

Kathleen Caldwell  
English War Bride  
Mauretania  
January 6, 1945



Canadian Museum of  
Immigration at Pier 21  
Musée canadien de  
l'immigration du Quai 21

Coming to Canada

This is not only my tale of coming to Canada, but also that of my sister-in-law, Joyce, who sadly passed away ten years ago.

I was living in Bayswater, London in 1939 and met my husband the year following. We were married in April, 1941. My daughter, Pat, was born in September 1942 and was present with me at the wedding of my husband's brother Joyce in Bexleyheath, Kent, her home, in 1943.

In late 1943, I moved to Woking, Surrey, as my husband was stationed close by at that time and my son, John, was born in September, 1944. The next day, Joyce gave birth to a daughter, Gillian. Joyce and I visited one another frequently and became very good friends.

When it became apparent that the war was coming to an end and that transportation would be delayed with the re-patriation of the armed forces, plus their dependents, Joyce and I were included among a small group of civilians permitted to leave at very short notice and attending a prior meeting which was mainly to warn us of danger and discomfort which lay ahead. In fact, we were told we would be "the bloodiest-minded lot of women 'ere the trip was over." Joyce and I were not discouraged. We should have been!

A frigid, cold Christmas 1944, and with it came our marching orders - all very hush-hush. I was to present myself and my two children with a maximum of 40 pounds of baggage to a Military Policeman at Waterloo Station on December 29th in the early afternoon. Fortunately, my husband was able to accompany us as I had a small trunk, John, age six months, in his carrycot, a bag with or necessary clothes and 2 1/2 year-old Pat, all of which would be very hard to manage alone..

Upon contacting the M.P. at Waterloo, we were directed to a bus where other women and children, including Joyce and Jill also got aboard and we set off through a thick fog - a real London pea-souper - led by a man carrying a flashlight to illuminate the road in the black-out to a hostel. At this point my husband had to make his goodbyes and return to camp. It was 18 months before I saw him again.

It's hard now to remember how many of us were assembled there but I can't imagine there were more than 50 or 60 women with their children, mostly babies, and we were to be the only civilians amongst hundreds of armed forces personnel on this particular voyage.

After refreshments and attending to our children, we again boarded a bus. By now it was dark and we were taken to the station, then by train to Liverpool. We sat on the train until morning. We were then directed to the dock where we saw the enormous S.S. Mauretania, our home for the next eight days.

Finally aboard, we found our quarters. Joyce and I were with two other girls and there babies in a four, double-bunked cabin with bathroom. All together: four women, four babies and Pat (the 2 1/2 year old). The portholes were closed and blacked out and the only fan, an open one with unprotected blades, was above my head in the upper berth. Fortunately, it stopped working the first night as I went to sleep with visions of being scalped if I sat up.

Our first meal aboard was fabulous: all the wonderful food we hadn't seen in years and we tucked right in. I think it was a welcome buffet. Actually, it is the only meal I remember as I was sea-sick for the rest of the journey.

Pat was very upset with all these changes in her routine and too young to understand so spent a lot of time screaming until finally falling asleep exhausted.

We went to bed that first night still berthed at the dock and woke up, already underway in the Irish Channel, all four adults horribly sea-sick. We ignored the early summons to lifeboat stations and were amazed when, with a sharp knock, our cabin door was thrown open and a delegation of ship's officers appeared demanding to know why we were not up on deck. Even the suggestion that we could have been torpedoed didn't stir us; at that point, we'd have welcomed it! However, we had strict orders to report for drills in future.

The days at sea were spent tending to our children, trying to keep clean (no Pampers then) with seawater soap. With different meal sittings, there was always at least one of us in the cabin to watch the babies. I was sea-sick the entire time but had to take Pat to the dining room for meals. And, we had the inevitable lifeboat drills which meant dashing up to the designated port or starboard deck with John in his carrying cot two life preservers, Pat, and my bag containing vital papers. As soon as I staggered out of the cabin door, one of the men charged by would grab Pat, she screaming with fright. I could always find her when I got to the appropriate deck. I can still hear the sound of those hundreds of heavy boots thundering along the corridors.

One day when we were on the deck for drill, the sun was shining and it was so warm, we all stayed there much longer than usual. Seems we had zig-zagged across the Atlantic and were just off the Azores. Next day, there were icicles hanging from the rails.

If my memory serves me, we reached Halifax Harbour on January 6, 1945. New Year's had passed unnoticed - there was no socializing during the voyage except when we were

all assembled on the decks. In fact, we could see endless rows of hammocks slung in probably what had been lounges and ballrooms in gentler times. However, as we stayed on board over night, there were more than a few celebrations, I'm sure.

In retrospect, when one thinks of the thousands of armed forces personnel those great Cunard liners carried safely back and forth across the Atlantic during the war, it seems an incredible feat. Fortunately they were never part of the convoys.

The next morning we disembarked and made our way through those long sheds at Pier 21 which remain so vividly in mind over the years, through Customs and Immigration to the waiting train. Joyce and I, with some others, went all the way to Vancouver, while many left for new homes from various stations as we wended our way across this vast snow-covered land. The train was so hot and dirty, we got off whenever it stopped and walked along the platform, without our coats, to cool off.

Trying to keep clean and wash diapers were very difficult with only a tiny wash basin, so it was wonderful help when some Red Cross ladies came with all the necessary equipment at a long stop (in Alberta I think) and bathed the babies for the first time in days, poor dears.

Arriving in Vancouver January 12th, we stayed overnight on the train and were surprised to find ourselves being interviewed by the press when alighted at the station. We were then taken to the lovely CPR boat in the harbour, complete with stateroom (a chance to spruce up) and across the Strait of Georgia to the beautiful, clean Victoria Harbour. What a sight the "Welcome to Victoria" - we'd arrived!

Our in-laws were there to meet us and drive us out to our first abode in Canada, a small summer cabin at Prospect Lake, about 20 miles out of Victoria. I could write a book about our experiences there - our pioneering days, as Joyce and I laughingly called them. Two townies with our two six-month-old babies and Pat. No running water; barrels to catch the rain and about a hundred yards across the road and down the path to the lake to bring it up by the pail. An outdoor privy in the woods along a slug-covered trail and - the bane of our lives - a wood and coal stove. Joyce and I just stared with wonder at what seemed like a wall of stacked wood outside, thinking there was enough kindling to last forever. We had only seen coal burned in fireplaces in England and there wasn't much of that available during the war. The only wood we had seen was six inch sticks in a tiny bundle which was used very frugally to start the fire with lots of newspaper 'donuts'.

The stove was, fortunately, already lit for us and our in-laws had provided us with some basic food supplies so our first attempt at cooking was boiling eggs which, after ages, never did boil but were hard anyway. As well as the stack of wood there was some coal for keeping the stove going overnight, as we eventually learned, our only heat except for an open fireplace in the living room. Our first effort in tending the stove was to fill it up with coal.. red hot in no time! We nearly burned the place down.

Neither one of us knew much about cooking and we had many disasters but we survived. We had absolutely no conception of the density of the bush around us and it's a miracle that Pat wasn't lost or drowned in the lake.

When the weather warmed up we enjoyed swimming in the lake. We took our soap and bathed there, too. It was also easier to take the laundry and rinse it in the lake to save hauling water. It may have been primitive but people were kind and welcoming and, no food shortage, black-out, blitz, V-1 or V-2's. Another world and we were adapting.

Eventually our husbands returned and we settled into normal lives. The years, so many, have passed and those little ones we brought all that way under such trying conditions are now parents and grandparents themselves.

My daughter, Pat, her husband, and I recently visited Nova Scotia and the wonderful Pier 21 Museum. It brought back many memories and our names are forever enshrined with those of the other immigrants on the Wall of Honour. It is a fine memorial to all we newcomers who came through the Port of Halifax and are now very proud to be Canadian citizens.

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December 9, 1999