

Don McKenna
Irish Immigrant
December 29, 1947

CANADA'S IMMIGRATION MUSEUM
PIER 21



ULSTER IMMIGRANTS

I'm Don McKenna.

I'm 26 and am a bridegroom of two months. But suppose I start at the beginning.

I was born in Greencastle, Belfast. My father was a civil servant - working in the General Post Office. We were a large family - seven boys and three girls. I'm the youngest - the seventh son of the seventh child - if that means anything! With such a large family, I found it necessary to leave school when I was fourteen and go to work.

I became apprenticed to a shoemaker and served my time for five years. When I was seventeen, I joined the National Fire Service on a part time basis - making and repairing shoes by day and serving with the N.F.S. at night.

After the war, I began to think about coming out to Canada. That was natural because two of my brothers, Liam and Jim, already were living in Canada and had invited me to join them on the other side of the Atlantic. Both were living in Toronto; Liam was in the export business and Jim was the manager of an Insulation firm. Well, after thinking it over for some weeks and after long discussions with my parents, I was on the verge of coming to Canada, when fate made it necessary to change my plans. My father and my brother Derry died the same year - that was in 1947. My mother became ill.

I wrote to my brothers in Canada for advice. They suggested that I come out to Canada and bring my mother and brother Bertie with me. This we decided to do, since my other brothers and sisters were all married and settled.

The three of us landed at Halifax on December 29th, 1948. I must say our first impression of Canada was not a particularly pleasant one. The weather was bitterly cold, the ground was covered with deep snow and an icy wind was blowing. Our teeth were chattering as we disembarked and made our way to the waiting train.

The train, which was warm and comfortable, seemed frightfully slow - but it probably only seemed slow as we were so anxious to reach

Toronto. The journey was a memorable one. I can still see the brilliantly lighted, gay Christmas trees in the gardens of the houses and farms we passed. The colourful decorations cheered us considerably and our spirits rose with each mile we left behind us. Two nights and a day passed and, finally, we rolled to a stop in Toronto's huge Union Station.

Porters were hurrying to and fro; everything was confusion and bustle. Then, suddenly, on the edge of the crowd down to meet the train I spotted my brothers Liam and Jim. It was wonderful. I guess we all shed a few tears; certainly we talked a lot - all at the same time: We had so much to tell them and they had so much to tell us. But the main thing was - we were all together - in Canada.

But that was nearly four years ago.

Today, Liam and his family still live in eastern Toronto, Jim in the western part of town and my Mother, myself and a certain young lady live happily together in a six-roomed house in the north end of Toronto.

The young lady is Mrs. Don McKenna who became my bride only two months ago and a very lovely girl she is. I think I'd better tell you a little more about her. I know you'll forgive me. I met Joan at a St. Patrick's Day party, last March, and, well, I suppose it was a case of 'love at first sight'. Anyway, we kept company regularly from then on and, this summer, we walked into a jewellery store and I casually told her to pick out a ring she liked. She looked dumbfounded but did as I requested. Not long afterward, we were married.

Now, my sister Dolly and her husband and three children - all from Belfast - have joined us, so we have a houseful of good Irish-Canadians. However, while we share the house, each family is completely independent as far as finances are concerned. What's more, we haven't yet had to battle over the kitchen. In fact, we get along wonderfully well together.

Joan and I have made many good friends here in Toronto but it's not too easy to make really intimate friends. In Belfast, I knew practically everyone in our locality. But here, one is lucky if he knows his next-door-neighbour. I don't mean that people are unfriendly by nature - they're not. It's simply that they're more reserved and take a bit of knowing. I happen to be on very good terms with the neighbours on either side of me and, while working in our gardens in the evenings, we often stop to gossip or give one another advice.

I like being a Canadian but there are a few things I miss. Most of all, I think I miss the ocean, the salt spray that hits the shores of Greencastle

and the sound of the waves. We're a thousand miles inland, here, and although our home is only four miles from Lake Ontario, fresh water is not the same as salt. Also I miss the gay dances I used to attend in the Plaza of Chichester Street and the carefree ways of a good Irish crowd. But one thing we do in Toronto which tends to remind us of my dancing days at home is held Sunday night dances in a big hall on Bathurst Street. At these dances, I've met a lot of fellows who've come to Canada from Belfast, County Tyrone and County Down. We have fine times together, we Irishmen and our Canadian wives and of course, each St. Patrick's Day, halls in Toronto are at a premium when we gather to 'drown the shamrock'. But here in Ontario, we have another leaf, the maple, and I'm finding it more attractive to me every day in the land I've claimed as my own, this great country of Canada.