

Robert J. Clapham
Home Child
Cedric
March 24, 1929

CANADA'S IMMIGRATION MUSEUM PIER 21



The Life Story of a Home
Boy By Robert J. Clapham



Herbert Fry, seen with his wife, Lorette, arrived in Canada from an English orphanage at the age of 14.
The Canadian Press

U.K. apology too late for Canada 'home children'

The Canadian Press
MONTREAL

They were called "home children" and about 100,000 of them, classed as orphans, were sent from England to Canada between 1867 and 1939.

But a British cabinet minister's admission this week that the policy was misguided came several decades too late for people like Herbert Fry of Stanbridge East, Que.

At age 14, Fry was sent from a Somerset orphanage to Canada, a land whose streets, he was told, were "paved with sheets of gold."

He arrived in 1924 and days later found himself on a pig farm in Quebec's Eastern Townships.

He spent the next seven years labouring daily for 25 cents a week, paid to him by the farm owners who provided him with a bed and three meals a day.

Forty years later, Fry found out he wasn't an orphan.

He was taken from his parents when they separated and placed in an orphanage.

He also learned he had three sisters.

Very bitter

"He was very bitter about that, about being taken from his parents," Fry's wife Lorette said in a telephone interview from Stanbridge East.

"He didn't come over by choice. . . . He doesn't know anything about his mother and his father," she said on behalf of her husband who is hard of hearing.

Britain sent about 160,000 children, some as young as five, to "white Commonwealth countries" including Canada, Australia and New Zealand under migration schemes between the 1850s and the 1960s.

On Monday, British Health Secretary Frank Dobson released a landmark statement, offering the government's sympathy "and my sincere regrets."

Britain has pledged to create a fund to help home children unable to visit their native country to meet with immediate family members. It has also promised to create a database to help chart the case histories of child migrants.

Mark Norton, who works in the British High Commission in Ottawa, said the original home-children policy aimed to help poor youngsters and orphans.

"Many of the children were destined for Victorian work-houses. The government believed it was giving them a new opportunity to lead a better life.

"But there are instances where this didn't happen at all."

Support network

David Lorente, who runs Home Children Canada, a support network, said the plan outlined by Dobson is primarily directed at Australians.

The last home children came to Canada before 1939 but Britain sent youngsters to Australia until 1967.

Lorente said most of the relatives in England of Canadian home children are dead.

"Canada was basically the first country that received home children. I'm not happy they left Canada out of it."

"People in Canada have lived all their lives not knowing anything about their families. People in Australia have only lived half their lives."

Lorente said two-thirds of the home children in Canada were abused — physically sexually, or mentally — by their mentors. He said many home children weren't orphans.

"There were too many kids on the streets in London, so they packed them up and shipped them out. It was the cheapest way to handle the political, economic and social problems."

I was born on Monday September 7, 1914 in a special "Home for Mothers", in a town called Clapham, which is South West London, in England. I was given the name of Clapham after the town.

At the tender age of six weeks, I was placed in a foster home in Lewisham, South East of London. My Godly Foster Mother took care of me and other children until she was called Home to her Lord and Savior, on a Sunday, January 31, 1926. I was with her for fourteen years. There were other children, besides myself, but I was with her the longest; except

another boy whose name was Kenneth Allen Alexander. A boy and girl lived with us for quite a long time. Then there were others, for shorter periods of time.

She was very good to us children and gave us lots of discipline, which I am very thankful for today, for as I look around I see lots of spoilt children. There was one drawback, it was that a few years before she past away, a married daughter came to live with her, for the daughter's husband had past away. This daughter had a great spite on us children

and was always scolding us for no good reason at all. She was like an old witch and I can tell you the reasons why. Our foster mother cared more about us than her own Grand Daughter.

When my Foster Mother passed away, they did not tell us kids, but we noticed the neighbours had their blinds drawn down, when we came home from church. She had passed away in hospital. We couldn't go to the funeral either.

After this, we knew for certain that us two boys had to be put into an orphanage, which did not make us too happy. Our Foster Aunt, the one who had come to live with us, kept scaring us by saying that if we did not behave ourselves, she would put us in a Home. She was still bitter that our Foster Mother had cared for us more than her Grand Daughter.

The other boy, Kenneth Allen Alexander and myself were very heart broken after losing our Foster Mother, for she had been very good to us. After her passing, we knew for sure where we were headed for. That was to go into an orphanage. The worse part, was us two boys were separated, for we went into different homes. Kenneth was the first to go. I was left for several weeks, until preparations were complete. I never saw that boy again after that.

On a Saturday afternoon, March 27, 1926, I was taken to this orphanage, which was in a place called, Bethnal Green, in North East London. I was homesick for weeks and you would have been too, if you had been in my shoes. The orphanage was founded in London, England, not too far from where the Salvation Army began. It was a poor part of London. The people were very, very poor. I will say this though we got a very good religious training in the home. It was a Methodist Home, called National Children's Home and Orphanage. Its founder was a Methodist Minister by the name of Rev. Dr. Thomas Bowman Stephenson. D.D.LL.D. He also started the Deaconess Movement in the Wesleyan Methodist Church. The women were called "Sisters" and wore a uniform, just like the women in the orphanage.

The "Sisters" in the home wore a badge, which was in the shape of a lifebuoy. Inside the Lifebuoy was a Bible on one side and a Dove on the other side. The wording on the Lifebuoy read "TO SEEK AND SAVE THAT WHICH WAS LOST". Meaning that we were lost as far as parents were concerned. We had a picture in our dormitory. It is a banner or a flag surrounded by a lifebuoy. The words on the lifebuoy read "TO SEEK AND TO SAVE THAT WHICH WAS LOST". On one side of the banner was a "Lamp" and on the other side was an open Bible.

We school boys had to learn a text, from the Bible every week. The text was three or four verses long and we had to say them from memory to the sister, every Friday at teatime, before we could go out and play. It got that some of us never had the text learnt, so what did the Sisters do? Well! We had to learn it and on the following Monday, at teatime, say it to her before we could go out and play. You know? One of the Sisters seemed to take a delight in giving us long verses to learn. Well! One Monday, a certain Sister gave us some extra long verses to learn. So I said to the boy beside me, "Don't you think we got enough to learn at school?" Well the Sister heard me and said, "What did you say?" So I had to repeat what I had said to the other boy. Then she said to me "You know what you can do after you have learnt the text?" I said "No sister." She said, "Instead of going out to play, you can go to bed."

Lo and behold! The head Matron came into the dormitory and asked me why I was in bed. I had to tell her, but she did not scold me like I thought she would. I thought she would be cross, but she was not and said to me, "Next time, keep your tongue in the side of your cheek."

I still missed my Foster Mother. I was very homesick. Day after day it lasted. It's an awful feeling to be homesick.

We were well looked after in the Home, I will say that for them. We had to go to Sunday School and Church twice every Sunday. There was only one thing missing and that was a parent's love and from what I can see, there are not too many children today, who are getting that love from their parents. I know as I was a Crossing Guard for almost nineteen years.

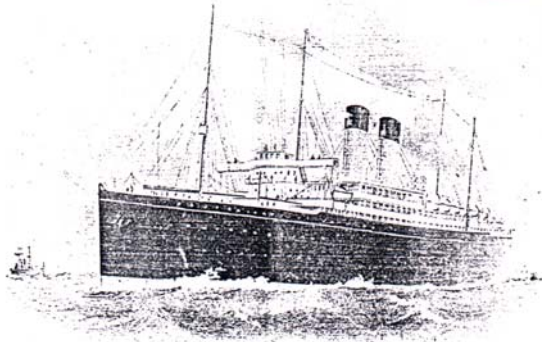
When I was living with my Foster Mother, I was brought up to go to Sunday School and Church twice on Sunday. I might just say that the year my Foster Mother passed away, I was awarded first prize for Diligent Attendance at Sunday School. I had gone 51 Sundays out of 52. Twice each Sunday. The Sunday that I missed, I was sick, so they gave me full marks.

In February, we were given the opportunity to go to Canada, to work on the farms as child labour. The idea of getting out of the home and a trip across the ocean on a big liner seemed to fascinate us. I will say this - that as I was walking down the gang plank, when we were coming off the ship, we were wishing that we were going back home, and to our amazement, that's exactly what we found out. To our despair we found out our mistake too late! I often think of the way that we were treated on some of the farms that we worked on.

We left England on Saturday, March 16, 1929 full of hope, but that was soon dispelled later on. We left Liverpool at 4 p.m. on the liner, RMS

SAILED FROM LIVERPOOL
ENGLAND MARCH 16TH
AT 4 PM 1929

White Star Line



On board SS "CEDRIC"

ARRIVED AT HALIFAX CAN
MARCH 24TH
1929

Cedric, a sister ship of the Celtic, which we saw on the rocks as we passed Ireland. We arrived in Halifax, Sunday morning March 24, 1929. After a very long delay in customs we boarded the train, bound for Hamilton, Ontario. The worse part of our journey was this - we never got a solid meal in all our journey, just sandwiches, here and there. We finally arrived on Tuesday morning like a hungry pack of wolves, and I'm not exaggerating one bit. I'm quite sure that the people that were bringing us over here got a solid meal and not just sandwiches, and they call themselves Christians, big deal! That's one of the reasons that we grew very

bitter at times and you would have felt the same way, I bet! We were just orphans, big deal! I call it baloney!

On Wednesday morning, the first day after we arrived in Hamilton, the farmers started to arrive at the Home to see about getting a boy to work for them. They took us into a big room and started to look us over. In the afternoon, one farmer interviewed me and thought that I would suit him. I was the first to go and to tell you the truth, I was not too happy to go. It was just like being at an auction sale, as if they were looking for a prize cow or a horse. You may laugh but it was no joke by any means. Just how would you have felt, if you thought that you were a slave, no less. Many nights I cried myself to sleep. It was a saddening experience leaving England, to go to a strange country, then having the farmer's children making fun of you; the imbeciles.

I was very homesick for a whole week. Many nights, I cried myself to sleep. It was a saddening experience, leaving England one week to go to a strange country without knowing a soul and to top it off, the farmer's children could do nothing but make fun of us. That, I will never forget as long as I live. Many of you have not the faintest idea what it was all about.

They say that life must go on, which is quite true, but it makes you wonder sometimes if it's worth it. Some people have the nerve to tell us not to worry about it, but just how would you feel with that kind of treatment.

I spent one whole year at the first farm that I went to, with the exception that in the summer I had to return to the "home" for a month as I had kidney trouble. There was a contract signed between the home official and the farmer. One night, when I was in bed, they came to take me back to the farm, which made me very upset, once more.

On Sundays, the farmer and his family would have company for dinner and as usual I had to eat in the kitchen by myself. Do you know? That one Sunday the minister came for supper. Three guesses where I ate that Sunday why of course I ate with them the first and last time that I ate in the dining room. Not that I worried, as long as I got fed.

When I went to work for this first farmer, I was supposed to get eight dollars per month. In the Fall, one night, when everybody was out I looked in his desk for some writing paper and an envelope, and what do you think that I found why a new contract! Lowering my wages to seven dollars per month. They kept it a secret. Do you wonder that I got bitter at times? You are tempted to say, "It was only a dollar." But listen: twelve times one makes twelve - am I right? I'm not that dumb, even if I was a home boy. Right! Don't you agree with me? Two years later I had the same trick played on me, by another farmer.

When my year was up with the first farmer, I went to work for a farmer at Nelson Village. I should say it was a woman that I was working for. On the Saturday, unbeknown to me, she went back to the home to tell them that I was no good. So on Monday morning, at the breakfast table she tells me to pack my trunk after breakfast, as she taking me back to the home, with no explanation whatever.

In the afternoon after lunchtime, another farmer came to the home looking for a boy to go and work for his wife, in the house. The girl she had was no good for in the afternoons, all she could do was powder her face, and not find any work to do.

This farmer had four children, and besides being a farmer, he was an electrician, installing the hydro in the farmers' barns and houses. So he needed a man to help him. Then he had to have another man to look after all the chickens. Then he had another man to look after the general farm work. Then there was me.

While I was working for this lady, I had to go to St. Joseph hospital for a week, as they found out that I was anemic.

I forgot to mention, that I just got five dollars per month [= approx. \$55 in 2002] and my board. In the spring, the man (from the home) said that I was not getting paid enough, so they took me away. Actually, I hated to leave for I was enjoying myself there with the young people.

My next job took me to a place named Rock Chapel, not too far from Hamilton, but this place turned out to be the worst place that I ever worked at. I was ill-treated, abused and ill fed. I just hated this place. I was very glad when my year was up.

My job in Copetown turned out to be the best place that I ever worked at, also my job at Mt. Hope was my last job.

At my job in Copetown, quite often I was asked to look after their children, whenever they went into the city. On Mondays, I had to help the farmer's wife with the washing machine, as they did not have an electric one.

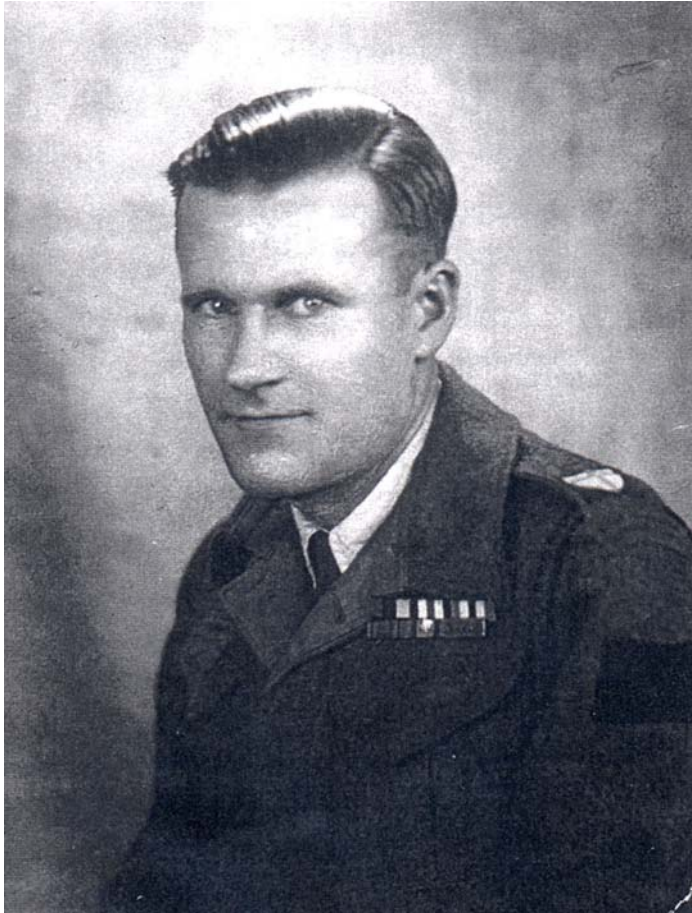
My next job was working for a mink rancher, raising minks for fur coats. He also had a pair of silver foxes, and a couple of nutria. I stayed with him for a couple of years. Then a friend of mine got me a job at the International Harvester Company, with a Christian foreman, helping to make farm machinery. It was hard work overtime but rewarding, as I was earning more money and my weekends were free, unless I had to work overtime on Saturdays. You see, they were doing war work at the time, that's where the overtime came in.

To end up my life, after retiring from The National Harvester Company, I worked as a School Traffic Officer, at a school crossing in Westdale, Hamilton. Due to two injuries on my left leg, I had to retire at the age of 80 years young. It is now 1997 and I am 83 years young.

Private Clapham R.J. B130522
5th Division. Royal Canadian Ordnance Corps.
Photo taken in Belgium March 1945



Officer Bob Clapham



By the KING'S Order the name of
Private Robert James Clapham,
Royal Canadian Ordnance Corps,
was published in the London Gazette on
28 June 1945
as mentioned in a Despatch for distinguished service.
I am charged to record
His Majesty's high appreciation.

A. J. G. G. G.

Secretary of State for War