

HOME LIFE IN AN ATOM-VILLAGE

FAMILY life on an isolated, closely guarded atomic research project might not appeal to many women, but for the past three years it has been the lot of Mrs. Ruth Allan, M.A., of Wellington. She is the wife of an electrical engineer who left New Zealand in March, 1945, to work with scientists from all over the world at Chalk River, Ontario, the site of Canada's secret war-time atomic research plant. When *The Listener* asked Mrs. Allan, who is back in New Zealand again, how she had enjoyed life in Chalk River village she admitted she was homesick for the first six months, but had settled down after that to an enjoyable time.

"When I arrived there in the autumn, just before the main migration from the laboratories at Montreal, there were only a few families in the village, and it was a fantastic sight. There was raw timber everywhere, all the roads were churned up, and they were digging seven-foot ditches to put down sewers before the winter freeze."

"It must have been a depressing introduction."

"It was, but I soon found that it was a lovely spot really. The plant is situated on the Ottawa River, about 130 miles west of Ottawa, in picturesque farming country dotted with lakes and pine forests. It had to be well away from everywhere because of radio-active gases emitted from the laboratory chimneys."

"But wouldn't that affect the workers' families?"

"The village was 12 miles from the plant, and there wasn't much danger there. At the plant they had a very elaborate alarm system to detect dangerous radio-activity inside or outside the buildings. They were afraid that in certain winds radio-active gases might hang over the plant."

"What would you have done if anything had happened?"

"Evacuated the whole plant just as quickly as they could."

"They weren't taking any risks then?"

Guarded by Mounted Police

"No. For security reasons the plant was surrounded by a high wire fence, and at first both the plant and the village were guarded by police. Later they realised it was futile guarding the wives and children who didn't know anything anyway, so they took the village guards away, except for one or two who acted as the local constabulary."

"How did you like the Canadian climate?"

"The first winter we found it terribly hard to get used to the cold, and I got very badly frostbitten. Although the village was only 46 degrees north we were just inside the Polar Fringe, which is caused by a cold air mass moving down over the land from the North Pole in winter. I'd thought that New Zealand

mountaineering clothes would be warm enough, but they were just hopeless. You simply had to get into fur or leather. We all wore fur-lined coats and boots, fur caps and mittens, and you had to keep your ears covered all the time. But in summer, by contrast, it was very hot, and we used to get a spell in mid-summer lasting from three to nine weeks when the heat gave you absolutely no rest. I can remember getting up in the middle of the night during one of these spells to look at the thermometer in the house, and finding it read 90 degrees."

"What were your housing conditions like?"

"At first we all lived in prefabricated houses—the kind they bring along on a lorry in two halves and dump on the spot—but later they built us permanent houses. My husband and I lived in a four-roomed wooden bungalow for which we paid 24 dollars a month rent, which is cheap by ordinary Canadian standards."

"The village must have had quite an international flavour."

Highest Birthrate

"Yes, it did. Dr. J. D. Cockroft from Cambridge was the head scientist, and there were Dr. Kowarski and Dr. Goldschmitt from France, Dr. Pontecorvo, an Italian, and several New Zealanders, though Australian scientists seemed to work mainly in American plants. Many of the workers and some of the scientists were French-Canadians, and altogether it used to be quite priceless to hear the children of different nationalities playing about the town and talking, some in precise Cambridge accents, others in French or in a Canadian drawl, and so on. There were a remarkable number of children there, and we were supposed to have the highest birthrate for our population for the whole of North America."

"Was there any particular reason for that?"

"Well, I suppose one reason was that conditions were so primitive at first that there wasn't much else to do except raise a family, although the main cause was probably the very low age-level of the population—our average age was about 29. Since it was the one place in Canada where a young couple could be sure of getting a house to live in, young workers were attracted more than older settled people. And we had a very good maternity service, though nothing like our own Plunket system."

"How were all these children educated?"

"We had a primary school built, at which, incidentally, the official language was English. That upset some of the French-Canadians, who didn't want their children to forget their French. The nearest high school was at a town called Pembroke, about 30 miles away. Buses ran to it and housewives used to be able to go there once a week on a shopping spree, although there were sufficient shops for everyday needs in the village."

"Were the working conditions good?"

"Professional staff like my husband had very good conditions. A bus took them to and from work every day, and there was no feverish working all through the night or the week-ends. But the atomic pile operators and the guards had a really miserable time of it—they had to work right through everything, three eight-hour shifts a day—while the workmen were considerably worse off than New Zealand workers are. In fact that was one of the first things I noticed about Canada. Once I asked our postmaster what he considered to be a fair working week and he said 48 hours. Yet the construction companies used to work their men 54 hours a week."

"Wasn't that because it was a special war-time project?"

"No. It seemed to be the general practice throughout Canada. Labour is not in such a strong position as here."

"How did all these different nationalities get on with each other in the village?"

"There was the usual petty gossip that you get in small communities, but apart from a certain cliquiness amongst some groups we all got on pretty well together. The most noticeable thing was the French-Canadian antagonism for the British, which seemed to me to be kept pretty well nourished. Many of the farmers round about spoke French, and the people of French descent would dearly love to have an independent Quebec."

"Did that affect your social life?"

"Oh no. There were the usual afternoon tea parties and evening visits. When the place became more firmly established we had a drama group and a French club where you could go and brush up on your French if you wanted to. We had plenty of entertainment. Concert parties used to visit us, and we had a community centre, a picture theatre, and bowling alleys. We could swim in the river in the summer or skate at an open-air rink in winter. And of course there was baseball and skiing. I stuck to skiing and boating mostly, and used to spend a lot of my time in the woods. I remember the thrill I got when I first saw wolf tracks, and once I saw a bear, and snakes several times."

The Russian Spy Ring

"Were any of the workers at your plant mixed up with the Russian conspiracy to obtain Canadian atom bomb secrets?"

"Yes. My husband actually worked with Dr. May, the main person concerned. I never met him myself, but he

was supposed to be a very charming person. He's now in prison serving his sentence. The whole business broke very mysteriously as far as we were concerned. Nobody knew who was mixed up in it, and if one of the research workers missed the bus and was late for work in the morning, everybody immediately jumped to the conclusion that he was being held for questioning by the Mounties.

"But I believe the Russians got very little out of it all. Dr. May was the only one concerned who was actually doing atomic work, and he did what he did not because he was paid for his information, but because he considered the Russians were our allies, and were entitled to it, since scientific knowledge is supposed to be universal anyway. He didn't even collect the bottle of whisky they left for him. This was despite the fact that he had signed all sorts of secrecy declarations. There were about 13 people involved altogether, and the last trial was still in progress when we left to come home."

"How did you like returning to New Zealand after your exciting time abroad?"

"What struck me most was the lack of colour in the clothes here. Canadian women take so much care with their appearance. Even those on the smallest incomes manage to dress very prettily."

"One last question. Can you tell us why you and Mr. Allan came back? We hear a lot of talk these days about scientists leaving New Zealand because of the lack of opportunity for them here."

Mrs. Allan laughed. "Well," she said, "I suppose the main reason was simply that my husband got homesick."

"And didn't you?"

"At first I was, but I managed to get over my homesickness after the first six months."



Spencer Digby photograph

RUTH ALLAN

The cold was so cold, and the hot was so hot