

Mildred Sowers nee
Young by Daughter
Susan Willis
English War Bride
Lady Rodney
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When Love was Young

By Susan (Sowers) Willis

One summer evening in 1941, Mildred and her friend Joan were in Croydon when they met two Canadian soldiers looking at photographs in a shop window. Harold and Eddie were stationed nearby at Caterham and in town for a night out. The four struck up a conversation and made dates for later, and it wasn't long before Mildred took Harold home to meet her parents. Harold recalls that they were somewhat reserved, but friendly. Mildred's mum Florence thought Harold looked like Bing Crosby and Eddie resembled Bob Hope. She would jokingly announce, 'Here comes Bing Crosby and Bob Hope.'

Everything was going smoothly for Mildred and Harold, until they missed the bus home after a date one evening. There wasn't another from Croydon back to Thornton Heath for over an hour, so they walked several miles home. Coming up Norbury Avenue, they saw Mildred's dad waiting by the front gate, obviously upset. Mildred was sent inside. Harold was told, 'If anything had happened to my Mildred, there is nothing I wouldn't do to you!' Harold felt unwelcome after such a stern warning, and went inside to collect his things and leave, but Florence convinced him to stay the night. The next morning Dad apologized. Harold never knew what Florence said to her husband, but the incident was never mentioned again.

As their relationship progressed, Harold stayed at Mildred's home on leaves, donating his ration tickets to her family, which Mildred's mum put to good use by cooking supper for everyone. Mildred often traveled on trains and buses to see Harold where he was stationed at Caterham, and later Seaford. Their friend Doreen from Seaford recalls that Mildred's mum was very strict and never allowed her to stay overnight, so as a result she always commuted back and forth.

Mildred spent evenings at home in her room writing to Harold. When the nightly air raid warning came, everyone ran for the shelter, realizing once inside that Mildred was inevitably missing. Her worried mum would say,

" Where is my Mildred? She must get in here." Without fail, Mildred would come sliding in at the last second with pen and paper still in hand, announcing "Here I am!"

The couple became engaged in 1943. Harold returned to England on leave from the Mediterranean after the war was over and the happy pair chose a wedding date of July 24, 1945. Harold's regiment, the Carleton York, was going home, and in order to remain overseas until his wedding, he had to join another regiment. He was posted to Germany with the 3rd Battalion, North Shore Regiment.

When the time came for Harold to travel to Thornton Heath for his wedding, the British Railway was on strike. Only British soldiers were allowed to cross the English Channel from Calais, France to Dover. Harold was desperate not to miss his wedding! He tried for days to get through, and even tore the Canadian badges off his tunic. An attempt at a British accent didn't succeed in fooling the guards either. They knew he was Canadian.

In Thornton Heath, everyone was busy making arrangements for the wedding. Rationing was strict after the war, so it was very good fortune to have a reception planned at a nearby restaurant complete with a wedding cake! Mildred waited anxiously with guests at the church for Harold on her wedding day. She looked resplendent in her wedding dress, accented with a bouquet of red carnations and a horseshoe for good luck. Word came that he was stranded with other troops in Calais, France, and would be an hour late. One hour later, word arrived that he would not make it at all. Bearing the unfortunate news with a grace particular to Mildred, and determined to show her guests a good time, she hid her disappointment well, and insisted they proceed with the party in Harold's absence. It turned out to be an unusual reception without the groom, but everyone enjoyed Mildred's one and only wedding cake. Harold arrived in Thornton Heath the following day, and discovered that he had not only missed his wedding, but his honeymoon as well. Mildred's parents had gone on holiday in their place, so the wedding was postponed until their return.

With family and friends reassembled at the church on August 4th, 1945, the groom waited anxiously for his bride, but she didn't arrive this time. The taxi carrying the bride and her father had a flat tire en route to the church, leaving Mildred stranded and in tears. Their broken down car was finally located, and Mildred and her dad were rushed to the church. The couple were finally married after an hour's delay, with a small reception after at Mildred's home. An account of the unusual circumstances of their wedding appeared in a local newspaper.

After a week long honeymoon in Seaford, Mildred returned home to Thornton Heath, and Harold went back to Germany. He returned to England on long service leave four months later. After only a month together, Harold was repatriated to Canada, and it was six months before Mildred and he were reunited. As she waited for her travel documents, Mildred visited friends and family saying her good-byes. There were many tearful farewells. Her mum and brother Lawrie took her to report at the designated place when she left England. Mildred sailed on the Lady Rodney from Southampton, arriving at Pier 21 in Halifax on June 21, 1946. A war bride train took her on to Moncton, where Harold and another couple were waiting. The next day they drove to Sheffield, and along the way Mildred was treated to fresh strawberries from a roadside stand, her first taste of New Brunswick. It must have been an exciting day for her, coming to a new country and finally being reunited with her husband after such a long separation.

Living at the family homestead the first few years, Mildred grew close to Harold's sister Dean, her brother-in-law Tommy and their children who lived on a farm nearby. They visited frequently, and Dean's children thought the world of their favorite aunt Mildred. Dean taught Mildred the survival skills needed for living in the country, canning preserves and meat, picking fiddleheads, and what Dean was best at, keeping a fire roaring in the woodstove. Quite an attraction in Sheffield with her accent and funny expressions, Mildred's cheerful smile and comical sense of humor made her a favorite with visitors. Dean's daughter Judy recalls Mildred's excitement the first time she saw a moose, describing it as a gentleman moose, a phrase that sent everyone into a fit of laughter. Judy fondly remembers that when Mildred came to their house to visit, she always brought laughter with her.

Mildred's best friend was her neighbor Celia, who also happened to be a war bride. Common backgrounds provided a comforting bond to build their friendship on. Mildred was also fortunate to find a second family away from home with her friend Jean's parents, who were also from England. Being near people from her homeland helped ease the initial culture shock she experienced, and must have made her adjustment to Canadian life somewhat easier. Mildred enjoyed her first Christmas in Canada at their home, especially the wonderful array of food. Homesick for her family though, Jean's mum kindly provided a shoulder for Mildred to cry on that Christmas Day.

Mildred's first child, Malcolm, was born in March 1947, and Linda in July 1948. Harold was working in construction, and like many other women whose husbands worked away from home, Mildred was left to raise the children mostly on her own. It probably wasn't what she expected out of marriage, but she made the best of the situation by being

the best mother she could be. Her children recall that she was "a good mother to us. She was our main thing in life, always there for us." It wasn't long before the young family outgrew the homestead. Mildred was happy and relieved when they decided to rent half of the Swenson farmhouse a few miles up the road in Sheffield. The old house faced the St. John River, making it extremely cold in the winter, but it was a place of their own. A woodstove heated the house, with a woodshed and outhouse in the back, a stark contrast to the central heating and indoor plumbing common to urban life in England that Mildred had been used to.

Mildred adjusted to her new life very well under not the easiest circumstances. She stretched and saved pennies, earning extra money trapping muskrats and selling pelts. Dean and Tommy had livestock and vegetables, and shared their abundance with Mildred and her family. Deer and moose meat were plentiful in season. With times rough for everyone, people looked out for each other, and Mildred managed to cope. It was never a question of success or failure for her. She chose this life, and was resolute in making a go of it.

Known as a great cook, Mildred became famous for making the best cookies for miles around. Her friend Marg also recalls, "Mildred made the best soup, simmering soup bones and fat into a broth on the back of the woodstove for days before adding vegetables. A favorite during hunting season." Settling down to country life must have been quite a transition for a sophisticated city girl. Mildred had been accustomed to the convenience of buses, trains and the subway in London. She had enjoyed a busy social life, going to movies, dances and visiting with her friends, always ready for some fun and laughter. Once in Sheffield, she found that a trip into Fredericton on the bus a few times a year was cause for excitement. It came up the road in the morning picking up passengers, and returned in the evening.. A day in the city was a big deal for everyone. Annual spring flooding was another event that always created a stir, living so near the river. Mildred always looked forward to her Uncle George's summer visits from Toronto, who always brought candy and gifts for everyone. His visit to Sheffield in June 1956 coincided with a long awaited visit from Mildred's parents. Mildred was overjoyed at the family reunion, and pleased that Malcolm and Linda met their grandparents.

Moving to Fredericton in 1960 dramatically changed life for everyone. The new house had modern luxuries of indoor plumbing and television, though Mildred still cooked on a woodstove. Small in stature, the high kitchen cupboards posed a problem for her, which she solved by standing on a block of wood. Malcolm and Linda attended a much larger school in the city, and they both became involved in sports. It

wasn't long before they made new friends, and soon had lives of their own. Still employed with the same company, but working in the office now, Harold had time to socialize as well. Mildred found herself on her own a lot, but being the outgoing, friendly person she was, it didn't take long for her to start new friendships, and she enjoyed having friends and family from Sheffield come to stay with her. She often took people in when spring flooding forced them from their homes. Celia had also moved to the same neighborhood, and Mildred often walked to her house to visit.

Mildred's hopes for another baby had resulted in miscarriages along the way, but in early 1961, she became pregnant again. For her own reasons, perhaps to be certain, she didn't tell anyone for several months. Linda and Malcolm discovered their mother was expecting a baby when Linda noticed a bag on the table while their mum was out one afternoon. Curious, she looked inside and found maternity clothes. She said, "Malcolm, you better come and look at this!" With her discovery, the secret was out of the bag. Susan was born in September 1961. Malcolm and Linda remember their father coming home late that night, waking them with the news that they had a sister. Having a baby in the house after so many years was a big adjustment for everyone. Mildred was thrilled however, and focused much attention on her new baby. Generous friends had two showers for her, and Edna remembers how Mildred made the adjustment to late motherhood. "At first, Mildred was worried about providing for another child, but she had faith that what she needed would come to her. She had a lot of fun with Susan." Before long, Mildred was out walking with Susan in the stroller, frequently going to Celia's to visit. She often wrote to her mum, Lawrie and wife Vera of delight in her little daughter, hopeful they might come to Canada to see her.

Mildred's father died in April 1962, but she was unable to attend his funeral. Uncle George died a few years later, leaving her a small inheritance, and as a result, she was then able to return to England to visit in May 1966, her first trip home in twenty years. Mildred was ecstatic, and friends delighted her with a going away party, showering her with gifts for the trip. Mildred spent two nostalgic weeks with family and old friends in familiar places; however, she found England had remained too reminiscent of wartime. It was a wonderful visit, but she was glad to return to her family. She commented afterwards that she could not live in England again. Canada had become her home.

Shortly after Mildred's arrival home, Linda got married. It was difficult for Mildred to accept her eldest daughter leaving home, soon followed by the news that she and Harold would be grandparents, but true to her character, Mildred coped very well under not the easiest circumstances.

Circumstances had clearly begun to affect Mildred as the year drew to a close. On December 16, 1966, she wrote a letter to her brother Lawrie, in which she told him, "Time is short, so a brief letter will have to do. I'm not looking forward to Xmas too much. If you were here you would understand." It was obvious to her brother from the melancholy tone of her words that Mildred was not her usual cheerful self, and that it was not a good time for her. Mildred ended her letter by saying she was going to town later that afternoon. She had no way of knowing how short time really was, or the tragedy that waited for her before that day was ended. Later that evening, Mildred and Harold were returning home from a Christmas party when Harold lost control of their car on an icy bridge and crashed. Suffering from serious injuries, Mildred remained in a coma for several hours, and passed away the following day, December 17, 1966, at the age of 42.

Blessed with a presence that could light up a room, Mildred's wonderful qualities of laughter and optimism for life still touch those who loved her. She possessed a unique ability to make the most of what fate dealt her. Lovingly remembered for her devotion to family and loyalty to friends, she will always remain an inspiration to the ones she left behind.