

Mike Kostek, archivist

School Boys in Khaki: The School Cadet Story

The cadence of drill marches, the barking of military orders, and the crack of .22 rifle fire in school assembly halls, are but fleeting memories today to former Edmonton public school students approaching four-score years and ten.

But, eighty-four-year-old Wilf McLean, retired principal of Harry Ainlay High School, recalls vividly the thrill of being a school cadet in Norwood School in the early 1920s. Particularly memorable were the annual inspections by military officers when they received companies of cadets. It was at these inspections that junior cadets could wear their handed-down uniforms.

A sixth grader in 1920, Cadet McLean weighed sixty-eight pounds, and stood fifty-four inches tall – only three inches taller than the heavy .303 Ross army rifle he shouldered in military drill activities.

Why was the sight of twelve-year-old cadets firing live ammunition at targets in the assembly halls and basements of Edmonton schools commonplace? The answer was simple – patriotism and preparedness to defend king and country. Canada's connection with the British Empire was very obvious in the early 1900s and schools reflected their fervent respect for king and country.

The school cadet movement was spawned by fear of the American Civil War spilling into Canada in the 1860s. After the American Civil War ended, Fenian raids into Canada spurred Canadian military officials to seek assurance

that young Canadian men were prepared to defend Canada and its British traditions. Money was allocated to Normal Schools and public grade schools in Eastern Canada for the development of courses in military training. Many Ontario schools soon formed cadet corps of twelve to nineteen-year-old boys.

The cadet movement spread to Canada West in the 1890s. In 1895, Calgary formed the first School Cadet Corps in the district of Alberta. Edmonton followed twelve years later when three cadet companies were organized at Queen's Avenue, McKay Avenue, and College Avenue schools. In charge of the Edmonton cadets was the legendary Captain C. K. Flint, supervisor of physical Culture for Edmonton Public Schools.

Most of the supplies and equipment, including .303 army rifles and ammunition, were supplied by the Canadian Department of Defence. Cadet uniforms were purchased by the school board, however.

Impetus to the school cadet movement was provided in 1910, when Lord Strathcona set up a \$500,000 trust fund to promote military training in schools. Some of the money from the Strathcona Trust Fund was earmarked for teacher training programs in army skills. By 1913, over 3,000 Canadian teachers had completed intensive programs in military cadet work. Most of these teachers received bonuses of \$100 to \$200 for their efforts in promoting cadet corps ac-

tivities after hours. The aims and objectives of the Strathcona Trust Fund were as follows:

- The improvement of the physical and intellectual capabilities of the children while at school, by means of a proper system of physical training calculated to improve their physical development, and at the same time to inculcate habits of alertness, orderliness, and prompt obedience.
- The fostering of a spirit of patriotism in the boys, leading them to realize that the first duty of a citizen is to be prepared to defend his country – to which end all boys should, so far as possible, be given an opportunity of acquiring a fair acquaintance with rill and rifle shooting.

Participation in the school cadet corps was compulsory for all boys over twelve years of age. Few parents in the early years questioned the military involvement of their lads for fear of being labelled unpatriotic.

Enrolment in school cadet corps grew rapidly and by 1920, almost 2,000 Edmonton Public School cadets were engaged in at least one hour of military training each week. In the late 1920s, however, petitions from Edmonton women's groups criticized cadet activities such as bayonet practice as a pervasive form of British military imperialism. Their pleas received a sympathetic hearing and convinced the Edmonton Public School Board trustees to make cadet training volun-

tary, effective September 1, 1928. In 1932, the movement was abolished only to resurface during World War II. In 1943, a modified school-cadet program including military drill, target practice, and army lectures was introduced as a two-credit option for senior high school students.

Despite its transitory nature, the early school cadet movement reflected the tenor of the times including the unquestioned respect for the Union Jack and all it represented.



McKay Avenue School Cadet William Bramley-Moore, age 12, 1918.