



Adventures With Anna: My Uncle Tony and the U.S. Open

Posted by Anna Wilding on August 19th, 2008

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The US Open is upon us once again. I am excited. It is the first time I have been to the US Open in New York. I have seen major tennis tournaments in Melbourne and at Wimbledon, but this year will be my first US Open.

Why am I excited? Aside from having been a player myself, and had considered entering some USTA national tournaments this year, until an injury forced me not to and, distressingly, possibly off the court for good - my great uncle, Captain Anthony Wilding won the Wimbledon men's singles title for four straight years from 1910 to 1913. So beat that all you Borgs and Sampras, and Federer's! Oh yeah right, three of you did in fact beat his record. HA! Wilding also won the doubles and mixed doubles.

In the days of boat and steamer travel, Anthony Wilding, even played at the hallowed grounds of Forest Hills. He was beaten in a showdown by the California "Comet" Maurice McLoughlin. My "Uncle Tony" actually played his last match in America at Forest Hills, before being killed in the war in 1915 at the tender age of 32. In that time, he also won bronze at the Olympics. He died with no children. He was about to marry American actor, silent screen star, Maxine Elliot.

Wilding was inducted into the International Hall of Tennis Fame at Newport, Rhode Island in 1978. Sadly, we, the closest surviving relatives, never got word of this great honor. I found out about it only in the last decade through my own inquiries. I have yet to visit.

In the New York Times in 1915, W. De B. Whyte wrote under the headline:-
“Anthony Wilding: A Gallant and Generous Sportsman and A Brave Gentleman”
- the following; “The war has exacted an appallingly heavy toll among the best and bravest athletes of the British Empire, but I believe none who will be more sincerely regretted in this country can be found in that ever-increasing roll of honor than the late Anthony Wilding. In tennis he was always the soul of honor; as courteous and gallant a player as ever set foot in an American court. He was the last man ever to excuse himself for poor form or indifferent play. He took his defeat of McLoughlin last summer with the best of good grace, without stopping to explain, as well he might have the heavy handicap and severe strain under which he was playing.....to do his best under these circumstances must have been impossible; yet no word or explanation came from him and if Norman Brooks has not told me I should never have known of them.....American players....they will never meet a more worthy opponent, a finer sportsman or a braver gentleman. “

I had occasion to visit Forest Hills, the old courts in Queens where he played, for the first time last year. I was hoping to find remnants of his life. It's a long way from New Zealand , my birthplace, and his.

In 2005, I went overland to Flanders from Dover, through Calais to find Anthony's grave from World War I. I spent several days there and was followed by an Italian journalist.

We stayed in small bed and breakfasts. I didn't have much information to go on - it was literally the slender details of the burial site in A. Wallis Myers biography on Anthony that was published decades ago - (and yes, we are republishing it in time, so check this site for details)

It was literally a matter of trying to find old French villages that weren't on any map that I could find. I did find his grave, and it had been moved. I was thankful he was one of several hundred thousand soldiers in the region, who had a name on his gravestone. Many did not. It was tragic to read on a gravestone “An Unknown Soldier “of World War I. Gives one pause, as every soldier has a family and or friends.

Stefano Semarro, the Italian sports writer and I came up with, wrote an entertaining feature article that was published in Europe and England about my journey.

When I visited Forest Hills, it was on a summer day last year. I had just moved to New York. Anthony didn't play the US Championships there. He did, however, play the Davis Cup there.

I couldn't find a photograph of Anthony in the Forest Hills clubhouse so I went on a journey to the depths of the old stadium. I wanted to buy the stadium on the spot. This place of former victory now lies in ruins and is disused in a pretty tree lined part of Queens. My mind pinged with ideas. The empty wallet of reality soon quelled those thoughts and so I continued on. I went around, and up and down, all through the stadium focusing on finding history of Anthony.

I was told that most of the old "stuff, plaques, pictures" had been taken over to the new stadium at Flushing Meadows or else had just "disappeared". There were vague recollections amongst people of there having been a plaque for Anthony but no one would know where it was now. I was determined. Nothing like looking for needles in a haystack, or in this case, piles and piles, meters deep of old tennis nets stashed under the stadium. As I stood there with a flashlight and perched precariously on top of the mountain of nets, I realized it would take a bulldozer to move the tonnes of netting, on the off chance a plaque may still be there.

I enjoyed visiting Forest Hills, the lawn courts are still in good form and I guess the old stadium there serves as a reminder of what it was all about for this neck of the woods in Queens. I love grass tennis courts, was an avid grass player myself, and the smell just sets me off to futures I have not yet seen, games I really should be playing, and to the days gone by. The latter a time I could well imagine Anthony playing in. A time when men looked stylish and resplendent in long trousers and thousands of women, in Anthony's case, "would swoon" upon seeing him take the court. How times have changed. In fact, do we women, still even swoon in this jaded age? For anyone? Swooning or not, what we do see now on the court is a myriad of colors, clothing lengths, and an athleticism by both men and women that would have been rare in Anthony's day.

We are looking at bringing in an Anthony Wilding clothing line in to see if, like Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps, there may be a way to make an energy efficient, streamline pair of long white trousers for tennis players. Anyone game to try?