

# a .i.p. and me

(very interesting person)

By KATHLEEN A. HICKS

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## HARRY HASSALL:

founder and First President-Col. Thos. Kennedy Branch 582  
Past President-Port Credit Branch 82  
Royal Canadian Legion  
Former Owner and Operator — Harry Hassall Florist,  
Cawthra Road

ME: On May 4, you were commended for the founding of the Cooksville Branch 528 and your long dedication to the Royal Canadian Legion. Express the excitement and pleasure of this evening.

MR. HASSALL: In regard to the recognition, I felt that it was something I had worked for and looked forward to for many years, and at last that recognition was fulfilled. Many people in life, as they do something worthwhile, may not get a plaque or anything, but they get it in other ways, for instance, good health, and a feeling that they have done some good for somebody else, and I feel that is recognition. I have always felt that my life was given to be of service to others. The Legion says, — Service not for self, but for others. It was an exciting evening that my wife and I will long remember. I felt that having the different people out, especially our Past Provincial President, Art Adams, our new Commander, Ralph Hawes, and District Commander Mitchell, Comrade Bill Shields of Oakville, was quite an honor.

ME: You joined the Great War Veterans in 1921, and then in 1925, the Earls Court Branch of the British Service League, which has become the Royal Canadian Legion. Tell me about your first involvement with the Legion.

MR. HASSALL: When we came back from the First Great War, all we got in gratuity was enough to buy a suit of clothes and an overcoat — that's all. There were all these winter groups — different organizations, and we weren't getting anywhere. So this great soapbox orator, Harry Lynn, got up and his slogan was "A thousand dollars or more, and we were going to have a walk to Ottawa and demand this \$1,000. But somehow or other, he disappeared from the scene — I think he got a better position. Sir Douglas Digby, who was over the British Legion at that time, saw the possibility of forming a branch from the British Legion here. He came over and lectured; they met in Winnipeg, and that's where the British Commonwealth League was founded Feb. 19, 1925. It was later called the Canadian Legion, and after 15 years ago, they got permission from the Queen to

add the Royal. No one would ever believe the work that the Legion did for the boys during World War II.

ME: Then it was suggested that you start the Cooksville Legion. What were some of the obstacles you had to overcome to get this branch underway?

MR. HASSALL: I was asked by the Command to form this branch because I had always lived in Cooksville. There was a crisis coming in the Legion, and that was membership. I had brought it up several times, although I had a lot of opposition, that the only way to get members was to go where the influx of people was, because they were just starting to move out from the city. Being a member of Port Credit for so long and having a lifetime membership, it was almost like leaving home, you might say, and taking a big chance on starting a new branch. The biggest obstacle was getting a place to meet. I spoke to Harry Woodall about renting the Orange Hall on Agnes Street, and we started holding our monthly meetings there. We went on to meet at the Rod and Gun Club and then Silverthorn School. Then I read in the paper that the Department of Highways was going to have a sale on parcels of land on the Dundas Highway, but we didn't have any finances — not a dollar. I decided to loan the Legion the money, and after a lot of bidding, I managed to get us a lot for \$8,000 just across from Tomken Road. Then through my wife's influence, we managed to get a portable. We eventually sold it for \$45,000 and bought property on Hensall Circle and five years ago, we built our present Legion Hall. There were a good many obstacles, but we managed to overcome them.

ME: Having received numerous medals over the years, what do they represent to you?

MR. HASSALL: Well, they represent many, many years of hard work and devotion. The meritorious medal and palm leaf is the highest award we can get in the Legion. I have Zone Commander's medal, and a medal from Port Credit for being president and a clasp on it for having been president of two branches. I also have the Centennial medal for being District Chairman of the Centennial Fund during 1967. People have asked me why I belong to the Legion, and my main reason is to help people. I can tell you of some very hard and trying things that I have seen and done. One Christmas I delivered a hamper to a very deserving case that Rev. Billingsley of St. John's Church had recommended. This lady had lost her husband from cancer, and she had

taken infantile paralysis and wore a leg brace, and one of her boys took it as well. When I delivered the hamper to her, she broke down in tears. And I told her we did this for one purpose, to help and to bring happiness. Through the door I could see a poppy stuck on a curtain. And do you know, the next poppy day that boy came out and sold poppies — he collected over \$100. It makes me think of the old saying, — A little child shall lead them.

ME: You were born in Staffordshire, England, and came to Canada in 1912, and began your work here in the coal mines of Nova Scotia. Elaborate on your first impressions of this new land.

MR. HASSALL: When we first came to this country it was February of 1912, and I was only 14 years of age. There was my mother, father and five brothers. We came over on the SS Magantic — the White Star Line, and we landed in Halifax. We were very well fixed while we were in England, because we had our own business — green grocer. There were coal mines in Staffordshire and the people in that area were very poor, and they used to want to charge when the mines were on strike. We left England leaving a lot of debt owing to us. After we landed, we took the old Inter-Colonial Railway down to Sydney Mines in Nova Scotia — it was a two day trip. I had an uncle there and he had written us and said things were good here in Canada; and it was a misrepresentation, because things weren't good. But he was lonesome and wanted company. We had no place to sleep and had to sleep on the floor; and my mother cried herself to sleep, she wanted to go back home. The reason my mother wanted to leave England was because she didn't want her boys to go into the mines or into potteries — that's where they make china. She wanted us to do something better; and to think we landed in a place that we hated. A man who met us at the station was from Belfast, Ireland, Mr. Lindsay — an Anglican minister. His meeting us was just like seeing an angel in a strange land. He did manage to find us a home, and it had just been freshly plastered. My mother was a very strong woman, but from the dampness of that wet plaster she got asthma. She got it so bad, and there was no cure or remedy much, except a patent asthma cure. Then they found out many years later that it was poisoning the system and they finally took it off the market. I went to school for one

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day to pass my sixth grade — that's all the education I had. You had to have grade six before they would find you work. So I started working in the mines, and I never saw daylight in the winter except on a Sunday. I went down  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile in the ground and walked two and a half miles under the ocean. The Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company practically ran a man's life there at that time, because they owned the houses and they owned the pit cars that took the men to work. I used to earn 85 cents a day.

**ME:** You served in World War I for the latter part of the war. Fill me in on some of your war experience.

**MR. HASSALL:** Sydney Mines and Cape Breton Island was the largest recruiting area in Canada. They sent more men overseas than any other part of Canada, because there was practically all British decent. I joined the army when I was 17½ years old, and I was in the 26th Battalion. I went to Sussex, New Brunswick for my training. I suffered an appendix attack in the barracks one morning, and I was operated on in a hospital at Saint John. When I got out of the hospital, Maj. Brooks, head of our company, told me my battalion was going overseas and he thought because of my operation I should be given a discharge. I told him I didn't want a discharge, I wanted to go overseas with the boys. So I went over in a draft to France. In 1917, I went through Vimy Ridge where we lost 45,000 men — 200,000 died altogether. Then at the right of Arras, a place called Agney, I got blown up with a shell and I was invalided to Etaps, the south of France. Then I was transferred to Bermondsey Military Hospital outside London for two or three months. Then I was sent home to Hart House in Toronto for physical therapy. My people had moved to Toronto for my mother's health. I was only home six years when my mother died of cancer. She had burned her insides out from drugs and probably anxiety, too. She had three boys in the war, and it was quite a lot of worry. They talk about the boys that go overseas, but I think we oft forget the parents left behind who have to worry.

**ME:** Having participated in a war, what are your personal feelings about such devastation?

**MR. HASSALL:** I remember when I was in France, I was in the Canadian 2nd Railway Corps, and it was just when Vimy was coming off, and I saw the railroad corps go up with flat cars and bring down the corpses. Now you can imagine as a boy what my thoughts would be to see that. All I could think

was, — Why do we have to have this? That thought has stayed with me until this day. When they started the League of Nations, we thought it was going to be the savior of mankind. Then we got the United Nations; what is it today? It's two great powers fighting to see who can dominate. I feel sorry that this is happening, because the United Nations could be a wonderful thing and bring great relief to mankind. But it's being worked for selfish ends today. As long as man will not sit down and work peacefully and work amiably and try to bring a better understanding, we won't find peace.

**ME:** Now tell me what led to your moving to Cooksville and Cawthra Road and into the florist business.

**MR. HASSALL:** I used to work on the Street Railway for the City of Toronto, and I did the Belt line and the Bathurst line, and I got to know the city very well. Then I got sick again — my old trouble flared up — and the doctor told me I would have to get out in the country. I came out to Cawthra Road under the Soldiers' Settlement scheme in 1923. We bought eight acres; Cawthra was a mud road then and it had a big elm tree that we had to go around. I had raised chickens as a boy and was very interested in them, so we started to raise chickens. Would you believe at that time, we went out and sold eggs for \$1.25 a dozen in 1924-'25. I have the books to prove it. We didn't have anything to call our own, we lived in a small house. Then eggs went down to 20-25 cents a dozen and so there wasn't much money in it, and we decided to plant fruit trees and a garden. We worked all the hours God would give us. I used to take my truck into the city and try to peddle my fruit and vegetables around where I used to live, and I wasn't doing too well. There was a Mr. Porter who stood at the Farmers' Market selling lettuce, radishes, and flowers — luxury items — and we couldn't sell our winter staples, potatoes and carrots and things. It just goes to show people will buy luxury items before necessities. And I said to my wife, "Look — look at the business he's doing." So I came home, and I happened to see in the paper that there was a greenhouse for sale in Bowmanville. We went and got it, dismantled it, brought it home and set it up; and that was my start in the florist business and I just kept expanding. Then we sold our property for a subdivision and moved up here. The town of Cooksville thought so much of us, when they put the subdivision in where our property was, they named a street Hassall Road and one after my wife's maiden name, Holden Crescent. That was a very nice gesture and we

are pleased with that.

**ME:** You have four children, two boys (Harry Jr., who owns his own florist business on Burnhamthorpe Road; and Jack, who owns Cawthorpe Village Square) and two girls (Margaret and Audrey). What enjoyment have they contributed to your life?

**MR. HASSALL:** I'll tell you, as far as enjoyment, they've contributed to my life — there was a great enjoyment when they were born; there was a great enjoyment in raising them, because they were raised in a home where they were loved. We had no money, but each one of them worked to try to sustain life itself. Since, the same as if a God giving thing, I get down on my knees and say my prayers and thank God that I have a family who had never asked me for help or never needed my help because they are self made people and have worked hard to get where they are today. Jack bought that property off a Mr. Mizan and put up five houses, and he took a gamble by pulling them down to start that plaza. Harry worked with me and got his experience and then started his own florist business. My daughter, Audrey, started the Kingsway Florist when she was only 17, and she has made a very good success of her life. Margaret is more the academic type; she has worked in journalism and had some of her writing in the old Port Credit Weekly. She is married to Dr. Ross Beardall, a veterinarian, and they have a practice in Kingston. We have seven grandchildren now. All the Hassalls live in Mississauga — that's the reason you see so many Hassalls in the phone book, we're all related.

**ME:** Having had such a full, rich life, what deep down satisfaction do you feel?

**MR. HASSALL:** My wife has always told people, "Mr. Hassall is too good and too kind and he always gave the profit away." And I did; I help different ones who were up against it. You can't do that and make money, but I feel that much happier by doing it. I felt that God has been more than good to me. I feel that God has given me that feeling inside that I can walk down the street a very proud man. Not just proud because of my decorations from the Legion, but by what I have done to help and make other people happy. I have tried to bring a little happiness into the lives of the less fortunate. If we had that imbedded in the hearts and minds of all our fellowman, we wouldn't have wars, we would live in peace, we would live in harmony and better understanding of each other.