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. 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

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.

ete out the meals for the four of us. . . . It was difficult. . . . You think you can’t get by, but you can.”

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

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 con-
scripted 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 week-
end 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 com-
unities near duty stations. 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.”

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, Monta-
tana, Wendell’s hometown. For Ruth and Wendell, prepa-
ration involved rigorous interviews with military per-
sonnel, 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 de-
mobilized and returned to
Montana. Ruth, meanwhile,
remained in England await-
ing her paperwork and an
assignment to a transport
ship. In March 1946, after
nearly six months of wait-
ing, Ruth reported to the
orientation held at camps
near Tidworth, England, in-
famous for their poor con-
ditions. 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 thou-
sand 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. When they arrived in New York,
“it was sultry, hot,” Ruth remembered,
“and we weren’t expecting that. I was wear-
ing 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.”

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.

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 protesters greeted the women with shouts of “Go back to Eng-
land.” Ibid., 80.
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.


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.

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 jfoley@state.mt.us or (406) 444-6779 for more information.

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