

Janet (Jenny) Matheson
McGill
Scottish War Bride
Britannic
April 1945



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

Janet (Jenny) Matheson McGill married George Richard Zarn March 21, 1944

Wartime Marriage in Scotland

George's ship the Prince Robert had a re-fit in the Clyde in 1943, where he met Jenny. Glasgow in war-time years was bursting at the seams with every nationality under the sun, Czechs, Poles, Russian sailors, Dutch Norwegians everything that was able to get out of Europe. The used to say that it was a wonder the British Isles didn't sink with the



sheer numbers based there. People in Canada used to wonder why so many British girls married overseas guys – simply really- all the local fellows we would ordinarily wed were away defending Egypt, North Africa, India, Burma and so on while we on the home front were getting bombed to bits!!!

Perhaps it would not be out of place to describe a war-time wedding. Jenny had been a Civil Servant (Income Tax, Etc.) since she was 16 and unlike all her pals, was not conscripted at 21 for Army, Navy Air Force or farm work but her job was regarded as useful at home, same as factory work. On the 18th March (Saturday) when she

reached the office, George was there sitting on the steps just got in on the early train from Plymouth on English Channel, armed with permission from his ship's Captain to get married. He had leave till Thursday. He thought all he had to do besides getting a license was pick

up another sailor from nearest pub to act as best man. Not so--notifying all Jenny's hordes of relatives, see the minister, arrange for a reception, borrow clothes coupons from various aunties to buy something in which to get married & so on & so on. First thing she had to go up to the office and resign, as in those times a woman permanent Civil Servant has to resign on marriage (of course she just returned to the job on Thursday, same job, but now a War Time Temporary). License was obtained, clothes bought with the coupons, a place found for a reception and word passed to all the friends and relatives (no private telephones then) on Saturday. Sunday saw the minister. In Church of Scotland the Banns are required to be called during the morning service three consecutive Sundays. Well once was all that could be done, so the minister fulfilled the other two Bann calls by standing out on Church steps, and called to all who could hear and world in general that a marriage had been proposed and any objections to the forthcoming now etc. etc. Jenny's Dad worried himself sick on Monday hunting up enough booze, which was scarce in the pubs, to offer the guests. Finally got married on Tuesday, went to Edinburgh for honeymoon, visited the Zoo from which all dangerous animals had been removed for safety from bombing, George returned Thursday to Plymouth – really never saw the best man he had picked up ever again, just a name on marriage certificate.

My War-Bride's Trip to Canada

Janet (McGill) Zarn

When I left Scotland in early 1945 the war was still on so I crossed the Atlantic in convoy under the general war-time secrecy. We had been married almost a year when my telegram arrived "Prepare to leave within two weeks". Only then was I permitted to leave my job and dash around to say goodbye to all the clan. A little over a week later instructions came advising me to catch the 10am going south from Glasgow Central Station on March 23, 1945-this was the Liverpool train so I assumed I'd be leaving from there. I suppose I was a bit surprised to see the platform at the station jammed with people, war-brides, their children, mothers, grandmothers, all the families they were leaving behind goodness knows I had enough myself seeing me off. We could never have visualized the eight hour aircraft travel of the future. It just seemed like we were leaving home for ever and going to the ends of the earth. When the time came many didn't want to go, were afraid of what lay ahead and buckets of tears were shed at that station I'm sure we had crossed the Scottish border before they dried up. Our ages ranged mostly between 18 and 25, some have been married for several years and had two or three children. My Mum's last words to me were "Remember, the door will always be open".

On arrival at Liverpool that evening we were taken to a Red Cross hostel and forbidden to go outside. All night long groups kept arriving from other UK points, in the morning we went to the docks in buses, through Customs and aboard the two passenger liners waiting for us. I don't know the name of the other one but I was put on the Britannic, a Cunarder converted to a troopship. It was two full days before we went out to sea, we lay at anchor in the middle of the Mersey between Liverpool and Birkenhead. I believe there were around 900 of us on the Britannic, likely the same on the other ship and we had also many soldiers and airmen being repatriated home to Canada. We girls with no children slept 12 to a cabin in bunks on D deck, those with babies in better accommodation on upper decks. Servicemen's quarters were still lower down in the ship and rumored POW's we were supposed to be carrying, well if true I don't know where they were. The army were our waiters at table and did we ever eat, hadn't had such good food for years, a lots of it!

During the night we heard anchors weighed and by morning light saw we were out in the Irish Sea in the middle of a convoy. Those of us from around the Clyde were quite familiar with the underwater boom across the Firth from Cloch Lighthouse to Cowal, Argyll and had seen the freighters file out through the gap between the guard ships for the open sea but beyond that knew nothing except that the navy took over for protection from the subs, based on the French and Norwegian coats. It was a wondrous sight you could never forget it, all those ships surrounding us in their designated positions traveling in a huge group across the face of the ocean. On a clear day we could count 80 or so vessels, the two passenger ships and as far as we could guess the rest were freighters and tankers, and dimly in the distance you could catch a glimpse of the naval escort. Though separated by a considerable distance we could wave each morning to the crews of the merchantmen, our port and starboard neighbors. We moved south along the Irish coast but after Fastnet it seemed our last link with home had gone for ever, even the gulls finally abandoned us!

On board in daylight hours women, children and servicemen could all mix freely, in fact one girl had her husband aboard and could visit with him during the day until lights out. Blackout was enforced after dark and we were not allowed out on deck; our "boss" was an army man and he was strict, woe betide you if he found that you were not carrying your gasmask, you'd be sent back to your cabin for it, actually no hardship as we'd been doing that for years! Lifeboat drill took place every morning around 9:30 though one morning the alarm did go off at 5:30 and was a bit frightening as we could hear shell-fire; probably a U-boat was around, we'll never know. In a convoy you have no idea where you are in the ocean but we must have traveled south a long way as it turned very

warm but we hit very heavy swells and there was a lot of sea-sickness. With only the minimum of medical help aboard we had more or less to take care of ourselves, the children didn't seem to be affected as much as their mothers so it was pretty hard on them but you do recover fast. The crossing took about 8 days then one morning we woke to find the rest of the convoy all gone, just the two passenger ships traveling up the Nova Scotia coast. I suppose the rest went south to New York or maybe to Newfoundland. That morning we sailed into Halifax.

We were all lined up like army divisions and separated according to which trains we were to catch to whatever destination across Canada we were bound for. Two or three of us whose husbands were in Halifax in the Navy were taken off by the Red Cross; I stayed there two days until George got leave to accompany me to Calgary. I liked Nova Scotia, reminded me of home all hills and sea. I made a glutton of myself eating eggs, bacon and banana splits and Montreal was like fairyland, all lit up after the years of living in a blackout. In fact, for the whole trip across the country you could almost forget there was still a war on-but that's another story, all the adjustments and mistakes that had to be corrected before one could "fit in".

Two incidents about the twelve girls in my cabin come to mind. Cathie Pullen, who left Glasgow with me, was met on her arrival in Fort William with the sad news that her husband had been killed in Europe while we were crossing the Atlantic. Possibly she returned to Scotland after war's end, I don't know. Another girl, either May Carver bound for Lunenburg, NS or Edith Julseth going to Girvan, Sask., I can't remember which, spent an unfortunate journey without her hand baggage. We were allowed in our cabins enough for a change of clothes plus the usual things girls' need and our trunks we never saw again till journey's end. Somehow our friend got separated from this hand baggage and after several days it was found that for some strange reason it had been put on the other passenger ship and there was no way to get it till Halifax. We all had to chip in and help her out with something to wear while she rinsed out her clothes - there was hardly enough room to wash out a hankie - also curlers, shampoos and so on. It was all rather fun and we used shake our fists at the bow of the other liner sailing behind us on the voyage.

Dad met Mom in Halifax and they stopped in Manitoba at his family's farm then came on to Calgary, Alberta. Rode the train south to Nanton where they borrowed a car and drove 20 miles west into the foothills where Dad had left his store when joining the Navy. The neighbors were a Stoney Indian Camp below the store on the banks of Willow Creek and the only white woman lived 4 miles south. What a change from the city of Glasgow!!!! A daughter and son were born while living there. A few

years later we moved to High River where we lived most of our lives. Mom returned to Scotland in 1952, 1970 & joined a War Brides trip late 70's early 80's to Europe and Great Britain, and made another trip back late 1980's. Dad wrote "Prairie Boys Afloat", stories about Navy life, which was published in 1979. Dad passed away in 1983 and Mom in 1992.