

Florence Stephen

BY KATHY MCCONKEY (FLORENCE'S NIECE)©

Florence Mary McIntosh Stephen was born in Aberdeen, Scotland, on 14 March 1925, the second daughter of Edward Stephen and Annabella Fleming McIntosh. They were an ordinary family, in an ordinary part of the town. Edward Stephen had served as a Gordon Highlander in the First World War but died young in 1937 (possibly from complications of injuries sustained during the war). There were four siblings and a cousin being cared for by Annabella, who also had to work to support the family.



Florence with siblings Agnes (front) and Isobel (rear) plus her Aunt Evie (in red) and Cousin Betty (right)

Source, all photos: author

When war broke out, Florence's oldest sibling was 17 and the youngest was 3 years old. The older children worked and helped take care of the younger ones. The family was bombed out of their home during one of the worst air raids on Aberdeen, on 21 April 1943; 98 people were killed that day. My parents had to take shelter behind a wall on their way home from the cinema to escape German planes strafing the area, and one of my aunts remembered being pulled into someone's home off the street and out of direct harm's way.

Bernard John (Jack) Rathwell was born on 19 August 1918 in Weyburn, Saskatchewan, Canada. His father, a farmer, was Samuel John Rathwell, whose father was a native of Wexford, Ireland. Jack's mother was Sarah Mary Brown, who died when he was 3 years old. Sarah was born in either England or Ireland, depending on which census is correct. Jack

and his older sibling, Jessie, were brought up in the Owen Sound area of Ontario by his paternal Uncle Joseph and his wife. In the 1921 Census Joseph was also a farmer. Samuel remarried in 1930.



Jack (centre) and army buddies

When Jack joined the Canadian Army, he was a carpenter (from his marriage record). The unit he served in was the 11th Field Company of the Royal Canadian Engineers.

I have not been able to determine exactly what Jack did in Scotland, or where he was located. He possibly worked in a forestry capacity, in the northeast. I also have no idea how he met Florence, but they married on 25 September 1943 in St. Andrews Cathedral, Aberdeen. On the marriage certificate he is named as Bernard John Rathwell, a carpenter from Owen



Shadow box with Jack's medals, presented to the Tara, Ontario, Legion on his death

Sound, Ontario, Canada, and a Sapper in the Royal Canadian Engineers, now engaged in the war service. His best man was Lloyd Eidt, also from Ontario. I believe Jack served overseas, from the medals in the shadow box that his family presented to the Tara, Ontario, Legion. Their son John was born in Aberdeen almost exactly a year after the wedding. The marriage and John's birth were both announced in the local newspaper.

I have been able to trace Florence's journey to Canada, leaving Southampton on RMS *Aquitania* on 25 April 1946 and disembarking in Halifax on 1 May in the evening. Her eventual destination was her husband's parents' farm at RR1 Chatsworth, Grey County, Ontario. Florence would have had to travel first from Aberdeen, by train, to one of the Canadian Wives' Bureau offices, and then on to Southampton. Quite a journey with a two-and-a-half-year-old boy!

Florence's life in Canada was not easy, but she was happy. The couple had two more sons, but the youngest tragically drowned as a toddler in a pond where they lived in Tara. Florence worked most of her life, starting on the farm, and at one point even as a cook on a Great Lakes vessel. Jack worked on the railroad until he reached a happy retirement, during which he enjoyed his most favourite pastime, fishing. Jack's oldest son, a grandson and a great-grandson all served in the military. Both surviving sons also served as prison officers, have families, and still live in the Guelph-Kitchener area.



Florence and Jack at their home in Tara



Florence (third from right) with mother and siblings

where other family members had settled, and there were many happy get-togethers. Also, in 1991, Florence, with one of her sons and his wife, made it to Aberdeen for my parents' golden wedding anniversary. There they enjoyed meeting up with relatives that they had not seen in a long time, and many happy memories were formed. Shortly after her own golden wedding anniversary, Florence died (after an extended illness) in Guelph in October 1993. Jack died in July 2001.