

Lily McBAIN

NOMINEE: Lily Kate McBAIN

MEMBER SPOUSE: James McBAIN, # 210

DETACHMENT(S): Bruce Mines 1928 – 1940, Fort Frances 1946 – 1948

NOMINATOR: Bonnie LACHAPELLE (grand daughter)

SILENT PARTNER STORY

Jim McBain spent his entire OPP career in northern Ontario, and his wife Lily and their three children accompanied him from location to location. Two of those locations, Bruce Mines and Fort Frances, were more remote than others, and Lily was called upon to perform many tasks on behalf of the OPP.

This is Lily's story, the wife of an officer posted to remote detachments in northern Ontario during the early years of the OPP. Lily Kate Higgs was born in Guilford, Surrey, England, and in 1920 married her fiancée, Jim McBain. They would have three children in the ensuing years.

In 1927, at the age of 28, Jim started his career with the OPP, with Lily at his side. Their first posting was to Capreol in 1928, where Jim was placed in charge. Later that year Jim, Lily and family moved to Bruce Mines, where they stayed until 1940. At Bruce Mines, many tasks fell upon Lily to support her husband's police duties. Jim only made \$100 a month at the start of his career and money was tight. If an officer needed a car he was required to buy it and pay for gas and repairs, all for a stipend of ten cents a mile. Through the years Lily took care of the money and paying the bills.

The job of a police officer back then was a 24-hour, 7-days a week job, so there was not much family time. This affected not only Lily but the children too, as sometimes they would not see their father for weeks at a time. For many of those years in the north Jim travelled by foot, snowshoes, canoe, horse, train, plane or motor vehicle. Lily used to worry about him when he was out in the bush, sometimes for a week at a time, not knowing if he was okay.

Every Sunday morning Jim used to type out his report to send to Toronto. Lily would read it to him so he could type it one-finger style. None of his reports were ever returned to him for corrections or otherwise. Lily would answer the phone when he was out taking care of police work. Through the Great Depression years, many men who were riding the rails would be sent to Jim and Lily's house to get a meal or sometimes to sleep in a warm bed in the old jail in Bruce Mines. She helped feed many people in need through these years. Lily even took in a family, mother and daughter, for the winter months, as their home in Bruce Mines wasn't suitable for the winter.

Lily's daughter, Sylvia was born on January 1st and as most of the children in the community of Bruce Mines were fairly poor, they often did not get anything for Christmas. Lily invited numerous children to her daughter's birthday party each year, and then would go all out and make sure these youngsters each got a gift, candy, a piece of cake, and a prize from the fish pond she set up. One of Sylvia's friends had kept the invitation for over 70 years because it meant so much to her.

After spending a few years in the Sudbury area, Jim was promoted to Corporal in 1946, and he and the family were transferred to Fort Frances. While there, he could not find housing for his family, so they arranged for the most unique living arrangements. Dahn D. Higley (*O.P.P., the history of the Ontario Provincial Police Force*, 1984, pg. 335) described the situation: "Accommodation was so difficult to find in 1946 that newly promoted Corporal J.S. McBain, on arriving at Fort Frances, was obliged to take over the tiny detachment building for a home for himself and his family. He moved the police post equipment to the courthouse and occupied the premises with the two cells serving as bedrooms. "

Higley notes that in many parts of the province, due to post-war inflation, constables paid as much as half of their salaries for accommodations. Lily and her family lived like this for the entire time they were in Fort Frances. Sylvia recalled one humorous memory of a time as a young child when the family was crossing the nearby U.S. border and the Customs Officer jokingly asked her if she had been in jail lately? She frankly replied that indeed that is where she slept last night.

Lily played a pivotal role in the career of her husband, Jim, performing various tasks on behalf of the OPP as he worked at various remote detachments across northern Ontario. At these postings, she was left alone with her family at detachment, often for days at a time. She often found herself performing

nursing duties or providing emotional support to her family and others. Once, while trying to arrest someone, a man bit Jim's arm and she had to act as nurse, soaking his infected arm in a baby bath with Epsom salts. Another time he was almost shot in the stomach, but fortunately the man had left the safety on and the gun did not fire. There were many such occasions.

Lily was expected to answer the detachment phone when it rang and the door when people knocked. When female prisoners were brought to the cells she was called upon to search them. Lily helped to ensure her husband's reports to headquarters were always in order and none were ever returned. She acted as nursemaid, made meals for prisoners and other visitors, and received no compensation food preparation or clean up. She found it gratifying to provide meals for work-related visitors such as officers and other officials, but also to the down and out, especially during the Depression years.

For over two years at Fort Frances Detachment, Lily and the children lived at the detachment, using two jail cells as bedrooms. Again, when Jim was away, sometimes for days at a time, she was in charge. Throughout his career, Lily was never sure what she would have done to raise three children if anything had happened to her husband. Nothing was ever said though, for she was his Silent Partner.

About Fort Francis

With a history that goes back over 200 years to the fur trade of the 18th century, the border town of Fort Frances located 347 kilometers west of Thunder Bay on Highway 11 and is currently home to just under 8,000 people (2016). A popular fishing destination, Fort Frances has played host to the *Fort Frances Canadian Bass Fishing Championship* since 1994.