

A full life and a long one

Martha DeBruyn, mother of 18 children, celebrates her 90th birthday

STORY AND PHOTO BY JENNIFER ENRIGHT

Miltonian Martha DeBruyn will be celebrating her 90th birthday on September 25 and in honour of that she will be feted at an open house on September 24 at the Milton Legion beginning at 2 pm.

But the longtime Halton resident is not only remarkable for her age. She's also a standout in her multiple role as mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. And soon she will add yet another role to her list - that of great great-grandmother once her first great great-grandchild is born next month.

The numbers in DeBruyn's case tell a surprising story. There aren't many families around, even among those that are large, that include among their number 18 children. Then add to that 36 grandchildren and 43 great-grandchildren.

Daughter Leeni Boughton, wife of Milton Councillor Mike Boughton, says her mother is "pretty special" for raising 18 kids. She says her mom "did without a lot for her kids."

Leeni grew up in the Brookville area with a long list of siblings that included Dina, Betty, Garrett, Tina, Martine, John, Madeline, Koosge; Peter, Tony, Rina, Doris, Larry, Mary Anne, Debbie, Theresa, and Chris Junior. Local people knew her family as being the "one with all those kids." And at one time, Leeni says there were seven DeBruyns attending school at Holy Rosary in Milton.

The DeBruyns were originally from Holland and the family didn't immigrate to Canada until 1950. Prior to that, they lived in the south of Holland where Martha and her husband Christopher were born and brought up and where they met and married. In her native Holland, Martha would give birth to 11 of her 18 children.

Ironically Martha, mother to so many children herself, remembers a motherless childhood. At the age of three, her own mother died and she lived in a predominately male household. "I had three brothers," recalls Martha. "I was always alone."

The trip the DeBruyns made to Canada in 1950 is one that stands out in her mind. They made a transatlantic crossing by boat, landing in Halifax. From there they boarded a train, but there was a slight change in plans. It seems the people that were going to sponsor them in Winnipeg, Manitoba had backed out of the arrangement. Instead they ended up in the Milton area where the Canadian immigration department had made arrangements for them to live in a house in Brookville.

Although they were happy to find a place with four walls for their large brood, it was a bit of a shock when they arrived at their new residence. Martha, who at the time was pregnant with her 12th child, can laugh about it now. "I still can see it," says Martha, who remembers that evening so many years ago when she arrived at her new home with 11 children. It was a rainy night as she recalls. "There was an old couch. It would be worth a lot of money now. It was an antique. And a stove with no pipes."

Fortunately, the DeBruyns received assistance from local residents, among them another Dutch immigrant, Claus Van Tol, who lived in the Campbellville area. Martha's husband and Van Tol, who became good friends, found the needed stovepipes and they brought back beds so that the children would have somewhere to sleep.

The DeBruyns decided to remain in Halton where Mr. DeBruyn found employment, first as a farmhand, then at the Acton Tannery, and finally at the Ford plant where he would work for just over 25 years.

A widow now, Martha is surrounded by memories of her family as well as a local community that assisted her when she needed help. She says it wasn't exactly easy bringing up 18 kids, but "everybody knew I had a big family."

Today, at 90 years of age, she's proud of her family and she remains thankful to those people who helped her many years ago when her children were still young. "People were really good to us."



PHOTO BY JENNIFER ENRIGHT
Milton resident Martha DeBruyn, who turns 90 this month, came to Canada in 1950 from her native Holland. DeBruyn, who raised 18 children, left the Netherlands with her husband and 11 children in 1950. Here she is holding a picture (on the left) that shows the family shortly before they left Holland as well as a family photo taken at one of their get togethers when they lived in Canada.

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