

Renée Evans

BY YVONNE POWELL (RENÉE'S DAUGHTER)

On 27 May 1944, all military leave in wartime England was suddenly cancelled. That day, Lorne Snell, a lance corporal with the 100th Battery of the 3rd Light AA Division of the Canadian Army, was the only man in uniform not confined to base. He had a wedding to attend. Nothing was going to deter him, even if it meant going all the way to his Colonel for permission—which he did! He was marrying his English bride, Renée Evans.

Renée and Lorne had met at a New Year's Eve house party in Coulsdon a scant four months before. Renée was a librarian in charge of the Coulsdon Branch Library. Lorne's unit was being housed in Coulsdon at the time. Since arriving in the South of England in January 1942, he had served as a gun-fitter and a dispatch rider (riding a Harley). Lorne was constantly taking courses to improve his skills. Soon after they met, he passed yet another trade test and was moved to the 4th Light AA Division, stationed in Kent, meaning they then had a long-distance courtship.

Why was all leave so unexpectedly cancelled just before their wedding? And why were key family members and close friends of the wedding party unable to attend? Renée and Lorne discovered the answer on their return from a brief honeymoon. Leave had been cancelled to protect D-Day plans (set for 6 June) from being leaked. What may have seemed an insurmountable glitch had

become a challenge.

The wedding went

ahead because of their qualities of resilience, determination, and teamwork. Those qualities continued to serve them well through almost 50 years of marriage.

Renée Evans was born in South East London on 19 June 1918, the second of five children. They were an active, close-knit family, raised during the Depression and coming into adulthood during the bombing of London. They lost both parents from illness in 1943. Renée began work as a library assistant at the age of 16. She studied her way through the various stages of librarianship and in 1943 achieved the level of Associate of the Library Association of London.

Lorne Snell was born on 11 May 1918 on a farm in East Wawanosh Township in Southwestern Ontario, the oldest of three children. The Depression years were hard on small farmers. In Grade 9, Lorne quit school to help with the family income. Still in his teens, he rode the rails to Northern Ontario, where he found work in a gold mine.



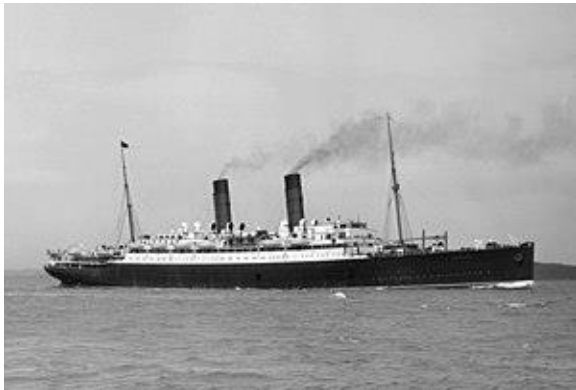
**Lorne Snell and Renée Evans
on their wedding day**

Source, family photos: author



**Renée (2nd from left, back row) and her
family, London, England, 1943**

Then came the war. Lorne enlisted in January 1941. Six weeks after the 1944 wedding, Lorne's unit was sent to Calais. Lorne and Renée kept their new-found love alive through letters over the next 14 months. Renée quit her library job to work in the Central Post Office in London while she was waiting to emigrate to Canada and began corresponding with her new but distant in-laws in Ontario. Bombing raids in London increased; Renée's family home was destroyed. Then word came that Lorne's father had died. Because of these events Renée was granted permission to travel to Canada before the end of the war.



RMS Franconia
Source: Wikipedia

On 30 March 1945 she left Liverpool on a stripped-down RMS *Franconia* (the same ship that had been the headquarters for Winston Churchill at the Yalta Conference). She arrived in Halifax on 11 April to read the headline "Last Bombs on Britain," which elicited a mixture of relief and regret. Then followed a long train ride to Goderich, Ontario, with connections in Montreal and Toronto. As the first war bride to arrive in town, she became the local curiosity. Many people dropped by to see "Lorne's girl." Three weeks after her arrival, on 8 May, the war in Europe was officially over. It was a bittersweet event. How she wished she could be part of the celebrations in London and see the lights again, after six long years of blackouts!

Four months later, on 11 September, Lorne returned home, safe and sound. They lived for a while with Lorne's mother, Jessie, and two younger siblings. Then it was time to get on with their married life—and more adventures. They bought a 100-acre VLA (*Veterans' Land Act*) farm near Mitchell, Ontario, but had one more hurdle to jump. Renée had to be firm with Jessie and tell her she wouldn't be moving in with them. They compromised—Jessie came for a month—then she found an apartment in nearby Stratford. Later, Jessie would give up her apartment and live a few months with each of her children on a rotating basis. This seemed to work well. She wasn't on her own, and our family got to know their one remaining grandparent.

Renée, the city girl, now tackled the basics of farming while adjusting to living in a house with a wood stove, an outhouse, and a well. She learned to slaughter and cook chickens, can and preserve garden produce, and milk cows. Four children joined the family: Anne (b. 1946), Wanda (b. 1948), Yvonne (b. 1949), and Jeanne (b. 1955). Renée raised a few eyebrows by gardening in shorts and a halter top, and by going dancing after she was six months pregnant. When she insisted on attending farm meetings (a very male domain), Lorne just smiled and said, "That's my girl." Renée and her differences were soon accepted.

Rodney died in a farming accident at the tender age of 22 months. This sad loss combined with the financial juggling of keeping a farm afloat, dampened their spirits. After 10 years of farming, they looked for new horizons. Twice in the next 27 years Lorne and Renée became pioneers in mining towns, helping



Lorne and Renée with daughter Anne

carve communities out of the wilderness: first in the uranium town of Elliot Lake, Ontario (1956), then in the iron ore town of Labrador City, Newfoundland (1963). In each community, Renée used her library training to set up and run libraries. She and Lorne actively helped establish new churches, Legions, and cross-country ski clubs, and also contributed to local politics. Their girls went on to university, married, and started their own families in new places.

As her family at home grew smaller, Renée came into her own. She travelled across Northern Canada as part of a United Church study and was awarded “Woman of the Year” for her community work in Labrador City. Over her years in Labrador, she had written many Letters to the Editor of the *Evening Telegram* in St. John’s, Newfoundland, decrying the way the Newfoundland government was using Labrador’s resources without giving back to the Labrador people. In the early 1970s she was stunned to receive a phone call from the Premier of Newfoundland asking if she would participate in a Royal Commission on Labrador. For two years, she and the other commission members travelled to every community in Labrador, holding town meetings, then writing up a series of recommendations for the future of Labrador. Bush planes and skidoos were the only means of reaching these communities—at the time there were no roads in Labrador. When Renée “got a bee in her bonnet,” she did something about it!

Renée and Lorne retired at age 65 to a property in Southern Ontario, going back to Lorne’s family roots. But “retirement” was a relative term. They turned that property into a parkland while building an environmentally friendly house—the second house they had built together. It was a yearly gathering place for their children and grandchildren.



Renée (sitting, blue cardigan) next to her sister and with British and Canadian cousins, July 2011

Lorne’s unexpected death in 1993 left Renée in shock. She had lost her companion of almost 50 years. Once again showing her resilience, she said goodbye to their retirement property and moved on—living with each of her daughters in Newfoundland, Barrie, and Renfrew, and travelling to England to visit with family. She made her last visit overseas at the age of 93 and lived to 101.

Thanks to her avid letter-writing over the years, and her ability to keep family ties alive, we cousins have established our own relationships “across the pond.” Renée’s 100th birthday party was a testament to the richness of her and

Lorne’s marriage. Sixty-five people attended, encompassing five generations of family from both sides of the ocean. Who could have foreseen the wide ripples that would be created by one English war bride and her Canadian soldier 76 years ago?