

## Theodore Augustus Girling (1876–1919): Canadian veterinarian and Great War poet

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More than 75 years have passed since the beginning of the Great War (1914–1918). Although it had a marked effect on the history of the 20th century, the role of Canadian veterinarians in this conflict is not well known (1) and few articles have appeared on this aspect of Canadian veterinary history or on the animals with which they and others worked (2–4) (Figure 1). The Canadian Army Veterinary Corps (CAVC) supplied and maintained veterinary personnel for the Canadian Expeditionary Force in Canada, England, and France during the 1914–1918 war (Figures 2–4). Some Canadian veterinarians were also members of the British Expeditionary Forces and at least one served in the Siberian Expeditionary Force (5). The CAVC, a history of which has yet to be written, existed as a specific group from 1910 to 1940.

People write poetry to express emotions that arise with life's experiences; it was a popular activity in the years of the Great War (1914–1918). Theodore Augustus Girling (1876–1919; VS, OVC, 1904) was one of the many who wrote poetry during the war, but he is of special interest because he was a veterinarian (6). His name is on veterinary war memorials at both the University of Guelph and the University of Saskatchewan (Figure 5). Most Canadians are familiar with the soldier-physician-poet, John McCrae, and perhaps with other poets of the war such as Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, but we know little about this veterinarian and his poetry.

The editor of the Canadian Veterinary Record, T.C. Evans, suggested in September, 1921, that the poems "deserve to be read and admired by every member of the profession" (7). From our historical perspective, would we agree with that assessment? Enhancement of our knowledge of veterinarians in the military and in municipal public health in Canada, as well as evaluation of Girling's poems, were our reasons for looking at the life of this veterinarian and poet.

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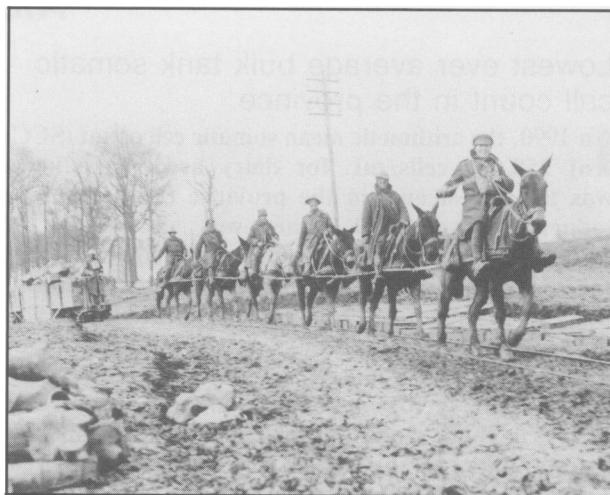
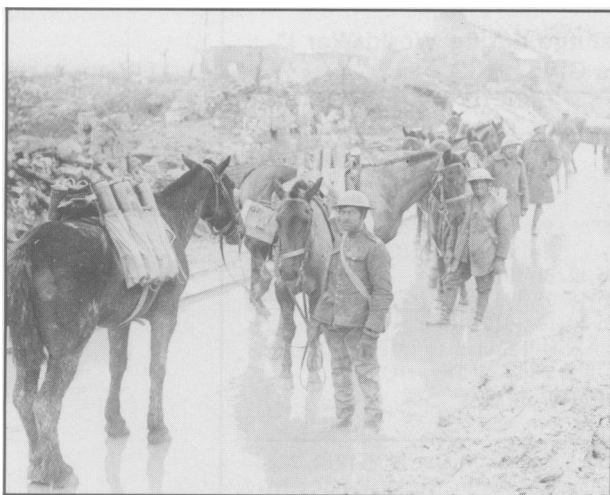


Figure 1. Mules pulling a supply train to the front. [National Archives Canada (NAC), PA-1135]

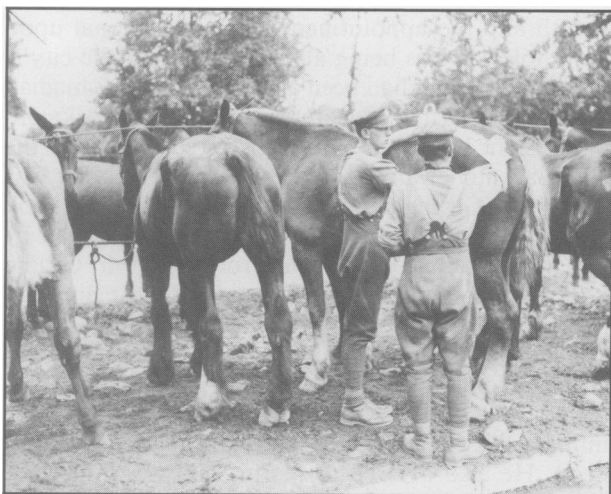
### Girling's life

Theodore Girling was born near Huddersfield in West Yorkshire, England on January 11, 1876, the sixth son of an Anglican clergyman, William H. Girling, and his wife Mary Lacy Hulbert. Theodore later married Dora Simcox and they had at least two sons. He died of illness at 43 years of age, on March 1, 1919, while serving with the Canadian Army Veterinary Corps and was buried in the Belgrade Cemetery, Namur, Belgium (plot 2, row A, grave 15).

Few facts were found about his life before the last 15 years spent as a veterinarian in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, and in the Army. In 1904, he graduated from the Ontario Veterinary College (Figure 6) with the Ontario Veterinary Association's gold medal for the best general examination (8). He mentions this medal in advertisements found in the city directory for Saskatoon from 1905 to 1909. Following graduation he went to Saskatoon where he practised out of a drugstore building on 2nd Avenue. In 1904, Saskatoon was at the end of the rail line and was probably therefore an ideal place to set up practice because of the expanding population and forwarding activities involving livestock. From 1908, Girling's practice included being veterinary officer for the militia. He may also have treated the city's horses prior to becoming the Veterinary Inspector for the Board of Health for the city of Saskatoon in 1912.



**Figure 2.** Packhorses for carrying ammunition to the front, standing in water with the troops. [NAC, PA-1231]



**Figure 3.** Animal identification being applied to a line of sick horses. [NAC, PA-1711]

Although not a member of the executive, he played a role in the formation of the Veterinary Association of Saskatchewan by moving several motions at the first general meeting of the Association in July 1909 (9). Girling moved that discussion proceed on the correction of the proposed bylaws and was involved in other motions dealing with the membership but was absent on discussions about tariffs, appearing again for the adjournment motion. That he was always the mover and never the seconder suggests an active role in the proceedings. His motion suggesting that specifying the exact annual license fee be deleted was defeated but his motions pertaining to the membership being able to vote by proxy and being represented on council by someone from all districts passed.

During his time as veterinarian to the Saskatoon Board of Health he was instrumental in improving the quality of the food supply for that city (10). The inaugural meeting of the Saskatoon Board of Health on January 17, 1911 included Dr. William J. McKay, who had been Medical Officer of Health (MOH) for Saskatoon since 1905. He was authorized to engage a veterinary surgeon at the meeting of April 13, 1911.



**Figure 4.** Veterinary instruments for the Canadian Army Veterinary Corps., on display at Shornecliffe, England during WWI. [NAC, PA-5508]

A detailed report from Girling was tabled by McKay at the meeting of March 25, 1912, on the subject of the fresh meat supply for the city. This was part of discussions on establishment of a municipal abattoir as a possible way to solve food hygiene problems. One has the impression that these two men had an amiable relationship. Once McKay, the MOH, went on a leave of absence in early 1913, Girling appears more often in correspondence and minutes. There were questions about travel claims for his motor car and a controversy, that had reached the newspapers, with the city analyst over an adulterated milk sample, as well as questions on when and how Girling had been appointed. The Board appeared to be in a state of unease under the several Acting MOH's in 1913, perhaps because it was under pressure to explain the high infant mortality rate from infantile diarrhea. Whether there were specific pressures on the Board from Girling's activities in meat and milk inspection is beyond the scope of this paper and will probably remain shrouded in history.

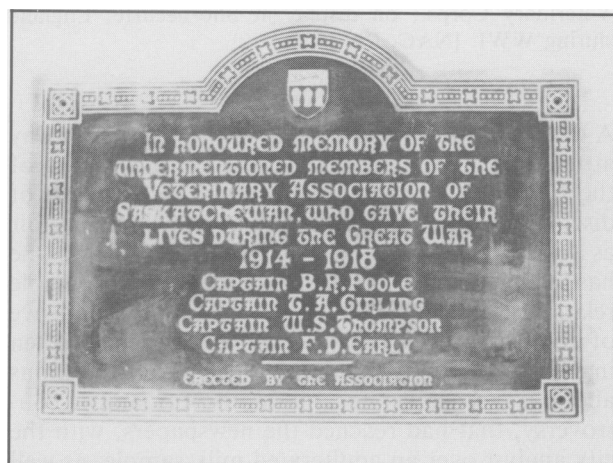
The verbal agreement with the MOH, McKay, and the fact that Girling went on payroll in January 1912 were verified by questions from the Acting MOH (10). Girling may well have been doing city veterinary work before that time since the authority to engage a veterinarian was available in April, 1911. The city had many horses, and since he gave an extensive report on abattoirs, as well as being sent to Chicago to evaluate meat inspection techniques within two months of joining the payroll. When McKay died in August 1913 before returning to Saskatoon, the Mayor, representing the city, and Girling, representing the Board of Health, attended the funeral in Morden, Manitoba, at city expense. This also suggests that Girling was both respected and worked well with the MOH. In June 1913, Girling was to be informed by the city clerk of the agreement "that the expense of upkeep and repair of his motor car, while same is being used by him in carrying out his duties, be borne by the city." This was

**Table 1. Partial list of the postings during World War I\* for Captain Theodore Augustus Girling, VS.**

Comment	Date	Unit
Prov. Lieut. CAVC	11/03/1915	Military Dist. 10, Winnipeg
left Canada	23/11/1915	9th Canadian Mounted Rifles
in England to	19/02/1916	Div. Engineers HQ, France
Brig. Vet. Officer	31/10/1916	9th Canadian Infantry Brigade, 3rd Can Div. HQ**
leave	02/11/1916 to 12/11/1916	
leave Paris	07/05/1917 to 18/05/1917	
leave Nice	05/12/1917 to 20/12/1917	
Brig. Vet. Officer	19/01/1918	4th Canadian Infantry Brigade, 2nd Can Div. HQ
admitted 48th Casualty clearing station	14/02/1919	
died	01/03/1919	

\*Girling was a Veterinary Lieutenant in the Canadian Militia 1908–1912, 22nd and 29th Saskatchewan Light Horse Regiments prior to World War I

\*\*Girling was with the 9th Brigade from early May 1916 but was named Veterinary Officer at the end of October



**Figure 5.** Commemorative plaque on the wall of Convocation Hall, University of Saskatchewan. (Courtesy of the Dean's Office, Western College Veterinary Medicine)

shortly after Girling had received a salary raise from 150 to 175 dollars a month retroactive to the beginning of 1913. His car expenses revealed that he was travelling long distances for the early days of automobiling (900 miles in 3 weeks of May, 1913).

Girling's duties included the purchase of horses for the city, their treatment when ill, and maintenance of a horse register. A report in February, 1913, lists 110 horses — Board of Health, 47; Board of Works, 42; Fire Department, 13; Electric Department, 3; Parks, 2; and one each for Stores, Police, and Commissioners. Girling submitted reports on specific cases of horse disease, in one lamenting the state of the city horse barns. Other duties included inspection of dairies and abattoirs, including meat inspection, as well as attending to restaurants, and hotels primarily concerning milk inspection. Tuberculosis testing of cattle, and investigating cases of animal cruelty (four cases in April, 1913), also fell to him.

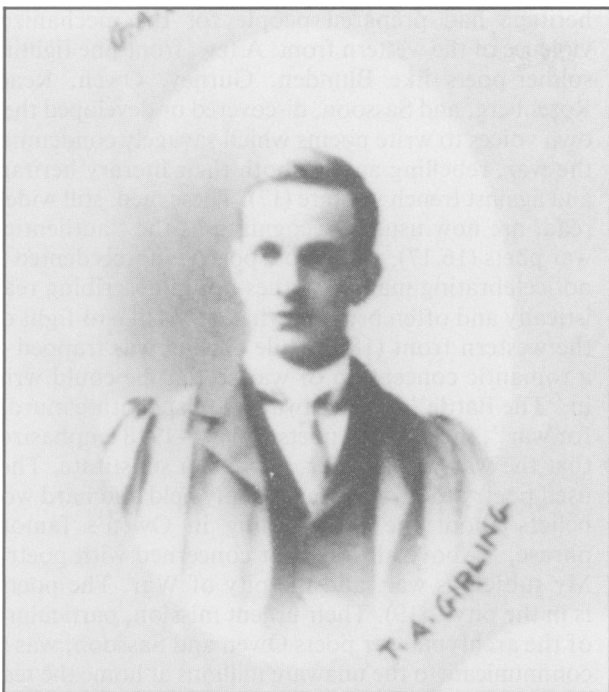
In February, 1915 another practitioner in Saskatoon, W.H. Orme, was "appointed temporarily to fill the position made vacant through Dr. Girling having volunteered; his salary to be at the rate of \$100.00 per

month and the appointment to be conditional upon his whole services being at the disposal of the city".

In 1908 Girling had been appointed in the Canadian Militia as Veterinary Lieutenant to the 22nd Saskatchewan Light Horse but was transferred in 1911 to the 29th Saskatchewan Light Horse, when the latter was organized. Girling's resignation from the militia, took effect in November, 1912. The reason was given by his Commanding Officer who wrote that "Mr. Girling is an excellent Officer, and he is sorry to lose him, but he has been appointed on the medical health staff of the city of Saskatoon, and feels that he is unable to continue service with the regiment." (11). Shortly after the outbreak of the war, Girling volunteered for active military duty in a letter with a Board of Health letterhead. He also offered to recruit more veterinarians (11). After re-enlisting, Girling's mobilization was with the 9th Canadian Mounted Rifles. He was appointed Provisional Lieutenant in the Canadian Army Veterinary Corps on March 11, 1915. A summary of his placements within the military is presented in Table 1. His unit embarked from St. John on November 23, 1915 aboard the SS California.

Little is known of his daily activities during the war but his poetry gives us an idea of the things he did. It was recorded in the Veterinary Record that Girling was promoted to the rank of Captain in November 1916, but retroactive to November 1915 (12,13). Theodore Girling survived the war but tragically died from bronchopneumonia at the No. 48 Casualty Clearing Station (11). An obituary appeared in the Veterinary Record (14). Although Girling was not eligible for the 1914–1915 Star, his widow was sent his medal entitlement that included the British War Medal and the Victory Medal, with the Oak Leaf Emblem attached to the ribbon denoting that Capt. Girling was distinguished by a "Mention in Despatches" (15). Dora Girling received the Widow's Cross of Sacrifice while his mother received the Mother's Cross.

In response to a request from his wife, a colleague described events at Theodore's death in a long letter (11):



**Figure 6.** Theodore A. Girling from photograph of Ontario Veterinary College class of 1904 (courtesy of Dr. C.A.V. Barker, Ontario Veterinary College Museum).

"...He was just like a little kid going to sleep. He opened his eyes once, tried to say something, smiled and slipped off without a struggle...I then started to get his stuff together. With him were his wrist watch, a ring, 55 franks, Belgium, *a leather case with some of those books of poems he wrote and a box of chess and...*" (our italics)

### Girling's poetry

*The Salient and other Poems* was first published by Cecil Palmer and Hayward in London in July 1918, with an expanded edition produced in November of that year. The frontispiece was a photograph of the famous "leaning Virgin and Child" of the Basilica, ("the lady with the limp" as soldiers said), at Albert, France, the subject of one of the poems ("Madonna"). The 22 poems in the second edition were written between 1916 and 1918 when Girling was Veterinary Officer of the 9th and later of the 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade.

As Veterinary Officer, his concerns were keeping horses healthy but he may also have acted as Brigade Transport Officer ("The Troubles of a Transport Officer", "The Horse Alloted to X Company": — "Oh! I am the Company's geegee, The horse that belongs to the bunch, The "Saddle him quick and lend me your stick, For I must get to Bruay for lunch.""). He would also have cared for sick and wounded horses, *vide* this excerpt from "Dumb Heroes".

There's a fresh-healed wound on the chestnut,  
The black mare's neck has a mark,  
The brown mule's new mate won't keep the same gait,  
As the one killed last night in the dark.

But they walk with the spirit of heroes,  
They dare not for medals or cross,  
But for duty alone, into perils unknown,  
They go, never counting the cost.

There's a swift painless death for the hopeless,  
With a grave in a shell-hole or field,  
There's a hospital base for the casualty case,  
And a vet. for those easily healed."

Apart from these few poems related to his work, others were romantic, concerned with a brief love affair in a rest area before going to the Somme ("An Idyll of the War": — "He rode a gallant charger, like Launcelot of old... She was his gentle Marie, He was her khaki knight.") or a chance meeting with a beautiful woman in Marie Antoinette's garden ("The Queen's Garden"). Other poems were religious ("Madonna", "Peace on Earth") including "The Vigil", one of his longest poems, in which he decides he is fighting because of Christian loyalties:

"How in the battle fame I always sought  
And strove in hope of ransom, gold, or power,  
Eager for love of maiden fair I fought,  
Or to revenge some evil bygone hour...

I kneel thy knight, O Lord, naked my breast  
Clothed but in armour to defend Thy right,  
My sword shall strike, my lance shall lie in rest,  
Only to conquer o'er Thy foemen's might."

Apart from feeling that he was fighting for Christ, Girling was also fighting for home ("The Bond": — "From lonely hearts of Britain, The love that made them brave, Returns to seek communion, With those it left to save."). An element of wanting fame remained in the dead soldier speaking in "Far Away" ("And then in the roll of honour, Just one feeble flicker of fame, E'er I sink in the great oblivion, Will be written my humble name."). He was also fighting because duty called men to the fight, *vide* "The Military Medal" ("He was a simple farmer lad, From far Saskatchewan, Who left his all to do 'his bit', Like every true-born man.").

As a Veterinary Officer in the forward support areas, Girling was within the range of long-range artillery, *vide* "Blighted" ("Dear flowers in woods and fields and birds above, Carolling happy songs of spring and love, Then suddenly a whistling, hurtling through the air, A crash-death and destruction, pain and fear."). He was moved by nature ("Blighted" and "The Flowers of the Wood": — "How sweet the flowers of the wood, Compared with those we buy, Reared in a simple hardihood, Yet delicate and shy."). One of his most stirring verses, about the battle of Vimy, was written with the help of a Canadian sergeant who had fought there ("The Battle"):

"They are packed in the fresh-made trenches,  
They have swallowed their ration of rum,  
And they wait for the final signal,  
For the zero hour has come...  
Over the top to victory,  
Over the top to pain,  
Over the top where the H. E.'s drop

And the hissing bullets rain...  
 Then on with a courage unmeasured,  
 To face, as was ne'er met before,  
 The barbarous modern inventions,  
 That substitute murder for war.  
 The pride and strength of the nation,  
 Free offered at liberty's call,  
 True sons of the heroes that built her,  
 Pass over to conquer or fall."

With the exception of "The Salient" ("And claim for Britain's Western sons, One more great victory mid the guns, — The heights of Passchendaele."), his verses do not celebrate Canadian achievements in the war. In "The Music at the Front", his longest and worst poem ("Let the German bombardment destroy what it will, It can never dishearten a spirit so free, As breathes in the "Bonnet of Bonnie Dundee"... "And gloomy thoughts are banished, as cheery voices blend, In laughter, loving chorus, "Who, who's your lady friend?" ")), he mentions Canada in the last line ("O Canada! We stand or fall for thee."). In his verses he celebrated his British rather than specifically Canadian heritage.

Other poems are about the soldier's life ("The Soldier's Home"), the destruction of a French village ("Antoinette Legru"), a memorial to a dead friend ("Ascension Day"), and a poem to a German whose airplane he saw crash ("Fallen").

Girling's Great War poetry remains in well-deserved oblivion, along with most of the other poetry of the period, of which it is a typical example. Written early in the war, Rupert Brooke's immensely popular "The Soldier", followed by the success of Julian Grenfell's "Into Battle", Laurence Binyoun's "For the Fallen", and John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields", had fuelled intense public interest in poetry. Poetry from the Front was in great demand throughout the war (16). The popular taste was for stirring heroics combined with the thrill of mild realism about the fighting. Girling's poetry meets this well. The feudal attitudes and language he used ("charger", "Launcelot", "knight", "maiden fair") were typical of much of the poetry of the period and were influenced in part by the Arthurian poems of Tennyson. There are echoes of Kipling in "Dumb Heroes" and "The Battle" in their meter, themes, sentimentality, and sense of unarticulated but instinctively understood response to some great purpose.

The task of poets is to use their gift of emotional sensitivity, intuition, and ability with language to reflect or interpret an age to an age. Appearing to be ahead of their time, they witness to universal truths in contemporary experience. The mainstream British poets of the war were the literary heirs of the British imperialist writers and poets such as Henty, Kipling, Newbolt, and Rider Haggard, and of the Victorian poet Tennyson. They used the obsolete poetic imagery and religious symbolism of these men, as Girling did, to try to describe a present which they had neither fully understood nor normally experienced. Existing poetic language was inadequate to the task. Trapped in the past, the failure of most poets in the Great War mirrored the failure of the British General Staff. Nothing in the history of war or of their literary

heritage had prepared people for the mechanized violence of the western front. A few, front-line fighting soldier-poets like Blunden, Gurney, Owen, Read, Rosenberg, and Sassoon, discovered or developed their own voices to write poems which savagely condemned the war, rebelling against both their literary heritage and against trench warfare (17). These men, still widely read, are now usually recognized as the "authentic" war poets (16,17), who wrote poetry unprecedented in not celebrating martial virtues but in describing realistically and often brutally what it was like to fight on the western front (18). While Girling was trapped in a romantic conception of war so that he could write in "The Battle" the giveaway line "substitute murder for war", the fighting poets of 1916–1918 emphasized that the war was murder, not just a substitute. They used poetry to express their deeply held and hard won beliefs about the war, feeling in Owen's famous phrase, "Above all I am not concerned with poetry. My subject is war, and the pity of War. The poetry is in the pity" (19). Their urgent mission, particularly of the archtypal war poets Owen and Sassoon, was to communicate to the unaware millions at home the realities of life for the common soldier in the disaster occurring in France (20). For this they used satire, irony and savage realism, so conspicuously absent from Girling's poems.

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The poetry of the First World War can be shown to have stages in evolution of consciousness about the war, from mindless patriotism, through anger and compassion, to an active desire for change (21,22). The traditional and expected topics of poetry, namely, beauty, love, heroes, nature, life and death -the themes of Girling's poetry- had no place for the shattering horror described by the war poets. There is no hint in Girling's poems that an entire generation of British, French, and German men had been destroyed on the western front. His poems have the quality of the innocence of 1914, an innocence which accepted the values of the existing social order celebrated in his poems, of "patriotism, loyalty, obedience, courage, reverence for the purity and sweetness of women and the nobility of the highly born, faith in God and in the wisdom of the ruling classes, contempt for shirkers, cowards and foreigners" (20). This innocence died in the mud of Flanders with the men and their horses.

Little has been written about Canadian poets of the Great War. John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields", written by the Canadian Medical Officer in 1915 during the second battle of Ypres, caught the public mood of anger of the period and became the most popular poem of the war, bequeathing the poppy as the enduring symbol of remembrance of the war dead (23). The



others have been forgotten (24). Girling's poems can claim no uniqueness as distinctively Canadian, as especially veterinary, or as particularly original or imaginative. They do give us a flavor of the war seen through the eyes of a patriotic Canadian Veterinary Officer of the period, serving close to the front, doing his bit for his country.

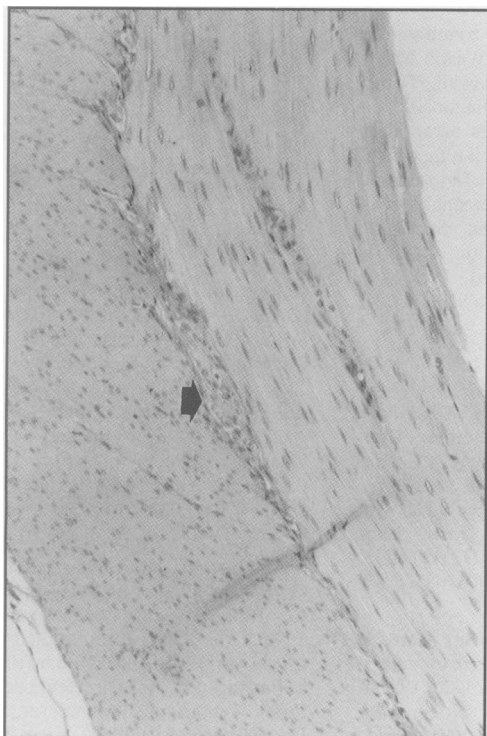
"They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old;  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning,  
We will remember them."

## Acknowledgments

We thank Dr. Clifford A.V. Barker, Ontario Veterinary College Museum, Dr. Ole Nielsen, Dean, Ontario Veterinary College, Ms. Theresa Curry, Office of the Dean, Western College Veterinary Medicine, and the staff of the Saskatchewan Archives Board, the National Archives of Canada, and the War Graves Commission. Assistance in finding some specific sources was given by Ms. Fay Hutchinson, City of Saskatoon Archivist, Saskatchewan Archives Board, University of Saskatchewan and Raymond Brault, National Archives of Canada, Government Records Branch, Personal Records Centre, Ottawa.

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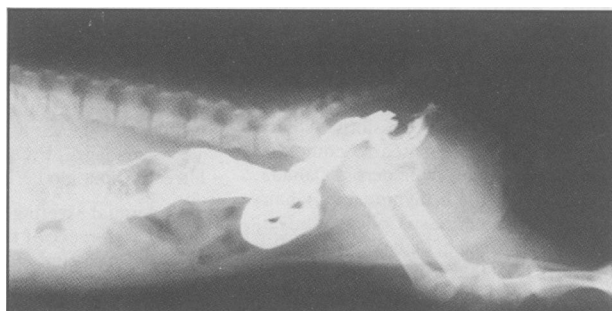


**Figure 4.** One of the rare and poorly formed ganglia (arrow) in a pup with a dilated colon. H&E.

## Correction

Forbes DJ, Dalla-Tina K, Lester S. Plasmacytic enterocolitis with hypoganglionosis in a puppy. *Can Vet J* 1991; 32: 624-625.

The CVJ regrets that Figures 3 and 4 were transposed during the production process. Figures 2 and 4 are being reprinted here to improve upon their clarity. The CVJ apologizes for these errors.



**Figure 2.** Lateral radiograph of abdomen of a pup following a barium enema showing unusual convolution of colon.