

#52 Private Bennett Lesley Fights for Canada, Part I

When I sat down to write today's post, I didn't think it would take long. Four hours later, I've gone down a trail that has proved to be very interesting. The editor of the *Kinsley Graphic* prefaced a letter published December 6, 1917 as "B. K. Lesley, formerly of Lewis but now in the Canadian Infantry in France, writes to his brother J. H. Lesley of Lewis as follows:". That statement made me wonder what a Lewis man was doing in the Canadian Infantry.

Through *Find A Grave*, I found that B. K.'s name was Bennett King Lesley. He died at 90 years old on January 27, 1975 in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. He was born in Lewis, Kansas, 134 years ago on March 9, 1884. Subsequent research revealed that his parents, Henry and Martha Huckstep Lesley, were early pioneers having come to the area in 1879. They had four sons and four daughters. Martha died in 1900 when Ben was just 16. Henry served on the school board, and his daughters taught in schools, but I found no record that Ben graduated from high school. One of Ben's older brothers, Herbert, died in 1909 when he was kicked by a mule.

I could not discover exactly why and when Ben left Edwards County; he is not mentioned in the newspapers during the years before the war. However, from 1903 thru 1914, Canada was heavily promoting homesteading opportunities in western Canada. I found mention of several other Edwards County men investigating and/or moving to Canada. The *Kinsley Graphic* of April 14, 1910 reported, *"The exodus of our good citizens to Canada is steadily increasing,....It is estimated that not less than fifty thousand heads of families, most of them successful farmers, expatriated themselves in 1909 and took up home under the British flag....The lure of cheap land is strong, and as long as the Canadian Northwest offers its virgin prairies to home seekers at low prices, the rush of settlers is likely to continue."* Perhaps Ben saw a better opportunity for himself in Canada and had been living there for a few years before the war.

Of the 619,636 soldiers in the Canadian army during WWI, at least 35,612 were American citizens by birth. Some

American men were angered by the 1914 invasion of neutral Belgium by the German armies attacking France. Some felt the United States should help defend France, which had been its staunch ally during the American Revolution. Some may have just been seeking adventure. Whatever the reason, I do know that Ben Lesley joined the Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force on November 24, 1916 in Vancouver.

At this point, I found B. K. Lesley's complete Canadian army records online. So far, I do not have a picture of Ben, but he is described as 32 years of age, 5' 10 ³/₄", medium complexion, brown hair, gray eyes, 20-20 vision, perfect hearing, and no fillings or dental problems. By trade he was an engineer and by faith, a Methodist. He was #2020155 and assigned to the 11th regiment of the 47th battalion, Canadian infantry. He trained, perhaps at New Westminster, BC.

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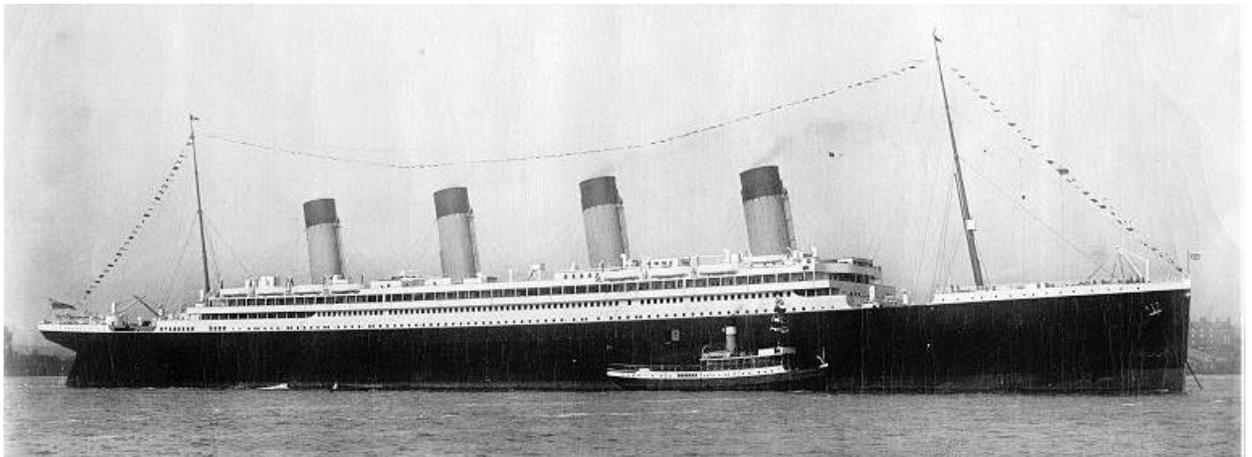
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On May 28, 1917, Private Lesley sailed out of Halifax for England on a British ocean liner, the *RMS Olympic*. I doubt Ben knew it, but his father had died back in Lewis the day before he sailed. In a letter written on June 16, 1916 to his brother James, Ben describes the journey.



"I arrived in England about a week ago, after a trip lasting two weeks and a half. We had a fine trip over. The ocean was just like a mill pond all the way and we were on a fine boat. It was almost like being in a town and I wasn't a bit sea sick, in fact, if I thought the water would always be as smooth I would be a sailor or a pirate or something in that line." (Hutchinson News, July 24, 1917)

Besides having a calm sea, Ben's trip was enhanced by the "fine boat" he was on. The *RMS Olympic*, which was launched in 1910, reigned as the largest ocean liner in the world from 1911-1913 except for the very brief time that the *RMS Titanic* sailed on her tragic maiden voyage. The *Olympic* and the other large ocean liner of the day, the *HMHS Britannic*, had been turned into troopships. The latter struck a mine and sank off the coast of Greece in 1916. The *Olympic* survived the war and sailed until 1935 earning it the nickname "Old Reliable".

During the war, Private B. K. Lesley wrote letters back to his brother James. I'll share one with you in my next post and then from time to time as they appear in the papers of 100 years ago.