

Betty Vine nee
Downes
English War Bride
Mauretania
April 6, 1946

CANADA'S IMMIGRATION MUSEUM
PIER 21



Editor's Note: The following memoir is based on an interview that was conducted by Elinor Maher and Beverly MacLellan for the Colchester Historical Society Museum & Archives as part of the museums Year of the War Bride research and exhibit of 2006. The Pier 21 Society would like to thank Ms. Maher, Ms. MacLellan and the war brides that contributed to this collection by sharing their experiences and impressions of the war years and their early days in Canada.

Name: Betty (nee Downes) Vine

Parents: Amelia & Robert Joseph Downes (Robert Downes was in the original Royal Flying Corps.)

Home: Coventry, Midlands

Birth date: December 18, 1923

War time memories:

Betty joined the Women's Auxiliary Air Force in 1940, at 17. She was at home in Coventry on leave when the Cathedral, near her home, was destroyed by bombs. Her aunt was in an air raid shelter in the crypt under the Cathedral when the church was destroyed by the Germans. They were trapped in the crypt until someone from the outside released them some time later. Betty's aunt later commented she didn't need to worry about going to hell as she'd already been there.

Betty also recalls the rationing and line ups people had to contend with in order to buy groceries. "I used to go Friday at 8 a.m. and line up until

noon for sausages. Then by the time I got to the head of the line they were usually sold out."

What was the attitude to Canadian service men in your community?

Betty and other war brides remember the Canadians were poor dancers. They seemed to hop instead of dancing properly. The uniforms worn by the Canadian servicemen seemed to fit better than the British uniforms.

Mrs. Downes found it difficult to understand Cecil because of his accent and the fact he was soft spoken.

Husband: F. Cecil (Frederick) Vine, born and lived in Port Morien, Cape Breton, until his family moved to Truro for him to attend the NSAC. His father was killed in a coal mine explosion before the war. Cecil left his studies to join the Canadian army and served with the Royal Service Corps.

After the war Cecil was a Settlement Supervisor with the Veterans Land Act. He was killed on Mount Thom in a car accident in November 1962.

How did you meet your husband?

Betty was stationed at #1 Fighter Station Tangmere, Chichester. A friend of hers was dating a Canadian and she met Cecil on a blind date to go to the movie Fantasia.

Wedding date: August 7, 1942

Wedding memories:

When a Canadian wanted to marry an Englishwoman during the war he had to get the approval of his commanding officer.

Betty's wedding dress was borrowed from a girl she knew in the Air Force. This girl came from a very well-to-do family. The dress had belonged to her sister and had been made by Hartnells, dressmakers to Elizabeth, the Queen Mother. British brides carried silver horseshoes in their bouquets for good luck.

What was your family's reaction to the news you were marrying a Canadian?

When Cecil asked her father's permission to marry Betty, Mr. Downe said to Cecil "Of course you'll live in England after you're married."

One of Betty's aunts said "You'll be back home in 6 months."

How did you come to Canada?

Betty could have come to Canada right after she and Cecil were married, as some women did, but she said "I saw the start of this war and I'm staying until the end of it. I would never have left."

Cecil had returned to Canada in September 1945. Betty had passage, with her son John, on the Cunard Liner Mauretania II which brought war brides over on specially designated trips from 1946 to 1948. "The food on the ship was fantastic, we ate like fools. I think I was the only one who didn't get seasick.

All of the children got seasick." Betty recalls they were all billeted according to rank. The officer's wives together, the sergeants' families together, etc. On her ship all but two of the nearly 2,000 women were destined for the western part of Canada.



What was the date you arrived in Canada?

April 6, 1946

What are your memories of arrival in Canada?

"I was very glad to get off that blooming ship, I was the first one off." Cecil was at Pier 21 to meet her. Like many war brides our trains seemed much larger and very different from those in England.

Many women were in for a huge shock in their new homes. One big-city English girl was met at the railroad station by a horse and buggy.

Children?

Son John was 18 months old when they came to Canada, born in 1944, another son Robert was born in 1950. Today Betty has two grandsons, one from each son.

What were your first impressions of Canada?

Betty recalls things were freer and friendlier in Canada. The I.O.D.E. got the brides together and with the help of Rev. Thompson, the local Anglican minister, about 30 of the women began the British Wives Club.

"My family was fairly easygoing so it was quite a shock when my mother-in-law greeted me with, 'I suppose you smoke.' Luckily I didn't. Then, on my first Sunday, I turned on the radio and she charged into the room and switched it off, saying, 'The radio is never to be played in this house on a Sunday.' I wondered what I'd got myself into."

There were many new things to get used to. Most British brides came from cities and had never seen rural mailboxes. They thought they were bird feeders.

Some faced very difficult situations. Betty recalls, "I'd been in Canada about a month when I went to visit a friend, also from Coventry, whose husband was working on a farm in Kentville. She was living in a house with a pump for water and a wood cookstove, no bathroom and the toilet at the end of the garden. She wasn't enjoying farm life at all. We were standing by the window when her husband went by, driving a horse and cart, dressed in his work clothes. The tears poured down her face and she said, 'Oh, my God, and he looked so handsome in his uniform!' She wound up back in England." And her husband moved back with her.

Where did you live when you first arrived in Canada?

Cecil arrived first almost a year prior to Betty and after her arrival they shared an apartment on King St with his widowed mother and sister. After two months the young family moved to their own apartment but shared a bathroom with another family upstairs. In 1947 they were one of the first families to settle on Granville Drive in Onslow, which was developed by the Veterans' Land Act.

What are the differences in your memories of Christmas, at home and when you first came to Canada?

Betty remembers evergreen Christmas trees were expensive in Britain. "I'd never seen a six-foot tree in a normal home before coming to Canada." She went home for Christmas with her family after her husband's death in 1962, with her two sons. With the help of the boys

they smuggled in a four-foot tree so her family could enjoy a Nova Scotian Christmas tree.

Did you have trips home? Did your family come to Canada to visit?

Betty's first trip back to England was for John's 6th birthday in 1950.

Betty's parents made many trips to Canada and her mother loved it here. Betty recalls when her father was here in 1951 he went to buy a case of beer and was horrified that in order to do so he had to buy a \$2.00 Liquor License.

Betty hasn't been back to visit since 1983 as she has been busy travelling to other parts of the world on vacation.

Did you or your children have difficulties obtaining Canadian Citizenship?

Betty clearly remembers being told War Brides and their children who were born in Britain would become Canadian citizens by an Act of Parliament. Betty had a Canadian passport for many years but in fact was not a Canadian citizen. This was straightened up easily in 2005. Her son John was born in England but came to Canada as an 18 month old and, of course, he had a Canadian father. John travelled the world for 30 years with the navy but didn't need a passport because he was in the military. When he went to get a passport he discovered he wasn't a citizen. His situation was straightened out easily.

Looking back: As she gets older Betty sometimes regrets the move to Canada. Although she only had one sister her parents came from big extended families and they often got together for family celebrations. Now her friends here are dying, her children and grandchildren don't live nearby and she finds it lonely.

