

Beryl Feaver

BY JOHN MCCONKEY (BERYL'S SON)©

My mother, Beryl Jean Feaver, was born on 15 November 1918 in Cowes, Isle of Wight, England. A little over six years earlier and 5,700 kms away (as the crow flies) Robert James (Bob) McConkey was born in Cobalt, Ontario, Canada, on 12 October 1912. How did these two people ever manage to meet, marry, and raise a family? It wasn't that strange in 1942! In fact, such events were common for Canadian servicemen and British women during World War II. Four years later Beryl joined the contingent of 44,000 war brides who (together with their 21,000 children) made the long Atlantic crossing to meet up with their husbands in Canada at the end of the war.

Bob's family were originally residents of Montreal, Quebec, but due to the shortage of work Bob's father Jack decided to relocate the family to Cobalt, Ontario, in 1911 to take advantage of opportunities afforded by the Silver Rush. The family moved back to Montreal in 1915 and that was where Bob spent most of his early years.

In 1940 Canada was approached by the British Government for help in the manning of early warning radar stations located on its east and south coasts. Bob volunteered and joined the RCAF, which was to supply manpower for the effort. After an intensive radar course, he was shipped to England and posted to a radar station at Bembridge, Isle of Wight, in April 1942.

Meanwhile, Beryl and her sister Doris had moved with their family from Cowes to Sandown. The story goes that this was to put some distance between Alice, their mother, and her mother-in-law. The move was serendipitous for Beryl. Most of the Canadian radar technicians lived in billets in



**Robert McConkey and Beryl Feaver
on their wedding day**

Source, all photos: author



Bob McConkey and his RCAF buddies

mobile radar unit) the Allied troops into Sicily and then mainland Italy. I was born nine months later in August 1943. Bob would not return from Europe until March 1945. I have an early childhood memory of

Sandown, which was the closest town to the base. These young men often frequented local dance halls in their off time, as did the local girls.

So, Beryl and Bob met and apparently had a whirlwind romance, since they were married that same year, in November 1942. I can't imagine what feelings Alice and Alf (Beryl's parents) had, but in the wedding picture they seem to be happy with their new son-in-law. The haste to arrange the wedding may also have been due to Bob receiving a new posting. Bob and Beryl had a short honeymoon in Bournemouth and then Bob was whisked off to North Africa to follow (with his

a strange man appearing in the house. But he would not stay long, as he was sent back to Canada in late May to be demobilized.

At that point, Beryl had another big decision to make—whether to follow Bob to Canada or wait until he was able to return to the Isle of Wight. I'm sure it was a heart-wrenching time for her and her parents to consider her leaving. But emigration seemed to be the best choice—particularly since her fare would be paid by the war brides program.

I remember nothing of the trip but understand the crossing was rough and that many of the passengers were seasick. The ship was the SS *Letitia*—of the Donaldson Atlantic Line—used during the war as a hospital ship. It left from Liverpool on 17 April 1946, so Mum and I would have already undergone a lengthy ferry and train journey from the south to the north of England before embarking. The ship reached Halifax (Pier 20) on 25 April, and after immigration processing we were put on a train next day for the 26-hour trip to Montreal. This was one of many war bride trains that started from Halifax and dropped the new immigrants off at various cities en route to a final destination in the mid-west. The train arrived at Bonaventure (Central) Station in Montreal the next morning, and Bob was there to meet us. So was a reporter and a cameraman from the *Montreal Standard*, and we were surprised to see a photo of the three of us in the late Saturday edition.



Montreal Standard, 27 April 1946

Times were hard as the world recovered from the war—even in Canada, which was far away from the conflict. Money was short in the family. Beryl was either ineligible or unable to find work. Bob was taken on as night manager for a local hotel. Our living accommodation was the top floor apartment in the duplex my grandparents, Jack and Daisy, rented. The summer was hot and humid, which added to the discomfort.



Beryl and Bob with his family

Beryl appreciated the friendship of Edna, Bob's youngest sister, and Henry, Bob's youngest brother (pictured) who were about the same age as her. Getting along with her mother-in-law, however, was not so easy. They shared building facilities and so spent time together while Bob and his father were at work. Beryl probably also experienced culture shock adjusting to Canadian customs and unfamiliar ways of doing things. She started to feel homesick and then discovered a second child was on the way. If the summer was oppressively hot, she was totally unprepared for the cold of winter. The pregnancy was also taking a toll on her and she often felt unwell.

These worries and health issues became apparent to her mother in Sandown from the letters Beryl wrote. Alice decided it was time to take some drastic action. She wrote to Bob at his work address and related her concerns about her daughter. Using some strong wording she implored Bob to "bring her back." And so, yet another Atlantic crossing was planned. We sailed from Halifax—this time on RMS *Aquitania*, arriving at Southampton on 17 February 1947.

It was another seven years until Bob saw his parents again—and a further eight years before he returned to Canada to visit them. Jack and Daisy arrived in the UK by ship for a three-month stay in late 1954. My mother never disclosed how she felt about having her mother-in-law in the same house once again!

Bob and Beryl celebrated their 40th wedding anniversary in 1982 and enjoyed six grandchildren. Tragically, both were killed in a car accident on the Isle of Wight in February 1983.

Strangely enough, I returned to Canada with my new wife in 1971 and we decided to stay. The Atlantic crossing cycle is now complete.