



## We will remember

The first time that rug hooker Frances Ennis visited Beaumont-Hamel in France, she took a moment to sit under the Caribou monument dedicated to fallen Newfoundland soldiers and reflect. On this site, on July 1, 1916, 801 young soldiers bravely climbed out of their trenches and charged directly into German fire. The next morning only 68 men responded to roll call; 255 men had died and 386 were wounded.

Profoundly moved by what had happened on this tragic day, Frances found herself writing – the poems “just flowing” from her as she sat. Her experience at Beaumont-Hamel left such a lasting impression she would often consider creating a series of rugs based on the images and feelings that have always stayed with her. Later, as a member of the Holy Heart of Mary Alumnae Choir heading to Beaumont-Hamel for a commemorative ceremony on July 1, 2008, her idea surfaced again.

But this time, she did not plan to hook alone. Along with fellow rug hookers and co-organizers, Mary Anne Murphy and Barbara O’Keefe, Frances invited singers in the 100-member choir to learn the craft of rug hooking and to develop a series of commemorative mats that would be auctioned to raise money for the choir’s travel costs.

The three women were surprised to receive interest from as many as 34 choir members, 31 of whom had absolutely no rug hooking experience. Obviously it was an idea that struck a chord.

*“After the 1st of July, about the 6th, I think, we left for a rest and what a march that was. All our chums gone. We were just dragging along the road when Sergeant Major Hicks brought a couple of accordions and put one in front and one in the rear. They started up The Banks of Newfoundland and we all cheered right up.”*

**Howard Morry (July, 1916), letter to family in Newfoundland, as recounted in the film “I Remain, Your Loving Son”**

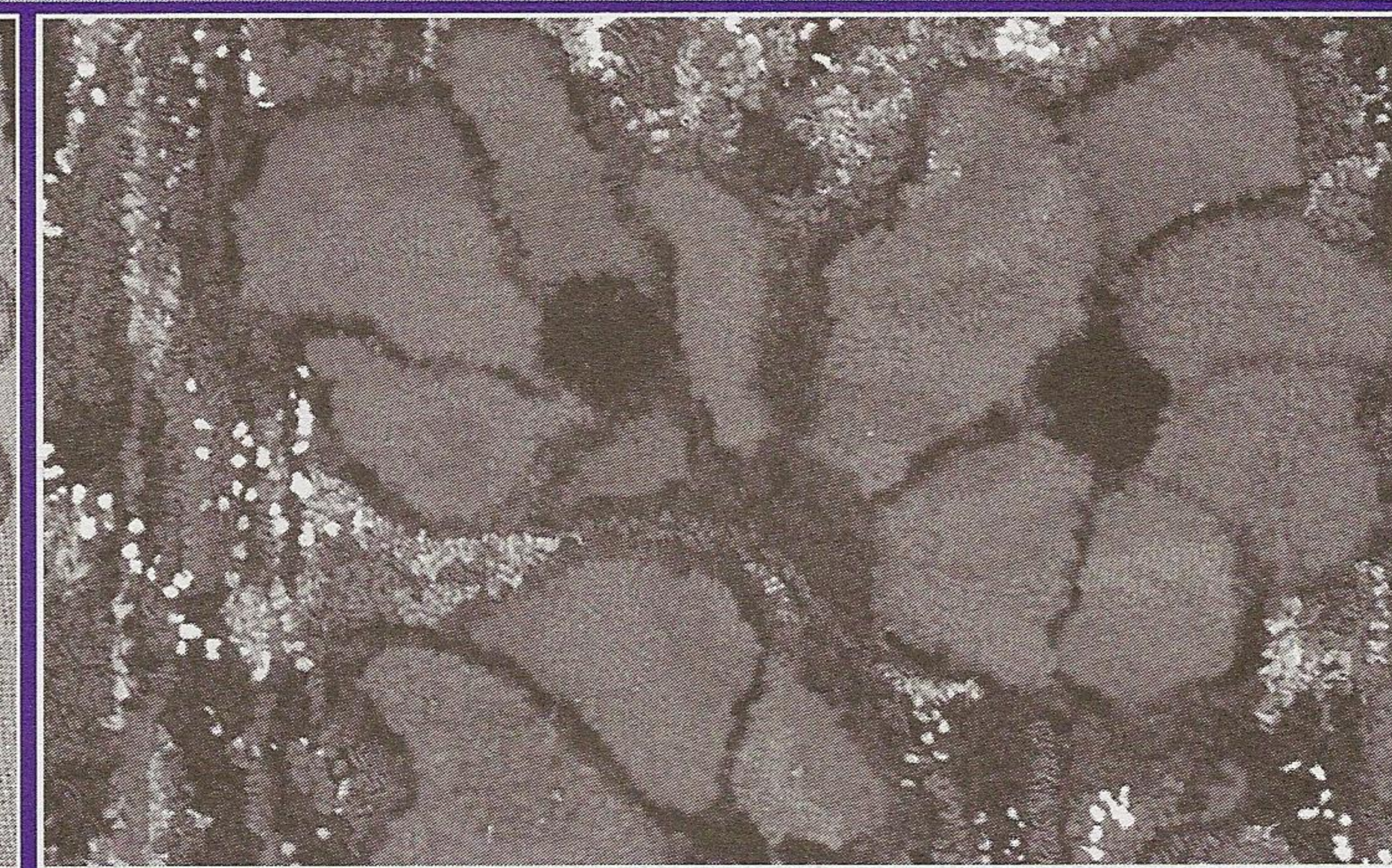
So every Tuesday night for the next six months, from March to November, 2007 these 34 women and their three coaches – with help from experienced rug hookers Maxine Ennis, Sheila Coultas and Bridgit Woodrow – developed a series of rugs that together present a moving social history of World War 1.

It was an undertaking that brought members of the choir together in new ways. While one would expect a choir to be a closely knit group, the size of the Holy Heart of Mary Alumnae Choir makes this kind of intimacy more challenging, despite the warm-hearted leadership of ebullient choral director and founder Dr. Valerie Long.

Modelled from a poster from Veteran's Affairs, this piece (28" x 40") was created by Frances Ennis and Mary Anne Murphy.



Moya O'Neill and Brenda Wolfe hooked this beautiful 28" x 26" mat based on the famous poem, In Flanders Fields, by Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae.



“The thing is, I’m an alto,” says Mary Anne, “so I would sit in the alto section and look across the choir sometimes and I would know someone by their part but I wouldn’t know their names. But in this way (rug hooking) you got to know them on another level beyond just singing.”

The Tuesday night sessions often provoked the recounting of family stories. One woman, Gerri Fleming, for example, hooked a mat of her grandfather and through it found a way to connect with a man she barely knew. Another woman, Pat Greene hooked the story of how her mother would store her brothers’ letters on the sideboard by the kettle.

Other choir members, who did not have direct familial ties to soldiers’ families, found themselves making unexpected connections.

Novice rug hooker, Sheila Power, did a little research before deciding on her mat. By searching the Internet, she came across a photo of the medals of WW1 veteran Cecil Greene (of the Green Family Forge in Trinity) and decided it would be an appropriate image to hook. At the time, however, she had never met the Greene family. Later on, when she, Barbara O’Keefe and Marilyn Cameron who worked with her on the mat, happened to meet Cecil’s great niece, they each felt an intense connection to the family. “My mother had told me stories about the war,” says Sheila, “but then when I met Ada (Greene) Nemec, Cecil’s niece, everything became so real.”

According to Mary Anne, Tuesday nights were evenings that everyone looked forward to, even though there was much to learn and there were inevitable frustrations. Normally a beginning rug hooker starts with a smaller piece, but these rugs measure on average four-and-a-half feet wide by two feet high – mammoth pieces for any rug hooker. The large size of the mats encouraged team

work; sometimes two or three women would work on one mat, and other times, when one woman could not finish her work, another hooker would jump in and help.

The women were also brought closer by the challenge of learning the many aspects of the craft, including how to hook effectively, the principles of good design, how to transfer an image and colour choice. It seemed like a

daunting task for 31 rank beginners but Frances says that “the numbers were a huge part of the success of the project. The inspiration that each woman gave to another, the camaraderie and friendships that flourished, and the tremendous artistic expression that transpired in the designs” led to the creation of rugs of incredibly high calibre.

Once the rugs were completed, however, the choir members faced a dilemma. Originally, they had wanted to auction off each rug separately. But once they saw the 34 rugs together, they realized that to do so would be, as Hon. Lt-Col. Kevin Hutchings of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment said after viewing them, “like taking a book and breaking it apart by chapter and selling each one.”

Instead, the rug hookers advertised for patrons. Now, the complete series of rugs will be

permanently displayed at the Veteran’s Pavilion on Quidi Vidi Road in St. John’s along with a plaque inscribed with donor names. And, the group also surpassed its fundraising goal.

Once in Beaumont-Hamel, Mary Anne Murphy says the choir’s experience was “absolutely incredible.” About 60 members of the choir were able to attend and “when one person would start to cry and not be able to sing, someone else would start to sing and so it worked.”

Not unlike how the singers hooked these phenomenal rugs – by working as a team and, when needed, pitching in. ☘



Pictured above are Diane McDonald and Sheila Feaver working on a piece entitled My Boy. Below are the lovely and multi-talented singing rug hookers!