

Harry Colebourne and Winnie-the-Bear

Date and place of Birth: April 12th 1897 in Birmingham, Warwickshire, England

Date and place of Death: September 24th, 1947 in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

Dr. Harry Colebourne came to Canada in 1905 when he was 18 years of age. He settled in Toronto initially and, in order to finance his university education, he worked in menial jobs such as selling fruit from door to door on the streets in Toronto and as a deckhand on commercial vessels plying the Great Lakes. In 1908, he enrolled at the Ontario Veterinary College located in Guelph. On the 25th of April 1911, he received his degree as a Veterinary Surgeon and following his graduation, he returned to Dewsbury, England to re-unite with his family. Following a short stay, he returned to Canada.

On July 3, 1911, he accepted a veterinary appointment with the Department of Agriculture, Health of Animals Branch in Winnipeg. In the same year he joined the 18th Mounted Rifles as a Militia Officer and then was seconded to the 34th Regiment of Cavalry, (later named the 34th Fort Garry Horse), on May 15, 1912. He was one of the original officers and immediately offered his services to his country. Subsequently, he was given leave of absence from the Department of Agriculture and left Winnipeg on August 23rd 1914, bound for Valcartier, Quebec. While enroute to Valcartier, he was detached from the 34th Fort Garry Horse and transferred to the Canadian Army Veterinary Corps. (C.A.V.C.)

On the 24th of August, the train stopped at White River, Ontario where Harry purchased a small black female bear cub for the sum of \$20 from a hunter who had killed her mother. Shortly after this, Harry named his little cub "Winnie" after the City of Winnipeg, his hometown. On September 12th 1914, he was taken on strength of the Second Canadian Infantry Brigade Headquarters under the command of Lt. Colonel Arthur W. Currie who was later on to become the commander of the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

Harry's six diaries he kept of the war show that on October 3rd 1914, he and "Winnie" embarked from Gaspé Bay enroute for England aboard the S.S. Manitou along with four other liners heading for England. On October 17th they disembarked and left Davenport, England, for Salisbury Plain at 7:00 that morning. Winnie was to remain with him and a pet to the Second Canadian Infantry Brigade Headquarters while he remained in England. At that time, the 6th Battalion, C.E.F., formed primarily by men of the 34th Fort Garry Horse, was also part of the Second Canadian Infantry Brigade. Winnie quickly became a pet to many of the soldiers and would follow them around like a tame dog in their off duty hours at Salisbury Plain. There was numerous photos taken of her with the men and these photos often became a keepsake for them to treasure.

However, this situation was to change when Harry was given to order to remove Winnie from the Brigade Headquarters, as she would not be able to accompany them to the battlefields in France where the Brigade was shortly to go. Consequently, on the 9th of December 1914, Harry proceeded to the London Zoo with his 'pet' where he left her in safe keeping until the end of the

war. According to his diary writings, it was his full intention to bring Winnie back to Canada with him after the war was over. His diary indicated that he was very fond of her and would often visit her when on leave from the war zones in France.

However, when the war ended in 1918, Harry remained in England temporarily and in 1919, he reversed his original intentions to bring Winnie home to Winnipeg. Instead, he donated her to the London Zoo as a gesture of his appreciation for the London Zoo's efforts in caring for her during those four war years. It was to be noted that Winnie had also become a feature attraction for the many thousands of visitors and especially young children. She was considered to be completely trustworthy by her bear keepers who said that of all the bears they had in the Zoo, Winnie was the only one they could say this about. She was also the tamest and best-behaved bear that the Zoo ever had.

The London Zoo in 1919 held a dedication ceremony by erecting a plaque to the effect that Captain Harry Colebourne of the Canadian Army Veterinary Corps had donated her to the Zoo. Numerous newspaper stories were written telling about this extraordinary bear and her friendly nature and antics. Two of her admirers of that early period after the war were A.A. Milne, a writer and his young son Christopher Robin. They frequently visited the Zoo where the young Milne boy would always want to go and see "Winnie". In 1926 as a result of his son's keen enjoyment in visiting with Winnie, Mr. Milne published the first and probably best known of the series of Pooh's Classics called "Winnie-The-Pooh." The other books were called, *The House at Pooh Corner*, *When We Were Very Young* and *Now We Are Six*. Winnie passed away on May 12th 1934 at the ripe old age of 20 years, a good life span for a bear.

Later on in the war, Harry was to be honoured for his services by being recommended for the O.B.E. (Order of the British Empire) by the Director of Canadian Veterinary Services, C.E. Edgett, D.S.O. "For his untiring devotion to his duties as a Veterinary Officer first with the Units in the Field, with whom he served for over three years, then as Senior Veterinary Officer of Bramshott Area. This officer has always been most attentive to his professional charge and unsparing in his endeavours to produce efficiency, both when employed as an executive officer and as an administrative officer. He has been twice mentioned in the Despatches of the Field Marshall, Commander in Chief, British Forces in France, and was previously recommended by this department for an Honour."

Following the end of the war, Captain Colebourn remained in England for a short while to further his veterinary education and training by taking a post-graduate course at the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons in London. He was subsequently accorded the title of Member of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (M.R.C.V.S.) following his successful graduation from that institution.

On returning to Canada in early 1920, he went directly to Winnipeg, his former place of residence. He then opened his own veterinary practice located at 471 McMillan Avenue and practiced there until 1926. Because of declining health, he gave up his practice to accept a position with his former employer the Department of Agriculture, Health of Animals Branch, as a veterinarian specializing in post-mortem work.

Although his health was not good, he did manage to maintain his military relationship with the Fort Garry Horse as their Veterinary Officer with the rank of Major from January 15th 1921, until his retirement from the military on April 15th 1929.

Throughout his 21½ years of service with the Department of Agriculture, Dominion Government of Canada, until his retirement on May 19th 1945, he continued to maintain his small animal private practice on a reduced scale. He built a small animal hospital at the rear of the family home located at 600 Corydon Avenue where he dedicated many hours of paid and unpaid service to numerous animals and their owners of that time. His dedicated love of animals prevailed throughout his life span until his untimely death on September 24th 1947, due to a fall down the basement stairs of his home.

Harry also served on the Executive of the Army and Navy Veterans in Canada during World War Two, Fort Garry Unit #60, then located at 291 Garry Street.

*This Biographic Sketch was prepared by his son-Fred Colebourn in May 1988.
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Winnie-the-Bear Statue at the Assiniboine Park Zoo

Statue Inscription:

On August 24th 1914, while en route overseas during World War I, Lieutenant Harry Colebourn, V.S., of the 34th Fort Garry House Regiment of Manitoba, purchased a black Canadian bear cub at White River, Ontario. He named her Winnie after Winnipeg, his hometown. The bear became the pet of the soldiers. While Lieutenant Colebourne served in France, she was left in the care of the London Zoo. In 1919, he gave her to the London Zoo where she was visited and loved by many, including the author A.A. Milne and his son Christopher.

In 1926, A.A. Milne gave the fictional character Winnie-The-Pooh, named after Lieutenant Colebourn's bear, to Christopher Robin and his friends for posterity. Winnie died at the London Zoo on May 12, 1934.

'Winnie-The-Bear' by sculptor William Epp, was dedicated to the children of the world on August 6, 1992.

