

Leading Aircraftman Neil Emerson McLaughlin

Regimental # 171886 (RCAF)



1914 – 1969

Neil McLaughlin was the first child born to Ira and Ellen ('Nellie' Currie) McLaughlin on April 22, 1914 in Grenfell, Saskatchewan, where his parents had married and lived on a dairy farm.

Ira's parents (originally "MacLaughlin" until Ira's generation) hailed from Scotland and emigrated to a farm at Clyde River, near Charlottetown, P.E.I., Canada.

From there, Ira went west to Grenfell where he married Nellie, from Almonte, Ontario, in 1913 and they had three sons, Neil, Elmer (Beezer), and Earl (Hap). In 1926 the family moved to Bezanson, and had a dairy and grain farm.

Sisters Jean (Herbert Kimble), Joan (Russell Ames), and Helen (Alan Redwood) were born in Grande Prairie, Alberta. Later Ira, Nellie and the youngest daughter Helen moved to Grande Prairie town where Ira worked as a salesman for the J. M. Crummy Garage and began a political career, sitting as the local Social Credit member of the Alberta legislature for 27 years from 1946 until 1973.

Neil attended school in Bezanson and later, high school in town, renting a house on the same street that his young family would later live on. Neil's early ambition to become a medical doctor was frustratingly denied due to lack of family funds for what would have been expensive years of training in a distant city. Years later, that circumstance was lamented publicly by father Ira in a speech he made in the Alberta Legislature in support for the establishment of a new student loan program. Neil initially worked on the family farm and at other jobs in the area.

At 20, Neil met Elizabeth (Betty) Wales, 15, who lived at Glen Leslie. Betty's father was sufficiently concerned by their mutual attraction that he sent Betty to Edmonton to finish high school. Because Betty was unwilling to ask her father's permission to marry, she and Neil waited until Betty turned 21! They married on August 8, 1940 on the farm where Betty had grown up in a two-story log homestead house that her father Ross Wales had built. The newlyweds set up their home in Belloy, Alberta (ENE of Wanham, and now essentially a ghost town), where Neil had become a United Grain Growers agent/grain buyer a year earlier. Their first child, Aileen, was born in Grande Prairie on April 3, 1942.

Neil volunteered to join the war effort and was enlisted into the RCAF in summer 1942 as a Leading Aircraftman or LAC. His aptitudes led to his selection as a mechanic-technician of the new technology called radar, which required intensive training courses in Edmonton and Saskatoon. Betty and the baby were able to accompany him during training. The RCAF granted him leave in fall of 1942 to help with the harvest.

Assigned to the 172 Squadron, Neil embarked for the UK in June of 1943. After a few months there, he was sent to Gibraltar, and from there to the Portuguese Azores islands which was an important outpost during the Battle of the Atlantic. He subsequently served in Limavady, Ireland and Malvern, England before returning home after the war in late 1945. While he was away, Betty and Aileen lived on the Wales family farm in a new modern house just built by her father.

Upon his return from the service, Neil again found work as an elevator agent with United Grain Growers, this time in Beaverlodge, where the second child, Ross Ira, named after both grandfathers, was born on August 28, 1946.

In 1947, Neil bought a quarter section with an existing house (still with "outdoor plumbing") at Glen Leslie, Alberta under the Veterans Land Act. That house nestled between the Somme School allotment and the Glen Leslie log school which had become the local church.

Neil and Betty also acquired an adjacent quarter section next to land owned by Betty's siblings. Now all four Wales children, Betty and brothers Alfred, Charlie and Jack, as well as their father Ross, owned interconnecting land.

The family lived and Neil worked the farm from 1946 until 1952. Daughter Gail and son William were born September 25, 1947 and July 20, 1949 respectively. In 1952 Neil continued to run the farm but again also took on a position as elevator agent to the UGG, this time in Grande Prairie. The family moved into town to live in a house (indoor plumbing!) that the company renovated close to Neil's work at the elevator. Daughter Bonnie's birth on December 15, 1955 brought the nuclear family number to seven.

A well-respected member of the business and farming community, Neil was often consulted for his knowledge of farming and grain marketing. A proud family man, he brought friends, relatives, and business acquaintances home for lunch or supper, sometimes even unannounced to wife Betty, who took it all in stride along with feeding the brood of five children. He was a member of the Smoky Royal Canadian Legion and of the Grande Prairie Masons.

Neil ran the GP UGG elevator from 1952 until 1964 except for the last years when he was appointed as the company district superintendent. Finding that position took him away from home too much, and also disliking the collection duties, he resigned and in 1964 he and Betty built a new house for the family to live in on the farm.

The farm was then expanded by purchasing and renting several other quarters in the area, some 15 miles away and more. Besides farming his core ten quarters and rented land, he did farming work on Riverview Ranch Co. land, and farmed a nearby quarter owned by daughter Aileen and her husband Gordon Bayley as well as brother Elmer's 3 1/2 quarters, sometimes employing Elmer's sons. Neil was generously supportive of his brother Elmer.

Neil had a strong entrepreneurial spirit. While also working with UGG and farming, he partnered with Charlie Moon, one of Betty's uncles, and Arnold Christie, a former UGG employee in Calgary, in the company that they had named Riverview Ranch Co. Riverview ran cattle on a lease south of the Smoky River and owned other land that included a section near Debolt called "Cranberry Lake Ranch". They also built corrals and a watering system on brother Elmer's. They grew potatoes, turnips, cereal grains, and hay on the Smoky River flats, utilizing a warehouse on the creek bank near the train trestle in Grande Prairie for storage, washing, waxing, and bagging. There came a fire that destroyed the building and contents that ended the venture.

Separate from Riverview, Neil owned a caterpillar crawler tractor and contracted government work building roads on mountainsides in B.C. and constructing the much-celebrated "Whitecourt cut-off" highway from Valleyview to Whitecourt connecting a much shorter route from GP to Edmonton. Sometimes brother-in-law Russell Ames was employed to drive the cat (sister Joan), and luckily survived when it rolled down a steep hill when he was driving it.

Neil saw his first four children launched, walking daughters Aileen (1960) and Gail (1967) down the aisle, seeing son Ross married and through fourth year university and son Bill graduate high school, and welcoming the first four grandchildren. Bonnie, the youngest child was still only aged 13 and attending Bezanson school when tragedy struck.

In early 1969 Neil was found to have a fast-growing and inoperable cancerous brain tumour. Radiation and chemotherapy treatment at the Cross Cancer Hospital in Edmonton did not help. Doctors at the time would/could not prescribe morphine or the like to ease his constant extreme pain. Paralyzed on one side, and rendered speechless, he passed away at only age 55 in the Grande Prairie Hospital on May 23, 1969.

Neil is remembered by his family as a very generous father and parent who respected, along with his wife Betty, the autonomy and personalities of each of his children. He was buried in the Glen Leslie Cemetery, and his wife Betty was buried beside him in 2018.

Submitted by Bonnie (McLaughlin) LaValley (April 8, 2021)
Written by Neil's children