

Aubrey Holmes, the son of the Work Point garrison's commanding officer in the 1890s, stashed the letters he received from friends and relatives behind an attic playhouse

By J. CECIL BEREZOWSKI

A chance meeting between a loose dormer window and a carpenter over a year ago opened a window to family life in Victoria's earliest military history.

Mark Miller was sent through a trap door into the attic of the commandant's quarter to nail shut a rattling window in the vacant historic Work Point Officers' Mess and Quarters. To his surprise he found a playhouse built into the attic. Surely this had been used by the children of the first army family to occupy these quarters in late 1890. (What a snug, dry hideaway on a wet January day in Victoria, in the midst of a muddy barracks construction area!)

Miller then spotted papers protruding from between the east wall and the ceiling of this idyllic playhouse with its commanding view of the entrance to Victoria Harbour.

The stash of papers, tucked into a binder cover, proved to be a collection of letters to Aubrey Holmes, the teenage son of Lt.-Col. and Mrs. Josiah Greenwood Holmes. Despite a century's worth of grime encrusting the letters, their historic significance was obvious. They were promptly placed with the curatorial staff of the Naval and Military Museum at Base Esquimalt.

The museum staff and volunteer Karen Rogers separated the letters, placing them between sheets of acid-free paper, and storing the lot in an acid-free box for cataloguing. There were 16 letters from friends and relatives back in Ontario.

Remarkably, the teenage hopes and worries from over a century ago bore much resemblance to present-day cares and reflect the anxiety of being away on the distant Pacific Coast.

The letters too demonstrate the impact of the newly completed CPR transcontinental railway. The cover of one letter written by Aubrey's friend, M. Lyons, was postmarked in Barrie, Ont., on April 24, 1890 and postmarked again in Victoria on Apr. 30, 1890, a mere six days later. The cover bore a three-cent postage

stamp and was addressed to Master A. Holmes, c/o Col. Holmes, DAQ c/o Bank of British Columbia, Victoria, B.C. How remarkable that more than a century ago, the mail was arriving from central Canada in a short six days. Suddenly, with the completion of the railroad as part of our Confederation deal, the Pacific Coast was no longer remote for military families.

The address was also instructive. Following the practice of earlier British officers, the local bank where one's pay was sent, also became the local forwarding address for personal mail.

In the letter, M. Lyon apologizes for not replying sooner but his lessons, he said, take him all night to do. And then he asks, "Has the tidal wave swept over Vancouver Island yet? ... A year ago, since I saw you and I hope not a year till I see you again." He concluded with the gem that the town (Barrie) is getting waterworks.

On Feb. 18, 1890, Aubrey's cousin H. Green wrote from London South, Ont.: "When father came back from the Coast, he brought Elsie a nice doll and Ned a train of cars. He brought me the best of all — it was a printing machine and I can print anything I like with it. I wish you were here ... we would have such fun with it.

"I suppose you are having lots of fun out there. What did you get on Xmas? I got four nice books, fifty cents, a nice game called King's Guards and a stocking full of nuts and candy.

"Elsie got two books, a set of dishes, a sleigh, a pair of bedside slippers and a stocking full of candy and nuts. I couldn't begin to tell you all the things Ned got because he got so much.

"One day when I was at school, Ned got into my room, got my bottle of perfume and threw it out the window. ... This morning, the furnace fire went out and I did not get to school until very late ... I must close now as it is getting late. I remain your loving cousin, H. Green. Write to me soon and tell Anna to write."

Anna Holmes was the younger sister of Aubrey and it was in her school book cover that he stashed his letters.

ISLANDER

A letter that could have been from today's era, but dated in Barrie, Jan. 11, 1891, came to Aubrey from his friend S.M. Lyon. He wrote, "Dear Friend, I received your letter All O.K. and was glad to hear you were all sound. ... The thermometer was 15 below zero a few days ago. ... Have you any sleighing up at Victoria? It is very good down here and there is quite a bit of business done. There are three rinks in town now so there is quite a bit of skating. ... I have a very bad cold, etc. I remain, yours truly, S.M. Lyon."

The Daily Colonist for May 9, 1888, reported, "The location of 'C' Battery on Work Point necessitated construction of a road to the sea by the provincial government. ... The site for the barracks is a very favourable one, and its selection to the discernment of Lt.-Col. Holmes, who as was stated by him at the Dunsmuir banquet, made the choice shortly after his first arrival in Victoria. It occupies eleven acres in Work Point, being surrounded by water on three sides making it convenient from a practical point and excellent from a strategic standpoint. The residence of the commandant and the field officers will occupy a pleasant position on the summit of the rise from the beach, facing the straits and the ever changing panorama of the mountains opposite."

Holmes had command of the new Military District No. 11 (British Columbia) and was commandant of the new 'C' Battery Artillery School for training West Coast militia units.

The historic Work Point Army garrison was being built for the officers and 100 NCOs and men of 'C' Battery, the first Canadian Permanent Force unit to serve here. 'C' Battery, led by Major James Peters, arrived in November 1887 to man the guns defending Victoria Harbour and the Royal Navy's base in Esquimalt Harbour. This also completed the terms of Confederation for the defence of British Columbia.

Another first in Victoria, even before the barracks had been completed, was 'C' Battery being placed on active service in