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Scottish War Bride
Ile de France
April 2, 1946



The War Brides - 1946

1946 the Ile de France sailed from Southampton docks on April 2, 1946. On board were five thousand Canadian servicemen, thirty war brides and husbands. It had been an emotional farewell at the dockside for the young women; Canada was a far country, six days by ocean liner, a long way from family and friends. Back then no one could visualize the ease in which such a journey would be undertaken in the years ahead.

The wives had separate quarters on board ship; joining their husbands for breakfast. We passed the time strolling the decks and chatting during the long voyage. The ship was overcrowded; troops slept in hammocks below decks, wall to wall soldiers. Uncomfortable certainly, but the men were happy to be homeward bound at last.

A number of the wives were pregnant, between seasickness and nausea it was not a pleasure cruise. Meals were served twice daily, a terrific menu, lavishly displayed on elegant tables, white linen tablecloths no less. Fire drill was our only activity, no snooker, quoits or shuffleboard on board for entertainment. Reading, playing cards and holding long conversations about our plans for the future seemed to be the only past time. Our lives had been focused on war, peacetime was an unknown factor to many of us. A number of the returning soldiers talked of broken marriages, hasty weddings before their departure overseas, others of sweethearts left behind, and friends who would not be returning home.

It was a pleasant surprise to many of the war brides that we could purchase whole cartons of chocolate bars in the ship's canteen. Rationing was over, most scarcely remembered pre-rationing days in Britain. Sailing into the harbour towards the city of Halifax, Nova Scotia, everyone went out on deck to catch a glimpse of the Canadian shoreline. It looked welcoming, but foreign. Halifax in those days was drab and gray, the wooden houses resembled apple crates turned upside down. Some passengers went ashore, most stayed on board. Several came back to report that the clothing stores had outdated styles and "old lady shoes."

Bright and early next morning the troops were marched to their trains, some for the Canadian West, others to Ontario and North Sidney, and Newfoundland. The trains were huge in comparison to our small British ones, with whistles that had such a melancholy wail. On arrival at North Sidney, we were dispersed to several hotels to stay overnight. It was something of a shock when we were assigned two couples to a room. Of course this was refused and we tossed a coin to see which couple would seek other accommodations. The volunteers who assisted throughout the land journey, arranging meals, locating baggage and handling the paper work, did a commendable job in undertaking the enormous task of welcoming the newcomers to Canada. Everyone was delighted to be on terra-firma once more. But, it was not for long.

The Cabot Straits lay ahead. "The stormiest crossing in years," said the sailors, as the vessel heaved its way across the Gulf of St. Lawrence, It was a long sleepless night for most of us. At six a.m. next morning everyone rushed on deck to catch sight of the Newfoundland coastline. There it was looming ahead, fogbound, forbidding, the ominous rock! Docking at Port-Aux-Basque in the dense fog, it was difficult to make out the figures of the longshoremen, wearing their oilskins, logan boots and sou'westers. Snow was everywhere, the ship had sailed from springtime back into winter. No one spoke, the silence hung heavy. The Newfie bullet awaited. It ran on a narrow gauge railway track three and a half foot wide and made the three hundred mile trip to St. John's in seventy-two hours. Being a social occasion, they didn't keep to the schedule.

The stewards were friendly. The menu consisted of Newfie fare, cod tongues, brewis, scrunchions, trout, bakeapple jam and salt beef dinner. The scenery was bleak, rocks, barrens, and endless snowdrifts. But inside the train was the real Newfoundlander, at home in his native land; kindly, humorous and generous. As the train chugged its way across the country numerous stops were made at quaint sounding places like Goobies, Come -by-Chance, and Topsail. When the passengers alighted at their destinations they looked back at the train as it pulled away, a last link with home and with those who shared a common bond. St. John's railway station was a hive of activity, what an affectionate welcome the veterans received from their families; most of whom had been overseas for the entire six years of the war. It was an apprehensive moment for the wives, uncertain as to their acceptance but for most it was a pleasant experience.

The drive along Water street, which was the Main road, passed several stores as they called them, not shops as in Britain: Bowrings and Ayre and Sons. The Cathedral was the tallest building in the city. Life was pretty rugged back then in Newfoundland, houses clung to the sides of

cliff faces, steep hills everywhere and many with no indoor plumbing. During the summer months one could forget the travails of life and enjoy the good times. Fishing in the many ponds as they called their lakes. Trout fishing in water so crystal clear we drank from it, berry picking for cranberries, blueberries and bakeapples. We went down to the sea often to gaze across towards the horizon and visualize the coastline of Scotland. In time we all became involved with the business of raising families, setting up house, and finding jobs. We formed the Rose and Thistle Club and enjoyed meeting in the afternoons and other social occasions.

The Newfoundland women were kindness itself, good hearted and fun loving; terrific bakers, their dark fruit cake, loaded with cherries, raisins, nuts, molasses and spices were a treat. Especially accompanied by a quaff of home made blueberry wine. Being invited to a "Time" which was another name for a party, meant a "scoff," with salt beef dinner, peas pudding and steam duff. There was lots of singing, dancing and music of the home-made variety, a winter's evening activity with the more people the merrier. Perhaps Newfoundlanders no longer boil the kettle and fry freshly caught trout by the side of a "pond" but then again maybe they do.

I left Newfoundland after ten years and moved to Ontario and then to British Columbia. . I bet they no longer use the old sayings like "bound you will." and the Newfoundlander's toast I bows towards you, I nods accordant, I catches your eye and I smiles.