

From Stranger to Gander Icon - The Toytman story

(By Robert G Pelley, 2025-01-27
bobsganderhistory.com)

Today, a 27th of January, is an appropriate date to present this story, as it is the time when the survivors of the Holocaust celebrate their reprieve and pray for those who did not make it through. But to begin, I take little credit for putting this story to paper. It is more than anything reconstruction of information I have received from many different sources over the years. A list of these sources is given at the end of the article.

The story starts with Bill Toytman as a kid in Poland. On 01 September 1939 Hitler's troupes invaded the country. By 23 September, the Polish forces were utterly defeated. The Nazi started their round-up of persons of Jewish extraction. The Nazis killed his parents, three sisters and a brother. Bill got caught a first time but managed to sneak out of the concentration camp. But he got caught again and was slated for an upcoming execution. But being a slight fellow of only 11 years old, he escaped again, by crawling through a road or sewer culvert.

He got picked by Soviet partisans and ended up in the Soviet Army. His "entrepreneurship" can be envisaged by the fact that he became a sergeant in the Soviet Army – at 15, directing men sometimes twice his age.

At the end of the war, he immigrated to Canada, coming in via Halifax, with all his worldly possessions in a greenish-brown rucksack. This rucksack never left him and could be generally seen over on the floor of his office, next to his desk. He ended up in Montreal, where he met the love of his life, Rose. They were given much help by the Jewish Community in Montreal, but Bill, for some reason, maybe because there were still many Americans still there, moved to St. John's, hoping to cater in particular to Jewish families.

According to my father, Bill found that there were not that many Jewish families, that they were well integrated into the local society and that local businesses serviced well the population. But he heard about a place called Gander. Gander was on the verge of becoming civilianised. Bill learned that civil aviation was about to, literally, take off. While the wartime workers were slowly leaving Gander, they would soon be replaced by new civilians. And they had few places to shop.

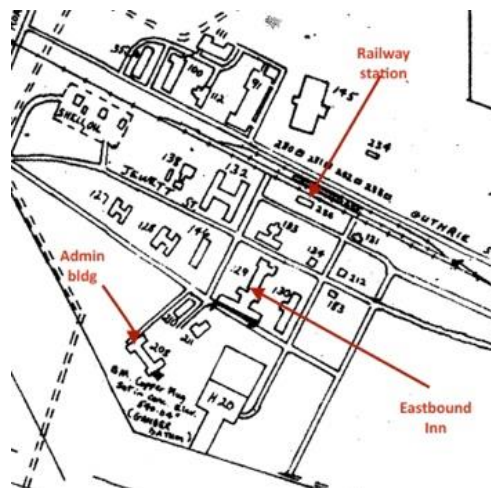
The actual date of Bill's arrival is not perfectly clear but appears to be summer or autumn of 1952. This fellow, the ultimate salesman, had no problem whatsoever making "cold calls". When he got off the train in Gander, he had no place in particular to go. So he spied houses across the tracks on Guthrie Road and, carrying his brown oversize suitcase, headed for the first one and knocked on the door. It was the residence of Clarence Lannon, his wife Vera and their six children.

Bill very soon started working out of a room in the house on the RAF side of Gander owned by Cy Oates, who was now operating Joey Smallwoods' piggery. Here is photo of Rose at age 20 in the doorway of that house. The kids are Louise Oates and Marilyn Knee.



This dwelling place being rather crowded, Mr Oates found him space in the piggery where he set up his first proper store.

The piggery store was a good step in the development of business but a bit off in one corner of the airport. Bill therefore moved his business in 1953 to a building on what was then a main drag. This building at 129 Pattison was better known as the "Eastbound Inn", as it served as accommodation for crews ferrying aircraft to England during the War. It would appear that at this point, he sold mostly articles of interest to women and toys though there were a few men's sundries such as socks and ties. Jim Butler once mentioned going there to buy his first water pistol.



Soon after his moving to the Eastbound Inn, he formed a partnership with Beulah Milley who had worked at the Royal Stores, a St. John's company with branches around the province. It would appear that Beulah minded the store while Bill spent his time on the road. Beulah also aided Rose learn about running a business and improving her English.

But "Old Gander" in the mid -50s was on its last legs. A new town was about to be built. There was no choice but to move to the new town. Bill Toytman caught on right away and made plans to move as quickly as possible. The following photos show the store, the first in the shopping centre, in the very early stage in 1955. Behind is nothing but trees.



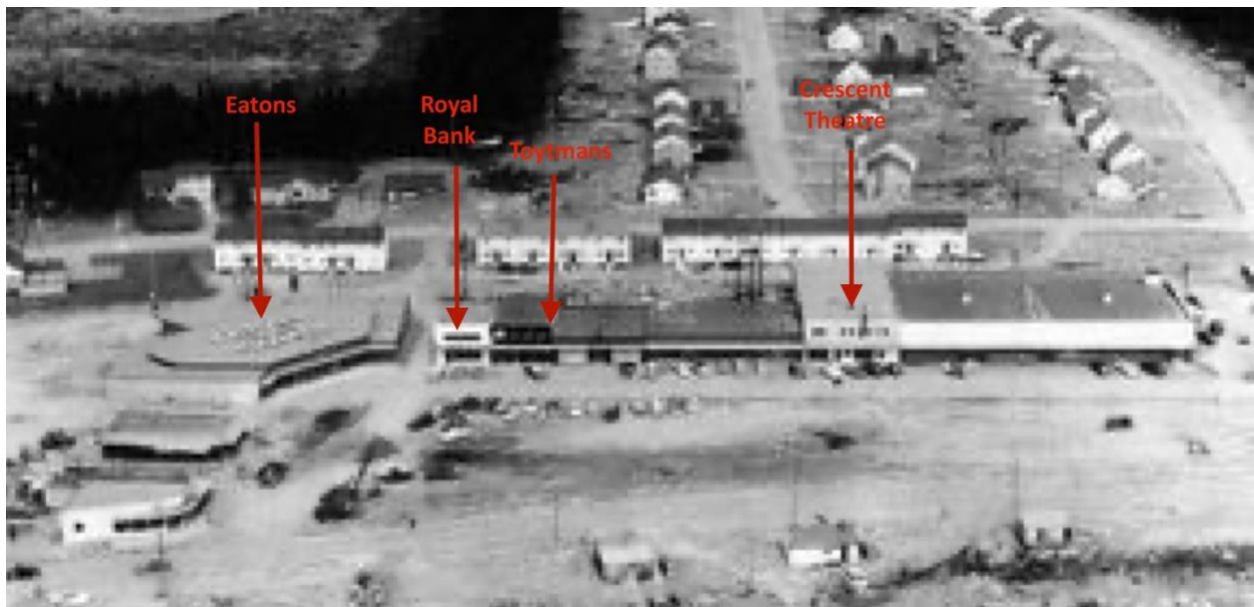
The car is apparently Rose's.

As an aside, I remember my father telling me the importance of saving money. He once said "Do like Mr Toytman. He saves his pennies to make up dollars."

The following ad from the Atlantic Guardian of 1957 says just that.



It is to be noted that the ad now shows a two-story building, sporting four windows across. The next photo show the location with respect to businesses that existed at the beginning of the first shopping mall.



No information was found as to the general contractor who built this store, nor the cost. But for reference, three buildings in the first shopping centre, built by Eastern Woodworkers, cost as follows in 1950's dollars:

Eaton's Store	230,035
Royal Bank	42,500
Crescent Theatre	130,921

At this point the partnership was dissolved. Beulah Milley opened her own shop (Milley's Style Shop), but the Milleys and the Toytmans remained on excellent terms, helping each other when the occasion arose.

Toytman's new store continued to be a "Fashion store" but with two additions. It at first sold groceries; this practice stopping when Goodyears Grocery and the COOP opened in the same mall. It also had a coffee counter that also served ice cream. This was a favourite haunt of school students during lunch break and the weekends until proper restaurants opened nearby.

It was Rose who pretty much ran the store. This is how one person described her visit.

"I used to love going to Toytman's with my mother. I remember Rose Toytman as being a pretty petite woman with dark hair. She had quite an accent, was a little outrageous and funny but she was liked by everybody. This delightful couple being Jewish was something of a novelty in Gander at the time. If Rose did not have what you wanted in the store, she would always say she could order it in from St. John's or somewhere and she always did. My mother and I were in the store one day when a lady wanted to buy a bra but couldn't find exactly what she wanted. Not wanting her to leave empty-handed, and with customers in the store, Rose laughingly (but seriously) pulled her sweater up around her neck and demonstrated the various features of the one she was wearing to see if it was the type the lady was interested in.

"That was Rose Toytman!"

Both Bill and Rose were always careful about dressing "for business". Bill was of slight build, about 5 feet 5 and always wore a suit and tie. Rose was a petite woman of about 5 feet 2 and dressed to be an example of what she sold.

At one point Toytman's store caught fire. There were strings of lights around the front windows, one of which had short-circuited. The flames ran around the whole store, causing a small "implosion", finally blowing out the front windows. The racks of clothing closest to the flames had only one sleeve burnt off. The coffee bar section was wiped out. When the fire alarm signalling the fire went off, Mrs. Toytman was having her hair done at the hairdressers next to Henry's Chinese restaurant. The photo below shows the exterior after.



The store was never put back into business as far as can be determined. There was a fire sale with one young lady reporting that she remembered her "father buying all kinds of stuff to send to his relatives in Corner Brook and Bay Roberts. It was around Christmas time as I had to wrap all the presents!" Rose did though later open and operate a bowling alley, the Rose Bowl Lanes.

In the middle of this adventure, Bill and Rose adopted two children. Louise Cooke remembers going out to the airport with her mother to cheer them on when the kids came in on Air Canada. Paula came first but she later died of a heart condition. Sam still lives in Gander.

After the loss of the store, the Toytmans soon moved to St. John's where Bill branched out into other types of business including a bar. He passed away on 07 August 2001 in Toronto and was buried in Hollywood, Florida. Rose passed away on 14 December 2013 in Ottawa and was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Greely, just south of Ottawa.

The Toytman's story is a great example of two things. Firstly, it shows how one can overcome adversity with a bit of luck, initial support and hard work. It also demonstrates what happens when labels lose their importance and people treat others as friends. Maybe the Toytmans were lucky to end up in Newfoundland - and especially in Gander, probably the best place in the world to make strangers feel at home, as a certain 11 September came to show.

Major sources include:

° "Fayes pages", a series of articles of Gander recollections put together by a newspaper editor in the Boston area, a former Gander student, Faye Lewis Raynard. Here is a list of some of the contributors to the articles on the subject of the Toytmans in Faye's column: Patricia Dempsey Hiscock, Jim Butler, Patricia DeeDee Lannon, Geraldine Fitzgerald Nimmo, Keith Lacey, Eileen Stack Kieley, Agnes Geange, Clarence Dewling, Thomas Philpott.

° Louise Oates with whom the Toytmans stayed in the early years.

° My late father's recollections, as he had chatted on several occasions with Bill Toytman.

° Photos sent to the author by the late Fred Smeaton jr

° The late Frank Tibbo's account of the Toytman story as recounted by Bill's son, Sam.

° Chats with other Gander residents, especially Walter Milley, son of Beulah.

The final version was verified by Louise Oates and San Toytman.