

War bride recounts harrowing experiences



By Bill Kilpatrick

In their book *Canadian Women: a history* the author's posed the following question in reference to the immigrant women who helped to populate Canada: "Who were the women who were willing to sacrifice the relative comforts of home, and the frequently permanent parting from family and friends, for what were often grueling and extraordinarily long journeys into unknown and inhospitable environments?" The author's point out that although the experiences varied "many did have extraordinary experiences as immigrants; and most of them must have found their lives enormously changed." One of those women who sacrificed her comforts of home and left behind her family and friends, and certainly had, what would be considered by most standards, a grueling journey into an inhospitable environment is 98-year-old Edna Armstrong who came to Canada in 1946 as a war bride of Joseph Armstrong of New Carlow. Armstrong came to Canada to begin a new life in New Carlow with her one-year-old son and another on the way. She did not know what to expect, nor did she fully comprehend what she was getting into, and there were times when she wanted to go home to England, but now, looking back at all of her experiences and the family she has nurtured which includes 9 children, 18 grandchildren, 33 great-grandchildren and 2 great-great-grandchildren, Armstrong said quite simply, "I have enjoyed my life." Armstrong was born Edna Fletcher on Jan. 8, 1925 in Christchurch Dorset England to parents Enos and Sarah Fletcher. Although she does not recall much from her early years she does remember that during the Great Depression her father worked on the Southern Railway, and was away more than he was home, but this helped provide a modest life for his family. She had running water, electricity, food, a wood stove in her bedroom and lots of other amenities. She recalls her brother who worked at a butcher shop and how he would often bring home fresh cuts of meat for the family. Speaking of those days Armstrong said, "We didn't have a rich life but we had an easy one." When the Second World War arrived, like so many families who experienced losses in those days, the Fletcher's were no exception. Her brother Leonard signed up for the Royal Air force immediately out of school and was piloting a Wellington bomber in December of 1939, when the plane was shot down over Belgium. The family received a letter that he was "reported missing," and it was not until the war was over that the family discovered that Leonard was buried in Belgium. Armstrong's other brother John saw service in Italy and survived the war. Armstrong's sister Mary served in the Royal Air Force as well, while Armstrong worked in Weston's bakery throughout the war. Armstrong spoke about how, during the Blitz from 1940 to 1941, her father and her would step outside and watch the dog fights above their home between the British and German planes. Their home was some 100 miles from London on the south coast, but Armstrong vividly remembers the distinct sounds that the German planes made as they flew over head on their way to conduct a bombing raid, and how some of the bombs made a "screeching sound" as they flew through the air. "They used to say as long as you can hear it [the bomb] you're alright," recounted Armstrong. The family, said Armstrong, used to eat upstairs in their home and then sleep in the basement so they would be able to get out of the

house quickly in the event of a bombing raid. Another vivid memory that she shared was when the first German bomb landed near her home which shattered all the windows and violently shook the entire house while she was inside. Armstrong stated how difficult it was to navigate her way home during the night because of the blackout protocols that were mandated on Sept. 1, 1939. Despite all of the other dangers that came with the war, she recounted how "unnerving" it was to ride a bus at night in heavy fog, not because of the fear of bombing, but because it was so difficult to see with the blackout mandate which meant that someone had to get out of the bus with a flashlight and guide the bus so it didn't go over the edge of the road. Of all the memories that she has of the war, the one that truly stands out for her was the day that she met her future husband Joseph Armstrong in 1943. "We girls used to go dancing on Saturday nights," said Armstrong, "and one night we decided that we were going to sneak into a pub that was kind of out-of-the-way, but still in town. Of course, the first person I saw was a friend of my dad's, which is another story, but we decided to go into a private room and there were some soldiers in there who were stationed in my hometown. They decided that they were going to come over and hassle us. We got playing darts and when it was time to go home I had to catch a bus." Joseph said, "Can I see you again?" To which Armstrong responded, "I don't know," and as the bus approached Joseph told her, "I'll see you next Friday right here," to which Armstrong responded, "Okay." Things moved fast, as many relationships did during the war and the couple got engaged over Christmas of 1943 and then were married on May 13, 1944 and their first child, Barry, arrived in October of that year. Joseph, who served in the Artillery 14th Field Regiment as a signaler, was discharged from the army and returned home to New Carlow in January of 1946. Unfortunately, Armstrong could not follow for another three months. During the three months she stayed with her parents who helped support her and her new son, but when it came time to leave for Canada, Armstrong was hesitant stating that "It was really hard leaving home." Regardless of her ambivalent feelings, "My mom and dad took me to London and I said goodbye to them," remembered Armstrong. "It was the worst time of the year to travel [by boat]," said Armstrong who expressed how the one saving grace was that she met a girl from her home town so she was not entirely alone on the 10 day trip across the Atlantic. On March 25, 1946 Armstrong and her son Barry boarded the Letitia for their journey to Canada. Armstrong was not prepared for the rough seas and spent the first seven days extremely seasick below deck, while a new acquaintance looked after Barry. "Oh dear, what a time," exclaimed Armstrong adding, "We started out and the first thing I did was I went and looked over the rail and there were these [massive] waves. It was really rough. I went back to the cabin and I spent seven days sick. By day seven I was feeling better and I went down to the dining hall, where they had boards around the table, so the food wouldn't fly off. So, I sat down and we hit a big wave and the dishes started coming towards me and I said, "That's it," and I left." Armstrong and her son arrived at Pier 21 in Halifax Nova Scotia on April 3, 1946 and from there she was to take the train to the closest station to New Carlow. "My husband told me that I was going to Barry's Bay, but when they came [to sort out who was going where] I was told that I was going to North Bay because that's the closest station." Armstrong was confused and thought, "I'm a stranger in a strange land, what do I know?" but luckily her train took her to Ottawa where her husband was waiting for her and he and his friend, Herman Wodzak, drove Armstrong to her new home in New Carlow. It was there that Armstrong's will would be tested and her resilience pushed to the limit. "I didn't know what I was doing," said Armstrong, "I went from helping my mom to having nothing; I didn't know what I was getting into." Armstrong spoke about the utter shock she felt when she arrived having come from a home where she had running water, a bathroom, and electricity to a house that was in the middle of the wilderness, where they had to fetch water from the creek, where there was no electricity, no refrigerator, and only an outhouse for a bathroom and where they could only bathe once per week. "This was a different life altogether," said Armstrong who still appeared to have a sense of shock on her face as she told the story. Armstrong said that she felt very isolated and alone and it didn't help that her mother-in-law was also staying at the family home, "She was the boss [and] I was scared of her when I first arrived," said Armstrong, "She never made me feel that welcome." Add to this the fact that Armstrong had never made bread or learned to can meat or vegetables, "We couldn't get fresh meat, or milk and all we used was powdered milk," said Armstrong with a lingering hint of disgust. She was a new mother and wife with another child on the way and who left all of her friends in England and was now surrounded by strangers who spoke in a strange dialect with strange phrases. Armstrong said that she would never forget the first morning she woke up and walked out of the bedroom and her brother-in-law Tommy said to her, "How's your hammer hanging?" and she didn't know how to respond so she just replied to Tommy with her polite English manners saying, "Very well." Then winter came along with amounts of snow that she was not used to and Armstrong was becoming more isolated, home sick and was seriously considering leaving. "If it wasn't for my sister-in-law Eileen Armstrong, I would have gone back home," said Armstrong, "She would always know when I was becoming frazzled and she would ask me to go out for a cigarette to take my mind off of things." Armstrong's children along with the support of Eileen were intricate in Armstrong's choice to stick it out and eventually, after a few trials and errors, she began to bake bread, can food and meat, and make jam. Armstrong took up crocheting and began making clothing for the family. She also attended dances and social gatherings in Barry's Bay, but it still took her a while to settle in stating that, "It took quite a few years to feel like home," but no

matter how comfortable she became she still refused to go into the cold cellar due to her deathly fear of snakes. The family moved around to Maynooth, and to Campbellford and back again and sure enough Armstrong was able to get a home with electricity, a bathroom, and running water, but when she was asked what she missed the most during those early years in Canada, surprisingly it was not electricity or an indoor bathroom, it was a woodstove in her bedroom and bananas. Her husband Joseph died in 1985 and soon after Armstrong moved out to Alberta where they have resided for the last 30 years. The family only recently returned to the area. It is not clear if she is in fact one of the last war brides in Hastings County, but what is clear is that she is woman of tremendous strength who has over come more adversity than many people could imagine in their lifetimes, and at 98-years-young she is still going strong. At this year's Bancroft Remembrance Day ceremony Armstrong will be honoured for her role as a war bride and will place a wreath on the cenotaph in honor of all war brides who, to this day, still stand as beacons of resilience, strength, and fortitude for all Canadians.