

Muriel Pitt
British Evacuee Child
Aquitania
August 1940



AM EVACUEES' MEMOIR
By Muriel Pitt



In 1940 I was nine years of age and my sister, Audrey, was 15. The first thing I remember was our mother asking us if we wished to go to Canada. With visions of Rocky Mountains and Red Indians I, of course, said yes. With great excitement we readied ourselves for this great adventure, at least that is how I viewed it.

It was some time in August when our father took us to a school in Harrow where we boarded a coach. We then continued on to pick up some other children including Malcolm Joyce and Doris and Pat French. We were taken to a school in the country countryside which, I have since learned, was at Eltham in Kent. My only memory of this place was that it was large and we had lots of fun.

We went by train and coach to Liverpool arriving at night. It had recently been bombed and fires were still burning at the docks. Our ship, the SS Oronsay, had been moved out into the harbour so we boarded a tender which took us out to the ship.

My sister and I shared a very small cabin and I, of course, was consigned to the upper bunk! We used our life jackets as pillows as we were told to never let go of them. We couldn't see outside as the portholes had been blacked over. Lifeboat drill was held every morning and it seemed to take hours. After that, we pretty well had the run of the ship and the crew was very patient with us. The most vivid memory I have of the Oronsay was the most awful smell of fuel. We used to hold our noses to go down to the dining room. I remember a church service being held in the Lounge with lots of singing and "sing-songs" were held nearly every evening.

We crossed the Atlantic in a large convoy of ships and I can remember that we remained close to a big white ship that had a red cross painted on the side. The crossing couldn't have been very rough as I don't remember being seasick or missing a meal, however Audrey was very ill.

Great excitement when we arrived in Halifax on August 9th. There were hundreds of curious people on the pier to see us. They yelled questions at us and threw funny looking coins . We stayed another night on the ship and before we left next day, we were thrilled to be asked to turn in our gas masks! We left Halifax by train and soon discovered that we were NOT going to the Rockies but to an island, Prince Edward Island.

We arrived in Charlottetown late at night and have since learned that hundreds of people turned out to greet us, however I was almost asleep so a policeman carried me to a car. The lady who took charge of our group on arrival was Miss Jessie Fullerton, a charming but very strict lady. We were taken to a tourist home, run by Ed and Irene Stewart, at Tea Hill. Since there wasn't enough room for all of us in the house, many of the boys slept in tents. We were there for about 10 days, as I remember, and it was absolutely wonderful.

Everything was done to entertain us, paper chases, swimming at the shore, berry picking, camp fires and singing at night and, of course, lots of visitors who came to look at us. I also remember we were lined up in front of the Lt. Governor's residence so that he could inspect us.

On one of our trips to the shore, I stepped on a shell and cut my foot. Canon Malone, the Rector of St. Peter's Cathedral in Charlottetown, happened to be visiting that day. He carried me to his car and took me into the Prince Edward Island Hospital emergency. He waited with me while they put stitches in my foot and then returned me to Tea Hill. This was the beginning of a long friendship with Canon Malone, who made many visits to Earnscliffe and I was always delighted to see him.

I was eventually sent to the farm of Houghton and Florence Mutch and their daughter, Vernita, in Earnscliffe. Audrey stayed in Charlottetown until she was 18 when she joined the RCAF and went back to England., eventually marrying an Canadian, Elmer Leadbeater from Antigonish and returning to Canada via the "Queen Elizabeth" in 1946. Also sent to Earnscliffe were brother and sister, Peter and Shirley Lynn. They stayed with the Tweedy family and we went to the same school.

Having never been on a farm before, life was certainly a change from the streets of Harrow, where my family lived in England. I loved the animals and I believe I was a bit of a problem for the first few months. However, I

eventually settled in and felt I was part of the family. One event I remember clearly was Christmas 1942 when my parents were able to speak to me over the radio courtesy of the BBC.

Living in the country, with only primitive transportation available during those years, plus the terrible winters, trips to Charlottetown were few and far between, so I was unable to stay in touch with any of my fellow evacuees. (I understand I missed out on the Christmas parties given by the RAF, who were in training in Charlottetown during the war!) My sister, Audrey, however, visited on several occasions. She cycled out once with a British Airman, Harold Staines, who was later killed in North Africa. Miss Fullerton also made regular visits and one time came with a Mr. Shakespeare!

I stayed with the Mutch family for the duration, returning to England on the SS "Duchess of Bedford", January 1st, 1946. Most of the Island evacuees had already left by that time and I think I was the last to leave. It was a very sad parting indeed, as I didn't want to go. As it turned out, the voyage back was another adventure where I met up with returning evacuees from other parts of the Maritimes. The arrival in Liverpool meant the adventure was over. The train ride to London through the rubble of the bombings, was a sobering Reminder of what I had been fortunate enough to miss. It was quite a shock to a sheltered 14 year old to realize and see the extent of the damage. It was a sight I will never forget.

Journey over, and it was good to see my family again and my new Canadian brother-in-law, waiting for me on the platform at Euston Station in London. In July 1949, I returned to PEI via Pier 21 again, this time on the SS "Aquitania", and as a landed immigrant.