

# The first lady of Chalk River Laboratories

The timing, though unplanned, was faultless, as Fraser Brace rolled into town Margaret Cook returned home to Chalk River. The construction company was looking for secretarial staff and Margaret was looking for her first job. Office manager Charlie Grey asked if she would like to work as a teletype operator. Naturally, Margaret was ready and willing and on Sept. 6, 1944 she became the first woman employed at the Chalk River site.

Born in the U.S.A. to Scottish parents, Margaret came to Canada as a small child and lived and attended school in Chalk River. "It was a wonderful place for children," she says. "Very safe, free and relaxed and very quiet."

At that time there was no electricity or telephone in the village and there were farms where the plant is now. When she finished high school Margaret went to business college in Montreal. She expected to stay there, or move to Ottawa when she was ready to get a job. As her training drew to an end she heard about the development in her home area and decided to try for a job there.

The building of the plant was a great boon for the area, money was coming in, businesses opening and there was work for all. At first no one knew what the plant was for and construction was well under way before the details be-



## Friends & neighbours

by Sheila Blore

came known locally. The prospect of steady employment in the area was especially important at that time as there would be jobs for the boys coming home from the war. The excitement was infectious as buildings went up, roads were pushed through and the first houses for the Deep River town site came through on railway flatcars.

Margaret's hopes were realized as she was offered a good job and could live at home. For about a month she was the only woman employed at the site, but then others followed. "We were a very happy group, working together

and playing together, there was never a dull moment." Margaret still keeps in touch with several of the friends she made in the early days.

"At first Margaret worked in a small office in Chalk River, where the Shell station now stands, and then in January '45 moved to an office at the site. There were a lot of security checks, including finger printing, "Which was no problem," says Margaret. "The security office was right next door to mine."

She smiles at the memory, "Their office was no better than mine. My first desk chair was an empty nail keg with a piece of sacking folded on top. Try offering that to a secretary today!"

In those days transport to the plant was by station wagon when the road was good, "which was not often," Margaret laughs. In the spring travel was by truck with the passengers having to get out half way, walk across planks laid over the mud and then climb into another truck. "Of course we wore high heels all the time and women did not wear slacks to work then," she reminisces. "We had lots of fun even getting to work." In Margaret's car she still carries a travel rug which her mother gave to her. "For my first Christmas to wrap around myself on the way to work."

After the move to the plant site the accommodation was somewhat better. There were chairs and desks and the girls did have a separate washroom. Most of the girls took their own lunches but could go to the construction camp cafeteria if they wished. Usually they didn't wish to, as the site was a sea of mud most of the time.

Margaret's teletype machine was installed by CPR, who also did the operator training, and was considered top of the line technology. The teletype machine was used to transmit data to the

DIL office in Montreal. For security reasons, Margaret was locked into her office and the material to be dispatched was fed through a slot in the door. She was required to take an oath of secrecy and like every one else had to check in and out of the site.

At first Margaret found living at home quite a change from Montreal, especially the lack of stores and entertainment. "After a while there were stores in Deep River," she comments, "and we got used to taking the 'shopping bus' to Pembroke. As for entertainment we very soon got used to making our own."

The Chalk River ladies softball team was very popular as were the weekly dances at the old Orange Hall. Again Margaret laughs, "There were lots of young men from Petawawa who came up for the dances."

After a while Margaret moved into the old Staff Hotel, where life was really quite lively. She stayed there for a year and then when construction was finished moved back to Montreal with Fraser Brace. There she lived for 25 years, with several short periods at other construction sites. During this time she kept in contact with friends in the Chalk River area and spent a part of each summer at the family cottage on Corry Lake.

When she retired Margaret decided to move back home and now lives in Deep River. Still keeping as lively and interested as ever she divides her time between her garden, which is her pride and joy, and golfing in summer. In the winter her other dearly loved activity, Scottish dancing, takes over along with curling. All year round Margaret spends a lot of time with her many friends, both old and new, and considers her move "back to her roots" as the best thing she ever did.



Margaret Cook

### Corrections

In the July 26 issue, the list price of the Diplomat Hotel was incorrectly given. The correct price is \$299,000.

Also in the July 26 issue, Jody Shaddick's name was left out of a caption under a picture of Chalk River's babysitting course graduates.

In the July 5 issue, Long Shots owners' representative Mike Garreau was incorrectly described as the bar's manager.