

Phyllis Pickford
English War Bride
Samaria
November 18, 1946



During World War II, I met and married a Canadian soldier. At the end of the war he returned to Canada with the understanding that our two children and I would follow him later.

My new life was to begin when I sailed as a 26 year-old war bride, with three year-old daughter Sandra and six month-old son Roger from Liverpool, England, November 12, 1946 aboard the S. S. Samaria, a troop ship carrying service men home.

I last saw my Nana the day I left, crying at the garden gate in Beckenham, Kent. She gave me as a parting gift, a silver St. Christopher mirror that I still use today. My mother escorted us to the train station in London. In tears, she gave me these words to survive by: "If you are ever lonely, look up at the moon and know that we are looking at it, too." She also encouraged me to try to be content, even if I must live in an attic. Strangely enough, I was to live in an attic that first winter.

My luggage had gone before me -- an old tin trunk and a wooden chest holding old pictures dating back six generations, and two family bibles. I carried a case of milk powder and terry towel diapers. There was no time for emotions on my part. I was busy with a baby in arms and a toddler on a harness. I had a husband waiting for me and my hopes were that the children would have a better life in Canada.

It was a long, rough voyage. We were six days at sea and I was seasick the entire time. Eventually I sent for a doctor who gave me some pills to settle my stomach so I could go to the dining room for a meal. However, as soon as I smelt the food, I rushed to the ship's rail and fed the fish. I wished that I would die. It was a good thing my mother gave me a little enamel potty as I had it under my nose throughout the voyage. While I was so sick, a kind lady looked after Sandra and took her to the dining room for her meals, which included a special party for the children.

Our sleeping quarters were a cabin, shared with 15 other women and their babies. We slept in bunks, Sandra shared mine and Roger was in a rope swing cot attached to my bunk. Time was spent making up baby formula and washing diapers that we hung from the ship's hot water pipes in our cabin. I remember one woman who was escorting a child to

Canada whose mother had been killed in an air raid. I also recall a woman who was very ill after giving birth. Her husband, a serviceman, was in another part of the ship, and, although men were not allowed in our quarters, I gave up my bed for him so he could be near her. One night there was a terrible storm and water rushed in through the porthole. He stuffed the porthole with blankets.

We arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia, November 18, 1946. I can remember the ship sliding up to dock and looking up and down at the decks and seeing hundreds of women and their children, all searching for someone they knew on shore. There were no immigration or health checks as this had already been done in England. The first night we slept on the floor at the YMCA. I remember the floor was still going up and down. At the Halifax railway station I had my first fried egg sandwich. It was a real treat as it was on white bread, which was unattainable in England during the war years.

My husband was waiting for us at Halifax. I could see him on the dock. One girl asked me, "Is that your husband? He does look old." I had to agree with her. He had come to meet us in civilian clothing, and the war had taken its toll on him, too.

Next day, we took the overnight train to Montreal. The porter carried baby Roger in his arms and rocked him through the night, as he would not settle down. He must have missed the motion of his swinging cot on the boat.

We changed trains at Montreal for the final journey to Sherbrooke. I thought the journey would never end. We eventually arrived in Lennoxville, where we had to wait for a taxi to take us to a farm. Here we spent our first winter in a two-room attic with no running water, electricity or indoor toilets. We had to pump water and carry it upstairs in a bucket. There was no sink, just an enamel bowl to wash ourselves in and do the dishes. We had a pail to empty the water into, which was also used as our toilet. When this was full it had to be taken down and emptied outside behind the barn. We used a Coleman lamp, which held oil and had to be pumped up onto the wick, then lit, and covered with a glass globe. For cooking, we had a wood stove which was later converted to oil.

I was terribly scared of the rats and mice that kept me awake at night. There were many strange noises. Called "dingbats", I later found out that the loud bangs were nails lifting in the roof because of frost.

The day after I arrived it snowed, and I did not see any green grass until the following May. That spring, I looked in the direction of Lennoxville

and saw the town flooded. The St. Francis River had burst its banks and the land around Bishop's University was under water.

We stayed on the farm for about six months. Then we went to Sherbrooke and stayed with one of my husband's army buddies who lived in a veteran's house. His wife had gone to England to visit her parents and they rented us their house while his wife was away. I looked after her husband and made his meals. When his wife returned we had to vacate. We were at a loss, with no where to go. Houses and apartments were still scarce.

Across the road lived an ex-army man who was planning to return to England. I went to see him and asked him if we could take over his house, if I boarded him until he left for England. He agreed, so we moved in thinking ourselves lucky to have a house with modern conveniences.

My husband found a job at a pulp and paper plant in Lennoxville, making asbestos tank covers. He would leave at 6 a.m. and return at 6 p.m. I always had a hot dinner ready when he arrived. We did not have much money in those days of 1947. The average wage for a man was \$50 dollars a week, same as all the other veterans living on our street. To supplement an income, the men used to take part time jobs. My husband dug potatoes and would take his pay in potatoes that would last us all the winter. Other men would paint houses, bartend or do janitorial work.

Thirteen years passed before I returned to England for a long-awaited reunion with my loved ones. Like most immigrants, I continue to seek balance between the part of me that yearns for England, family and childhood memories, and the part that must remain in Canada with children, grandchildren and now great-grandchildren.

