

Military Montreal In The Sixties

*Recalling the Familiar Figures of Former Days -- Interesting
Incidents -- Some Famous Batteries -- Factories Replace
Barracks -- The Lash in Use.*



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The uniforms of the Royal Canadian Regiment now to be seen daily on our streets, are a visible mark that Montreal is once again a garrison city, and a reminder to those of an older generation of the anxiety which was felt throughout this country when in 1862 Mason and Slidell were forcibly taken off the British steamer Trent by the American navy; an illegal act which threatened to result in war between the United States and Great Britain. This anxiety was only relieved when British troops reached our shores to garrison the various points which were most vulnerable to attack from the United States.

In 1862 Montreal's garrison was composed of a detachment of the Imperial Garrison Artillery, and the headquarters of the Royal Canadian Rifle Regiment, who occupied the Quebec Gate Barracks, which had been vacated by the 39th Regiment, now the Dorsetshire Regiment, a short time previously on their return to England.

HOUSING THE TROOPS

So threatening were the conditions between the two countries that troops were sent to Montreal before proper provision had been made for barrack accommodation, and some of the regiments were compelled to go under canvas on Logan's farm, now Lafontaine Park. It was not long, however, until Molson's College, on St. Mary and Voltigeurs streets, the Jesuits' College, on College street, west of McGill, and the stone block on the north-east corner of St. Paul and St. Sulpice streets, were transformed into barracks and occupied by some of the crack corps of the British army. A new gun shed was erected for the field artillery on the eastern parade ground of the Quebec Gate Barracks—which then covered the large block of land bounded by Water, St. Paul, Barrack and Lacroix streets—the ground floor being used as a gun shed, and the first floor as a barrack room; the latter must have been very cold in winter. Buildings on the Lacroix street side were converted into stables, with barrack rooms above, which, for sanitary reasons, would not be tolerated in the present day. Buildings were erected on St. Mary street, in the vicinity of Marlborough street, for the accommodation of the military train and for field artillery, and a building on the north side of St. Mary street, near the corner of Marlborough, was used as a military prison.

ARMY SERVICE CORPS

The Military Train, now termed the Army Service Corps, had a great attraction for the youth of those days, not only for their natty uniforms, which were much the same as the cavalry of the line, but owing to the corps being equipped with mules, an animal then unknown to the youth of Montreal. The patient, sure-footed animals, with their long-flapping ears, and outrageous bray were admired by all as they drew the grey-colored wagons of the Imperial army through our streets when supplying stores to the different barracks. When the corps was on a route march the rattle of harness, chains, and the rhythm of hoof beats, as they passed through our streets, some of which were then paved with cobblestones, made a jingle that caused the boys of that day to be fired with the ambition to be a soldier. When the Military Train left Montreal their mules were sold; many of them being

acquired by the Shedden Cartage Co., rendering faithful service until old age impaired their usefulness, and they went the way of all flesh.

Among the Batteries of Artillery which formed part of the Montreal garrison in the 60's were the Grey and Bay batteries, so distinguished from the color of their horses. Major Penn, one of the commanders, was one of the most popular officers our city ever had; one who, whether at the head of his battery, or driving with the Tandem Club of that day, was conspicuous for his horsemanship and the superior quality of his horseflesh. He was beloved by all, and it was a severe blow to his many friends and admirers when they learned of his sad death in the Abyssinian war.

A CONSPICUOUS FIGURE

The Grey Battery with its magnificent grey horses, Armstrong breech-loading guns, only then replacing the muzzle-loading guns, and well trained artillery men, caused many of the southern gentlemen, who at that time were guests at the Montreal House, now the site of the Sailors' Institute, and also at the St. Lawrence Hall, to express the wish that the southern army had a few such batteries to assist them in the great struggle which was then raging with no definite results to either side. At the head of the battery rode Sergt.-Major Bigwood, a man weighing over two hundred pounds, mounted on a magnificent grey horse of a size that would place him in the class known in the recent war as the haireys; yet man and horse were so well proportioned that they were not only the pride of every man in the battery, but the admiration of all who were fortunate enough to see the battery on parade.

Mr. Vogt, a well known artist of this city fifty years ago, painted a picture of the horses of the Grey Battery passing the Champ de Mars on watering parade worthy of a place in any art gallery. If it is in the possession of any of our citizens, a suggestion may not be out of place, and that is that a fitting, permanent home for it would be on the walls of the Art Gallery of Montreal.

The Quebec Gate Barracks in the 60's was the centre of all military affairs. On the west corner of Water and Barrack streets were the commissariat stores from whence were issued daily, meat, bread, baked on the premises, and provisions for the various units quartered in different parts of the city, and on St. Helen's Island. The Government woodyard, fronting on Water street, occupied about four-fifths of the block bounded by that street, Woodyard Lane, Lacroix and St. Mary streets. As the barracks, military buildings and the officers' and married men's quarters throughout the city and St. Helen's Island were heated with wood, one can imagine the thousands of cords of good maple, birch and beech which were issued from this yard annually.

The old-fashioned square box-stove, with its long row of stovepipes, was the heating medium, and as those pipes rapidly filled with soot and ashes the tinsmiths of the city had profitable contracts with the Imperial Government which called for the cleaning of the pipes once a month.

THE TOWN MAJOR

That important officer in all garrison cities, the town major, had his office in the old Donegana Hotel, now the Notre Dame Hospital, and genial, courteous Town Major Pope was a well-known and popular figure to the citizens of those days. Civilians were prohibited from landing on St. Helen's Island unless in possession of a pass issued by the town major. On such

passes the writer often had the pleasure of being conveyed to the island by the Military Jolly Boat, manned by six oarsmen and a coxswain, which left the foot of Barrack street several times daily, being the only ferry between the city and the island fifty years ago. This ferry, however, was too slow for Prince Arthur—now the Duke of Connaught—who in 1869 and the beginning of 1870 was stationed in Montreal with his regiment, the Rifle Brigade. He retained the services of Joe Vincent—one of the last of the famous boatmen of the river, and who for years kept boats for hire at the foot of Jacques Cartier Square—who personally rowed him to and from the island whenever his duties called him there, and would cover the distance in one-half the time of the military boat. Boatmen such as he and the late J. Jordon are now unknown; each saved many lives from a watery grave on our harbor front, and often at the risk of his own.

ST. HELEN'S ISLAND

As St. Helen's Island was an important military post, it had a fairly numerous garrison in addition to a number of families who had their quarters in the buildings, which are still standing on the eastern end. The heads of the families who were retired soldiers of exceptional character, were engaged in the powder magazines and ordnance stores. The substantial barrack buildings, which faced the city, were burned down some years ago, but the ordnance stores adjoining them were saved. They are now practically empty, except for the rifle racks, which formerly held thousands of the old muzzle-loaders, which were later replaced by the much vaunted, but now obsolete Snider rifle.

In the autumn of 1866 the writer, while roaming over the Island with the son of one of the Ordnance Department, saw him throw a stick which he had in his hand at a tree a few feet off. Something fell, and on running up we found that he had killed a wild turkey. Alas! the wild turkey, like the wild pigeon, is but a memory in this province.

Molson's College building, now occupied as a wall paper factory, was first used as barracks by the 16th Regiment, commanded by Colonel Peacock. The block of dwellings known as Molson's terrace, overlooking the river, and fronting on the barracks' square, was used as quarters for the officers' mess. These barracks were subsequently, and successively, occupied by the 30th Regiment—now the East Lancashire; the 23rd—Royal Welsh Fusiliers; the 25th—the King's Own Borderers; the 69th—Welsh Regiment; and the 78th—Seaforth Highlanders. The latter regiment came to Canada from India, where they had taken part in the Indian Mutiny.

A REGIMENTAL MASCOT

On the Voltigeurs street side of the barrack-yard was a wooden paling fence, which gave a clear view to the barrack square, and the citizens of the neighborhood would gather here to watch the regimental drill, or listen to the music of the excellent bands, when the officers were at dinner. The 23rd Welsh Fusiliers had a special attraction in a handsome goat, which when on parade had a silver plate hanging from its horns, bearing an inscription which stated that the goat was a gift to the regiment from Her Majesty Queen Victoria. The goat walked at the side of the drum-major, and no soldier of the regiment kept more perfect step with the bands than did this regimental mascot.

Not only did Molson's barrack yard echo daily to the tramp of men going through company and battalion drill, or the monotonous tramps of the unfortunates, who for misdemeanors were doing their two hours' pack

drill, in heavy marching order, but it also echoed to the groans, at different times, of at least three incorrigibles, who were publicly flogged, and subsequently drummed out of the regiment. The triangle to which the unfortunate was strapped, the body naked to the waist, the doctor on one side of the triangle, the sergeant-major on the other, and the drummer with his cat of nine tails, waiting for orders, must have had a depressing, yet disciplinary, effect upon the regiment lined up to witness the punishment. When the order was given to the drummer to proceed with his hated duty, he swung the whip around his head three times, a sergeant calling out at each revolution, one, two, three, and at the word three the lash fell on the unfortunate's back; and, no matter how great may have been his fortitude, his moans would be heard before many strokes had been applied. This form of punishment has been long since abolished in the British army.

THE BARRACKS SITES

From 1862 until the Imperial troops left Montreal the barracks on St. Paul and St. Sulpice streets were occupied by the Grenadier Guards, Scots Guards and the 100th Royal Canadian Regiment. The Jesuit Barracks by the 60th King's Royal Rifles, the 47th Regiment, and, I think, a detachment of the 17th Regiment. The Quebec Gate Barracks by a battalion of the 60th Rifles, a battalion of the Rifle Brigade, of which the Duke of Connaught was then an officer, different batteries of artillery, detachments of the Royal Engineers, Commissariat Corps, and the 13th Hussars. During the years the Imperial troops were in Montreal the officers of the various corps took an active part in the social life of our city, and whether as spectators or participants, their handsome uniforms, military bearing, love of clean sport, and enthusiasm did much to make a success of the weekly drives of the Tandem Club, the masquerades in the Victoria Skating Rink, the lacrosse and cricket matches, the annual snowshoe races, and the public and private balls, which were outstanding features in the life of Montreal of those days.

The removal of the troops from our city was severely felt by our merchants and traders. As most of the officers were of independent means, they put a great deal of money into circulation, in addition to that disbursed by the rank and file, and the Imperial Government for supplies and maintenance of the troops. The careful student of our city's history will find that our commercial prosperity dates from the arrival of the Imperial troops in 1862. In 1857 Montreal passed through a financial crisis, from which she had not recovered at the period of the Trent affair; but the money put into circulation at that time by the Imperial Government not only brought relief from the stringency which was crippling commerce and labor, but laid the foundations of the financial and commercial prosperity which has made Montreal one of the richest cities per capita on the continent. Montreal has many reasons to remember gratefully the days when the Imperial troops formed part of our civic life.