

Stella Marion Bates nee  
Pickering  
British Evacuee Child  
Oronsay  
August of 1940



Stella Marion Bates (born Stella Marion Pickering) was a British child evacuated to Canada during World War II. She arrived in Halifax in August of 1940, on the S.S. Oronsay.

I was always a Daddy's girl. I adored my mother, but Dad, well, Dad was Dad. My memories of life before August 6 1940 are somewhat scant, although I do remember Mum waking us up in the middle of the night and bringing us downstairs to lay beneath the dining table with cotton wool in our ears so as to drown out the noise of the guns firing and I thought it great fun to see my baby brother strapped in his body-sized gas mask which we all took turns to keep the air pumping in. I can recall being a happy child and was delighted to be asked if I would like a holiday in Canada. Naturally, I assumed the whole family would be going. The big day dawned and we all walked up to await the coach - my sister and I got on and sat right at the back and the driver started up when, much to my horror I realized my mother and father had not yet embarked! I stood up and shouted out to the driver to stop as my parents were not on and everyone told me to sit down and not be so stupid as of course they were not coming.

From that moment on I just remember crying and crying and no one could pacify me. I know we eventually stopped and were taken into a large hall where we were sleeping the night on the floor and volunteers were requested to go up on stage to entertain us. One young girl sang "When I grow too old to dream" and to this day that particular song still brings tears to my eyes.

We sailed on the S.S. Oronsay which was a large vessel and I vaguely recall being in a cabin with 4 bunk beds with my sister who was 8 (two years older than me), one other older girl and a lady who seemed to be in charge of us. However, I was either crying or being seasick for most of the journey and don't remember eating anything at all. I know the 'lady' used to take me to the head of the companionway leading down to the 'mess' but as soon as I got there the smell of engine oil would set me off being sick again and she would have to take me back to the cabin! I must have been great fun to be with on that trip.

When we arrived on PEI we were taken to a farm (which I now know to be Mrs. Stewart's) for a certain amount of time in quarantine and prospective foster parents visited and got to know us. 'Uncle' Charlie Beer found me there and I adored him from the first moment I saw him. Luckily it turned out to be mutual and he visited regularly and the bond between us grew very quickly. I had red hair and he called me goldilocks, and he would leave me notes which always ended with (G.L., G.L., W.T.B.M.?) Translated this was Goldilocks, Goldilocks, wilt thou be mine? Coincidentally, he and his wife, Amber, had a daughter Betty so he always said we would be Goldilocks and the 3 Beers!

Eventually he asked if I would like to live with him and he brought 'Aunt' Amber to meet me; I still don't know how a 6 year old could be so devious but I waited until it was all officially settled before telling him that I had a sister and we were not to be separated! Naturally, Uncle Charlie being Uncle Charlie, agreed and we settled down to a very happy life. Incidentally, Uncle Charlie was the Chief Fire Officer in Charlottetown. Because I was so young, I don't know what happened next but something bad occurred to do with Uncle Charlie's parents and they had to leave their home and come to live with him. That meant that there was no room for my sister and I, and after a blissful seven months we were moved on. I don't know whether anyone can imagine how that felt - firstly, I thought I must have done something terrible in England for me mother and father to send me away, and then, when I thought I was being so good I was being sent away yet again! I decided I must be really, really wicked.

Luckily, we then went to live with the Fred Moore's, also in Charlottetown and he and his family ran Moore and MacLeod's store in the town. Uncle Fred and Aunt Della made us very welcome and I stayed there for the remainder of the war. However my sister didn't settle there and she moved out to the country for the rest of the duration, but by then I was quite happy to be on my own with the Moore's and Uncle Fred's father, who also lived with us.

I think it was about this time that I identified with and imagined myself as Anne of Green Gables. Well, I had the red hair and felt like an orphan. It started with Aunt Della giving me the book as a present and I was totally hooked. I was lucky enough to be able to visit most of the places mentioned in the book and I would regularly disappear into my 'Anne' world. I still would not part with my Anne books for anything and have encouraged my granddaughters to enjoy them too.

I went to West Kent School and had the most wonderful teacher, Mary MacLennan (Lea). She was my mentor and taught me so much, in fact I feel she made me mostly what I am today. She taught me for 3 years at

West Kent and I kept in touch with her right up until she died in January this year. I was lucky enough to be able to visit with her each time I returned to the Island and saw her for the last time at our big reunion in September 2001. I will be forever grateful to her for her affection and friendship as well as her teaching.

I had a wonderful life on PEI and still consider it to be my other home. I was lucky enough to make lots of very good friends, quite a few of which I am still in touch with. I have met up with some of them on the occasions that I have returned to PEI. The first time I returned there was in 1973 when Uncle Fred paid for me to have a holiday there and meet his second wife, Lorna (Aunt Della had died in 1959) and Lorna and I became very special friends and she later spent several holidays with us in England. Whenever I return to PEI I always stay with her daughter, Carolyn Estabrooks, who lives in Nova Scotia but still returns to the Island each summer.

Of course, after the war when we were told we were to be sent home immediately all the old fears came back. What had I done this time? I thought I had been so good. At the back of my mind was always the thought that if I behaved well and did all I was asked at school and at home I would be able to stay and yet here I was being told I had to go again. I remember Uncle Fred and Aunt Della driving me over and to Halifax and making it all sound very exciting but I had to leave most of my things behind - by bicycle (which I had only had a few months), doll's pram, etc, but I did get caught up in all the lovely presents and farewells I was getting from people. On the great day of sailing to England on the S.S. Scythia, Aunt Della did not come out of her room to say good bye to me, which confirmed what I had already thought - that I was being banished again for I knew not what. It was only in later years that I learnt that she was too upset and couldn't face the thought of me going. If only someone had told me that!

Sadly for my mother, I didn't recognize her when we arrived in England and one of the biggest shocks of my life was walking in through the front door on to uncarpeted floors, no running hot water, no car, a shared bedroom, no fridge, washing machine, radiators; let alone the rationing, bomb sites and more. The hardest part was not being able to tell anyone - I couldn't hurt my mother by saying anything and she was just so happy to have us back. I did feel sorry for my brother, though, as he didn't know us at all - he had been one year old when we left and now he was six and had been alone with my mother for most of that time as my father was still away in the army and didn't come back to England for another year after we returned.

I was put into a school which was below the level I was used to and some of the children couldn't read properly and I hated it, especially as it was a girls only school and I had always been used to co-ed in Canada. I had to stay there for 2 years but managed to get a part scholarship to a secretarial college when I was 13 and spend the last two years of my schooling there, thoroughly enjoying the shorthand and typing I learned there. I worked hard and did very well at the college, finishing up as Head Girl and getting a good job in London. Eventually Dad returned home and we had a happy family again, although PEI was always in my mind. Unfortunately I didn't have Dad long enough, he died suddenly in 1957 at the age of 52 - much too young. He lived long enough to be proud of my achievements at school and give me away at my wedding.

I married young, almost 20, and we have had 48 happy years so far. I have two sons, both married and both with a son and daughter each who we see a lot of, and since the aforesaid reunion last year I again met up with Malcolm Joyce, who lived near me in England and in Charlottetown and who was in my school class in PEI. He returned to Canada when he was 16 and we had no contact since then but have vowed to keep in touch from now on, having had a very emotional meeting which surprised us both!

When my children were young I remember thinking "How could my mother have sent us away? I don't think I could have done it." I did mention it to Mum once and she said that they had been told we would be gone for six months, if she had known then that it would be five years before she saw us again we would never have gone. So I tell myself that maybe I hadn't really done anything wrong at all....