

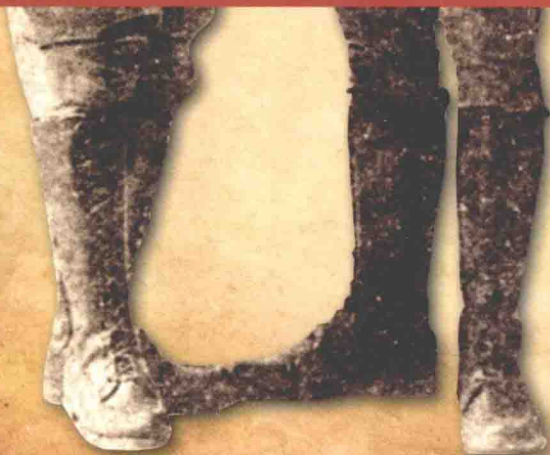


Vancouver

Halifax

# The Amazing Foot Race OF 1921

HALIFAX TO VANCOUVER IN 134 DAYS

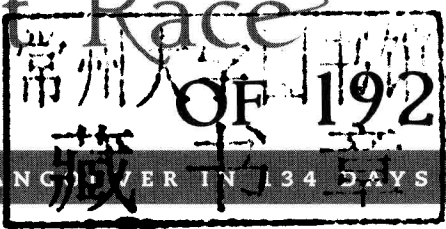


Shirley Jean Roll Tucker



# The Amazing Foot Race OF 1921

HALIFAX TO VANCOUVER IN 134 DAYS



Shirley Jean Roll Tucker



VICTORIA • VANCOUVER • CALGARY

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## A tribute to:

Clyde W. Tucker

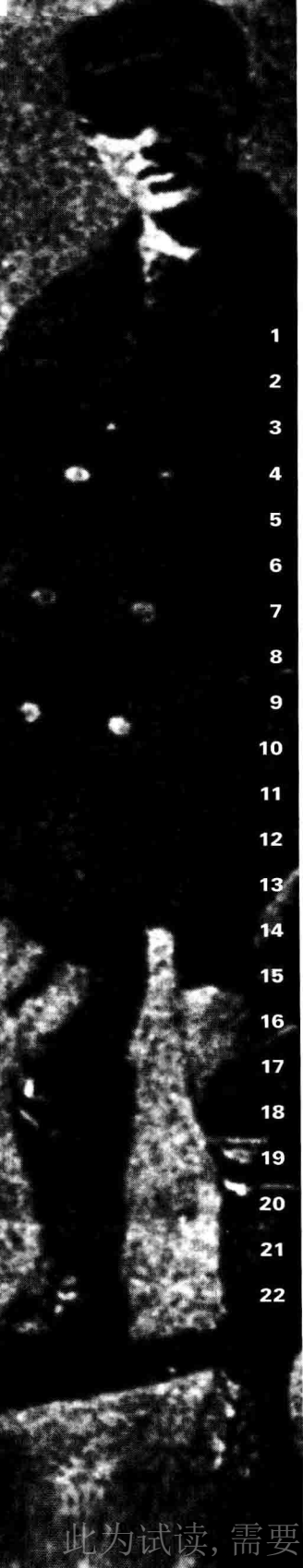
My husband, an exemplary Canadian;

My parents Freda, Paul and Ted Roll, proud Canadians;

My grandparents, Wilhelm and Justine (Schattle) Paul,

and Adam and Louisa, (Becker) Roll,

Immigrants with dreams of becoming Canadians



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The  
Amazing  
Foot Race  
OF 1921





A stylized map of Canada is shown in the background. A black line with circular markers at each stop traces a route from Vancouver on the west coast to Halifax on the east coast. The line starts at Vancouver, goes south through the Pacific Northwest, then curves east through the Great Lakes and Ontario, and finally heads northeast to Halifax. There are 11 markers in total, including the start and end points.

# The Amazing Foot Race OF 1921

HALIFAX TO VANCOUVER IN 134 DAYS

Shirley Jean Roll Tucker



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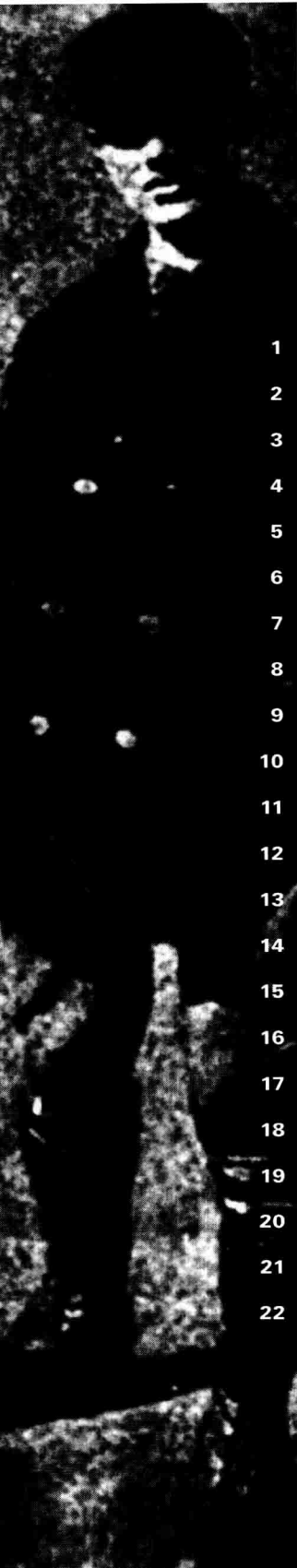
My parents Freda, Paul and Ted Roll, proud Canadians;

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History is never a thing of the past  
in vital communities,  
but still there to whisper stories  
into the ears of those willing to listen.

DAPHNE MARLATT

## Introduction

**L**ike most flag-waving Canadian writers, I am a sucker for an old-fashioned, made-in-Canada adventure story with genuine Canuck heroes. In pursuit of such tales, I devour newspapers, peruse magazines and scour archival records.

In 2005 I came across a story dated June 9, 1921, on microfilm in the Nova Scotia Archives. Written for the *Halifax Herald's* sister paper, the *Evening Star*, it celebrated the success of five transcontinental foot racers from Nova Scotia—one of them a woman—under the headline “The Greatest Contest in History of Pedestrianism Will Close Monday [June 11].” Maybe I hadn’t struck gold, but this journalistic nugget, revealing the Olympian determination, fortitude and endurance of five plucky people who crossed the young Dominion from sea to sea on foot, and in record time, bolstered my faith in the spirit of the Canadian ideal.

The hikers set out from Halifax in mid-winter, and for three months they battled intermittent snow, sleet, freezing rain and high winds as they made 20 to 35 miles a day over slippery ties and rails. Charles Burkman, the lone hiker, announced from Kenora on April 22 that he had, in fact, completed 45 miles that day.

They did not have the high-tech gear that modern hikers possess: no “breathable waterproof anti-slip” boots with shock-absorbing heels, no “hyper-dri HD3 parkas with T-Max insulation,” no “thermal medical socks” for extra comfort and support. For their “cross-Canada trudge,” the five supplemented personal gear with outfits purchased from Munnis in Halifax or solicited from supporters. Shoe packs, heavy golf stockings, flannel shirts, mackinaws, slickers, caps with ties

and wool-lined leather mitts were the order of the day. The hikers replaced worn boots regularly and received gifts of clothing (such as underwear from Stanfield's) and Larrigans (a Cape Breton Island footwear consisting of cowhide moccasins and calfskin leggings) along the way.

There were many other examples of public generosity extending beyond the purchase of the hikers' 10-cent postcards and the offer of free meals and lodging. In Cavers, Ontario, two public-spirited wives of CPR operators drove 11 miles to cook the Dills a delicious dinner, then sent them on their way with a large basket of fruit to eat on the road. A Russian immigrant family, living in the wilderness of Thunder Bay, toasted Burkman and the Behans with homemade potato vodka, and both the Behans and the lone hiker shared the Norwegian staples of pancakes and Rogers' golden syrup, washed down with coffee and a spoonful of milk, at Tache, Ontario. Chocolates and cigarettes were regularly handed out to all the racers, all across the country.

A fine representation of the 6 million Canadians populating the towns, villages and hamlets along the 3,645-mile route from Halifax to Vancouver celebrated and assisted the hikers. Mobs of schoolchildren were released for half-day holidays to cheer them on, and many isolated country folk, scattered along the railroad, raised their spirits and provided a few hours of fellowship, which the pedestrians returned in kind. Some supporters even attempted to entice the often tired and dispirited walkers with invitations to ride in automobiles, hop aboard passenger trains, or extend their visits to avoid adverse weather conditions, but no hiker succumbed to the temptation.

Although there is no evidence to suggest that money was ever paid to any of the contestants by the *Halifax Herald*, the newspaper did support the event with ingenuity and finesse. It even used the hike to bully Haligonians into taking responsibility for their lives and health. By publishing the accounts dispatched to the newspaper by the transcontinental adventurers from railroad stations along their route, the *Herald* whetted the public appetite for more information. Maps, run at least bimonthly in the newspaper, illustrated the hikers' progress and effectively involved readers of all stripes in tracking the competitors, offering them a vicarious opportunity to travel beyond the communities in which they were born. As the event gained in popularity, letters of advice, remedies for physical ills, tribute poems and a general outpouring of moral support appeared in the *Herald* and many other newspapers across the country. The dramatic events of the five-month odyssey endeared the walkers to the people who read the daily accounts in the newspaper, chose their favourites and cheered them on.

The ambitious editor of the *Herald* handled the competition skillfully, encouraging the participation of dignitaries, in various communities, who called in favours from other officials, including fire chiefs, law-enforcement officers, clergymen, train officials working along the lines, parliamentarians and even Prime Minister Arthur Meighen. In some instances, as in Truro, almost the entire community turned out to gawk, applaud and buy postcards, the financial mainstay of the pedestrians.

There were many reasons for the race's success. The country's contribution to the First World War, both on the battlefields and in industry, propelled the colony into national maturity that challenged public and social policies. At the same time, Canadians were poised uncertainly on the edge of recession, the result of too few people and too small an economic base, high unemployment exacerbated by thousands of "returned men," and a collapsed demand for military production. Women left the jobs they had filled when 450,000 men went into uniform; almost simultaneously they received the right to vote, federally and provincially, which represented a major cultural change. Unrest became endemic in the west ("the milch cow of Confederation," according to many prairie editors). In this uncertain climate, distractions were the order of the day. "Cheap" sports like foot racing helped satisfy armchair sporting folk whose ability to participate was limited by money, diet and the physical geography of the second-largest country in the world. This "great transcontinental hike" became a common and benign cause that brought together a nation clearly in search of an identity.

*The Amazing Race of 1921* is a social history presented in journalistic form. It is intended to encourage readers to search out family roots, conscious of the spirit of the five Olympian phantoms racing from Halifax to Saint John to Montreal... Ottawa... Port Arthur... Winnipeg... Calgary... Banff... Revelstoke... Salmon Arm... Ashcroft... Spuzzum... Vancouver, and all the places in between that represent our heritage. The CPR line is still there, but it no longer stretches over wild, desolate countryside. Few are the narrow trestle bridges crossing perilous canyons. The majority of railway stations have been torn down or replaced with other forms of real estate like casinos, museums, art galleries or libraries, and signposts indicating where railroad towns once existed have been relegated to archival records or historic postcards.

With the co-operation of the *Halifax Herald*, and the support of Heritage House publisher Rodger D. Touchie, managing editor Vivian Sinclair and editor Audrey McClellan, I have pieced together a true Canadian adventure, that celebrates



those remarkable folk-heroes Charles Burkman, the lone hiker; John (Jack) and Clifford Behan, a father-son duo; and Frank and Jenny Dill (a husband-and-wife team): ordinary people who achieved extraordinary results. No previous sporting event had sparked the imagination of the country the way this one did, uniting it in a common voice, and my book is a tribute to what is best about the Canadian spirit, as described by the *Herald*:

All the old time contests pale before [the transcontinental hike]. A few seconds' test of speed or a few hours of endurance are nothing in comparison. The determination and endurance of this competition were phenomenal... They have excelled all the records of antiquity.

**NOTE** Place-name spellings in quotations and newspaper excerpts from the time have been left unchanged—for example, “St. John” was how “Saint John” was spelled—but modern spellings are used in this text.