

BARRY GI BRIDES MAGAZINE

Number One

November 2009



Barry & District News January 1946

Welcome!

My name is Glenn Booker. I live in Barry, south Wales, UK and I am responsible for this magazine. My immediate aim and purpose is to share some of the stories of the Barry women *that I know of* who married American service personnel during and after World War Two. I do hope that this little publication will run for a few months. We shall see! But first things first (for the uninitiated):

What was a GI and what was a GI Bride?

Stamped on the equipment of US Army soldiers were the words: "Government Issue". Somehow and sometime this was transferred to the men who used the equipment so that they became known as GI's. For our purpose GI refers more generally to American servicemen who married British women whether they were Army, Navy or Air Force – or US merchant marine or even War Department civilians! Perhaps "War Brides" would be more accurate – those marriages which came about as a result of the war.

How many such GI/War Brides were there?

From the UK as a whole 40,000 women married Americans. From south Wales over 700 became GI brides. And from Barry and district? There were fifty six Anglo-American weddings so far as I can tell.

Why take an interest in this subject?

Because the decision that these women made to marry men from overseas would make a world of difference to them and their children – but also it would make an incalculable difference to their families left behind: to their parents, foremost, but also to their siblings and their children. In short, they were putting a vast ocean between themselves and their loved ones "Over Here" that could not be *easily* crossed for three decades or so. And of course, when they did return they would be changed people, not just by the usual events of life but by virtue of having been immersed in a *foreign* culture for several years. For instance, their former accents would almost certainly have long gone and their outlook and their ways would be so – DIFFERENT!

In 1946 my mother's sister, Thelma Toomey, married Homer Copeland, so becoming a GI Bride and living most of the remainder of her life in the United States of America. In 2002 I thought that it was high time for me to catch up with her...

Fact

At least 16 women from nearby Penarth married American men.

Journey to Junction City, Kansas, USA, October 2002

- Glenn Booker

Up to 2002, I had met my aunt, Thelma Copeland, only three times in my life. I did not recall much of her 1960 visit when I was four years old. Her 1986 and 1992 trips to the UK had been memorable family occasions, but were too few, to be sure. I decided it was time for me to travel to Junction City, Kansas, USA, to visit her. But things did not turn out as expected...

Sunday October 6th

I spoke to Thelma on the phone to discuss last minute matters. She was looking forward to and preparing for my visit. I was looking forward to asking her questions to fill in the gaps in my knowledge of their past in the USA. All was looking good...

Monday

I flew from London Heathrow to John F Kennedy airport, New York City. From here I was to proceed slowly across the US by train until arriving in Junction City on Friday October 11th.

Tuesday

In the evening I phoned Thelma from my hotel in Baltimore, Maryland, to chat. She was still looking forward to seeing me.

Wednesday

Today I was "incommunicado" as I was on the Amtrak from Washington DC to Chicago and through the night, too.

Fact

Apart from the 56 Barry GI Brides another 15 women from the town became engaged to Americans.

How many of these married their fiancés? I know not.

Thursday

I had about four hours to spend in Chicago while I waited for the train that would take me south to Kansas City. I arrived late in the day. I tried to phone Thelma but no answer.

Fateful Friday

From my journal:

“Decided to phone auntie Thelma. Spoke to Tommy (*her son*). Not ready for BOMBSHELL. She died Tuesday night just hours after I had spoken to her from Baltimore. A severe heart attack – What a tragedy! A shock! All this way after all this time and I miss her by three days! What a shock to the family!”

If Thelma had not died I would have only seen her daughter, Cynthia, who I had met in 1986, and her family, but I now got to meet all my American cousins. Dana and his wife and Doris and their daughter Tanya had flown in from Tacoma, in Washington state, for the funeral, as had, of course, Tommy and his wife Monica.

Saturday & Sunday

The weekend was mainly taken up with seeing friends of Thelma paying their respects.

Monday

My mother and my uncle Brian arrived after lunch on the Roadrunner. It was a very, very difficult arrival for them, of course, as they were used to being met on previous visits by Thelma and Homer (who had died in 2001).

Tuesday October 15th: The Funeral

It was a sunny day, with a blue sky but with a cold. Thankfully it warmed up by the afternoon. Many tears were shed today.

We went to the Funeral Chapel for a fitting service. “The green, green grass of home”, by Tom Jones and, “Country road take me home,” by John Denver were played. A

moving poem was read by Doris. Then to the cemetery at nearby Fort Riley where Thelma's remains were laid next to Homer's, then back to Junction City and the Veterans of Foreign Wars hall for refreshments. After that it was back to the house where I sat by myself for awhile in the afternoon sun feeling tired and sad. There was to be no catching up with Thelma. Only her family would be able to fill in the gaps and help paint the portrait of a GI Bride.



Thelma Copeland c. 1947

Looking Back

Now of course I was definitely not the most affected person at Thelma's funeral as compared with the rest of the mourners I hardly knew her. But that **was** the point of my journey. I had wanted to get to know her better and to talk about her life especially as a War Bride. But it was not to be. I had missed her. But then, in a way, I had "missed" Thelma all my life. She had been the absent aunt in a far off place. I felt more for her siblings, Pat, Brian and Cynthia, who had seen so little of her, really. This was the long term life-long consequence of what had happened in 1946 in Barry, Wales, when Thelma and Homer were married.

More about that next month...

Permission from Dad and Uncle Sam

There were two initial obstacles for the potential GI bride to overcome before she could tie the knot. First there was the matter of the groom-to-be asking the father for the hand of his daughter. Of the 56 Barry GI Brides I know of, at least 34 had fathers to be asked. One wonders how those conversations must have gone! I do know that my paternal grandmother said “no” to an American who asked to marry her daughter!

Then there was obtaining Uncle Sam’s blessing. The US military authorities were concerned about GI’s being exploited by British women, so were wary about granting permission.

“In order to marry, the American soldiers had to get written permission from their Commanding Officer at least two months in advance of the wedding. The Commander’s decision would be based on interviewing the prospective bride. Occasionally senior officers disapproved of war marriages and would make a couple wait several months before granting an interview.”

<http://www.plimsoll.org/SeaPeople/womenandthesea/womenandwar/warbrides.asp>

To use a pardonable pun Uncle Sam’s approach to GI marriages was not exactly, er, uniform as thousands did eventually obtain permission. If the unit of the groom-to-be was shipped to France after D-Day, but before they could marry, then a long wait could ensue although some returned from the front to get married.

Two questions to put to GI Brides:

- 1. How did your parents react?**
- 2. Did Uncle Sam play hardball?**

Fancy that:

Of the 56 Barry Brides 5 (at least) were married in the USA.

To sail to America a GI bride needed:

- A visa, passport, 2 copies of birth certificate, 2 copies of police record and marriage certificate
- Sworn statement from husband that he could support her, with details of salary
- Statement from husband's Commander supporting salary details
- £10 in cash and no more
- Statement from husband's family if he were not yet home that they were willing and able to house her
- Discharge papers if she had served in military
- Evidence that she would get a train ticket to final destination on disembarking

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Home in America

Of course, *virtually all* the GI Brides from the UK went to live in the States after the war. It was a given that the woman would go to the man's country-home-kith and kin and live there. A few returned sooner than expected because their husbands/fiancés had made it clear that they were not wanted when they arrived in the country, usually New York City. A few brides might well have changed their minds before they even boarded ship for the trans-Atlantic voyage. But the Land of the Free was to be their destination.



Arriving at Tidworth Transit Camp

Next month... A Wren Bride

We shall have a look at Miss Betty Farmer who in 1944 became Mrs Betty Nelson and so embarked on the adventure of her lifetime that would lead others of her family to migrate to the US in her wake.



Also: What did the Brides think of the Land “flowing with milk and honey” when they arrived there?

Feedback, please!

What do you think of the *purpose* of this little magazine?

Do you have any questions?

Do you have anything to contribute?

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