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BESSIE MARION ROFFEY

Prairie pioneer, super-centenarian, Alberta's oldest resident. Born March 2, 1897, in Tottenham, England. Died June 17 in High Prairie, Alta., of old age, aged 111.

Bessie Roffey was born into an artistic family of Huguenot descent. Her father James was a lead player at the Empire Theatre Leicester Square, the biggest music hall in London at the time. Her mother Rosalie was a singer and pianist.

Bessie's early days were carefree ones. But when meningitis claimed the life of her father when she was 7, her life took an unexpected course.

In the summer of 1906, money from the Actors' Benevolent Fund paid for Bessie and her mother to sail on the steamship Lake Manitoba to Quebec City. After a train ride on an "immigrant car," Bessie arrived in Winnipeg to begin a new life on the Prairies.

"A new country, strange schools and children, and never staying in one place long enough to make friends," Bessie recalled in Christmas letters later in her life. "It was a lonely life for a child, but in so many ways a happy life. Mother taught me to make my own happiness, and never to be afraid to be alone. I love to wander in the bush, and have seen many things and places others miss. But I hate towns and cities."

In November, 1923, Bessie married William Roffey in Kitscoty, Alta. They had met when she was hired to cook and clean for his family. Bessie and her beloved Billy enjoyed more than 70 years of marriage, before Billy's passing in 1994.

The couple started out with nothing but four horses that Billy's dad had given him. In summer there was farm work for both of them; in winter there was the sawmill and logging for Billy, and washing and sewing for Bessie. "We worked hard and knew what it was to go without," Bessie said. By 1937, they were able to put their savings toward a farm in Kinuso, Alta.

"I love this land that is Canada," she said. "Hardship, yes, but such wonderful people, all ready to help the other fellow. In the isolated communities we were dependent on ourselves and on our neighbours. No doctor, no nurse, so it was do your best."

Bessie lived in Kinuso until 2004, when at 107 she moved to a care facility in High Prairie. Although her sight and hearing diminished toward the end of her life, her memory remained keen.

Bessie saw a huge amount in her lifetime, including more than a century of Canadian history. She watched the coronation of King Edward VII in 1902 from her father's shoulders.

Bessie was proud of her son Donald, her four grandchildren and five great-grandchildren. Although born in England, she was especially proud to be a Canadian.

BRIAN MACKIE

Brian Mackie's grandfather was Bessie's cousin.