

Sewell Camp Field Post Office 1915

Exhibit Synopsis

v. JUN 3 2022

This exhibit was reorganized in December 2021, with a new title page, synopsis and page runners in preparation for London 2022. This exhibit was originally shown as "Sewell Camp the White City, 1915".

Purpose, scope and background

This one-frame postal history exhibit studies a Field Post Office (FPO) operating for 7 months in 1915 at Sewell, Manitoba Canada. Vast acres of Crown lands were available to assemble and train battalions of soldiers for the War effort in France and Belgium. The theatre of operations traced back to the Canadian Militia era, with the first Sewell Camp hammer used in the same geographic area during summer training sessions held from 1911 to 1914. The Canadian Pacific main rail line cuts through the locale and Sewell, with its depot, siding and loading platform was chosen as namesake and staging area for military operations. In 1915, C.P. ran twice per day east bound and west bound trains providing reliable RPO service for Sewell Camp mail, and special trains to move battalions of soldiers, horses and equipment. **For reasons unknown, the Sewell train station was renamed Camp Hughes on 29 July 1915**, setting off a series of unforeseen events that impacted the FPO until the close of the training season. Over 10,000 soldiers trained at Sewell Camp in 1915, living in bell tents arranged by Battalion around the nerve center of the training camp: Military HQ, Post Office, Paymaster, Stores and Sewell C.P.R. Station. The close proximity of the Post Office to the Battalion lines assisted mail pick-up, delivery, sorting and clearing. The soldiers made the most of it, sending or receiving an estimated 1 million pieces of mail during the 1915 training season.

Treatment:

Treatment is generally outlined on the Title Page. A comment can be added regarding the deltiology used on the pages. The overwhelming majority of collectable material issued by the 1915 Sewell FPO is post cards. The post cards were a quick, inexpensive way to send short messages to loved ones, and often provided a visual image of their summer home. The use of deltiology aids treatment by providing postal history information on the mailing side, but the visual images and messaging can also be used to support the narrative (golden thread) in some way.

Title Page:

The exhibit begins on the Title Page. The earliest known use of any Sewell Camp hammer in 1915 is shown. In the upper right hand corner is spyglass image of the Post Office, a fitting image for scrutiny of a military mail themed exhibit. The full Post Office image appears on the last page along with a summary of the mail season.

Importance:

The exhibit is noteworthy in that it is the only exhibit telling the Sewell Camp FPO story of 1915. The exhibit combines rare material and new information derived from personal research creating an exhibit that can't be replicated.

Exhibit/Subject importance is enhanced by introducing human dimension aspects to the exhibit. Personal research names the Post Master and his salary, the numbers of staff, the mail service provided to the battalions and summaries of mail handled and revenue. This conceptualizes a busy Field Post Office serving 10,000 soldiers, and expands a marking exhibit beyond the normal scrutiny of hammers and post marks by introducing an operational perspective.

Philatelic Importance involves two hammers and a name change that were introduced at Sewell Camp in 1915:

- Sewell Camp hammer 2 was a badly needed back up to the lone Hammer 1 (1911 issue) in use. Proofed in July, hammer 2 has only two reports (both registered mail). One of the 2 elusive philatelic gems is shown.
- The name change to Camp Hughes is a philatelic anomaly for a Field Post Office, happening in the middle of seasonal postal operations. One of 5 Canadian Field Post Offices marshalling battalions toward the war effort in 1915, Sewell Camp was the only one to reorganize around the confusion created by a name change. New hammers were ordered, but personal research indicates that only a two week window existed for Camp Hughes hammers to be put into service. **One 1915 Camp Hughes postmark is shown and is the only one known to exist. This philatelic rarity rewrites the published narrative on Sewell Camp/Camp Hughes: it had been previously assumed that no Camp Hughes hammers arrived in time to be used in 1915 but were all put into service in 1916.**

Philatelic/Subject Knowledge:

The exhibit demonstrates philatelic knowledge through the analysis of stamps on cover, study of rates and identification of the marking devices used. Where possible, unusual items such as redirected or dead letter office mail is introduced as treatment and to emphasize broad philatelic knowledge. **Subject knowledge** is reflected by the careful selection of material and text displayed that support the stated purpose, the exhibit plan and narrative.

Personal Study and Research:

- **Study of the Sewell Camp 1915 Commandants Report.** This generated the name of the Commanding Officer (Postmaster) and official operating dates of the Camp for the year. The exhibitor chose to frame the exhibit around the "official" opening and closing dates due to the certainty provided, but the FPO operated before and after the official training season. This reflects a need for mail service as the military operation prepared and gathered for training and to wind down the operations in the fall, thereby expanding a window

of collecting opportunity. The Report also provided arrival and departure dates of the battalions, critical for identifying mail trends and rarity possibilities. **Discovery:** The design of the 1915 mail service using post boxes and frequency of daily pickup and delivery, including serving battalions away on bivouac/maneuvers.

- **Study of the 1915 Auditor General's Report and 1915 Postmaster General's Report.**
Discovery: Salary of the Commanding Officer and his impressive credentials as a senior postal inspector.
Discovery: The accreditation of the FPO as an "Accounting Post Office". This allowed the FPO to issue Money Orders, but obliged to submit regular accounting reports. This highlights the need for a qualified Commanding Officer. **Discovery:** The monthly accounting reports filed led to aggregate totals for revenue, pieces of registered mail handled and numbers of money orders issued and paid out. This information is presented as an epilogue on the last page. The last monthly report filed was to 1 December 1915. It is highly unlikely that the FPO operated after that, due to the struggles of living in bell tents under severe winter conditions.
- **Study of Military Proof Strikes of Canada**, by Robert Lee. The proof strikes of the Sewell Camp and Camp Hughes hammers are in this publication and they provide clues as to the approximate timeline for Sewell Camp hammer 2 and the Camp Hughes hammers to be deployed and serviceable. **Discovery: Personal research identified one Camp Hughes postmark on cover in 1915, which changes the established postal history narrative of Sewell Camp in 1915.** Other researchers had assumed the late in the year proof dates on the hammers made it highly unlikely that the Camp Hughes hammers were dispatched and put into service in 1915. **Discovery:** Personal research determined that because Sewell Camp hammer 1 was used on 29 October (in exhibit) that left a small window in November for the Camp Hughes hammers to be put into service and that few soldiers were left to send and receive mail.
- **Personal communications with the C.P. Railway Archives Department**, to develop the narrative of the change of name of the Sewell train station to Camp Hughes. **No correspondence linking the C.P.R. and the Canadian Militia Department on this decision can be produced, but the C.P.R. clearly led this initiative.** The C.P.R. forwarded copies of a railway timetable and name change bulletin. *Used by permission.*
- **Study of in-period newspapers.** The *Brandon Daily Sun* provided information regarding the Sewell name change and subsequent impacts. **Discovery:** *The Portage Weekly Standard* lends providence to the post card tied with a **NOV 12 15 Camp Hughes postmark.** The newspaper confirms the transport of the 9th Canadian Mounted Rifles from Camp Hughes to winter billets at Portage, as alluded to in the post card message.
- **Census of Sewell Camp hammer 2 reports.** Published information states that there are 3 reported usages of the rare Sewell Camp hammer 2, including a usage archived in the National Archives in Ottawa. An inquiry with Library and Archives Canada failed to produce an example to verify the published information. Therefore the personal census conducted concludes that **there are 2 recorded usages of Sewell Camp hammer 2.**

Rarity/Challenge/Difficulty of Acquisition:

There is no public data base organized to collect and share reports of Sewell Camp/Camp Hughes hammers. Statements regarding rarity of material in the exhibit have been produced through census numbers compiled, personal discovery and/or information compiled in previously published material. Some rarity information in publications has become outdated due to new findings.

Special material in the exhibit is mounted within a **red mat** and provides bookends to the exhibit. The EKU (1911) and LKU (Oct 29 15) of Sewell Camp hammer 1 is shown, as is the EKU (May 20) of hammer 1 in 1915. One of two recordings of Sewell Camp hammer 2 is shown, and the only known use of a Camp Hughes hammer in 1915 is shown. **Other hard to find items:** incoming mail, redirected mail, DLO mail, short paid mail with postage due stamps and mail with orderly room markings. The only known photo of the "Camp Hughes" FPO is shown on a post card.

Further to the challenge factors stated on the cover page, it is difficult to find exhibit quality covers with special postage rates attached and/or sent to obscure destinations.

Condition:

The Sewell FPO was providing mail service to soldiers living in bell tents, so the condition of the material is remarkably good considering the environment to write and receive letters and post cards. Some post marks await replacement by better examples when collected.

Things not in this exhibit:

The exhibitor is searching for a money order receipt and an example from a roller cancelling device, primarily used for parcels. Neither has ever been seen. OHMS official mail from Sewell Camp is highly collectible, but the exhibitor has never had the opportunity to obtain any.

References:

- The Official Commandants Report: Sewell Camp 1915** Library and Archives Canada
- Military Proof Strikes of Canada, edited by J. Paul Hughes** *Published by Robert A. Lee, Philatelist*
- Sewell Camp/Camp Hughes** C. Douglas Sayles BNA Topics APR-MAY-JUN 1997 pg. 47 [Link](#) to article
- Soldiers of the First World War Database** Library and Archives Canada

