

Bessie Cazaly Roffey

1897-2008

(South Peace News, Alberta, Canada, newspaper article)

One of High Prairie and Kinuso's most valued treasures has passed away. Bessie Roffey, Alberta's oldest citizen, passed away in High Prairie June 17 at the age of 111 years. Bessie Marion Cazalet Roffey was born on March 2, 1897 in London, England. She lived in Europe until moving to Kinuso, where she lived for just over 65 years, before moving to J.B. Wood Extended Care Unit in High Prairie for her remaining years. Having lived over three centuries, the history Bessie carried with her is now gone. From the invention of the automobile, the lamplighters in London when coal gas was used for fuel, to seeing Queen Victoria drive by in her carriage to visit her daughter at the end of the street, Bessie lived and saw it all. She lived through countless technological advances, before modern automobiles, TVs, computers, modern medicine, the Atomic Age and the Space Age. She has survived several world wars and the horrific 1918 flu epidemic.

Bessie's husband, Billy, as she fondly remembers him, died in 1994 at the age of 92 years. They had been married for 71 years. They had one son, Donald, and daughter-in-law Junell. Bessie was born in England, but was always adamant she wasn't British. She often referred with pride to her French Huguenot ancestry. She credited and blamed her ancestry for some aspects of her character and for some of her firmly held beliefs. Bessie's father died when she was eight years old. She remembers being placed in a free girl's school for the descendants of French Huguenots. She attended the school for two years and didn't like it at all. Until her last year, she could still count a little in French and sing the simple French songs she learned.

Bessie and her mother came to Canada in 1906. Money to pay for the trip came from the Actor's Benevolent Fund. Both her mother and father had contributed to the fund being involved in the theatre. When Bessie and her mother came to Canada, they had no particular destination in mind. Because Bessie's mother was a good cook, someone had advised her to come to Canada where she could get lots of work. Bessie remembers the trip to Canada on a wooden ship named the Lake Manitoba, which had been used to transport soldiers to the Boer War. A storm that lasted for three days during the 10-day voyage across the Atlantic Ocean, battered the ship so bad she thought they would all be lost.

The two landed in Quebec and waited for the train that would take them to the Prairies. Bessie remembers the long train ride in what was called an immigrant car. The railroad car had wooden slat seats, which could be made into a bed and a stove in the back where you could boil an egg or make tea. People at stops along the way sold food to the people on the train. Bessie and her mother arrived in Winnipeg, which was then about the same size as High Prairie is today. They stayed in Mrs. Sandford's Home of Welcome. Because Bessie and her mother were traveling alone, they were allowed to stay at Mrs. Sandford's. The Home of Welcome was really for single girls who had traveled from England to marry bachelors on the Canadian prairies. Usually, these were poor English girls who had their passage paid to Canada so they would marry and help colonize the country. The girls would stay at the Home of Welcome until they left to marry the fellow who had picked them to be his wife. Bessie's mother got work cooking in hotels and boarding houses. They moved from one small town to another, across the prairies and into southern British Columbia. Moving frequently gave Bessie little opportunity to go to school. When they finally settled enough for Bessie to attend school regularly she passed Grades 1-8 in five years.

Bessie's mother eventually remarried. Her stepfather, T.J. Taylor, worked as an elevator agent and her mother continued with cooking jobs so the family kept moving across Alberta. When Bessie finished the schooling she was to have, she worked in a store in Lloydminster for several years. She has many fond memories of the friendships with her coworkers at the store and the increasing responsibilities she was given. She could talk for hours about the parties, plays and dances she attended at that time. She vividly recalled certain party dresses she wore. As she told everyone about the dances, she sang parts of the songs not heard for years while describing how the Waltz Promenade was danced.

Later, her mother wanted Bessie to go with them to Florida so she gave up her job at the store and spent a year in Florida. When she returned to Alberta, Bessie met her husband, Billy, in Duagh, north of Edmonton. She was hired to cook and clean for Billy's family. She says she had a few boyfriends but none impressed her like Billy, with his red hair. They were married on Nov. 22, 1923.

Bessie says they had a wonderful married life and life has not been very enjoyable since Billy died. After working the family farm for a few years after they married, Billy got work logging with Patterson and Fields and they moved to Spurfield, a sawmill and logging operation between Smith and Slave Lake. Bessie had many fond memories of the 10 years they spent in Spurfield and the friends they made. While Billy worked at logging, Bessie took in washing and ironing for the men who worked in the bush and the mill, those who didn't have families with them. She knitted and sold woolen socks for 75 cents a pair. Mitts were 50 cents a pair. The price was a nickel for washing and darning a pair of socks.

In 1937, for about \$1,000, the couple purchased a farm near Kinuso where they lived and farmed. They retired to a house in the nearby village in 1979. While still on the farm, Billy often worked out at local mills and logging operations so Bessie did a lot of farm work. She looked after stock, raised poultry and vegetables for sale and generally did whatever she could to help make a living during those hard times.

In her later years, Bessie loved gardening. Her garden and flowers were the envy of many in Kinuso. After her move to J.B. Wood, she delighted many with her stories and knowledge carried over three centuries. Bessie's funeral was June 28 at the Kinuso Agricultural Hall with Rev. Joan Schellenberger officiating. Interment followed in the Swan Valley Cemetery.

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