

Mary C.
Pier 21 Volunteer
with the Sister of
Service



First of all I want to thank you for the lovely memories of Pier 21, the faces of those immigrants looking out the train window are the images exactly we saw so many hundreds of times as they headed for their destination. I used to wonder what their feelings were and most of them had little children, and almost all wanted to go to "Trono". When I worked there I was living with the Sisters of Service on the corner of Tobin and Barrington .. so it was just a short run to get to work .. I seemed to always be late and in those days we wore heels, so from time to time I would trip and would have to go to the doctor to get a bandage, they started calling me Calamity Jane. We had three doctors on the staff and two nurses as well as many Immigration officers, guards, cafeteria staff, and detention quarters, where they put illegals of those without correct identification. There were bars on the doors and many times they would rebel and refuse to eat,... and their trays would be slid in but untouched.

The sisters did most their work at the Pier, some had another language and there were also interpreters on out staff or called in from the city if our crowd could not understand the language. By the way the cost of staying at the Sisters was \$8.00 per wk. for room and board we had to be in by midnight so we soon learned which windows would open and do some climbing. One sister was on duty and if we heard her patrolling (mostly the beads clanging) would give us some time to act asleep, sometimes with our clothes still on. It was like that at St. F. X. when we went down to dances. The guys would meet us at the train station by they couldn't come back as we were leaving because they had to be in by midnight.

There must have been thousands came over after W.W.II, "the big one" and this would be around 1947 I remember particularly two smaller boats coming in and their clothes would be on a makeshift clothesline between spars. Often they would run out of food and water would take about a month or more to arrive in the New World! If my memory serves me.. the man who started the Graves pickle business in the Valley was one of those who came many were from Latvia, Estonia, and other countries that had been overrun by Hitler and later bombed by the Allies. You probably studied all this history,.. in the 90's I took a History of the

World course the instructors were from St. F. X. .. it seemed there were wars continuously through the centuries ever since man stood up on all two's and made a bow and arrow. I remember reading not too long ago that there were 60 odd wars at the time and a lot of them civil and had to do with sects and religious beliefs. So not much has changed I often wonder why the Muslims are so fanatic, praying five times a day and so full of hatred, it is likely a splinter group, more emotional than educated who go wacko like some Iranians did and others. Mohammed didn't arrive on the scene until the 6th century so we (Christians) got here first!

When we visited the Pier last year, it seemed so different without desks, brass-buttoned guys, we had a very large filing department, I believe there worked full time there. At first I was in the steno pool and dictaphones were new.. later I graduated to be secretary to the Asst. Superintendent, Jeff Christie. Our window was right on the harbor and the ships from most countries in Europe (this was after the displaced folk) docked beside our office, most people traveled by ship then Customs were the first on board confiscating what they shouldn't have brought in, mostly fancy liquor bottles, which I often wondered who drank!! or they were poured in to the brink.

Getting back to the D.P.s, I remember the babies all had pierced ears and the mothers would nurse them for the world to see; the Red Cross met all these people as soon as they were "processed" and looked after temporary lodging and all of them had to be seen by the medical team. One of the docs was from Johannesburg and we became good friends, I remember he had those tiny eyeglasses that are popular now but he left S. Africa because they were performing abortions, things have changed drastically. This letter is getting anecdotal, I remember Stephen King saying one night on TV that that in not a bad thing except for the reader.

Mrs. Goldbloom deserves so much credit for preserving Pier 21, it would be interesting to know how many did come through. Joe used to say "we each have a history" and there was a time when I didn't consider it important but I guess it was around high school (having had an excellent teacher I got to love it.) You probably read about the 30's Depression and weak-kneed Chamberlain meeting with Hitler and though H. had already overrun parts of some countries, he said "there will be peace for our time" on his return to England. One positive thing about the War was that jobs became plentiful and many went into the Army, some who were never out of their hometown and they thought it would be exciting to see the world and have employment.

The train station was real busy those days, mostly taking the D.P.s to their destination. I guess I was young enough then that I didn't get into the nitty gritty of it all and our office looked after personnel and mostly in touch with Ottawa. I will send a picture Motley Crew of our bowling crowd having a wing ding at the Lord Nelson. Christie is the bald guy in middle of photo and me, I'm the one sitting on the left front row with my new velvet dress that I had made!

We had to go through the CN station to get to work, then out to where the trains were and there was a door that opened to a long ramp which we walked thru to get to our office.

It was an exciting, busy time but I guess in looking back that I realize the important role Canada played by accepting these unfortunate folks and in many cases providing them with land for those who wished to farm. We had a farm settlement dept. I am sure they contributed to our country in many ways.

If I think of anything else about that period I will drop you a line it's been a long time though I have great memories of working there.

Sincerely,

Mary C.

P.S.- Sometimes a passenger would behave strange enroute and was considered mentally unsound so they were taken immediately to the N.S. Hospital in Dartmouth and we would arrange a Board of Inquiry I went once with an Immigration Officer to take dictation and it was a lady about 40 who had an unusual way to have a baby in her cabin. So after all were asleep she would go into the nursery and take a baby back to her quarters. There is a medical term for this and in her case and many where they were denied landing station.