

I REMEMBER:

*An English WWII child
evacuee to Canada*



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*To all the families that opened their homes and their hearts
to the evacuee children during WWII*

WAR DECLARED

ON THE DAY WAR WAS DECLARED, I was still an only child, not quite 8 years of age living in England. It was a Sunday and on that morning the church bells had rung out calling the people to church where they had prayed fervently for a miracle that there would be “Peace in our time”. But now there was an air of sombre expectancy as we gathered silently around the wireless awaiting the dreaded announcement. Old heads bowed close to the wireless as they listened and remembered the first Great War with all the tragedy and hardship it had caused.

Meanwhile, outside on that bright September day, the sun shone from a clear blue sky between the rows of tall dark chimneys that stood like sentinels atop the slate grey rooftops. Indoors around the wireless the atmosphere was tense. Then the voice of doom announced: “We are at war with Germany”. The silence was broken by the sound of a gasp, a sob, the intake of a breath. Then a hubbub, everyone talking as they all headed out into the street to join their neighbours gathered out in the street voicing their concerns and opinions. Above all the cacophony of voices a siren started its undulating wail. All eyes looked up to the sky. No Messerschmidt, no Heinkels. Thank God! – just a flock of pigeons whirling around. The siren continued to wail.

I remember the gas masks that we had to practice wearing at school. We had been taught always to have our gas masks with us. I ran back indoors and up the stair, snatching the gas masks from my parents room, then grabbing mine from my bedpost. I attempted to put it on while running downstairs. The mask smelled horrid of rubber. In my panic, I had put it on the wrong way so I couldn't see. Tumble! Tumble! Tumble! down the stairs still clutching gas masks for my parents. Stumbling out into the street someone gathered me up. It was my grandfather.

Still holding me, my granddad removed the awkward gas mask from my face. I was surprised to see old Mrs. Lane sitting nonchalantly on her front doorstep, cup in hand calmly drinking tea, her old dog Gyp sitting beside her. The ALL CLEAR siren sounds, then all is quiet. Grandad spoke gently to me. "Stop trembling lass, it was just a siren practice, you didn't know. You did the right thing." Comforted by my granddad, I felt vindicated.

Soon after, we were alerted night after night by the sound of sirens, running out to the air-raid shelters in pitch dark of the blackout since no light must be seen. The shelters were dug under the old garbage hill. The only light was a candle in a perforated soup tin. The sounds of bomb blasts and anti-aircraft fire traumatized me.

My grandmother, a well respected member of our neighbourhood, would lead us in prayer and in singing – "O God our Help in Ages Past". Nanna urged us to sing LOUDER! I sang my heart out at the top of my voice, thinking it was so God could hear us from underground and all the noise above. (I realized years later, it was to drown out the sounds of the raid above us.) This was a regular scenario as the raids went relentlessly on.

Huge barrage balloons were sent up to surround and protect the iron and steel works of our town. They looked like huge grey elephants in the sky. They were anchored to the ground by steel cables and set high enough so German bombers would have to fly high enough to go over them and in so doing, miss their target, or if they flew too low, get caught in the steel cables. My mother and I once saw lightning strike the steel cable and explode the balloon. We referred to the Barrage Balloons as BIG BERTHA.



My grandad. Back row, 6th from the left.

I had my 8th birthday December, 1939. By spring 1940 there was talk of an invasion of the U.K. by Germany. All of the children were gathered at the school and we boarded buses to take us to safety inland, away from the target areas. I was taken in by an elderly couple in the countryside of Kirby Moorside; it was such a new and exciting experience. There were sheep in the field behind a stone wall I liked watching. Daisies and buttercups grew in abundance along the roadside and water gushed forth from a spring close by. The government also started a scheme to evacuate children between the ages of 5–15 to Commonwealth countries. My parents decided that I should go to Canada as our town was a prime target for bombers or an invasion, just 8 miles inland from the North Sea Coast at Redcar. My dad came and brought me from Kirby Moorside to prepare for my evacuation to Canada. I was sad to leave the cottage in the country and the kind couple.

I started on my big adventure in July, 1940. My mother and my grandparents took me to the railway station where many other children were assembled; some younger than me, most with their mothers, fathers already

away in the army. We all wore luggage tag labels as if we were just a bunch of luggage. Mine read, C.O.R.B. #75 – Children's Overseas Reception Board. (It is still our trade mark whenever evacuees gather for reunions.) Mine had my name and my uncle's name with no exact address – just CLIVE, ALBERTA.

My father was medically unfit for the army. He was assigned to classified work in a secret location and forbidden to leave the site or reveal the location. We boarded the trains with hugs and kisses. As the train started to move, I saw my father. He had left his "secret" work, and sneaked out to the railway station to say goodbye to me, his only child off to Canada. He did not know how long it would be before he would see me again or what awaited me on my journey by ship across the dangerous U-boat infested Atlantic Ocean or even what my life would be like in Alberta.

My daddy ran alongside the train blowing kisses as the train gathered speed and he could no longer keep up. At that point, I could no longer see him for the tears in my eyes as we children all waved and waved at nothingness.

I was 8 ½ years old. I will never forget, as long as I live, the trauma of that parting. I still weep thinking about it.

The birds were still singing. The sun still shone. The church bells were silenced until the day they would ring out in jubilation.

LEAVING FOR CANADA

AFTER LEAVING MIDDLESBOURGH on the train we came to Liverpool where the ships were docked. We children stayed in what seemed like a dormitory – beds all in one long room. My mother had packed me a lunch “for my journey”. I had eaten sparingly as I thought the sandwiches and little cheese portions were to last me for my journey to Canada. We were sent out to play on the first day in a green space. There were other children there as well. I think they were from an orphanage. I let a little girl hold my white doll while I held my black doll (Topsy). The little girl was called indoors and my doll went also, never for me to see again. When we came in doors I was heartbroken and upset to find that my saved sandwiches and cheese portions had been discarded. I cried and cried at the loss of my doll and then my “lunch for the journey”. (By the way, I still have Topsy. She is over 75 years old!)

Next morning, we went by bus to where our ship the “Anselm” was. As we went up the gangplank our gas masks we still carried, were taken from us. I, as well as a few others put up a futile fight to try and keep our precious gas masks. On the ship, I had to share a cabin with 3 girls who were sisters. I was bullied by them but being outnumbered, I decided to

“grin and bear it”. The sailors were kind to us. Our escort was Miss Craven, she said, “Like Craven A cigarettes!”

We all had life preservers and practised wearing them. We were instructed never to throw anything overboard because a German U-boat might see it and follow us. Just past Ireland, some U-boats did follow us and attacked our convoy. We all had to stand on deck with our life preservers on awaiting orders. It was terrifying. Noise and explosion were all around us. It was so cold standing there in the dark amidst all the sight and sounds of war at sea. Then it went quiet. We went back to our bunks but were told to still wear our life preservers. It is impossible to rest with that bulky thing on over top of our clothes. The lead boat of our convoy and some escort boats had been torpedoed and sunk. The convoy had scattered, but the ANSELM went on, full steam ahead and alone.

Some of the children were sea sick. Not me! When day light came there was nothing but sea and sky and a few puffs of smoke on the horizon. As the days wore on, one by one of what was left of our convoy rejoined us. Someone said they saw land and we all went on deck. Sure enough there was land in the distance. CANADA!

We finally arrived at Pier 21 in Halifax. The people gathered at the dock; they waved and cheered. We waved and cheered back. Mounties kept the people back as we came ashore. I understood it was in case a spy would get us to talk about things in England. We stayed at the school for the deaf in Halifax while we were “processed”, ie, sorted out, health checks etc. I remember well noticing that the grass in Canada was a different shade of green than in England. I was most pleasantly surprised to see the familiar Kellogg’s corn flakes at breakfast.

Some of the children were taken home by kind people in Halifax. The rest of us were put on what were called Immigrant trains and set off across Canada. Whenever the train stopped, people came and gave us candy, cookies, biscuits, with the RCMP still guarding us and handing over what the people offered. Lots of waving and blowing kisses went on.

I remember that there was a black man on the train. I had never seen a black man before except in a book! I thought his name was Mr. Porter and

"Hello, Edmonton! We're Here at Last"



Jean Hadfield, 8, and Robert Keith Melvor, 7, stop for a moment on the steps of a C.N.R. train from the east, and smile for a JOURNAL cameraman who was among those who welcomed them from England yesterday. They have come thousands of miles to escape the threat of bombing which hangs over their homes in England. They've scuffed the toes of their shoes in their long journey, and Robert carried "On the Boat with Bob and Nancy." Robert will stay with his uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. E. L. Mills of Edmonton; Jean is going to the home of a relative, George Armstrong, at Clive.

EDMONTON JOURNAL AUG. 1940

he was kind and helpful. I showed him my black doll Topsy, and he smiled. I also met a nice lady on the train. I had written a post card to my parents to say that I was safe in Canada, but did not know how to send it to them. The lady mailed it for me and wrote a note to my mother, telling her that she had seen me and I was well. My mother and this caring lady ended up becoming firm pen pals, and kept in contact for many years after the war.

At each stop our group became less and less as children were taken home by good people. I had an address luggage tag pinned on my coat with the name of my mother's ½ brother in Alberta. My mother had never met him as he had left for Canada before she was born. By the time we got to Edmonton, only 6 were left who were going to B.C., myself and a boy 7 years old named Keith McIvor were the only two leaving the train at Edmonton.

Keith and I clung to each other when his aunt and uncle met him at the train. My uncle had not been located yet as my mother only had his name and Clive, Alberta. Keith's aunt said she wanted to keep me as well. I spent 2 lovely days there. I thought I was in paradise. They were kind, the home was spacious and all the neighbours visited us. Then word came that my Uncle George had been located. I spoke to him on the phone. He asked me a few family things, he said of me to child welfare worker, "That lass is one of ours, she must come to us."

Good bye Keith! Good bye Edmonton and the kind family.

ARRIVING IN ALBERTA

AFTER ANOTHER TRAIN JOURNEY I was met at Lacombe Station by my Uncle George, his wife Aunt Mary, and their daughter Mary Ellen. Mary Ellen was 10 and I was seriously surprised to see she had on LIPSTICK! I was introduced to some of the locals and taken for lunch in Fong's Cafe. Mr. Fong gave me a box of Cracker Jack and there was a ring inside the box. I had never seen a Chinese person before, nor had I had Cracker Jack. I was thrilled with the "ring" and put it on my finger. I felt close to Uncle George whom I had never met before because whenever he spoke it was with the familiar accent of home in England. He sounded just like my maternal grandfather that I rarely saw. It made me feel at home. We drove 11 miles to the farm that was to be my home for almost 5 years. It was late July when I arrived.

It was a shock to me, an only child from town, to suddenly find myself on a rural farm. The house was made of wood. There was no electricity. We had only coal oil lamps, no running water or sewer, no toilet facilities except an outdoor dugout arrangement in the bushes. I was no longer an only child as I now had 9 cousins. They became my "brothers and sisters". They nick named me "little Jean" because one of them was also named Jean;

she was older at 16 and bigger than me. She became known as "big Jean". There was no sign of a church or chapel to be seen by the farm in Alberta. In fact, nothing much to be seen of anything except trees, fields and buildings and lots of farm creatures.

The farm was 5 miles from Clive, the small town where we delivered grain to the elevator and where we picked up the mail. The grain was taken there by a horse drawn wagon and mail picked up at the same time. If some important mail was anticipated or there was no grain to be delivered, then a trip to Clive was made on horseback by one of the older boys. The main town of Lacombe was approximately 11 miles away where there was a hospital, a hotel and all the usual amenities found in small towns.

I often heard the men and older boys call out "Jesus Christ!" or "God Almighty!" or even an angry sounding "God damn!" I thought maybe that was how they prayed to God or asked God to curse someone or thing. I shared a bed with two older cousins and I didn't see anyone kneel and pray at bed time, so I didn't want to be different. Perhaps they said their prayers silently in bed. I climbed into the bed like the others; I was glad to be between the two and felt safe from the strange little sounds that came from the straw mattress at our slightest move. I lay very still and said my prayers in silence.

That first night, I needed to go to the toilet, which was a wooden shack in the bushes over a deep hole in the earth. I was always nervous that I might fall through the hole in the seat into the pit below. The urgency of my need overcame my fear of going out in the darkness to the outhouse, so I slipped quietly out of bed. I cautiously felt my way down the ladder then out into onto the porch and into bright moonlight. Sounds of loud barks and howls pierced the still night. The farm dogs sleeping under the porch came out and answered the howls with howls of their own. Terrified, I thought there must be wolves in the bushes near the outhouse and made a hasty retreat into the house and up the ladder. Perhaps I could wait until morning. I wriggled myself into bed between the sleeping girls and lay trembling.

Finally, I fell asleep dreaming of wolves and monsters until I was rudely awakened by my cousins complaining loudly that I had "Wet the bed!"

LACOMBE GLOBE 15-8-1940

English Girl Makes New Friends at Clive

A trifle shy but quite happy, Jean Hadfield, aged eight, Lacombe district's first evacuee child, arrived recently from England after stopping for a short stay in Edmonton while enroute. She is now residing with her aunt and uncle, Mr. and Mrs. George Armstrong, in Clive, and has made several trips to Lacombe and through the surrounding district to enable her to become acquainted. She was somewhat disappointed in noting that the Indians in Lacombe had no feathers, such as those she seen at the "cinema" in England, and hopes that this will be forgotten when she sees her first "Moun-tie."

She is the only child of Mr. and Mrs. W. O. Hadfield of North Ormsby, Middlesborough, in Yorkshire. Her father is a member of the Local Defence Volunteers, whose duties include keeping an eagle-eye open for German parachutists, according to the little English girl.

First Evacuee Arrives in District

The Lacombe Globe, Thursday, August 15, 1940

How humiliating. What shame. The mattress cover of sewn together flour bags had to be emptied of the wet straw, then washed and hung out to dry, a visible reminder of my shame as it flapped in the breeze. The mattress was stuffed again with fresh clean straw when it was dry, in time for our bed that night. I was given a big old tomato can to be kept beside the bed

for use if needed in the night. It was explained to me that my wolves were actually coyotes and although they sounded near, they were far away from our out house. Over the years however, I often saw coyotes out in the bush.

In all the time I was there on the farm in Alberta, I never once had any gesture of affection. No hugs or kisses as I was used to from my mother, father and grandparents; I missed that very much. I was never abused in any way; I was just equal to the rest of the kids. I did my share of "chores", gathering eggs, peeling potatoes, shucking corn, bringing water in from the well or filling the wood box. Our fun was ice skating on the slough, picking berries, saskatoons, or pin cherries for Ma to make jam or jelly, climbing trees to reach Magpie nests and taking the eggs. We got 1 cent each for blown Magpie eggs taken to town.

I started school in grade 4. Mary Ellen was jealous because she was older than me and also was in grade 4. She would hide my mitts or destroy my homework. Once she pushed me off the horse only to be angrier when I was picked up by one of the neighbour boys who she liked. We rode by her with me behind him holding on around his waist. I'm sure I had a smug look on my face. Ha! Ha! Mary Ellen!!

MY FIRST WINTER

I HAD NEVER EXPERIENCED SUCH COLD, nor as much snow in my 9 years of age as that on the farm in Alberta. Even the woolen sweaters I had brought with me from England, lovingly knitted by Nanna didn't keep out the cold weather. I was soon outfitted into one-piece, long legged underwear (which I hated). Local service clubs, I.O.D.E (Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire), Foresters, Lions, as well as the local community all contributed to my well-being. I soon had all that I needed for my new life, snow suit, mitts, winter boots, and a leather helmet with warm lining and flaps to keep my ears warm. Much to my delight, I was also given a pair of bob-skates. They had been hanging for years in the barn. They were old and rusty, with two sets of runners on each, now polished and sharpened, they fitted exactly. Now I would begin skating lessons on the frozen slough in the pasture.

The day arrived. Several big potatoes were put in the oven right after breakfast. I couldn't imagine what for, but by now I have learned not to ask so many questions, just wait and observe. In the afternoon the potatoes were cooked hot. They were put into each of the skate boots. My bob-skates have no boot, just a strap to fasten to my winter boots. That's not fair! But my winter boots get stuffed with hot potatoes and they go into

the sack with all the other skates. After some scurrying around, a big old pair of boots was found for me to wear for the ride out to the slough. The boots are snug with 2 pairs of thick boys socks inside. At last we set off on the horses.

There are already some skaters on our slough by the time we arrived. They had no slough on their property, and they had already cleared the snow off and banked it around the edges. Big old dead trees are laid around the edges and used as benches to sit and put our skates on. As we approached our horses whinnied to those already tethered there. Soon we dismounted and tied our horses nearby. Greeting exchanged, we sat on the tree trunk benches. The sack of skates was opened and the potatoes taken out of the skate boots and put into our winter boots as we exchange boots for skates. Now I understand. The skates were cozy and warm from the potatoes! Our boots with potatoes were returned to the sack while everyone enjoyed skating.

One of the neighbour boys showed me how to fasten the bob-skates onto my boots, then helped me onto the ice. He held me from behind slowing moving me along while I nervously shuffled my feet forward inch by inch. Everyone else was swirling and twirling and carefully avoiding us. The dogs joined in the fun too, skittering, barking and sliding amongst the skaters. My skates only go in one direction. I didn't think I liked skating. Everyone else seemed to enjoy it, but then I skate forward, perhaps 3 or 4 feet. To my utter amazement, I realized I am no longer being held up. I skated! I skated all by myself! Then victory became disaster as my feet shot forward and I sat down with a jolt on the ice.

Willing hands came and picked me up. A little shocked, but nothing more hurt than my dignity. I was guided back to the tree trunk bench and helped off with my bob skates and back into the big old boots, now cosy and warm from the potatoes. The potatoes are all removed from the boots, broken open and the warm flesh eaten hungrily, sans salt, sans butter, before heading back to our horses and the ride home.

After several more episodes like this, I received a beautiful pair of skates with white leather boots attached. They were sent to me by a lady I



had met on the train from Halifax. She had written down my address of my home in England and told my parents that she had met me. From then on, she had kept in contact with my parent and I and surprised me with the wonderful gift of skates. I soon became quite proficient at skating in my precious new skates. Whenever we went skating on the slough, the hot potatoes kept our skates and boots warm and cozy, then provided a warm snack before heading home.



JEAN HATFIELD FELISKIAK was only 8 years old in 1940, when she was caught in the throes of the Second World War in Middlesbrough, England. At the time it was thought best for children between the ages of 5-15 to leave England and find safety in the Commonwealth countries of the Empire, thus began the exodus of 3,000 Child Evacuees. Without parents, in a group of 80 evacuee children, Jean was sent across the Atlantic to live on a small isolated farm in rural Alberta with relatives she had never met. From a single child, living the genteel city life, Jean was thrown into the Canadian West with a family of 9 children, coyotes, guns and Old Beauty the school horse.

I Remember is a story of a child profoundly changed by war, the prairies and the Canadian spirit.

MEMOIR \$12 CDN



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