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English War Bride
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Canadian War Bride - My Story

I remember the summer of 1939 very well. The weather was beautiful, hot and sunny every day, quite a change from the usual English summers. I was twelve years old, and I was looking forward to September as I had just won a scholarship to attend Stockton Secondary School for Girls.

I lived with my paternal grandmother at Croft Spa, Co. Durham, as my mother died when I was five years old. My father was working as a chauffeur for Lady Payne Gallway who lived in Bedale, Yorkshire. She was a very kind and thoughtful person, and invited me to stay at her home for a few weeks so that I could spend some time with my father during the summer holidays. Other than that I only saw him every other weekend when he had days off.

I was there when war was declared. Looking back now I wonder what thoughts went through my father's mind at the time. He served in WWI and was gassed at Ypres, and he never ever spoke about any of his experiences. I'm sure he was glad he had a daughter, who would not have to endure the horrors he went through.

My first was time job was helping to pack and distribute lunch bags for 'evacuees' arriving in Bedale. I don't recall what was in those bags except for water biscuits. I can still see those huge square tin boxes!

I returned home at the end of September, but of course school opening was cancelled until the air raid shelters were built. In October we were told we would be sharing a school out in the country, on a part time basis. This made extra travelling time for me as I lived fifteen miles away. We eventually moved back to the city school premises in September of 1940. Every weekday for the next five years I caught the 8 a.m. train to school and arrived home on the 5 p.m. train. I met a lot of different people during those train rides.

My father was drafted for war work in a factory at Leeds, and I never saw him again after 1940. He remarried early in 1942 and died of an aneurysm in September of the same year. My half brother was born six

months after his death. My grandmother refused to keep contact with his widow, so I never met my brother until I found him through the Internet in August 1998.

My wartime experiences were pretty much the same as everyone else's. The choking sensation when first trying on my gas mask, shortages, rationing, "make do and mend", and that horrible lumpy "national wheatmeal bread" made from flour that looked as though it had been dropped on the floor and then swept up again before being baked! One year a ship with a cargo of lemons got diverted to Middlesbrough for some unknown reason, and all the local stores did a brisk trade in lemons while supplies lasted. We had an almost forgotten treat of fresh lemonade.

We lived in an area surrounded by airfields, but we were not bombed by the enemy. Occasionally a lone raider would fly over and machine gun our street, but there were no casualties.

In 1944 I finished school, passed my 'O' Levels, and got a job with a railway engineering company. They specialized in building tracks from factories to hook up with the main rail lines. I liked my job except in winter. It was so cold in the drawing office that we got chilblains on the side of our hands from being in contact with the icy cold tracing paper for hours on end!

My grandmother had pretty strict ideas about raising a teenager. However I was allowed to go dancing at the local Village Hall once a week from the time I was sixteen. Conditions were I came home immediately after the dance. After I started to work I was also allowed to go to shows with a date, and curfew was raised to 11 p.m. There was certainly no shortages of willing escorts, and we all had a good time. I met my future husband at a dance, and we really enjoyed each other's company, although I certainly wasn't thinking of getting married at that point, and neither was he.

He told me about his family, and that he lived on a farm in southern Saskatchewan. There were no paved roads, no electricity, and no running water. His father had put a down payment on a quarter section of land for him, and he was going to be starting from scratch when he got home.

In May of 1945 the war was at last coming to an end, and one beautiful starry night, when we were walking home, he asked me to marry him. I had to think about it for a couple of days before I said "Yes."

Since I had been shuttled around from place to place prior to my ending up living with my grandmother, the idea of being part of a 'real' family

was very appealing to me. I had been an orphan since I was fifteen, and my grandmother, who was then a very active lady of seventy-nine, was always telling me that she was not going to be around forever, and I was going to have to look after myself eventually. I was in love with this man and it was wonderful to be asked to share his life and to build a wonderful future together. I knew that my grandmother was not going to be too happy about it, and she was not, because she thought I was too young, and Canada was too far away. However we finally worked it out, but not before #6 Bomber Group was shipped home to Canada. This was probably a good thing as it gave everyone a time for reflection. I must confess I didn't appreciate it then!

I spent the next year and a half filling out innumerable forms and getting my name on the waiting list for a passage. My grandmother gave me the fare as a wedding present, because neither Ross nor I had enough money for the trip. I left home on December 23, 1946. My grandmother and I said our good-byes at home. It was quite sad to be leaving, especially at the holiday season, and although I hoped to be able to come back for a visit I think we both knew that we would probably not see each other again, but we didn't mention it. The train left Darlington station at midnight, and a friend from work saw me off to London. I took a taxi from King's Cross to Euston and spent most of the day sitting in a waiting room with a large group of other passengers. I met another war bride who was travelling alone to Gananoque so we teamed up for the journey, although we were not in the same section of the ship. The boat train left in the afternoon, and we sailed from Southampton before it was dark, because I remember we saw Land's End on the way out.

I travelled wartime first class which meant six passengers to a cabin with three double decker bunks; so space was quite limited. The dining room was a joy to behold with beautifully set tables and the food was excellent especially the white rolls! The only problem was each meal seemed to consist of more food than we were used to having for a week's rations so the stewards never managed to persuade anyone to have second helpings.

As I sat at the table the first night and watched my soup gently swaying around in the bowl I wondered how good a sailor I would be, but all worked out well and I never missed a meal. The north Atlantic was not a kind place in winter and it was quite stormy. Once we were well underway the ship creaked and rolled incessantly. My elbows were black and blue when I disembarked, from hitting the corridor walls while trying to keep my balance. However I really enjoyed my first sea voyage, and spent most evenings dancing with some nice British Merchant Navy fellows who were on their way to New York.

We arrived in Halifax on December 30. It was almost sunset and the golden rays shining across the harbour looked like a good omen. Immigration processed us on board and then we walked through Pier 21 to the waiting train. I ended up with a group of Scottish girls who were heading west. Since it was almost New Year's Eve they were all prepared with their 'wee dram' so the next night our car celebrated the New Year with songs and laughter. I think of them every New Year's and wonder how they all made out.

When we got to Winnipeg we had a few hours stopover so a group of us decided to have a look at the place. I was wearing my British utility winter coat which would probably have been suitable for a spring day on Portage and Main, but certainly not a January day. I got outside the station and the cold blast hit me, and I immediately headed back for the train. The next day I couldn't understand why my nose was so red and sore. The porter took one look at me and said "Lady you froze your nose." I never went back near Winnipeg again for thirty years, and when I did I made sure it was in summer time!

The original plan was that Ross would meet me at Swift Current (Sask) but somewhere after Winnipeg I received a telegram saying he was in Moose Jaw. So I got off the train and found my way to the concourse and couldn't see a familiar face anywhere. I must have looked a little forlorn as two policemen came over to ask if they could help me, and as I was talking to them Ross appeared on the scene. This became our family joke as Ross loved to tell our sons "The first time I saw your mother in Canada, she was standing between two burly cops, and I didn't know whether to go and claim her or quietly sneak away."

This was the winter of the big snow on the prairies so the only way to get around was by train, and even they got stuck in snow banks on the main line! We decided to stay in Moose Jaw for a few days and get our blood tests etc, done. Then we discovered someone had stolen my wedding ring out of Ross's suitcase, so off we went to get another ring and the marriage license. And ran into another problem. I was only nineteen and I didn't have a letter stating that I had permission to marry. We were directed to go and have a chat with a Judge McFee, who thought the whole thing was hilarious. He not only provided the letter, but offered to perform the ceremony himself, that afternoon if we wished. However we decided to go to Shaunavon so that some of Ross's family could be present.

The weather turned worse after our arrival there, and the trains quit running so the mail didn't arrive with the papers we needed, and I felt I was in limbo. My future sister-in-law took me under her wing and started to teach me the mysteries of how to run a cook stove and how to bake

cookies etc. I had never done any cooking before because of rationing, although I could manage to turn dried egg powder into a reasonable facsimile of scrambled eggs. My future brother-in-law teased me about my accent, and my future mother-in-law sat back and didn't say much. We became very good friends through time, but she wasn't too impressed with me at first. As she told me later, I didn't look like I'd make a good farmers wife. Eventually everything came together and we were married January 16, 1947 at 9 p.m. in the United Church Manse with Ross' family as witnesses.

The next step was the journey to Bracken, which is about a hundred miles south of Swift Current and eleven miles north of the U.S.A. – Canadian border. On the train again – which only ran once a week. It took two days because first we headed due west to Manyberries on the Alberta border, and then headed east on the Southern branch line. We over nighted in Manyberries, where I had my first encounter with dill pickles which I thought tasted awful. The journey was very boring; there was nothing to see but snow and I kept falling asleep.

We arrived in Bracken around supper time. I think the whole town came to the station. As I stepped down to the platform I saw this very drunk, older man staggering towards me yelling, “Where’s that _____, _____ war bride?” I thought “Oh no, what have I landed myself into?” Fortunately it was not my father-in-law, just a neighbor named Old Jim. We took my mother-in-law over to stay with her sister, and then went to some friends of my husband’s for supper. After a very pleasant evening it was time for the sleigh ride home. Young Jim (son of the afore mentioned Old Jim was in charge of that, and he wasn’t drunk.) They loaded up the groceries and the luggage and stopped at the Beer Parlour and loaded up Old Jim. Then we headed down the main street, at the foot of which was a huge snow bank. When we went over the snow bank everything went flying out the back of the sleigh, including Old Jim. They picked him up, but one of my suitcases was retrieved later the next day by the lady who lived across the road. My first sleigh ride was certainly memorable!

I was not impressed with the prairies. Certainly you could see for miles, but what was there to see? I was quite bored that first winter as it snowed and the wind blew and the drifts grew higher. There was no possibility of visiting anyone. The weekly trip to “town” for groceries and mail was a major undertaking. Then in late February I got appendicitis. The hospital was thirty miles away at Climax. It took two miles to the highway. The hospital was in an old house. There were two small rooms in the front, one was the operating room and the other a ward with three beds crowded in. There were two other wards upstairs and the bathroom was a honey bucket in a closet at the top of the stairs. Primitive, but at

least they had a doctor and a couple of R.N.'s They didn't operate on me then, and I had two more trips to go through before I laid down the law and refused to go home until my appendix was removed. I missed my "shower" and the opportunity to meet the local ladies when I was in the hospital.

At that time the C.C.F. was the government in power and Tommy Douglas had introduced Medicare for all Sask. Residents. The fellow in the Municipal Office insisted that I didn't qualify, so we had a heated discussion as to where a comma should have been inserted in a paragraph in the regulations, and I began to wonder "what next?" Anyway I won the argument which was fortunate, because we didn't have enough money to pay the bill! By this time it was April and we had moved to our own little shack. It had three rooms and the roof leaked. Our furniture was mostly "Early Orange Box," and we were existing on \$90 a month V.L.A. allowance, which didn't go far even in those days. But we were together and it seemed like heaven.

A year later our elder son was Ian was born, and the next year we were "dried out". It just didn't rain, even the Russian Thistles didn't grow. We moved to Manitoba, and our moving was like a scene from the "Grapes of Wrath" with all our meager possessions loaded on an old three ton truck, and a Scotch collie dog perched on top of everything. Ross worked in a garage for three years until we got some money together again. We used to go to Saskatchewan to put in the crop in the spring and go back and harvest in the fall. It was a long commute! Our second son Bruce was born in Manitoba. In 1952 Ross's father retired and we moved to the "home farm". I learned to drive the tractor and the combine, grow a big garden and preserve most of our own food. In 1961 we got power in the south country, and having a fridge and a freezer made my life much easier. We also put in a cistern for water so things became quite civilized.

I never got back to see my grandmother. She died in 1959 at the age of ninety-three. I was very upset that I couldn't go to see her during her last illness. It was the same old story of no money. It seemed that every year something happened to the crop – a hail storm – grasshoppers – whatever. I began to realize why Saskatchewan was called the "next year country." My grandmother's death was the catalyst that ended my marriage, because she left me a modest inheritance and Ross expected me to put it in his bank account, and it was "His Account" and not a joint account. Of course this was in keeping with the times, when women were considered totally incompetent in dealing with financial matters.

However I considered this move would be akin to throwing my money in a black hole, and so the fight was on. This was the lowest point in my entire life in Canada. After much soul searching I finally invested the

money in myself and got my teaching degree. It was the best decision I ever made in my life. Ross did come to my graduation and we remained on speaking terms, but we never lived together again and were divorced in 1972 after being legally married for twenty-five years!

I worked in Central Butte for five years until the boys were through high school. Then we all went off to do our own thing. Ian went as an apprentice printer for The Swift Current Sun. Bruce went to Alberta to work in the “oil patch”, and I went to Stanley Mission, which was near LaRonge, to teach in a Cree settlement. Two years later I moved to Old Crow; a Vuntut Gwichin settlement in the northern Yukon. After that I spent three years in Dawson City, and eventually ended up as co-ordinator – instructor for the Teslin Campus of Yukon College. I retired three years ago. Like most people here, I was only coming up to stay for a couple of years, but I liked the lifestyle and so I’m here for good.

Both Ross and I remarried. Friends say he treated his second wife much better than he treated me, so maybe I taught him something! He died in 1981. I ended up with a seemingly charming fellow who turned into an alcoholic. It was difficult living with “a street angel and fireside devil”! I divorced him in 1989. Although this was a traumatic event, it was not as devastating to me as the end of my first marriage. I find it amusing, that now he is a reformed alcoholic, he phones me once a year and then takes me out for dinner. Life certainly has some weird turns!

Last year I managed to track down my brother in England, and this year I went to visit him and his family. I enjoyed the visit very much, but it was a strange experience in some ways – to return after fifty three years. Lots of memories were stirred up, mostly happy ones but not all. The green spaces I remembered are all built up now, and the freeways remind me of Toronto and the 401. I had no trouble finding my way around Darlington and I was quite impressed with the new City Hall, and how they have cleaned up the river and what was a scruffy part of the city centre. Most of my travelling was done in the North Yorkshire Moors National Park, and of course the moors and the villages are timeless. As the locals say “they’s bin theer since t’time’ ot’ Vikings an’ they’ll still be theer when thee’s gone.” I would like to go back for another visit, and perhaps take a bus tour of the whole island, but I wouldn’t want to live there again.

If I had to make the choice again I would still choose to come to Canada. I think overall there have been more ups than downs. I have achieved so many things I would never have been able to do had I stayed in England. I am certainly a different person from the shy young girl, who arrived here so long ago. I have travelled extensively, and met a variety of

interesting people. Canada has been good to me, and I feel that I have contributed something of value to Canada in return.

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