

Troop Entertainer Impersonator Dies

Ross Hamilton, the soft-voiced Marjorie who sang and clowned her way into the hearts and memories of hundreds of Canadian soldiers during the First World War, died here Wednesday of heart disease.

The Nova Scotia soldier lived quietly alone in the hamlet of Pleasant Valley, N. S., surrounded by mementoes of the flirtatious and enchanting leading lady of the 11 Dumbells whose stage antics on the front and in major theatres across Canada and the United States won wide acclaim.

Hamilton died at Camp Hill Veterans' Hospital after a seven-week illness. He was 76.

A native of Pugwash, the man who took to skirts and a falsetto voice to bolster troop morale never guessed his enlistment in the ambulance corps would lead to his return to Canada as a woman. Marjorie was born in a canvas dress and feather-covered helmet in the black days prior to the 1917 battle of Vimy, France when 4,000 Canadians were killed.

Eleven soldiers obtained permission to put on a concert for the troops in an old barn and borrowed their name from the red dumbbell on the soldier insignia of the Third Canadian Division. They thought they needed girls to attract the boys, Hamilton said a few years before his death, and "believe me we did too. I didn't dare leave the show without first changing back to men's clothes."

The group soon joined the division's concert party organized by Capt. Merton Plunkett, whose job it was to put on shows to cheer up the troops. The Dumbells travelled all over combat areas in France by truck, playing to thousands of weary men.

Rousing songs like "Take Me Back to Dear Old Blighty," "Wild Wild Women," and "It's a Lovely War" brightened the dreary life in the trenches and led the Dumbells to a command performance before the King of Belgium and a short stint in London.

After the war, the group played to capacity houses across Canada and in every major city in the United States. But in 1928, real girls were introduced to the revue and Hamilton slipped slowly from public view.

"I knew I couldn't compete with a beautiful girl," he once said. For the next 10 years he was on and off the stage, finally joining up for the Second World War and with the coming of peace he settled down in a lonely log cabin in Pleasant Valley.

There are only three Dumbells left. Jack Ayre lives in Toronto, Frank (Jerry) Brayford in Malakwa, B. C., and Alan Murray in Montreal. Their last reunion was for a CBC television show earlier this year. In 1955, six of the originals climbed on stage at Toronto's Massey Hall before 3,000 people and nearly brought the roof down.

Hamilton is survived by two sisters, Mrs. Joan MacKay of Toronto and Mrs. Margaret Hampton of North Carolina. Funeral service is to be held Friday at New Annan.

In Collingwood, Ont., Capt. Plunkett, 77, said Mr. Hamilton worked with him the time the Dumbells were formed until they disbanded. "I am very sorry to hear of Ross's death. He was very popular and very talented."

In Toronto, Jack Ayre, 71, the original pianist, recalled the nine weeks the group played on Broadway in 1921.

"Ross was tremendous. The people were saying they never saw anything like that boy. He was terrific.

"We were all soldiers who were taken right out of the line to form this group. Ross was an ambulance man, a very fine ambulance man.



Ross Hamilton—"Marjorie" to all who saw the Dumbells perform—died in Camp Hill Hospital early yesterday. He was 76. As Marjorie, Hamilton was the "leading lady" of the Canadian army concert party which played to Canadian troops in France during the First World War and toured North America after the war. (CP Wirephoto)