

The Gracie Fields Story
By Carrie-Ann Smith

Museums and Heritage Sites embrace the past, educate the present, and, when we are especially lucky, inspire the future. A museum such as Pier 21 has the great fortune of celebrating living history and as the librarian of this special place, I have been in a unique position to not only collect, present, and educate but to see first-hand how people can be brought together by sharing a common place and experience.

Well before the Pier 21 National Historic Site opened on July 1, 1999, the Pier 21 Society had begun collecting personal memoirs and arrival stories. Immigrants, war brides, British evacuee children, and Second World War veterans were slowly beginning to learn of the museum project and contribute their memories of passing through the old waterfront shed.

One day a letter, simply addressed to “Pier 21, Halifax, Nova Scotia”, arrived. The first line read, “I don’t know if anyone is ever going to read this.” I have always felt privileged that it landed on my desk. In his letter Bill Pineo described the experience of being a young soldier in 1940 waiting for his ship to disembark from Pier 21 and take him overseas to join the war effort. While the anxious soldiers were counting down to what might be their last glimpse of Canada, another vessel came alongside and, suddenly, there was music. Mr. Pineo wrote,

“...the air was filled with the beautiful clear voice of Gracie Fields echoing throughout the harbour. It had to be the favourite of almost everyone, and the timing was most appropriate, “Wish Me Luck as You Wave Me Goodbye.” A short silence was followed by another great song, as the ships started to move into their respective positions, “We’ll meet again, don’t know where, don’t know when, but I know we’ll meet again some sunny day.” The silence on the ships was broken by cheers, and it is almost certain that the day will remain in the memory of all those who were there.”

Mr. Pineo wrote that he never knew if it really was Gracie Fields singing or if someone aboard that ship had just decided to play a record as a tribute and farewell to the boys. The event had clearly made a lasting impression on him. My letter of thanks on behalf of the Society began a friendship and a correspondence that lasts to this day.

I was curious about Gracie Fields and did a little research online. The Yorkshire girl that I had never heard of had been a huge star of stage, screen and radio in Britain and North America. Ms. Fields was at the height of her fame in 1938 and toured the United States, Canada and South Africa. After the outbreak of war Gracie entertained British troops in France and went on to raise \$500,000 for the British war effort.

Gracie Fields and Bill Pineo were in the back of my mind on a busy afternoon a few months later. Pier 21 includes a small Resource Centre where visitors and researchers can access information related to its history and seek advice on subjects ranging from

genealogy to, as the case would be, archival image acquisition. On this day I was approached by a lady who was looking for a newspaper photograph. We have an extensive photo collection but very few newspaper images and I knew that none of ours were what she wanted. She was walking away disappointed when I said, “Maybe if you tell me what the picture looked like I can think of something similar.” She replied that there couldn’t possibly be anything similar because it was a photograph of her at age eleven singing to departing soldiers with Gracie Fields. With great excitement, I yelled, “You sang with Gracie Fields!”, and with surprise she yelled, “You know who Gracie Fields is!”

The event had made as big an impression on her as it had on Mr. Pineo. Our visitor introduced herself as Ann Miller and explained that over the last few decades she had



often wondered what became of the boys that she sang to as she stood on the deck of the Duchess of Richmond with Gracie Fields that afternoon.

Early in 1939, her father, a First World War veteran of the R. N. Reserve, was re-commissioned and posted to Singapore. His wife and four children, ranging in ages from three months to ten years stayed behind in Sussex England. In April of 1940 he cabled asking, in code, if his wife and children would join him in Singapore, via

Vancouver. The Atlantic at that time was considered the safest way of traveling to the orient. It was agreed that the Ann’s mother and the children would be more secure in Singapore for the duration of the war.

Ann writes,

“So with sounds of Dunkirk for background ‘music’, my brave mother made the necessary arrangements. Stored furniture, packed precious belongings, obtained our passage and with a suitcase each, we set off on our voyage.

There were many children on board, mostly with their mothers and also a very gracious woman named Gracie Fields, who very kindly (having none of her own) and to give the mothers a welcome break, entertained the children for about an hour or more each day.

Gracie formed a Children's Choir, for the ship's concert and we were taught the songs of the day, war songs and hits from Pinnochio, a film which had just been released.

On about the 11th or 12th of June, our ship berthed in Halifax. Those who were going on to Montreal were not allowed ashore. We children amused ourselves watching the loading of a troop ship alongside. Hundreds of soldiers in their khaki uniforms with their packs on their backs climbed the steep gangplank.

Late in the afternoon there was an announcement over the loud-speaker for all children to join the Captain on the bridge. Naturally we all raced up and there we found our friend Gracie and the Captain, who had decided it would be nice if we sang to the soldiers on the other ship.

We did not need to be told, that they were going to England to fight and perhaps die for us. We sang, 'Pack Up Your Troubles' 'We'll Meet Again' 'Wish Me Luck as You Wave Me Good-bye' and then in the late afternoon as the troop ship sailed, Gracie sang "Red Sails in The Sunset", her beautiful voice resounding across the sea.

I was only just eleven and was really saddened by it all. It was something I never forgot and through the intervening years. I often wondered about the fate of those brave young men. Never ceasing to think of them whenever I heard "Red Sails in the Sunset".

Ann met Gracie once again, when the singer visited Melbourne in 1964 but our story is about a different reunion.

Serendipitously, when she visited us Ms. Miller was traveling across Canada and making her way to Mr. Pineo's hometown of Naniamo, B.C. the following week. Arrangements were made for a meeting and the two had a wonderful reunion, even making it into the local paper. Since then we have heard from Mr. Pineo frequently and had multiple visits from his son. Ms. Miller, who now resides in Australia, generously contributed her memories to our story collection once she returned from vacation and we received a wonderfully detailed account from her younger brother who writes that he had been waving at some soldiers and instigated the entire impromptu concert.

Someone sang a song and someone heard it. Someone wrote a letter and someone read it. Every time that we reach out there is the potential for a connection. When we celebrate the past this Heritage Day let us remember that while our museums and historic sites are

filled with artifacts and images it is real people and thousands of tiny moments like the one that Bill and Ann shared that are what makes them special, intimate, and alive.

For anyone interested reaching out Pier 21 is a non-profit Society that, in addition to educating the public about the significance of immigration and Canadians important role in the Second World War, is motivated by a desire to provide Pier 21 alumni with a place to return to. Some sit quietly reflecting on everything that has happened since they were last there, others talk excitedly and relay tales of seasickness and shipboard adventures. Like Bill Pineo and Ann Miller everyone who passed through its doors has a story to tell. It was just a beat-up immigration shed on the Halifax waterfront, but for thousands of individuals it marked a new beginning - the way that all great stories start.



Bill and Ann