

Second World War tore families apart, but created new ones in Canada



DAVID BLY
HERITAGE

The bleak prairie of southwest Saskatchewan is a long way from the green meadows of England, in more ways than distance.

One day in 1945, the homesickness became more than Kay Robertson could bear, so she bundled her infant son, David, into the old baby carriage, and went for a walk.

"I walked around a whole section (one square mile)," she said. "I cried for the first couple of miles, then I sniffled for a couple of miles, and by the time I got back, I was OK."

She was newly arrived from England, where she had met and married Robby Robertson, a Canadian soldier from Saskatchewan.

Her story is the story of the war bride, and it has become part of Canada's cultural heritage. More than 48,000 women who married Canadians serving abroad, along with 22,000 children, came to Canada as part of what Pierre Berton called "one of the great and unheralded mass movements in recent history."

Some came from France, Holland and other countries, but more than 90 per cent came from the British Isles where the Canadians started going as early as 1939 to train and prepare to fight the German army that was stomping its way across Europe.

Each war bride's story is unique, but they are all connected by many common threads.

"Some of those threads are the isolation and the fact that they were never really prepared for the country they were coming to," said Beverly Tosh, a Calgary artist who has assembled a mixed-media exhibition based on war brides' stories and portraits.

Her involvement started in 2001 when she painted a portrait of her war bride mother who had just turned 80. It was a huge painting, 225 centimetres wide and 170 centimetres high, and it ended up on the front page of a newspaper in New Zealand where she had gone to teach art.

"When the story came out, so many war brides contacted me, I couldn't keep up," Tosh said. They wanted to tell their stories, and she was a willing listener.

When she returned to Calgary, she continued to collect stories, and began working on a series of portraits painted on rough plywood boards that lend an amazing depth and texture to the paintings.

The artworks, now totalling 60, and some 600 smaller images made from old photographs, along with the recorded stories of the war brides, form the exhibition Tosh has called One-Way Passage.

It has shown in Calgary and Kelowna, and will be shown across the country, including at Pier 21 in Halifax, where the war brides landed in Canada. In 2007, it will show for several months at the new Canadian War Museum in Ottawa.



Kay Robertson



War bride Doreen Kamis holds up a print of her wedding photo. Tim Fraser, Calgary Herald



Calgary artist Beverly Tosh has assembled an exhibition based on war brides' stories and portraits. David Bly, Calgary Herald



Muriel Aust

Tosh said she is surprised at the response to the exhibition — it started out as a very personal project. Her own mother spoke little about her experiences, and the stories helped her understand what her mother went through.

"My mother was a war bride from Saskatoon," she said. "We tend to think of those who came to Canada, but an estimated 4,000 left Canada."

Most of those who left — including Tosh's mother — had married airmen who had come to Canada as part of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. Her mother went to New Zealand in 1946, returning in 1957 with her two daughters when the marriage ended.

Tosh said she glimpsed some of what war brides endured when she left New Zealand for Canada. "I know the wrenching of leaving

your homeland," she said.

The moment of departure is one of the common elements in all war bride stories.

Muriel Anst said she was so busy preparing herself and two small children to come to Canada that she gave little thought to the leaving until she was actually on the ship.

"It was when the band played Will Ye No Come Back Again? that it hit me," said Anst, a member of the Calgary chapter of the Alberta War Brides Association.

"I thought, 'What am I doing, leaving my mother and my brother and my relatives?' I wanted to jump out and go back to my family.

"But I said, 'Well, my children can't swim, so hello Canada, here I come.'"

Hazel West of Taber recalls that same sad song.

"The telling moment was on board the ship," said West, who sailed from Britain in April 1946 to join her husband, Russell, in Raymond, Alta. "As the ship was pulling away from the dock, I had that strange feeling that the dock was moving away and I was standing still. We could see these people, and the band was playing sad songs ...

"I said to myself, 'What have I done? Hey, you're leaving your country, you're leaving your people.'

"Until that moment it had all been romance and happiness. We were so young and impulsive."

Edna McDonald, now of Calgary, said she felt the same way.

"As we were going past Land's End, we were all crying our eyes out," said McDonald. "We were saying, 'What have we done?' In those days, it wasn't a case of flying home if we didn't like it."

Kay Robertson said goodbye to her parents at the train station as she set out on the journey that would take her to Hazel, Sask. She was an only child, and she was leaving with her parents' first grandchild.

"My mom and dad were small people," said Robertson. "They looked smaller than ever standing there at the station as the train left."

Doreen Kamis, president of the Alberta War Brides Association and of the Calgary chapter, said war bride marriages were strong, despite the odds.

"A few went back to Britain," said Kamis, who came from England to the Nightingale district near Strathmore, "but the divorce rate in war brides is only four per cent. That's quite low."

Hazel West said war brides committed to their marriages because they had little choice.

"We had no money, and had no way to go home," she said. "If someone had given me a ticket in that first six months, I would have gone home.

"But you had to stay, because you had no choice, so you made those transitions. You had to get up each day and go through that day. You had to deal with the outside toilet whether you wanted to or not, and with that dreadful coal stove."

Hazel had had the beginnings of a stage career in London before she came to Canada.

"Suddenly you're in Raymond with a pair of ballet shoes, and what are you going to do with them?" she said.

"I gave them to a 14-year-old girl who was all starry-eyed at meeting someone from the big city, someone who had danced. I shoved them at her as she was going out the door ... because I knew I was never going to use

them. There was that terrible moment of giving something up, becoming something else."

But she has no regrets. Hazel said despite the challenges and the changes, life in Canada gave her more opportunities than she would have had in Britain.

She was able to go to university, she taught hundreds of young people drama, singing and dancing, and has always been active in her community.

"I have served on every board in this town: Museum, library, the Taber Players, I did them all," she said. "I know I could not have done these things in Britain because of class distinctions.

"I was able to teach language arts and my favourite thing, drama, and be exposed to these Canadian kids — they were a lesson in themselves.

"I have had the freedom to pursue all these lovely opportunities."

For Julia Everett, Canada is indisputably home. She met her husband, Doug, during an air raid, and gave birth to their second son during another air raid while her mother was off in search of the midwife.

In Canada, they had three more sons.

"Now I have 15 grandchildren and 15 great-grandchildren," she said. "We did our part to populate Canada."

Kamis said war bride associations began forming in the 1970s as the women finished raising their families.

Because many are widows now, the war brides look after each other.

"Because so many live alone, we try to keep the buddy system," she said.

She is also part of the effort to get 2006 recognized as the Year of the War Bride. Her organization has contacted Premier Ralph Klein, as well as mayors in the province.

"The mayor of Edmonton said the declaration will be made there in September when we have our reunion there," said Kamis.

Meanwhile, the war brides look out for each other, and get together regularly to reminisce about their experiences.

"Although we love Canada, there is still that bond to that country where we were born," Kamis said.

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David Bly, Calgary Herald

Some of Beverly Tosh's portraits of war brides, based on old photos, painted on rough plywood.

