

Bellville Intelligencer  
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From the Past  
By Marg Haylock Capon – Osprey New Network

## Gwendolen Rides To Washington

Gwendolen Lazer 19, rode from Belleville to Washington D.C. to present President Calvin Coolidge an invitation From the Canadian people to the 140<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the landing of the United Empire Loyalists in Quinte

Gwendolen Lazier Braidwood, who made history in 1924 when as a Belleville teen she travelled 1200 km (720 miles) on horseback to Washington D.C. to hand-deliver an invitation to U.S. President Calvin Coolidge, has died. She was 102.

In the book “When Years Would Count Us Old”, a collection of stories profiling Prince Edward Country senior citizens of achievement, a Belleville native and former Wellington resident described her journey.

“It was the 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Empire Loyalist landing in the Bay of Quinte area and (Belleville) Mayor William Mikel wanted some advertising for it” she said of the occasion, on June 14, 1924, to mark the settlement of Upper Canada.

“He thought the hand delivery of invitations would be good publicity and he knew that my sister could ride, so he asked her to make the trip to Washington. She was to carry an invitation to the celebration of the event to the president.”

“I was in Toronto and when I came home my sister said she had been asked to make the trip. She wasn’t strong enough to do it,” said Mrs. Braidwood, recalling that she volunteered to make the ride in her sister’s place.

Both her father and sister scoffed at the idea and for very good reason. She had never ridden a horse.

“When you are 18 and some says you can’t do something, that is all it takes to make you do it,” she said.

Preparation for the ride, the longest continuous journey of its kind on record in 1924 began when “Miss Gwen,” as she was nicknamed, obtained a suitable mount.

I had had no experience with horses. I was scared to death of them. “My sister was a good horsewoman and my grandmother could drive a four-in-hand,” she recalled, adding that her great grandfather, William Weller, had run the Weller stagecoach line.

The horse supplied for Miss Gwen was an aged cavalry mount name Tip that had once been owned by an army colonel. He was quiet and well-mannered.

Before final approval for the ride was given, Miss Gwen was required to go riding with a "Major Bumstead," then head of the Ontario Provincial Police.

"He took me along the road by the school for the deaf and a train was coming. The horses started to gallop and I closed my eyes and hung on. When we got them stopped, I asked Major Bumstead if I could ride and he said 'of course you can ride'," she recalled.

Gwendolen Braidwood's historic ride to Washington started on April 24<sup>th</sup> 1924, with a rousing send-off from city hall in Belleville.

The young rider was attired in her sister's habit and boots and her father's derby. Tip was tacked up in a western saddle and English bridle.

Miss Gwen's saddlebags contained a pair of curling tongs, two changes of undergarments, two blouses, one black crepe dress with removable sleeves, patent leather pumps and a Spanish shawl. For protection she carried a small revolver.

Her adventure-packed journey took 32 days.

"You couldn't make the ride today. Even then, I had trouble feeding Tip. I'd buy a bushel of oats and feed him as I could." she said, recalling that she spent the first night of her journey at an inn in Shannonville.

As she rode toward Washington and word of her journey spread, enthusiastic crowds turned out and she was given keys to the cities through which she passed. At West Point, N.Y., the entire cadet corps was turned out for her.

"Outside Philadelphia, I was met by General Butler, retired head of the United States Marine Corps. Wishing to impress him, I announced that at Belleville we had the largest distillery in the British Empire. There was dead silence, then General Butler explained that he had been sent to "clean up Philadelphia."

Only once during her marathon ride was Miss Gwen required to draw her gun. She was a crack shot, having gone hunting with her brothers on many occasions.

A car load of boys met her on a back road, parked in front of her, then demanded money.

"I took out my revolver and shot out their rear tire, then used my spurs on Tip for the only time on the ride," she said.

When Miss Gwen reached Washington, she was escorted to the White House where she delivered the city of Belleville's invitation to President Coolidge.

A photograph of the young courier being greeted by the president, while astride Tip, was taken upon her arrival in Washington.

"It is the only picture you will ever see of Coolidge smiling. Tip had just taken his hat and dropped it on the ground" she said.

Gwendolen Lazier and her horse made a triumphant return, by train, to Belleville, where they were greeted by cheering crowds.

Mrs. Braidwood recalled that Tip was later sold to a little boy who lived near Belleville.

"He was an invalid and he had begged his parent to buy the horse. I went out to see him 10 years later with Toronto reporter, Farley Faulker. I whistled and Tip picked up his ears and came right over to me," she said.

Mrs. Braidwood and her husband Lt. Cmdr. Jack Braidwood lived in Wellington for several years. Following his death she remained a resident of the village and also became a familiar face in Picton, where she volunteered at the Prince Edward County Memorial Hospital Auxiliary's Second Time Around shop.

A funeral service was held at St. Andrew's Anglican Church in Wellington on Oct. 17. (2007).

As well as outliving her husband, Mrs. Braidwood was predeceased by brothers Stephen and Fried and sister Alice Jacobson.

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*Transcribed by Don Galna U.E.*

*Col. Edward Jessup Branch*  
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