

Remembering Canada's war brides

Liberal MLA TJ Burke, the grandson of a war bride, has joined campaign to have 2006 named the Year of the War Bride

By Kathy Kaufield
Telegraph-Journal

Nineteen-year-old Jean Paul was likely more than a little nervous when she and her baby daughter arrived by canoe on the shores of the Tobique First Nation during the spring of 1946.

The young British war bride had, after all, just left behind her own family and middle-class life to move across the ocean to a foreign land and start a new life with her husband, Canadian soldier Charles (Buck) Paul, a Maliseet from Tobique.



(Submitted Photo)

War brides arrive in Halifax aboard the Aquitania in 1946.

She had never met her husband's family, never been to Canada before and was, in fact, the first non-aboriginal woman to live on the reserve besides the nuns.

"She gave up (her middle-class life in Britain) to live on a little Indian reserve where there was no running water, no electricity," says her grandson, Liberal MLA TJ Burke.

Why?

That's easy, Mr. Burke says.

"My grandparents loved each other very dearly."

Ms. Paul and her Canadian soldier husband ended up living happily on the reserve for the rest of their lives, raising six children, all of whom went on to graduate from university - quite an accomplishment in those days.

Ms. Paul even learned to speak Maliseet fluently and is described by her grandson as "the glue that held the family together" until her death in 1991.

Mr. Burke says he has a lot of admiration for the sacrifices made by his grandmother and the thousands of other war brides who came to Canada after the Second World War, which is why he didn't hesitate to become the first MLA in Canada to support a campaign led by a Fredericton woman to have 2006 named the Year of the War Bride.

Melynda Jarratt, who has researched war brides since 1987, is urging Ottawa to declare next year in honour of war brides to mark the 60th anniversary of the arrival of the majority of them in Canada. She said it would be a fitting tribute to these women, especially coming after 2005, which is the Year of the Veteran.

"It's a no-brainer. The war brides are an indelible part of the Canadian cultural mosaic. They are who we are. We look at them, they are a mirror of us. They represent so much," Ms. Jarratt says. "They had a huge impact (on Canada)."

Ms. Jarratt says about 40,000 war brides plus their children came to Canada in 1946. About 3,000 came to New Brunswick. She says about one million Canadians have a war bride somewhere in their family tree.

Ms. Jarratt says these women deserve to be commemorated nationally for their sacrifices, their grit and their contributions to Canada.

"They were an unprecedented immigrant wave, a unique phenomenon that will never occur again in Canadian immigration history," she says. "They married for life. They stuck it out. They dug in. They adapted and they became good Canadian citizens."



Burke

She said war brides, the majority of whom came from Britain, reinforced Canada's connection to its mother country and strengthened cultural ties between the two countries.

Ms. Jarratt says these women also changed the communities where they lived.

"There's very few people who grew up during that period who don't recall a war bride in their community. They became leaders. They became very much a part of their local community," she said.

War brides aren't represented by a national organization in Canada but many of them keep in touch and informed via Ms. Jarratt's website. She said the brides have talked for quite some time about launching a campaign for the Year of the War Bride but no one took any official action until Ms. Jarratt started quietly working on the issue several months ago.

She said she needs an MP to introduce a private member's bill in the House of Commons declaring the year and then it must be passed, not exactly an easy task with all the talk recently of an impending election. Ms. Jarratt also wants provincial legislatures to throw their support behind her bid in the hopes it will encourage Ottawa to do the same.

Mr. Burke says he will introduce a motion when the legislature opens later this month, asking for the government's support.

"They need to be recognized as key contributors to our society and to be acknowledged for all the sacrifices they made," he says.

Ms. Jarratt says she has approached Fredericton MP Andy Scott about the matter but he didn't make any commitments.

She says the bill wouldn't have to be passed before the end of 2005 because many of the commemorative events wouldn't be scheduled until later in 2006. But she would like to see if it could be done as quickly as possible.

Some have told her she has taken on an impossible task but Ms. Jarratt doesn't think so.

"They also said that it was impossible to bring 44,000 war brides and 21,000 children across the ocean. Anything can be done and it's not that hard to do," she said. "I don't think that this is impossible. They can pass a bill, one very important bill that will mean one helluva lot to alot of Canadians who love their war brides."

More information about Ms. Jarratt's campaign and about war brides can be found on her website: www.canadianwarbrides.com