

## ■ From the Society

# From Liverpool to Cut Bank

## The Story of Montana War Bride Ruth Poore Batchen

by Jodie Foley

In December 1945 Congress passed the War Brides Act (Public Law 271) allowing American citizens' foreign-born spouses and their children admission into the United States. The act waived quotas and other provisions of the country's stringent immigration law and made nearly one million military wives eligible to become U.S. residents. These women formed the largest immigrant group the United States had seen since the 1920s.<sup>1</sup> While it is uncertain how many of these women came to live in Montana, we do know they became residents of towns across the state—living, working, and raising children in communities very different from those that they had once called home.

The experiences of Montana war brides represent an important and largely unexplored part of the state's World War II-era history. To address that oversight, the Montana Historical Society initiated the Montana War Brides Oral History Project in March 2000 in cooperation with Dr. Seena Kohl, an anthropology professor at Webster University. The resulting interviews document the women's experiences of wartime deprivation, courtship and marriage, immigration, and adaptation to American life. The recollections of Ruth Poore Batchen, a British war bride, provide a sampling of those experiences.

Born in Liverpool, England, in 1921, Ruth Monica Boileau was one of ten children. She attended a convent school until the age of fourteen, when compulsory education ended for British students. From the late 1930s through the 1940s, Ruth and her family faced the deprivations and uncertainties endemic to wartime Europe. "We were [allowed] two ounces of butter a week per person and two ounces of meat per person to eat," Ruth said in a spring 2002 interview. "It was hard on my mother trying to

1. Elfrieda Shukert, *War Brides of World War II* (Novato, Calif., 1988), 1. The number of war brides who immigrated following the passage of PL 271 is difficult to confirm since the women arranged their travel through both military channels and private sponsorships. The commonly quoted figure of seventy thousand women refers only to the British war brides transported by the U.S. government in 1946. For more information on the history of war brides in the United States, see *ibid.*; and Jenel Virden, *Good-Bye Piccadilly: British War Brides in America* (Urbana, Ill., 1996).



Courtesy the Ruth Poore Batchen Family

During World War II, Liverpool native Ruth Boileau met Wendell Poore, a U.S. Army soldier from Cut Bank, Montana. They married in 1945, and she followed him to Montana in 1946. Her story and those of other war brides inspired the Montana Historical Society to launch the Montana War Brides Oral History Project to explore this largely untold part of the state's history. These interviews document the women's experiences of wartime deprivation, courtship and marriage, immigration, and adaptation to American life.

eke out the meals for the four of us. . . . It was difficult. . . . You think you can't get by, but you can."<sup>2</sup>

Another hardship the family faced was the threat of German bombs. "Originally the Germans weren't able to get as far as Liverpool, but once France fell, they could. . . . So much changed after that," Ruth recalled. When the

2. Ruth Batchen Poore, interview by Seena Kohl, July 10, 2002, Billings, Montana, Montana War Brides Oral History Project, Oral History 2039, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena. Quotations in this article are from this interview.

air-raid sirens went off, "I grabbed all my blankets, . . . found my sisters . . . mother and father, and we sat around the dining room table. We didn't know what was going to happen. We were supposed to go into the air-raid shelter, but we didn't. . . . I can't tell you why. Finally, the 'all-clear' sounded, and we looked at one another and started to cry."

Like many young British women, Ruth was conscripted into military service, a measure that helped free-up men for combat duty. She went to boot camp in 1942 and served at the Anti-Aircraft Command in London. Quickly adapting to her new life, Ruth made friends, explored the city, and eventually found romance. During a weekend outing to Windsor Castle, Ruth met Wendell Poore, a U.S. Army Air Corps staff sergeant. "On a bus going to Oxbridge . . . this fellow started talking to us. . . . One girl was taking pictures, and Wendell asked for her address so he could get copies. She gave it to him and that was that. I didn't think too much of it, until the officer of the day called and said, 'You have a young man wanting to see you tonight.' That was how it started."

After several months of dating, Ruth and Wendell's relationship deepened. The courtship was not without challenges, however. The estimated sixteen million young American soldiers serving overseas between 1939 and 1945 took a toll on communities near duty stations.<sup>3</sup> Increased rates of venereal disease and illegitimate births fed stereotypes and misconceptions. As a result, family members on both sides of the Atlantic often discouraged couples from marrying. Ruth's and Wendell's families were no exception. Wendell's sister warned him in a letter, "Watch out for those girls. They are only after your money."

3. This number reflects soldiers deployed to more than fifty countries. An estimated two million served in England alone. Shukert, *War Brides*, 1-2, 7.

Brushing aside his family's concerns, Wendell proposed marriage, using a picture of a "keepsake diamond" torn from the pages of *Life Magazine* in lieu of the gold band he could not afford. The betrothed couple began making plans for a wedding and for the move to Cut Bank, Montana, Wendell's hometown. For Ruth and Wendell, preparations involved rigorous interviews with military personnel, medical and psychological examinations, and plenty of paperwork.

Wendell and Ruth were married in Liverpool on May 19, 1945. Shortly after the wedding, Wendell was transferred to Germany to complete his tour of service. In October he demobilized and returned to Montana. Ruth, meanwhile, remained in England awaiting her paperwork and an assignment to a transport ship. In March 1946, after nearly six months of waiting, Ruth reported to the orientation held at camps near Tidworth, England, infamous for their poor conditions.<sup>4</sup> Two weeks later she boarded the *Edmund B. Alexander*, a converted ocean liner, and sailed for New York.

Ruth shared the six-day journey with nearly a thousand other war brides and their children. Seasick and weary, the women gratefully disembarked in New York, only to be delayed for two days by protestors angry that American soldiers had married foreign women.<sup>5</sup> When they arrived in New York, "it was sultry, hot," Ruth remembered, "and we weren't expecting that. I was wearing a tweed suit. We had to be in New York for two days before we got to the train station. . . . They had to lock the buses we were held in because we were being picketed by women who were mad at us."

4. The *Los Angeles Times* compared the conditions at Tidworth to those of German concentration camps. In fact, POWs served food and cleaned at the Tidworth camps. Shukert, *War Brides*, 49-55.

5. The protestors greeted the women with shouts of "Go back to England." *Ibid.*, 80.



Courtesy the Ruth Poore Batchen Family

Ruth and Wendell married on May 19, 1945, in Liverpool. In October he demobilized and returned home while she remained in England awaiting paperwork and assignment to a transport ship.

Ruth's reception in Montana was much warmer. "I was met in Great Falls, with flowers and a corsage, by my husband and [his family]. . . . There was also someone from the *Great Falls Tribune* who came and took pictures and did a story. We ended up on the front page!"

The couple remained in Great Falls for two days before making the journey to Cut Bank and their new home, located in a converted grain elevator. After the guests left, the work of settling in began in earnest. "I went into a grocery store and tried to order. . . . The butcher said, 'Ma'am, I don't know what you are saying.' This went back and forth for a while until he asked me to write it down. He read it and said, 'Oh, you must be from back East.' I said, 'Well, . . . yes.' 'Boston?' he guessed. I said, 'Oh no, much further east than Boston.' He then said, 'There is nothing further east than Boston.' 'Oh yes, there is!' I finally told him I was from England!"

Among the more difficult aspects of Ruth's new life was homesickness, especially for her parents, but the women of Cut Bank helped make her transition to Montana life easier. Ruth felt deep gratitude to those who took her around and showed her the ropes.

Ruth and Wendell remained in Cut Bank until 1949, when his employer, the Union Oil Company, transferred him to Billings. In Billings Ruth met a dozen other war brides—from England, Ireland, France, and Australia—with whom she built strong friendships.

The Poores lived in Billings for the rest of their lives, raising six children. Wendell passed away in 1976. Ruth, who later married William Batchen, lived for nearly twenty more years surrounded by her children and grandchildren. She died on February 7, 2004.


While Ruth Batchen's story parallels the experiences of other Montana war brides, each woman faced unique challenges—language barriers, conflicting approaches to child rearing, isolation, and even maltreatment. The women interviewed for the Montana War Brides Oral History Project immigrated from France, England, Wales, Poland, and Australia. They were raised in urban settings and in small villages. They graduated from college or ended their formal education as teenagers. Whatever their background, the war brides faced challenges with determination and strength. Their personal struggles in turn strengthened their families and the communities they came to call home.



Courtesy the Ruth Poore Batchen Family

Although greeted in New York in 1946 by protestors angry that American soldiers had married foreign women, Ruth met a warm reception in Montana. By 1953, when she and her two oldest children visited New York en route to see family in England, she felt at home in her adopted country.

In addition to providing a unique perspective on wartime Montana, the war bride interviews complement the Montana Historical Society's military history collections, which include soldiers' records dating back to the 1870s, soldiers' journals and letters home, reminiscences, and a series of interviews titled *Twentieth-Century Montana Veterans*.

The Montana War Brides Oral History Project interviews are available in the Montana Historical Society Archives in audiotape and transcript form. Researchers can also purchase copies for personal use. Contact Jodie Foley at [jofoley@state.mt.us](mailto:jofoley@state.mt.us) or (406) 444-6779 for more information. 

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