

# Lorne Willson's Early Years

By Rod Fraser

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*Lorne Willson (second from left) with other crew members sometime during 1944-45*

I had hoped to write a book about my life up to the end of the Second World War — at a time when I was 33 years of age, a RCAF veteran, employed in Northern British Columbia and married with two children. I have given up the idea.

My family (with one exception) didn't show much

interest, so it just seemed silly to expend the effort. Still my story is a good one — an interesting tale of a man with an unusual childhood, an early life filled with adventure, and war service in the RCAF — the last year as part of a Lancaster bomber crew in the air war over Germany.

Rather than give up the idea, I am writing it as two magazine-sized articles — the first telling the story of my early years, and the second, the tale of my last year of the war. I hope you enjoy them.

I am old and frail now. My memory is not the best, and my access to documents is limited. This is my excuse for taking some liberties with the facts to tell a more interesting story. For those who might find fault with this, I apologize in advance.

## The Jane Laycock Children's Home

My name is Lorne Willson and I was born in Brant County, near Paris, Ontario. My earliest memory — when I was just shy of four years of age in 1917 — was a conversation in the lobby of the *Jane Laycock Children's Home* in Brantford.

My sister Evelyn was crying inconsolably and pleading with our mother not to leave us, to find some way to keep us together.

My mother took us to a small room off the lobby and asked us to sit down. When we were quiet, she

said,

*"Look Evelyn, your Dad died suddenly in an accident last January while coming home from his new job in Buffalo. He planned to stay with us for a week or so, gather all our belongings and move us to a home near his work. These plans fell apart with his death."*

*"We couldn't stay with my sister in Woodstock indefinitely. I have to earn my living. I've found a job as a housekeeper with two bachelor farmers in South Dumfries. My employers made it clear that my job was conditional on finding a place for the three of you to live."*

*"This school is a wonderful place. You will be together and find friends among the other children. It has a good reputation. You will be sure to get a proper education."*

*"I will think of you every day, write you often, and my employers have agreed to have you to the farm for Christmas and three weeks in the summer. It was the best I could do."*

*"Now Evelyn, I know you are only ten, but we are being called upon to do great things here. We may be living separately, but we are still a family. It all depends on you. I need you to look after Ford and Lorne. Can you do that for me? Now speak up, I need to hear you say it."*

*"Yes mother", Evelyn replied.*

*"And you boys. You listen to Evelyn and do what she asks. She will take care of you. Are we all clear here?"*



This was the start of my life at the Jane Laycock School. Everything Mom said about it was true. On the whole, it was a warm, comfortable place to live. We were well treated, properly fed and learned a great deal.

The *Jane Laycock Children's Home* was located at the top of Farringdon Hill. It was a large, attractive brick building, three stories in height, with lovely windows allowing an abundance of light and a lovely view of the City of Brantford.

The top floor (and part of the second floor) provided the sleeping quarters and bathrooms for the students (we were always referred to as students) and those staff members who lodged on the premises.

There was a common room on the second floor for reading. It had comfortable seating, tables and chairs to do our homework, and books, puzzles, games and the like for our amusement.

The main floor contained a classroom for our studies. The twenty-five students who lived at the

home took classes there, in grades one to eight, modelled on the one-room schoolhouses that were so common in Ontario at the time. Our teacher was Miss Cousins.

Elsewhere on the first floor were the kitchen, dining room, larder and cloakrooms. Storage for the school was provided in the basement and the first floor rooms that were not otherwise occupied.

## Life on the Farm

Although not physically present in our everyday lives, our mother was still with us in many important ways. Regular as clockwork, every two weeks, we received a letter telling us her news, assuring us of her love and trying to be as cheerful as she could, given our circumstances.

Mother was getting on quite well with Andrew and Jack McLelland — her new employers in South Dumfries. The two bachelors had grown fond of her, enjoyed her cooking and her company.

On our summer vacations, we traveled to the McLelland farm, learned to do chores and were given the run of the place for the three weeks we were there. Our older brother, Murvyn, who also worked at the farm, was there to show us the ropes.

Everything seemed to be falling in place. Our circumstances were unusual to be sure. We were

often separated, and sad that this was so. But our mother's hopes had proven true.

We were still a family; we looked after one another; and we continued to be our mother's children — legally and in every other sense. Our future showed promise and we felt good about ourselves.

I will pause at this moment and mention a small curiosity. During our time at the orphanage, we started calling our mother Abbie. I think it was because Andrew and Jack always called her Abbie. We picked up the habit; our mother found it amusing; soon it stuck.

Every Christmas during those years, we were invited to the farm for a lovely family dinner and visited for three or four days. Most Christmases were lovely and predictable — but 1924 was special.

During Christmas dinner, Abbie announced that she and Andy were to be married early in 1925, a few months hence.

Evelyn was the bridesmaid and Abbie's sister agreed to be matron of honour. Andy's brother, Jack McLelland, was the best man. We three boys — Murvyn, Ford and I — would have a place in the wedding party as well. This was good news for us. We liked the McLelland brothers, enjoyed our vacations at the farm and hoped to be a family once

again.

The wedding was a small, intimate affair and we were decked out in new clothes for the occasion. This was followed by dinner (and dancing) at the McLelland farm. It was a lovely day.

Jack McLelland drove us back to school the next day, while Andy and Abbie took the train to Toronto for a short honeymoon. It had been arranged we would finish our school year at Jane Laycock and come to live at the farm at the end of June.



Murvyn completed his schooling that year and was working in town as an auto mechanic. He continued to live at the farm. Evelyn lived in town and worked in a factory in Paris on the office staff. She had completed grade ten.

In the fall of 1925, I enrolled in grade eight at the Keg Lane School (having skipped a grade during my years at Jane Laycock). Ford entered grade nine at Paris High School.

Keg Lane School occupied approximately an acre of land and was a brisk walk of just less than two miles from the farm. The school was an attractive red-brick construction, with a circular driveway and a nice lawn at the front.

Although I was only there for one year, it was a

happy time. I liked my life on the farm and feeling part of a family again.

The following year, I started classes at Paris High School. This called for an additional one-mile walk, making the total one-way trip just short of three miles. In the cold of winter, Andy often took pity on me and gave me a lift. My brother, Ford, left school after grade ten and was working in town.

### Working for a Living

When I completed grade ten, Murvyn offered me a job, working as an auto mechanic and welder in town. Although I had no experience, Murvyn agreed to train me.

My brother had started a business, selling gasoline to motorists and repairing automobiles. Since he was well known in town and an excellent mechanic, he had lots of work and needed extra staff.

The idea of working with Murvyn, learning a valuable skill and earning some decent money was appealing to me. I agreed immediately and started work a week later.

Over the next six years, my brother was true to his word. I learned everything there was to know about welding and became an accomplished auto mechanic. Even when the depression hit in 1930, we

continued to keep busy—although business declined as the depression deepened.

By the summer of 1934, I decided to give up my job and see the world. Murvyn was the businessman in the family. Not me.

My dreams led me in other directions. I wanted to travel, see different places and meet new people. As J.R.R. Tolkien once said, "Not all those who wander are lost." I hoped that would be true for me.

## Riding the Rails

In the fall of 1934, I traveled west by train with a long-time friend, Ivan Goodall. We arranged with the Canadian Pacific Railway to obtain free passage and meals, in exchange for helping with the cattle transported west by rail.

We were required to load, unload, feed, water and care for the cattle during our journey west. When not working, we traveled in a passenger car.

It was a good bargain for two young farm lads who hoped to travel west free of charge. And it was an inspired arrangement for the railway. It kept their costs low and ensured their cattle had proper care as they rolled across Northern Ontario and the Western Provinces.

After a week or so, we stopped in Trail, BC, a

town that today has a population of approximately 8,000. Trail is on the Columbia River in the West Kootenay region of British Columbia. Since our responsibilities for the cattle were largely discharged as we passed through Alberta, Ivan and I decided to detrain and try our luck looking for work at the local smelter.

I was hired on as a welder and Ivan got a job as a laborer. Later I was assigned work as a boiler operator. Shortly after being hired on, we found a boarding house in town, run by a widow named Irene Henry. It was a respectable establishment, the food was good and Ivan and I each had a room to call our own.

We were given breakfast in the morning and dinner in the evening. For slightly more money, Mrs. Henry would pack us a lunch for work. I can't remember how much it cost for room and board, but it was affordable, clean and comfortable.

Although we were happy with Trail for the most part, I found the pollution oppressive. The airborne sulphur and water pollution from the plant was considerable and eventually the fumes started to affect my breathing.

So after a year, four of us pooled our money, purchased a used car and headed for Vancouver. Winter was coming on — being late November of 1935 — and the four of us wanted to be out of the

mountains by the time the worst of it arrived.

I obtained a job as a welder in Vancouver shortly before Christmas and started work in the New Year. It was a good job, but I wasn't happy with my situation. The pollution from coal-fired furnaces and factories in Vancouver, particularly in the winter, was considerable.

Coming on top of my year in Trail — where I suffered from the same problem — I wheezed and coughed all too frequently. I felt I had no choice but to look for work in a healthier place, perhaps in a rural area, where I hoped my respiratory problems would improve.

## Life at 100 Mile House

During my time in Vancouver, I made a point of reading the want ads in the city newspapers to find work in the interior of British Columbia.

In the fall of 1936, after noticing a job in the paper for an auto mechanic and welder at the Bridge Street Estate (also known as 100 Mile House) in the South Cariboo, I was interviewed for the position in Vancouver by Lord Martin Cecil (the second son of the Marquis of Exeter).

Cecil's father had purchased the Bridge Street Estate in 1912, including the 12,000 acres of ranch land surrounding it. In the early days of ownership,

the ranch was run by a manager. But that ended in 1930, when the aforementioned Martin Cecil came to Canada and took over operating the estate.

He was a quiet and unassuming man, dressed in the work clothes of a rancher. I had no idea of his posh background. We hit it off and I was hired on the spot. Cecil suggested I start work as soon as possible after the Christmas holiday. That was fine with me.

I gave my notice to my employer, Canadian John Wood, and arranged to travel to my new job by train in late January of 1937. I arrived on a snowy cold day, and shortly after I packed my gear away and cleaned up, I enjoyed a lovely dinner at the Lodge

I soon settled in and found the staff to be small, but friendly. I had lots to do, keeping the various machines and autos in good repair. Times were difficult in the Cariboo in those years, with cattle prices low and falling, so it was a challenge for Martin Cecil to hold it all together.

By the time I moved there in 1937, the Lodge was managed by Cecil's wife, whom he married in 1934. It catered to all kinds of guests, including English gentry, hunting parties, vacationing families and other travelers. It was largely a seasonal business with only infrequent guests during the off season. The Lodge was never full, so I was offered room and board and enjoyed being part of this larger

family.

The main business of the estate was ranching. In the early 1930s, Cecil kept Merino sheep, but that didn't last for long. The estate soon reverted to raising beef cattle.



In the early fall of 1938, a young woman from Bellis, Alberta—just shy of 20 years of age — came to work at the Lodge. Her name was Alice Sawchuk.

Like many of the staff, she was brought up in a small farming community. This was quite deliberate. Cecil picked rural people to work for him — as life on the estate was little more than a large farm. It was rough living with few urban conveniences.

I was interested in this young woman, as she was attractive, bright, and a chatty companion. And if truth be told, I was eager for some female companionship.

Many of the staff, including Cecil and his wife, were quite religious. While friendly and good people generally, they tended to stick together, leaving those of us who weren't part of their group to ourselves.

Alice and I hit it off and started spending much of our free time together. There were a multitude of good books available at the Lodge (primarily for the

guests), and since we both loved to read, this added to what we otherwise had in common.

By this time, I had been working at the estate for a little less than two years. My breathing had returned to normal. It was no longer labored or wheezy. I was in good health and resolved to keep it that way.

In the months that followed, Alice and I decided to marry. There were a number of good reasons for this, but one of them was the expectation of war in Europe. I was an accomplished mechanic by that time and planned to enlist in the Royal Canadian Air Force ('RCAF'). Since I would be moved from airbase to airbase in the course of my training and subsequent postings, I wanted Alice to be with me. Marriage would make this easier and allow us to be a couple.

The news from Europe was increasingly bleak. On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland. Two days later, France and the United Kingdom declared war on Germany. Canada followed a few days later. The die was cast and we were at war.

## Marriage and Enlistment

On a lovely weekend in the early summer of 1939, we drove to Vancouver to visit Alice's family and friends. It was part of our vacation time, and we

used it to finalize our wedding plans.

Our idea was to get married and rent an apartment in Vancouver. Then Alice would give up her job at 100 Mile House when the apartment became available. I would continue to work until it was clear war was coming. Then I would give notice to Martin Cecil and move to Vancouver to be with Alice. At that point I could enlist in the RCAF and assess our plans in light of basic training, postings and the like.

To implement these plans, the first order of business was the wedding. On July 3, 1939, we slipped across the border with a couple of friends and were married in Washington State at the small town of Bellingham.

I gave my notice to Martin Cecil soon after, and we spent the fall awaiting our first daughter, Donna Joan Willson, who was born in mid-November. With Donna born and healthy, I enlisted in the RCAF in late fall and was sent to St. Thomas in Ontario for my basic training.

## Life in the Royal Canadian Air Force

The RCAF were pleased to accept a young man who was an experienced welder and auto mechanic. Skills such as this were a rarity in the RCAF. With this kind of background, it was relatively easy to

learn to maintain and repair aircraft.

I rose through the ranks quickly, reaching the rank of Sergeant in mid-1942. By that time, I was stationed at the repair depot in Winnipeg (during which time I enrolled in university to improve my formal education). Alice and Donna lived with me at the base in a small, but comfortable apartment.

I volunteered for air crew in early-1943 and was sent to Brandon for flight training. I soon washed out as a pilot, but was reassigned to train as a 'bomb-aider'. This was fine with me. To serve as air crew, in any capacity was my goal.

After my training was completed, I was sent to England and assigned to '*419 Moose Squadron*' at RAF Middleton-St. George. I was part of a crew of seven, flying in a Lancaster bomber on regular bombing runs to France and Germany. By mid-November of 1944, I had flown more than 30 operations (or sorties), and I continued to rack up successful missions until the war in Europe was over in early May of 1945.

To get an idea of what it was like for those of us in '*419 Moose Squadron*', you should read my article, '[\*Lorne Willson's War in Bomber Command\*](#)'.

## Heading Home after the War

I sailed for home a month after the war ended in

Europe, planning to volunteer for the continuing war in Asia. Alas it ended in September 1945 and I was then finally discharged from the RCAF.

During the months I was in Europe, my wife Alice and our daughter, Donna, took up residence in Vancouver (near her family) and so this was my destination upon arriving in Canada.

It was lovely being back home with my family, and I busied myself trying to find work in the interior of British Columbia. After a time, I was successful and we moved to Campbell River, where I became a logger.

Of course, there were many more chapters to my life in the years that followed, including the birth of my second daughter, Gail Willson, in December of 1946. But as in all things, people like to read about lives that are full and interesting. I confess mine became quite commonplace after the war. So it is only fitting and proper that I end my story here.

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