

Dave Brown: The day Canada's Sweetheart came to town remains special for retired sergeant

By Dave Brown, Ottawa Citizen February 16, 2014



Lou Guertin is a retired Ottawa police officer and veteran living at Perley Rideau. He was Charlotte Whitton's driver for five years, and drove the lead car in the 1948 parade that welcomed Barbara Ann Scott and her gold medal home. Barbara's husband has given her 1988 Mercedes sports car to the veterans' home for a fundraiser and they plan to raffle it.

Photograph by: Ottawa Citizen, POSTMEDIA

OTTAWA — When Louis “Lou” Guertin sat down to chat with me last week, one of the first things we realized was that we had loved the same woman, as had millions of others.

The 93-year-old retired Ottawa police sergeant and Second World War veteran is now a resident at the Perley and Rideau Veterans' Health Centre.

The object of all that love was Ottawa native and 1948 Olympic figure skating champion Barbara Ann Scott, who became known as “Canada's Sweetheart.” She died in Florida in 2012 at

age 84. I remembered her from photos that reached into the classrooms of my school in Northern Ontario. Lou had driven her around — in a way.

To understand that, we have to go back to Ottawa in 1948. When the city had serious celebrating to do, it happened at “The Square.” Some called it the town square. It’s now known as Confederation Square. It’s where the town folk went to show pride and do serious chest-thumping.

The tiny 19-year-old beauty for weeks owned the most time and space in newsreels and newspapers as she skated her way to Canada’s first figure skating gold medal at the St. Moritz Olympics. She also held the Canadian, North American and world championships. Holding them all at the same time, she set a one-year record that has not yet been matched.

The Square was packed. The city was waiting to present her with a suitable gift — a yellow Buick convertible. Speeches and cheers weren’t enough. This called for a parade.

In the mix was a first-year constable who had joined a competition to lead the parade with the city’s official car, a Cadillac. In the end, eight officers would take turns driving that car, and Lou Guertin still beams with pride that he got a chance at the wheel.

What has those days top-of-mind for the old soldier these days is that he feels particularly close to those days. He can almost touch them by going about 100 metres from his room and running a hand over a glossy red 1988 Mercedes Benz convertible sitting in a corridor.

The national sweetheart never lost touch with her hometown, and she never missed a chance to show her appreciation for veterans. After marrying and moving to Florida, she frequently returned for visits, and always found time to visit institutionalized vets. She was an outspoken supporter of the Perley Rideau.

She was asked to serve as an honorary co-chair for a current \$5-million campaign (Building Choices, Enriching Lives) to help the Perley better serve more seniors and veterans. Dan Clapin, executive director of the Perley Rideau Foundation, says there was no hesitation.

Her red convertible was one of her loves. She called it “Bennie.” The love still shows. It’s wearing its original paint and chrome, and the gleam shows it was cared for very much.

Barbara’s husband, Tom King, donated the car to the institution, and it’s now a prize in a raffle. In keeping with the year of her triumph, only 1,948 tickets have been printed. They’re going for \$100 each. The draw will be May 9.

The promotions people at the Perley used Lou as bait to get me interested in this obvious play to sell raffle tickets. They didn’t know it, but the old soldier/cop and I go a long way back. Starting in 1960, I spent three years as a police reporter when the city and the police department were much smaller. He was an easy man to get along with. I moved to city hall reporting when Charlotte Whitton served her last term as mayor, and made politics interesting.

Lou Guertin was her personal driver for those years. He took the job seriously and playfully avoided letting slip any details about the mayor's comings and goings.

He was five years at war and landed with the Cameron Highlanders on D Day. He seems to have taken seriously the war warnings about "tight lips."

But he slipped a little. More correctly, he grumped. "You know, she never paid much attention to my needs. She never told me to take a break and get a coffee or get a bite to eat. She had me wait with the car."

After his five-year war, he declared his own kind of peace. He'd had enough of guns. He used to be teased at the copshop, for once showing up for a shift, having left his gun at home.

Tickets are available by calling (613) 526-7173, or online at perleyrideau.ca/Mercedes.