

Birthe M. Harrigan
Danish Immigrant
United States
August 16, 1929



First Story:

I was 3 yrs of age when my mother, sister and I came to Canada to join my father, Johannes Nielsen, who had emigrated to Canada in 1928. We travelled by rail from Halifax through Montreal to Toronto, where my father met us at Union Station. We then travelled to Woodstock Ontario - our first home in Canada. We later moved to Ingersoll, then on to London, Ontario, where I attended school and received my education. On April 22, 1950, I married Wallace Charles Harrigan. We have two sons Paul and John and are now retired and living in Mississauga.

Second Story After Visiting the Museum in 1999:

In the late 1920's we were a young family living in Aarhus Denmark. My father due to difficult times suffered a financial setback and decided to make a fresh start in North America. His sister was already living in the New York area, however the USA had a restrictive quota on immigration so he decided to emigrate to Canada.

In the summer of 1928 he set sail for Canada and may have disembarked in Quebec. There with other young Danish men he boarded a train for the Prairie Provinces. He had always liked the outdoors and although without experience he had a desire to farm. He was successful in getting work on a farm near Lloydminster. His plan had been to earn sufficient monies to bring my mother, sister and I to Canada to join him within the year.

He soon realized that living on a farm in the prairies would not be to the liking of my mother, a city girl who had always lived in an urban setting, close to people with whom she could socialize. He left the west and moved to South Western Ontario and settled in Woodstock where he was able to get part time work.

He sent money home for boat passage tickets and as recorded my mother, sister and I (Ellen Margrethe Nielsen , Inge and Birthe) sailed from Copenhagen Denmark on board the S/S United States on August 7, 1929 and landed at Pier 21 in Halifax on August 16, 1929.

As I was three years of age and my sister Inge just two, we remember little of the boat trip or the arrival in Canada other than what my mother has told us over the years. It apparently was quite uneventful and we received quick clearance and were soon on our way by train to Montreal (our first stop on our way to meet my dad). In Montreal we were met by acquaintances from the Danish Lutheran Church and spent a couple of days before proceeding to Toronto to meet my father at Union Station.

The only thing that Mother told me about that meeting was that she was never so glad to see my Father, however to his disappointment my sister and I mistook him for his younger brother Erik. After meeting my father we boarded the train to Woodstock as a united family.

Life in Canada was not easy for immigrants without money in those days. My father went looking for work every morning and took whatever he could get. Just before our first Christmas a welcome snowfall provided work for my father assuring us of a Christmas that I remember to this day, with a small Christmas tree, home made ornaments, a good dinner and a box of gifts and clothing that arrived just in time from Denmark.

Those early days although tough were good times that built character in those early immigrants and the majority went on to be hard working contributors to what Canada is today.

I hope this isn't too long. I am sure my mother would have had many interesting stories she could have told of the days at sea and the arrival in Halifax.

Mother never felt really that Canada was her home until she returned with me to Denmark for the summer of 1948. After we were in Denmark for only a couple of weeks she said to me, "I can hardly wait to get home to Canada". I think that sums it up.

All the best to everyone at Pier 21. You have made it into a true Preservation of Memories for many Canadians.