

Beryl Affleck
English War Bride
Queen Mary
August of 1946



The Queen Mary called in Halifax as a troop ship in August 1946, bringing war brides and children to their new homes in Canada. I was part of a small group of husbands and wives travelling together, mostly Canadian officers who had been serving with British Armed Forces. We had little advance notice of our sailing and arrived in Portsmouth after a hectic trip from my home in Chester on the North Whales Border, and were on our way a few hours later. I didn't go back home again for fourteen years.

My Husband, Hugh, who was in the Royal Navy had the idea that if I kept moving in the fresh air I wouldn't get seasick and though it seemed to me at the time that I walked most of the way across the Atlantic, I definitely did not get seasick.

On our Morning hikes around the upper deck we met two elderly gentlemen also taking their constitutional walk. They wore long dark overcoats and black Hamburg hats, which were politely lifted to us every time we passed each other. It was a couple of days before we found out that it was the Prime Minister of Canada, Mr. Mackenzie King, and his Finance Minister, returning from a meeting with Winston Churchill in London.

We docked in Halifax late at night, and by 2:00 p.m. we were going ashore in the pouring rain, heading for the train to continue our journey. As Hugh and I were heading down the gangway we saw the huge nets hauling baggage out of the hold to be loaded on trains and we watched in horror as one load swung against the side of the dock. We recognized a large sea chest belonging to us, that we had packed with a great care a few days earlier. It split open and silverware, china, books and pictures, all our precious memories dropped into the dark, oily waters of the Halifax Harbour!

I couldn't believe what was happening to me, and I hadn't even set foot on Canadian soils yet! All my mother's dire warning about this wild new country rushed into my mind, but there was no time to reconsider; the train was already sounding its whistle and we had to get on board. Before, I knew it we were on our way to Toronto and a whole new life, with just what we carried in our hands. Looking back, I can see we were no worse off than most of the early immigrants to Canada arriving with

just what they could carry, but at the time, it was devastating. I didn't sleep much, and looking through the window as the daylight came, I saw endless stretches of dark trees and rushing rivers but no towns or people.

But when we came into Quebec, little villages clustered around the tall white churches were very reassuring. We tried to phone Hugh's family from Montreal but there was no reply, so it was back on the train again towards Toronto.

Around suppertime we walked into Union Station, where I was overwhelmed by the high vaulted ceilings, the shiny floors and the big, clean windows, so different to the wartime-stations back home. Again, we phoned with no answer, so we took a taxi out to the beaches. The family had moved in the six years that Hugh had been overseas, so he was as lost as I was. We hadn't realised until then that it was the Labour Day weekend and the folks were returning from the cottage after the summer.

So what did we do? Well, we broke in through the milk box, opened the back door and went in. I remember the hushed quiet of the house, the drawn curtains and the smell of wax. We were so tired at this point that we ate some cheese and crackers and fell asleep on the big couch in the living room. Several hours later, we were awakened by Hugh's parents and a large collie dog, whose wet tongue on my face was a lovely welcome. They hadn't expected us so soon and here we were, a son returning after so many years and an unknown daughter-in-law. What a night that was! We talked until the wee small hours and then settled into a comfortable bed for the first time in almost two weeks.

Eventually, life settled down and we began to make a home of our own up on the third floor of the family home. Soon the winter came and my introduction to winter boots, toques and snuggies. How I laughed at the idea of putting them on and off, but I soon found the value of them when the temperature dropped. I loved the snow, and the dog and I went for long walks every day. In those days, folks thought it was strange that I would just go for a walk but we had never had a car at home, and walking was the only way to get around.

Soon after Christmas began to fill my mind. Letters from my mom and dad every week were my lifeline and I was determined to make that Christmas a special one for my family. Everyone seemed to have so much in Canada, and though they spoke of rations and shortages, they had no idea what the words really meant. I packed box after box with food and treats including lots of tea and sugar for my Mum and cheese and tobacco for my Dad, toys and clothes for my young brother who had only known wartime Christmases.

When Christmas eve came, I went to Church with a happy heart, knowing that back in Chester, it was going to be a truly merry Christmas at last. Next morning it was snowing again and down in the living room was a huge tree covered with lights and decorations and underneath, piles of gifts all wrapped in bright paper. We had only given small gifts to each other back at home and I was overwhelmed by all the gifts. There were clothes, things for the flat, chocolates and even gifts for the baby due in the spring. Hugh's dad acted as Santa Claus, handling out parcels to each in turn, and I went from tears to laughter, and back again all day long. Dinner was a feast, including my first taste of cranberry sauce! At each place was a small red candle in a brass candlestick, and as the meal began, the candles were lit. We watched them through the meal and the person whose candle lasted the longest was assured of long and happy life, I was told.

What a wonderful day it was, and in the evening we walked in the moonlight and snow down to Lake Ontario. As we walked, the tree lights were shining through many windows and to me it was a fairyland after all the years of bombs, and blackouts, and sadness. It was no wonder I knew right then that Canada was going to be a wonderful place to bring up our family, and every year at Christmas time I remember how the love and acceptance I found here made my first Canadian Christmas so very special.