

One family's lost boy is remembered 100 years later

Henry Bell almost got out. Not out of the army tunnel where he died, age 19, on July 1, 1916 under the fields of Mametz, France. Out of the coal pits.

Was he thirsty at the end? Of all things to wonder, for some reason that's what comes to mind.

Chances are he was blown apart, suffocated or crushed before lingering physical discomfort became a torture. But I picture him down there in the dark — dirt in his throat, just wanting a cold, pure drink of delicious water before setting off across the great divide into death.

He may still be there.

It is said a million men were killed or maimed in the Battle of the Somme between July 1 and Nov. 18 in that middling year of a war few now bother to remember. The British Army recorded 57,470 casualties on the first day alone, the worst event in its fabled history. But it wasn't the army that suffered those losses, it was tens of thousands of families, including mine.

Great-uncle Jack didn't have anyone else. His wife, Harriet, died giving birth to Henry, who I fear his father nicknamed Harry in her memory — what schoolboy wants to be called Harry Bell? Jack and Harriet's little girl, Florence, died years before, at age 2. A family photo from about 1904 shows Jack and Henry together, a dignified and solid father and son, fully inhabiting their lives.

Jack lived for decades after Henry died.

He never remarried. He never buried his son.

Henry shouldn't have been in that tunnel. He wasn't intended for the family trade of burrowing holes deep beneath the earth — a tradition stretching back hundreds of years for the Geordie boys and men of Northeast England. At age 15, Henry was apprenticed to an organ maker, marking the start of his attempted escape from the pits, as coal mines are called in that country. Miners are a fiercely proud lot, wearing their grime and bearing coal-covered lungs as hard-won markers of rock-engraved courage. Tunnels are held up by strength of conviction as much as by timbers. But for all their pride, few coal miners dream of sons following in their footsteps.

Not a pitman, but a music man was to be his role in life.

The Royal Engineers didn't show up in County Durham recruiting organ makers, but tunnel men to dig under the front lines and implant gigantic bombs to breach German defenses. Henry signed up to be one of these "sappers," who were called moles or sewer rats by their fellow soldiers. Six months later, he died, one of about 3,000 British miners who perished under the Western Front rather than on it, according to the UK's *Daily Mail*.

His name is engraved on France's Thiepval Memorial to the Missing of the Somme. And in the nave of Westminster Abbey is the grave of the Unknown Warrior, one anonymous soldier brought home from France to be honored by king and country on Nov. 11, 1920. Like millions of others, I once paused there and cried a little at the thought it might be my own family's lost boy.

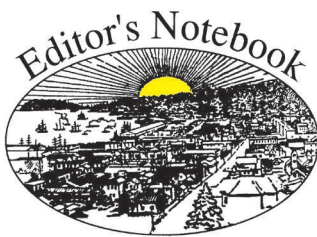
Poet Owen Sheers wrote "Mametz Wood" about the aftermath of the terrible battle in which Henry died. In part, it reads:

*For years afterwards the farmers found them —
the wasted young, turning up under their plough blades
as they tended the land back into itself.
A chit of bone, the china plate of a shoulder blade,
the relic of a finger, the blown
and broken bird's egg of a skull, ...
their socketed heads tilted back at an angle
and their jaws, those that have them, dropped open.
As if the notes they had sung
have only now, with this unearthing,
slipped from their absent tongues.*

I picture Henry still buried — deeper, in the heart of the earth, from which only the slow grinding wheels of geological time will once again deliver him to the light in some distant and, we hope, more benevolent age. Perhaps he will be turned into coal, or diamond.

—M.S.W.

Matt Winters is editor and publisher of the *Chinook Observer* and *Coast River Business Journal*. Henry Bell was his grandfather's first cousin.



Winters/Bell Family Archives

John Bell and his son, Henry, posed for a formal photograph in the comparatively innocent years just before World War I. A member of the 97th Field Engineers, part of the 21st Division, Henry lost his life in the attack on German lines at Mametz, France, 100 years ago today.



John Henry Bell enlisted in the Royal Engineers in November 1915 and was killed half a year later. In a sad commentary on the futility of war, his enlistment document was damaged during Nazi air attacks on London during World War II.

British National Archives

Open forum

Preserve library

The murderous hate crime committed in Orlando put a stop to my letter about the future of the Astoria Library. It seemed irrelevant, even frivolous, in light of the pain and loss inflicted on the LGBTQ community — indeed, on the nation itself.

But on further reflection, it seems that discussing the future of a library is especially relevant now. Libraries promote learning and information sharing, and are central to the health of our democracy. Furthermore, libraries are inclusive, demonstrating that we can move forward from diversity to inclusiveness for all members of our society.

I completely agree with Paxton Hoag ("Library question" *The Daily Astorian*, June 10). The city of Astoria should choose the least expensive option for the Astor Library building by expanding into the basement, thereby doubling the size of the present library. Money not spent on exterior expansion can be used for state of the art monitoring systems, possibly even for extra staffing, to address concerns about a two-level facility.

What is missing in all the discussion about the library's future is the significance of the present building. The architectural style is called "brutalist," a term derived from the French beton brut,

or "raw concrete." Brutalist buildings were popular in the 1960s, when our library was built. The designer was local architect Ebba Wicks Brown, who was the daughter of renowned Astoria architect John Wicks, and was also reportedly the first woman architect registered in the state of Oregon.

There is an increasing appreciation for brutalist architecture, especially among younger people, who see the style as a refection of the 1960s, an iconic time in this country's history. Preserving the library's exterior should be among the highest considerations in future planning, thereby preventing another downtown building from being irreversibly "muddled" up.

I am told by a young architect friend that the present consultant for the library's planning is experienced in building new libraries, but has little experience in preservation work. My friend feels that the planning models are stacked in favor of building a new facility, which then leaves the present library as another abandoned building, while we the taxpayers foot the bill.

I worry that decisions will be made that "save" the Astor Library, while at the same time destroying the integrity of its design. Instead, the city should upgrade, modernize, make accessible and reconfigure the interior of the present library build-

ing. Preserve the exterior. Any thing less will be brutal, indeed.

FRED WHITE
Astoria

In the dark

The recent sit-in by the Democrats was special, and further demonstrates the posture of the Democrats versus the Republicans. We the people, by a margin of 80-plus percent plus, want reasonable gun control.

There are two Democratic bills: one to eliminate the loophole in the Brady Bill, and require background checks for both private and gun show sales; the second to forbid sale of guns to individuals on the FBI terrorist watch list and no-fly list, plus denying sales to spousal abusers and felons. The sit-in's hope was to generate a vote on those two bills.

Legislators (in theory) are elected to represent the will of the people, and especially the will of the majority. Obviously the Republicans choose to ignore their fundamental purpose, and vote the will of the 10 percent and the National Rifle Association.

The second purpose of the sit-in was to underscore the wide chasm currently separating the parties and directing blame for the least productive

Congress ever — and lay blame on the Republican majority, which have, in the last seven years, successfully shut down democracy.

After watching C-SPAN and listening to poignant speeches depicting the horrors of mass slaughters utilizing assault weapons, and the chant by the Democrats participating in the sit-in chanting "no vote, no break," I then switched over to FOX news.

Their reporting of the event was essentially a lie. The bottom ticker said, "Demos block speaker Ryan's vote." Not true, they voted on an unrelated bill. Hannity claimed that speaker Ryan might shut off the lights, and how horrible the Demos were for violating the video rules. But not a word about what was really going on.

The Republican National Committee is well aware that 40 percent of the electorate vote almost exclusively on name recognition alone; they haven't a clue as to what their representative actually does, and FOX continues to keep it that way. They will keep it that way by brainwashing their little minds with Benghazi, emails, birther nonsense, the Second Amendment, and whatever lies suit the RNC's purpose.

MURRAY E. STANLEY JR.
Astoria



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