

# Dad's War Experiences

**Inga Bjornson**

*Brandon, Manitoba*

The “Minningarrit Íslenzkra Hermanna 1914-1918” lists all the men of Icelandic origin who fought in World War One. It names all those who gave their lives in “the war to end all wars” as well as those who returned home; one of whom was my father Arni Bjornson. He enlisted in Winnipeg on March 14, 1917 as a nineteen year old looking for adventure. However his parents saw their only son going to fight and perhaps die in a war they did not understand. He joined the 223rd Battalion and fought in Passchendale, Amiens, Arras, Cambrai and Vimy Ridge.

He came home in June of 1919 to find his father had just drowned in a well while building the cribbing, so took over the care of his mother and sisters by continuing on in the harness-making trade which he had begun at age 14. His physical wounds were caused by shrapnel and he could insert entire pencils into the crevices in his legs. He was also deafened by a shell having landed behind him. Other wounds manifested themselves as nightmares, anxiety and an aversion to talking about the worst of his experiences.

He had been buried alive, and only the fact that his curved helmet slipped over his face to allow him a small amount of air saved him until his buddies dug him out. One day he was assigned the job of bringing in supplies with mules, as the Orientals whose job that was had run away. On walking up



**Arnie in later, more peaceful times in Baldur, Manitoba**

a hill with several mules and men, he tripped on the cobblestones and fell to the ground just as machine fire broke out and slaughtered all those around him. He rolled into the ditch with his knapsack riddled with bullets and managed to crawl back to his unit.

He brought home bloodied German leather belts with “God is with Us” (the words being very similar to Icelandic) and mused about the absence of a God in the hellhole he experienced. His olfactory senses were repulsed at the smell of rotting baloney behind the butcher shop as it reminded him of the odour of corpses. Pineapple never graced our table as it reminded him of the poison-

ous mustard or chlorine gas which the Germans pumped into the air.

My father never married until he was 44 years old and I was born three years later. The stories I heard when I was an adult were still so vivid for him, yet had happened so long before. My very existence is the result of many miracles, his parents’ prayers and so many other factors that I will never know. I do know that the war my father participated in has affected me in that I carry these stories forever and have told them to my family. The effects of war flow onward for generations.