

LETTICE MATILDA BINGHAM

Come down to old Northumberland;  
The hills are very blue;  
And skies as soft as slumberland  
Are waiting there for you:  
The old church bells are ringing,  
And magic's spell is clinging  
To old Northumberland.

There are two more verses in the song which has been sung throughout Northumberland. The words were composed while Lettice Drope was homesick in Western Canada, away from her native county.

Lettice was born in the gay nineties, the third daughter of James Drope and Ida MacPherson. Birthplace was Harwood and death came in 1956 at Cobourg after a courageous struggle against cancer.

When Lettice attended public school in Cobourg a school inspector asked what she intended to do when she grew up.

"I'm going to teach in Cobourg Collegiate," she said.

That ambition was realized in 1937, when Lettice pioneered in teaching a new subject at Cobourg Collegiate and Central Public School. It was accomplished after a titanic struggle with school authority which was diffident about introducing music in the schools.

Lettice had prepared herself for the task. She persevered against criticism and myopic outlook.

At two-and-one-half the petite Irish-Canadian lassie made her debut as a fairy on stage in a pantomime at Christmas. In fact, the Drope home was a fairyland adventure; the mother, an accomplished musician, involved the family in music and acting.

Little Lettice won a prize for reading, and tickets were given her to a "Punch and Judy" show by a "medicine man". She learned about Shakespeare when her brother played a part on stage.

J. Edward Fisher, when organist and choir master at the Methodist Church, Cobourg, gave Lettice piano lessons. She was eight. Emma, an elder sister, married the organist. The couple lived in the old Minaker house, opposite St. Peter's church, where Lettice stayed while attending public school in Cobourg.

In 1949, when relating her career, Lettice said:

"One summer when I was trying my high school entrance examinations, there was a large military camp assembled just north of town. Everything was very gay and bands played all day long. The Arlington and Columbian hotels were filled with American guests; among them, General and Mrs. T. D. Bingham and their youngest son, William McKee Bingham.

"My brother-in-law, J. Edward Fisher, often spoke of McKee Bingham, the tenor, for whom he played accompaniments at musicales in the Cornell home."

There was another interesting sidelight in the early Cobourg experience. Lettice was acquainted with Beatrice Lillie. One Sunday, Mrs. Lillie invited Lettice and her sister, Lottie, in for tea. Lettice sang "The Holy City". Bea remarked, "If only I had a voice like that, I might become world famous!" (Bea did become world famous as a comedienne).

When J. Edward Fisher was appointed organist of the Metropolitan church, Regina, Lettice went west with the Fishers. Here the talented young performer was a member of the collegiate choir. Calla Laird was a classmate. Senator Laird, a former editor of The Cobourg Sentinel-Star, often entertained Cobourg people.

Lettice learned French in Regina, a colorful city in

the early 1900s with red-coated mounted police, Indians in full regalia at the fairs; and musicales on Sundays at the Fisher home.

Lettice won the gold medal for contralto voice at the Regina festival, became a church soloist, and was a member of the Saskatchewan University drama club. Summers were spent teaching at prairie schools, but transportation to the vast rural acres wasn't provided.

"I rode horseback," said Lettice, "and I had many a wild ride over trackless prairie on a restless pinto pony."

In 1915, when home at Harwood, Ontario, Lettice met William McKee Bingham, a New York teacher on vacation; the tenor who had performed in the Cornell home. It was here where Katharine Cornell, America's greatest tragedienne, spent summers with her uncle and aunt. When the Cornells moved from the mansion, it became the site for The Hatfield Hall Girls' School, and following closure housed the radio station (1956), and is now in apartments.

The 'tenor' visitor became teacher to Lettice. With family approval, Lettice went to New York for study; joining a Rehearsal Club and Actors' Equity. An exciting time followed as singer and dancer in various productions; among these Lettice performed as a peeress at the "coronation of Anne Boleyn".

"We were utterly spoiled," recalled Lettice, "with invitations to professional matinees, banquets and private parties." Then after theatre the Zeigfield Follies held stage on the roof garden of the New Amsterdam Theatre. The "Follies" comprised "25 most beautiful women in the world".

After 64 performances of "King Henry the Eighth", roles in "The Merchant of Venice" and "The Merry Wives of Windsor", Lettice returned to Harwood.

In Canada during the silent movie period, Lettice sang

back stage for Lillian Gish and Cleopatra scenes.

In 1917, Lettice married her vocal teacher, William McKee Bingham, in Port Hope. There was no resident Anglican minister in Harwood. The Bingham's went to Philadelphia where the husband was soloist at the Academy of Music.

Summers were spent at Harwood until 1928 when Bingham was appointed consul at Peterborough, and Lettice was engaged on the staff of the Toronto Conservatory of Music.

As a specialist, Lettice Bingham, with a Licentiate Degree from Trinity College of Music, London, England, came to teach music in the schools of Cobourg in 1937. Here among club and other community activities, Lettice pioneered summer theatre in Victoria Hall.

William McKee Bingham predeceased his wife. Daughter Marguerite lived with her mother near the four corners, King Street west. One day at the climax of her tenure, Lettice pointed out:

"Loved ones have passed on, and life is not the gay adventure it was, but I have enjoyed my work in Cobourg schools. It was difficult at first. Music has now become an important subject and I think we all agree, a necessary and useful one."

(Sources of Information: The Drope family; personal friendship; Cobourg Collegiate West; The Cobourg Sentinel-Star).

\*The Hills Of Old Northumberland

was set to music by  
J. Edward Fisher in 1934.