea)

In response to the question "Have you been an apprentice?" he says "Yes, A. Bird(Baker) Corsham, England, 7 years".

On 11/11/1916 he embarked from Sydney and disembarked at Devonport, England on 30/1/1917.

He was 5'7 ¼ inches and weighed 122lb. His complexion was fair, he had blue eyes and brown hair.

He was sent from Folkestone on 2/5/1917 and arrived in France on 3/5/1917

He was hospitalised in France on 13/7/1917 and rejoined the battalion (in France) on 19/9/1917/

His Army Record is recorded in great detail, on a typed Army Form B 103, showing Regimental No. 6306 All this in the middle of a bloody war.

The final entry on the form is dated 6/10/1917 "Killed in Action".

Frank's father was sent a package containing his effects and these were acknowledged by William Gerrish of Priory Street, Corsham on 22/2/1918. William returned a handwritten note "Can you please tell me what became of my son's bible and watch which were not returned?" The reply was that no official report had been received concerning these items.

On 6/10/1917 the 18th Battalion to which Frank belonged was engaged in the Battle of Broodseinde which was part of the Battle of Passchendaele.

There were 20,000 casualties on each side. Three days of heavy rain turned part of the ground into a morass.

The overall result was British and Commonwealth troops advanced 1,000 yards.

9 Victoria Crosses were awarded during the Battle of Broodseinde.

Frank Gerrish has no known grave. He is commemorated on the Ypres (Menin Gate) Memorial in Belgium.

Inside the arch of the Memorial, on tablets of Portland Stone, are inscribed the names of 56,000 men who served in the Ypres campaign and have no known grave.

The Menin Gate Memorial was opened on 24/7/1927 and since then, with the brief interval of the German Occupation in the Second World War, the City of Ypres has conducted a ceremony at the Memorial at dusk each evening to commemorate those who died in the Ypres campaign.

Frank Gerrish's name is located at panel 85 at the Australian War Memorial.

Colin Coombs.