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Roberta Salter, left, grew up in the shadow of her mother, Aimee Semple McPherson, shown here in a 1938 file photo. McPherson blazed her way to fame in an era when women remained at home.



AIMEE SEMPLE MCPHERSON

Preacher's devotion recalled by daughter

The Salford native wouldn't even ask the people for gas money, Roberta Salter says of her mother.

By Anne London
The London Free Press

WOODSTOCK — Roberta Salter, the daughter of Oxford County's most famous native, remembers her mother as a dedicated evangelist.

"She would drop everything to travel across the country to preach without even asking the people for gas money," Salter says of her mother, Aimee Semple McPherson.

She grew up in the shadow of her mother, who blazed her way along the sawdust trail in an era when most women remained at home. Salter was born in Hong Kong after the 1909 death of her father, missionary Robert Semple, and spent her youth traveling to tent meetings where her mother preached.

Sister Aimee, as she came to be known, was born on a farm near Salford, south of Ingersoll, in 1890. She was found dead in a California hotel room of an accidental overdose of sleeping pills in 1944.

Now 79 and living in New York, Salter was here to view the Woodstock Little Theatre's production of a play about her mother by Woodstock playwright Bill Butt. "She was a feminist and she had an exciting personality," Butt says of the evangelist.

Salter, who attended a performance Friday at Woodstock Museum, says she was pleased with the play — which she called "a monumental task" — although it may have moved along too quickly for her liking.

FOUNDED CHURCH: The Aimee Semple McPherson story is indeed a monumental one. On the way from Salford to California, she founded a church which today has 783 congregations in North America, more than 2,000 foreign missions, 30 schools, 32 bible colleges and a radio network which broadcasts daily in 27 countries.

McPherson also drew criticism for her show business approach to preaching and provoked questions about her lifestyle, which included three marriages. One of the biggest controversies was in 1926 when she explained a 32-day disappearance by saying she was kidnapped amid rumors it was staged to cover up an affair.

Roberta says when her mother returned to Canada after her father's death, she married Harold McPherson. For a while, Harold McPherson worked alongside his famous wife. When the couple arrived in a new town, it was McPherson who would pitch the tent and build the seats.

QUEEN OF THE MAY: "And then my mother would walk to the pulpit like the queen of the May. And what was he? People used to look at him and say, 'There's the preacher's husband.'"

After the couple divorced, Sister Aimee took Roberta and Rolf, a son born when she was married to McPherson, to California where she became pastor of Angelus Temple with a congregation of 5,300.

The disappearance of her mother in 1926 and front-page newspaper stories of the incident left a deep impression on Salter, then 16. "In those days, the news boys used to shout 'extra, extra, read all about it' when the papers came out. We were always part of the extra. That's why I say I developed 'extra' phobia."