

Elizabeth Alexander

BY MORNA PATERSON (ELIZABETH'S DAUGHTER)

My mother, Elizabeth (Elsie) McKenzie Alexander, was born on 20 June 1923 in Forres, which is located in the northeast of Scotland, about five miles from the North Sea between Inverness, Nairn and Elgin. Her father was an insurance agent, and her grandfather was a police inspector. Her mother, Annie Murie Alexander (née Colville), was a homemaker until the war began, when she took in airmen from the nearby RAF base at Kinloss. My father was probably one of them. Several of them kept in touch with her until her death.



Class 5, Air Gunner Course 31, 1942; Jim in centre back

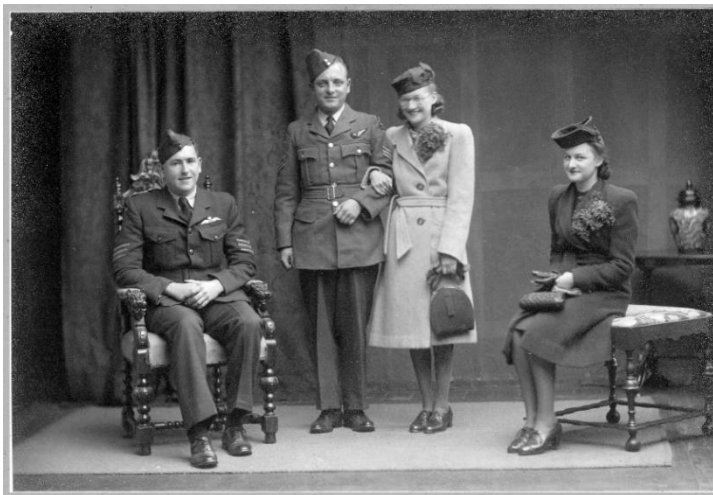
Source: all family photos: author

My grandparents had met at a hospital for the mentally ill near Aberdeen, where she was a nurse and he was an orderly. My grandmother's uncle emigrated to Nova Scotia and had a grandson who is now well known as Alex Colville, the Canadian artist. He and my mother bore a striking resemblance.

My mother attended Forres Academy and played the organ in church. She was turned down for war service because of her poor eyesight and worked in the local jewellers until her move to Canada.

The day war broke out, on 3 September 1939, my mother and her family were scheduled to leave for a holiday in Blackpool. Instead, they each had gold signet rings made with the date engraved on the inside. (I inherited the ring from my mother and sadly lost it many years later.) This date would prove to be very meaningful to both my mother and me.

My father, James Edward Paterson, grew up on a farm in central Manitoba near the tiny village of Edrans with three brothers and a sister, all of whom joined the war effort and served overseas. I am not sure when he enlisted, but I do have a photo of Class 5 of Air Gunner Course 31, taken in May 1942, with the names of the graduates, plus their hometowns and R numbers on the back. My father, a sergeant, was R106318. I must admit that at this point I do not know what the number represents; however, I do know that he was a tail gunner on Lancaster bombers with the RCAF out of Kinloss. A most dangerous job.



James Paterson and Elizabeth Alexander on their wedding day

I wish I had taken the time to have conversations with my mother about her life—but don't we all? I do recall a rather sad story related to their wedding day, 5 November 1942. Another member of the flying squad had taken my father's place on the mission that day and never returned.

My mother arrived at Pier 21 on a blacked-out troop ship in secret on 3 September 1943 and made her way by train across the country with a Swiss war bride called Clare who carried on to Vancouver—lucky her! On her arrival in Edrans, Manitoba, where my grandfather was the station master for the CPR line, he handed her a telegram telling her that her father had died. A sad start to her life in Canada. Edrans, located between Neepawa, Carberry and Brandon, did not even have a grain elevator. It did, however, have a brick-making plant, a filling station with a grocery store, a school, and a church.



Elsie and Jim in Edrans about 1943/44

The station house, besides not having any indoor plumbing, did not have electricity either. This must have come as quite a shock to my mother, who was from the grand town of Forres, with all the modern conveniences of the time. I believe my father was one of those Canadian soldiers who painted a rosier picture than was reality. However, it could have been worse, and my grandparents adored my mother. When my father returned to Canada, he too worked for the CPR, but in Brookdale, several train stops west of Edrans. Brookdale had two grain elevators, a grocery store, a cafe, a hardware store, a church and a two-storey, five-room school for grades 1 to 12, with a large gymnasium used for community functions such as dances and the annual Christmas concert. It also had a lumber yard, a garbage dump and of course, a curling rink!

I was born in Winnipeg on 3 September 1947 and spent the first 11 years of my life in a small house that also was without indoor plumbing. When I tell my friends this today, they find it hard to believe. Nor can those who grew up in a city imagine my mother living in a tiny four-room home with an earthen cellar in



Immigration Building, Pier 21

Source: Sheldon Revet

the middle of the Canadian Prairies, melting snow on top of the stove to do the laundry, bringing in frozen bed sheets from the clothesline in the middle of winter to drape over the clothes horse, or swatting big Manitoba mosquitoes in the summer and canning vegetables from our large garden in the fall. Obviously, life in Canada suited her in many ways, because she stayed.

Mom and I returned to Pier 21 many years later, on yet another 3 September, a lovely day with a bagpiper walking up and down the pier. The Pier 21 museum is a must for anyone interested in the stories of the courageous folk who set off for the New World. My mother was a member of the War Brides Association

and attended many of their annual conferences. She kept in close touch with several other war brides throughout her life. She died in Brandon, Manitoba, in 2008. Jim had died in January 1971 and is buried in Winnipeg's Brookside military cemetery.