



BENZIE SANGMA

Intel  
July 24/04 p.D9 Intelligencer

Had her mother not died the year before, had her older sister not hurt her ankle, and had her father not aroused her defiant spirit with his comment, "Oh, go right ahead. You won't get further than Shannonville, anyway," Gwen Lazier (now Braidwood) probably might not have made history.

But Braidwood, 18 years old at the time and with no prior horse riding experience, accepted the challenge and went on an unprecedented adventure that late spring of 1924. She was chosen to go by horseback from Belleville to Washington D.C. to meet the then President of the United States, Calvin Coolidge. Her mission was to deliver to President Coolidge an invitation from the Mayor of Belleville (W.C.Mikel at the time) to attend the two-day festivities in the city beginning on June 16 marking the 140th anniversary of the United Empire Loyalists settling in Quinte. Her trip which covered about 1,120 km from Belleville to Washington D.C. was an attempt to represent the manner in which travelling was done as a pioneer.

A member of Belleville's Lazier family was chosen as both sides of the family were UELs who had settled in the area in the late 18th century. Alice, older of the two sisters by four years, was an experienced horserider while Gwen had, up until the event, feared horses and by her own admission, steered clear of them. Fate intervened, however, and propelled Gwen to the fore when her sister wound up with a broken ankle.

"If my mother had been alive at that time she would have never let me go. My older sister said I couldn't go but I told her to shut up and said that I was going. My father was going on a trip to England at the time and he said I could go. So, that was that," smiled 99-year-old Braidwood clasping her hands together as she sat on her recliner attempting to reconstruct the details of her famed adventure 80 years ago.

A gentleman, the area resident recounted, had lent her his former cavalry horse named Tip which she had to go and bring it in herself from a rural farm about eight kilometres out of town.

"It took me a good two hours to bring Tip in," she laughed.

At a benefit concert held at the Griffin's Opera House

in Belleville, a total of \$102.65 was raised to sponsor Lazier's trip, an amount that, as she discovered later, she hardly needed. Dressed in her sister's riding clothes and boots and carrying with her her brother's raincoat, her father's derby hat, a shawl, a dress, pair of slippers and changes of underwear topped with a small Colt revolver, Lazier headed out on her adventure at 3 p.m. on April 24, 1924.

Her route was planned ahead and the trip took her through Shannonville, Napanee, Kingston and the crossing at Cape Vincent, passing through Watertown, Utica, Schenectady, Albany, Renesselaer, Rhinebeck, Poughkeepsie, Peekskill, Yonkers, New York City, Newark,

Trenton, Philadelphia, Wilmington, Elktown, Baltimore, Laurel and finally her destination, Washington, D.C.

"It rained on me a number of times but nothing more than slight showers. I rose early and stopped for breaks along the way. People knew through the newspapers that I was coming to their communities and the city officials offered me meals and a place to stay," recalled Braidwood.

Aside from the two incidents where she had to shoot her revolver into the air as a warning to the four men who were approaching her, and the time she was thrown to the ground when a car in New York side-swiped Tip, she thought her trip went as well as expected.

She recalled feeling much heartened to see many members of the cadet corps in West Point, New York, turn out in the rain lining the streets and waving at her as she passed by. In smaller communities, school children turned out to watch and cheer her on.

On May 30, thirty-six days after she started, she reached Washington and stayed overnight at Raleigh Hotel where she met with reporters, and according to her logbook, went out for dinner with one of them. The next day, May 31, took her to the lawns behind the White House where she met President Coolidge and handed to him the official invitation from the Mayor of Belleville.

"He seemed very friendly. He autographed a book I had with me," said Braidwood. Tip made sure even the President of the United States pay his respects to his friend when he removed with his teeth the hat the president was still wearing at the time he met Lazier.

At the White House, she recalled meeting a Belleville woman who was employed there as a member of the housekeeping staff. This coincidence got Lazier in to see inside the Oval Office.

Lazier left Washington the next morning by train as she had to get back to Belleville in time for the UEL celebrations. By this time she had become fast friends with Tip and she recalled wanting to see to his comfort on their way back home.

"I paid a man \$8 or \$10 not to crate Tip. Only later I was so cross to learn that he was crated and was kept standing all through the trip, about 48 hours. Poor thing collapsed when we got here. He was okay but I wished they hadn't crated him," said Braidwood, shaking her head with remembered indignation.

Her mission complete, she recalled giving Tip back to his owner. The only time she saw him again was five years later when she went to visit him at the farm.

"I called out to him and he still recognized me after all those years," she chuckled. But that was it. Following her adventurous trip to Washington, she never went horseback riding again.

So, what really made Braidwood take on such a mission as a young woman? Her ninety-nine-year-old voice answered, "I was 18 then and that was my idea of fun."