

Just

Yesterday . . .



Irene Magnusson

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2013

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Introduction

"I got used to being "small" long ago – it's only on the outside – inside I'm as big as anyone!"

My Grandma Irene Magnusson wrote these words to me in 1996 when I sent her a letter bemoaning the fact that my little sister had grown taller than me. I wonder if Grandma realized how true those words were?

I remember a woman who, at age 70, climbed a tree to retrieve a toy plane, cross-country skied into her eighties and, even in the toughest times could make people laugh. I've heard stories of the little girl who chased off the schoolyard bullies, the young woman who made the very best she could of a penniless Depression Era wedding, and a young Mom who always managed to feed her kids even when the cupboard was bare.

From the day of her birth, in a screeching January blizzard with no doctor attending, the prevailing concept that has resurfaced in her life, over and over, is "strength."

This book is a tribute to that strength. It's a lifetime of memories, lessons learned and observations. It's her humour, her passions, her unique point of view. It's everything she learned and gathered in her life that she would like to pass along to you.

The first section contains the stories of her life. They explore her childhood with her 12 brothers and sisters, her youth and the warm years of motherhood and marriage.

Just Yesterday

Just yesterday they toddled close about me,
 Pulling my skirts and clamouring at my knee –
Just yesterday I bathed and dressed and fed them –
 Today, where can my precious toddlers be?

Just yesterday, I sent my dark-haired daughter
 On her first day of school, up o'er the hill –
I watched her then, her wave in doubtful parting;
 I close my eyes and I can see her still.
But now a mountain range of time divides us,
 Her days of school are over now and gone;
Just yesterday she was my grey-eyed darling –
 I long to hold her now but she is gone.

Just yesterday, I thought and planned just for them,
 Their care filled every waking hour and night . . .
They need me now – Oh, just a little longer –
 That need will pass as birdlike each learned flight;
Then will they go their way no longer wanting
 A mother's plans or worries or support –
I pray I've started them along life's roadway
 With step that's firm, with strength to find their
port.

Just yesterday, I had my babes around me,
 My days were full, my children were my own;
Today they're leaving, one by one departing –
 Tomorrow they must walk like I, their road, alone.

1954

Has Spring Really Sprung?

Today is the 2nd official day of spring, and our weather creator has taken heed of this earlier-than-usual date by giving us a real snow-melting sunshiny spring day. One should make an occasion of it, celebrated in some special way.

When I was a kid we knew exactly what to do. Well.... We knew what to do if it wasn't a school day, this first magic day of spring, when the crickets ran and the snow turned soft and slushy. If it was a school day, we somehow stuck it out, somehow lived until 3:30 when the bell said "Go!"

Then we rushed out to do what we would have been doing all day if we hadn't been incarcerated by the schoolhouse.

We knew the first day of spring, whenever it came, was for sloshing around in the water. We put on our rubber boots, and out we went. As long ago as I was a kid, they were not nice light easy-to-slip-on boots, kneehighs such as kids have now. I grew up in the 'gumboot' days, when rubbers really were made of rubber. They were thick, black up to the ankle, and laced up the front with heavy laces.

One characteristic of the gumboot was, that if worn all day, they built-in a ring around their wearer's ankle, cut into the skin, raw and sore, and well filled with mud - because we surely didn't stop wading just because the water came up to our ankles! - and this ring defied removing with soap and water, and usually remained until

summer when you could get into the creeks are the lake for a good soak.

It wouldn't take too long before the gum boots would have an outlet for the excess water, we would no longer have to remove them and empty them out. A bother, as the laces were so hard to loosen and redo. A crack might appear where we perhaps climbed over a fence with a sharp nail or barbed wire to catch our boot on, or you might chop it a little as you were splitting wood.

Kids know why boots come up to their ankles - or knees, as the newer models do. It is so they will hold more water. And socks were (are?) Only as good as the amount of water they will soak up, and how long before they become a sodden mass wadded around their wearer's toes.

Nylon snow suits are another invention thought up long after my own kidhood, and I suppose they take longer to saturate through and through than the old woolly coats we had, which got really heavy after you fell in a ditch or slough and soaked up about thirty pounds of moisture. I seem to recall a distinctive stinky smell emanating from my wet wool coat. Sheepish, I suppose it was.

I never got to wear those nice protective slacks or ski pants when I was young and footloose: again they were 'not for girls', although I saw some of my friends wearing boys' pants. I made do with a long black woolen stocking which came to the knee and about two inches farther - then a bare space. Br-r-r when you fell in the snow!

I wouldn't want to put ideas into any nice docile child reading this, but we kids did not stay close around the

yard, contentedly kicking thawed cowpies off their humps of ice and building mushy snowmen. We traveled.

As soon as the breakfast dishes were done and the chores finished - or as finished as we felt we could get away with - we just took off. Down to the creek would be the first choice for exploring, and if it were running, then follow its winding route for miles, waiting along on top of the ice if the water was overflowing, and correcting any little errors old mother nature might be making in the water's course.

We made bridges, and set stick-boats floating away forever - or a few feet if they tangled in the overhanging bushes. Sometimes the water was brown from dead leaves, and flowed like maple syrup over the ice. Your feet got cold too, but after a while you couldn't feel them anymore. You certainly felt them later, when you finally got home, maybe not until supper time, and took those gum boots off, pouring of the icy water, and peeled those soggy rolled up socks off your toes. Sometimes it seemed as though the skin would come along with them.

And there were your toes. Swollen, red and ugly, with wrinkles like an elephant's hide. But very clean. Except for the black ring around your ankles, from the boots.

If the creek wasn't running yet, often the sloughs would be opened first, and here we could go to ride around on our raft.

I can't remember whether the rafts were made at home and somehow moved to the slew, but probably they were built on the spot, by my enterprising brothers, would've thoughtfully pilfer Dad's hammers and saws and

spikes, and a few loose fenceposts, with a board or two to lay across to tie the whole mess together.

Anyway, away we went, as soon as there was a clear patch of water to float on, with long thin poles to push our craft along. I don't remember ever falling off (sometimes I was threatened to be pushed off, if I didn't cooperate) but once our raft fell apart and we had to wade ashore. The water was very cold, up to my waist, and full of long dead grass. And I remember the feel of the ice, cold and slippery under the water.

I seem to recall a bit of a switching received that day when we finally got home. Probably mother took out her relief that we had drowned (or was it disappointment?).

There were other things to do, when spring arrived, out there in the country. You looked for gophers and listened for crows. When the hills turned brown and warm in the sun, you looked for crocuses, which you carefully coaxed out of the dry grass and tucked a few in your pocket or under your toque, to hand, limp and hairy, to Mother when you got home. How come mothers always accept such offerings with smiles and looks of gratitude? Like we'd brought something very nice, very thoughtfully chosen.

I suppose it is because they are mothers. And probably remember their own crocus-picking days, when mud squished between their feet, and trickling water sang calypso songs.

So now that the sun has shone down and warmed the snow beyond hope of skiing, I think I'll pull my long

white rubbers on and go out to see if I can find a trickling stream to put my toe in, or a chip of wood to set afloat. I know of no slough left with enough water to float a raft, in fact the snow has been meager this winter, and there will be little run-off.

March 28, 1984



Listen to a Songbird

The sun stood high behind trees as usual that clean June morning. As usual half a dozen young people, myself among them, were in the yard, talking, laughing, planning the day's activities.

And as usual, on a bare dry branch of the tall poplar over there in the morning sun a meadowlark trilled and warbled his heartbreakingly beautiful spring song.

Joyfully, was he telling other birds - and any who cared to hear - that he had staked his territory, found his mate, and wonderful things were about to happen.

For a week or more, I have heard him there, when I rose early before the family was up. I stroll in the warm spring dawn, out to the wee house and back, serenaded by a dozen songbirds. Sweetest of singers was my meadowlark.

This is my secret time, a time alone, to think and grow . . . And just to be me. To one who is 13 this is a precious thing and not easy to find.

How I envy the free unfettered happy Songbird, who could leave the earth and soar high, come and go as he would, no one saying "go" or "stay" or giving orders to him. How I longed to shed my heavy shoes and soar with him.

Now he was singing for us all.

On this morning a neighborhood boy stood with my brothers. Farm homes were miles apart, shanks mare our transportation in those long-ago days, so we often stayed over if night came before our visit was ended. This he had done.

None of the five boys were discussing where they might go to shoot gophers - a common Sunday sport - or, some would say chore - since gophers are considered a pest, destroyers of crops, and so must be killed. Also boys - and men - enjoyed killing things, as I well knew.

The .22 rifle belonged to my oldest brother, Larry, who was 17 - the same age as Edgar, the neighbor boy. A

box of shells went with it, and all of them would use the .22, taking turns picking off the little tan ground squirrels.

Edgar took the gun, citing on a barn roof peak, then distant rock, liking its feel.

Meadowlark again poured forth in his praise of life, bright yellow chest swelling with the effort, his black V mark like an onyx necklet.

The barrel swung around, was aimed, and a shot rang out. The song ended as the splat of bullet struck feathered breast. The lifeless body fluttered down - and down - until it struck a stone protruding from the grass, staining it with drops of red.

"Oh boy! Look at that! Got him dead center! How's that for a good shot?" Edgar gloated, as he ejected the empty cartridge, pride on his face as he glanced around, expecting praise.

My brothers stood silent. The enormity of his crime - the finality of that death - took a moment to sink into my protesting brain. Then I sprang.

"Damn you! Damn you!" I screamed as I beat him with my fist.

"You've killed my bird! You murderer!"

He put the gun down and pinioned my two wrists with one hand, his long arm holding me out of reach, while I struggled and ranted.

It seemed if I could only reach them I would choke the life out of that triumphant grinning face and spatter his blood on the grass and rocks - like my dead bird.

Long after his apologies, after long years have passed, when I have seen many innocent creatures die - I

still recall my terrible rage. The boy - as so many others -
had never really listened to a song bird.

Alberta Trails
Circa 1982 - 1983



Picking Blueberries at Moose Lake

The years relentless pass – and
Summer, generous with her days
Begins to pinch a bit by gold September ...
Nights grow coolish as they lengthen
While brittle leaves take on a papery tune ...
The time has come for serious berry picking.

We pile into the old MacLaughlin-Buick –
My dad, my brothers, a few neighbors and
My love and me.
The elders crowd the cab while we
Sprawl amidst the tents and bedrolls, pails, pots and pans
And the .22 for partridges and grouse –
As we depart not long past dawn.

We rattle past the fields, the lakes, the mountain,
Until we reach the sands along Moose Lake.
Beneath a stand of jackpines, softly sighing,
We pitch our tents,

Make a crude table, and hang
A can of water from our barrel
Above the campfire's flames to boil for tea.

I cannot wait. I take my pail
And wander out to scout the silent woods
For the jewels of the forest,
These round blue succulent morsels
Powdered with a bloom of fairy dust.
See how they nestle in my caressing palm!
So slowly seems, at first ... soon topping up.
When I reach to skim a leaf
Or quick red ant who, curious, dropped in,
I almost *must* caress those berries
And run them through my fingers once again.
Tired but triumphant I bring in
My first pail – ready now
For the black tea and
The sandwich of bologna.

My brothers, long of leg and wind,
Haunt through the woods
And down the glades, pails dangling
From their belts,
Hands flailing in the choicer pick,
Then on to search for better ...
While I – and hovering near – my love,
Feel a sense of disrespect, almost of waste,
If I should leave a cluster
Hanging there unclaimed – it seems

So You Think it was Always Hallowe'en


Hallowe'en, as we note it today, is probably an invention of our own. Hallowe'en is indeed the night before the celebration, observed in the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches, called variously All Saints' Day, Allhallows, or Hallowmas. This a tribute to God and all the Saints – known and not known. This has gone on since about 835 A.D., when the Pope of the day decreed.

The choice of date was a good one, they thought, since from time unrecorded the heathen nations of Europe had celebrated November 1st as a great festival, where they made bonfires to chase away the evil spirits who might come calling.

The Druids held that the Lord of the Dead, Saman, called out hordes of evil spirits on that night, spirits of the dead who might come back and harm the living. Apparently the fires were too light, too bright for them to withstand, so they couldn't do so much damage.

For another heathen tribe, the Celts, Hallowe'en was the last night of their year, and as we do on the New Year, they felt it was a good time to make predictions for the coming year. There was also a goddess (old Romans) called Pomona, who was goddess of the fruit and trees, to do homage to at that time.

Thus we get the use of apples, nuts and fruits as part of the celebrations. When I was a kid, we went to the neighbors (or stayed home) and had a party. A major event of the evening was ducking for apples. We felt pretty rich if we also had a few nuts to crack.



I don't recall the boys ever playing at the 'guess who your future boyfriend will be' – girlfriend, as the case might be. Perhaps they didn't care - or more likely, they didn't want anyone to know they cared. But the girls, well...

One stunt was to peel an apple – and we had to make the peeling all in one long strip – then twirl it three times around our head, with our eyes shut, throw the peel, and it was supposed to make the initial of our future true love as it fell. There were several such neat rigmaroles, all guaranteed to give us the dope on this, the most important question we could ask – at the time.

Of course, we knew there were supposed to be all sorts of witches, ill omens, ghosts, and spooks. Bats, poor little things, are nocturnal, so they were incorporated into the 'afraid of' things in our night life, as were black cats, the hooty owl and whatever goes 'bump' in the night.

One of the most hair-raising games I was exposed to as a youngster I never learned the name of – if it had a name. We all stood in a circle, shoulder to shoulder, facing center, our hands behind our back. In the almost-dark of one sputtering candle in a lop-sided jack'o'lantern. In a room hung with spiders, bats'n'cats, paper ghosts and long grey spirally strings. The leader (I believe it was our hostess, Edna Smith) started some kind of story about the cat that "got it" in a wreck – or something – and as she told her gruesome tale, in a very spooky voice, she handed out these bits and parts of the departed cat, which we were to pass along, behind our backs, to the next one as soon as we could, without ever seeing it, of course.

If you don't think a fried up piece of fur (for the hide) and a handful of wet string (for the intestines) is spooky, when you can't see it, only feel – then try a little bun of soft dough (for the brains) and a wet chunk of liver (for the guts). All the squealing and shrieking that went on would have – and probably did, chase away any intruding spirits that might have been loitering about.

Oh hum, that was long ago. But we did have fun – and no harm done- so thanks for the memories. I don't think I ever pulled a 'trick' on anyone in my life but once, and that was to throw a handful of dead leaves into a nice tidy yard. I had to be instructed in how to do that, even, by a visiting cousin.

But we heard about all the things our fathers and uncles did when they were young, and I'm sure it inspired a lot of boys to go out and do likewise. We certainly never went around hounding the neighbors for 'tricks or treats'! But we did have parents who would shell out enough ingredients for us to make a panful of fudge, or puffed wheat squares.

One Hallowe'en we learned how to make fondant, and had a chocolate dipping party – that was fun. And we got to pop a few bowls of popcorn, too. Only a few times did we fail to grow our own pumpkins for the jack'o'lantern we thought was a necessity of life. I seem to recall we made one out of a cardboard box once, when we were desperate, but we could only use a flashlight in it, Dad said. He didn't want us burning the place down over our heads, with a candle. Smart Dad.

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The Old Schoolyard

The first time I saw that plot of land I was about eleven years old. Snow covered our world. It was the first day of school. The change-over from our mile-and-a-half walk to school to two-and-a-half miles came not from a move by our family, nor a change of schools, but the fact that the school itself was moved.

In the late twenties it was common practice to keep country schools open all summer, while closing them from Christmas until the first of March. This saved a lot on fuel required to keep those drafty uninsulated buildings bearable -- I will not say warm -- during the two bitter months of January and February.

This plan also probably prevented countless frostbitten chins, cheeks and fingers, chills and misery among school-agers, by lessening the times their tender bodies were exposed to the winds and cold as they floundered through snow-drifts in -- by today's standards -- woefully inadequate clothing.

But - - back to the school. Exactly why the school board decided to move it, I can't recall. Presumably it had to do with the placement of children in the school district, so distances would be more fairly shared. In the case of our family, we were the losers.

Our road to school now crossed several open strips and alongside fields, and worse yet, faced us into the northwest on our early morning treks.

You will know that our prevailing winds came from the northwest, consequently we had to spend some time walking backwards, to ease the slicing cold on our faces.

My father was the community 'mover' in those years and he was awarded the task. In some nefarious manner he managed - - with a few hired helpers - - to rip that old school off its foundation, load it onto a bevy of sleighs and slide them over the snow the two-and-a-half miles to its new site, a three acre plot cut from the corner of a quarter section of 'company land'.

'Company land' meant it was wild, open, and in most cases heavily wooded - - for most of the land around here was wooded at one time. These 'companies', in this case the British American Land Company, did not farm these acres, nor did they pay taxes. The land could not be homesteaded. Sometimes it was leased. This quarter was quite unused.

In preparation for the event of the school arriving, some trees had been slashed and cut into firewood. Green, of course. A pair of pits were waiting out back - aw-a-a-y out back - for their little buildings. A double furrow was ploughed around the edge by someone with a breaking

plow, as a fire guard. Just outside this furrow a fence was built with four strands of #9 wire, mounted on twisted tamarack posts.

This fence may have kept out wandering livestock. There was no herd law in those years and cattle and horses roamed at will. It certainly didn't keep the school kids in!

The saplings too small for firewood had been cut by someone who had long forgotten his barefoot days. His sharp axe had cut in a slanting chop which left the little stumps four to six inches high - - and unbelievably painful to step on, or trip and fall among as we played and explored.

These sharp little rascals lasted well, too, and were there for many years (if we didn't grub them out) until at last they rotted away.

So when school opened for the year that March, we were in a new world. New places to explore, new trees to climb, new faces to get used to. Several families of kids joined our ranks due to the school's move. Several old friends changed to other schools, and it was as though they had died or moved to China, for we saw them no more.

Our school had one room, one furnace, one teacher and pupils from grades one to eight. In the year after it was moved there were twenty-six kids in all grades. We had good times, and some not so good.

We changed over in the next year, from winter holidays to summer holidays, and started our new grades on September 1st rather than March 1st as we had done. Some gained a grade, some lost a grade.

Through the spring we older kids cleared out stumps and rose bushes until we had a ball diamond of sorts. We used the road allowance as outfield. We went into the thick groves beyond the fence and cut or broke down saplings and built ourselves teepees - - one for the boys and one for the girls - - and heaven help anyone who trespassed into the wrong domain!

During the summer men came and put up sturdy posts with tough rope swings - - which we fought over ever after. We carried water from the nearby farm, slopping cold down our legs from banging pails. Lucky were we if we arrived with pail still half filled. Water to drink, or to wash our hands in, when we were ordered to do so. Eventually a well was dug. From its deep dark depths we could only scrape a small amount of murky water into the pail on its long rope. This well never did produce, and finally dried up completely. We went back to carrying in our endless 'turns'.

There was a big woodpile, replenished each winter, stacked in long rows. There was the 'janitor', one of the older kids who took on the sweeping, blackboard washing, dusting and the wood lugging for \$2.50 a month. He or she also had the pleasure of going early to school and lighting the fire in the furnace to 'warm' the place up, on those cold, cold mornings.

The woodpile was useful to hide behind when we played hide'n'seek, as were the twin biffies out back and the ditch along the road in front.

Our many feet in their many steps soon wore the grass short - - it was never cut - - after that the turf itself

wore away, leaving our school and island surrounded by a surf of sand. In the sand the young ones made farms and roads and castles. The older, meaner ones wrecked the farms, trod on the castles, and wrote nasty words with sticks when the teacher wasn't looking.

Sand went in handfuls down the back of girls' necks, and was in turn offered as decoration on top of incautious heads. Much went into the school, sometimes usefully, as when we were instructed to use wet handfuls of sand to scour clean the desk tops of the sweat of our labours - - and of the many and cryptic comments pencilled or inked thereon. It worked elegantly.

Half a century has passed since those hectic school days. The school is gone, as are many of those pupils. I cannot point, now in this neighbourhood, to a single schoolmate of those first years, at Paramount on the 'new' school ground.

Only the land - - and I - - remain. Those three-acres along with the quarter section it was carved from have been part of our farm for many years. Broken desolate chunks of foundation, built by my father's hand, lie scattered.

We have no difficulty spotting the depressions, filled yet sunken, where the biffies were, or the useless well. A few smooth wiggly lengths of #9 wire, along with half a dozen of the original tamarack posts, shells still standing, smooth and grey with age, their centers rotted to dust, linger with our barbed wire fencing which once contained our calves. Our cattle, too, are long gone.

To this day, nothing grows on the well-worked sand around the long-gone porch except a few sand dock and couple of misguided wild strawberry bushes which bear no fruit.

Beyond the sand knoll the poplars stand tall, interspersed with a few spruce. Wildflowers crowd the floor below in a profusion of bloom in their season. Ants hill and devour the fallen wood. In winter we ski among the trees.

In Alberta's 75th anniversary year we hosted over two hundred family members in a camp-out reunion there on the old school yard. Many tales were recounted of 'way back then', exciting events recalled, perhaps not all factual, but all interesting.

Alberta Trails
Circa 1983



How We Made the Merry-Go-Round

It was a warm late spring evening. The year was 1930. We kids, all eight of us old enough to be outside in the yard, were getting a little bored with our usual games of tag, catch, ante-over or hide 'n' seek.

The farmyard, a broad green ringed with poplar trees, echoed with our shouts and cries, for we were healthy lively youngsters, from our brother Larry, fifteen, to little fat Margret, four. Even little Walter, who was two, had been out for awhile, joining in our play. Mother was in with the baby, waiting for Dad to come home from work.

The swings, hung from tree branches, swing continuously, both the long and the short one, with cries of "My turn!" and "Push me higher!" ringing in the warm air.

We hardly knew the word 'sports' and 'recreation' would have floored us. We just played at whatever we could think up to do.

We had climbed all the trees suitable for climbing – and some that weren't. My own tree-climbing specialty was to creep as high in a tall thin tree as I could get, grip the trunk closely in my skinny arms and start it swaying, throwing myself back and forth as hard as I could, to get a good 'ride', meanwhile gazing up at the passing clouds swirling above the branches. A real thrill could be obtained this way, if one didn't 'chicken out'.

I could take it. Some of my brothers couldn't so I felt a bit superior. There were many things they exceeded at.


Even tree-swinging palled after a time. We often played in the barn loft, creeping up behind the team on the ladder built against the wall. There we climbed up to the rafters, strung halfway to the high humped roof, and sometimes we walked them, like tightrope walkers, high above the hay, where we could land safely if we fell off. Sometimes there was no hay left; we walked our rafters anyway, resulting in a few none-too-gentle falls.

Another barn game was called skinning the cat. You hung by your hands from the rafters (which were rough and full of splinters), then raised your feet until you could pass them through between your arms, along with the rest of you, and so hung 'skinned' until you got back enough breath to push your butt back through and get 'unskinned'.

Unless, of course, you fell off first. I would do it, if only as the oldest girl among a slough of boys, just to prove I could. And fell often. That loft floor was as hard as any other board floor, when you hit from about eight feet up.

We had a swing up there, too, and we used it on rainy days, but outside was where we all wanted to be, when it was warm and not raining.

In the thirties, our store-bought game supplies were practically nil. I remember we had a softball, probably picked up at some Sports Day, or maybe swiped from school. There was a baseball, too, that someone had brought, possibly one of our uncles who played in the men's team in town. The skin would come off it, and we had to sew it with store string almost every time we used it. That would be about the limit.



Our other equipment was all home created. We had baseball bats Dad whittled out of a dry pole, softball bats made out of boards. Our swings were made of the ropes a friend of Dad's, who had a ropemaker, made for us. You bought a ball of binder twine, which cost about 50¢ then, and with this little gadget the man twisted strand on strand of twine into a rope. I think it took two to run it.

This rope was used for halter shanks, to tether horses or milk cows to graze off the yard grass overnight, to tie down loads of freight Dad hauled for anyone needing hauling done, to secure tarps, and of course, for our swing ropes.

We didn't like new rope for skipping; it hurt our hands. But an old softened-up discarded halter shank was just right, and skipping was a way of life among us.

I remember the thrill of skipping just before a thunder storm, with the giant dark clouds gathering and the wind only a far-off whisper. I guess the pressure was high or something, for we would feel very light and could go so fast, almost as if we were flying, skipping along the hard dry dirt road leading into our yard.

I'd hate to go inside when I was thus 'flying' and more than once got a soaking when I skipped or hopped too far from home before the storm broke.

Oh, hopping. That was another of our pleasures. You cross your arms behind your back for balance, stand up very straight, almost leaning back and you start hopping, a sort of jig of two steps on one foot then two on the other. You can get a bounce to it, and while you're not moving as

fast as in a run, it is easier to do – and a lot more exciting. I think I could still hop, if I tried. But not far!

Well, this June evening we were ripe for something different, and we started scheming between us.

One of us must have gone to a show and saw a merry-go-round, or else read about it. At any rate the idea took hold. We must have one. But how?

Brother Dean, fourteen, came up with the plan. We would saw off this big tree which stood about halfway to the barn. It was partly dead anyway. Everyone who came tied his saddle horse or team to it, so the bark was all skinned off and shiny. The branches were meager and broken from too many kids climbing them. We decided it would do for our purposes.

We may have asked Mom's permission, but I doubt it. Mainly we were on our own. The big boys got the saw and an ax and started cutting the tree down. I think they stood on sawhorses with a plank across, as they cut the tree down, leaving a high stump.

We younger kids gathered all the branches and carted them away, after the big old poplar tree crashed down. Larry and Dean sawed the trunk into firewood lengths. These we carried over to the woodpile.

Next the stump was cut again, this time after careful marking, so it would be level on top, and just high enough to suit our aims.

Somewhere from Dad's supply of lumber, a wide spruce about fourteen feet long, was scrounged. With the aid of one of Dad's ship's augers the boys drilled a hole an

inch in diameter through the center of the plank and deep into the stump.

Into this hole a long broad-headed bolt with a big washer under its head was driven, first through the plank, then into the heart of the stump. A couple of 'handhold' slats were nailed a foot or so from the ends of the plank and our merry-go-round was complete.

A rider would sit on each end of the plank. Two 'pushers' stood next to the stump and when ready started the spinning by pushing and running with the plank. When the 'pushers' got tired or the riders were going fast enough to suit them, they ducked down and squatted on the ground until called in for more speed. If they wished they could dash out from the center, but that took good timing. It was tough to get a belt on the head from the plank if you missed your time.

Of course the older boys tried it out first with some of we younger ones pushing. We knew we'd get our turn. They soon found that a dollop of axel grease on the pin made for more speed and less work for the pushers.

Unfortunately, after all his work, Dean found he was not cut out for such spinning around, as every time he tried it he had to throw up. So he became a prized pusher.

I fully enjoyed the giddy swing of it. We soon learned to balance ourselves according to our weight, by sitting closer to the center or further back. We could give the little kids rides, too, by holding them in front of ourselves, and not going full speed. We mounted by holding one end of the plank down, as the first one got on

and got a good hold. Then the pusher helped the other rider pull his end down and mount.

One pusher would be enough, if we didn't demand too much speed and were willing to limit our ride. A few times an over-zealous pusher got us going too fast before we were secure and we flew off the back end to land in the dirt, full of shrieks and a few bumps.

Many neighbor kids came over the years to help us fill the night air with our shouts and laughter, as we rode our merry-go-round by the light of the moon or the stars or a bonfire blazing in the bare place Dad had decided was safe.

We had many other self-made games. Sometimes we played cowboys and Indians, with stick horses and wooden 'guns'. We made bows and arrows. We knew a hundred places to hide when we were hiding-and-seeking. Poison tag was fun, when the gang was fairly equal in age, too rough when we all played together, big and small.

We played Jip, a team game requiring only two sticks and a hole in the ground for equipment. London bridge, ring-around-the-rosy and pump-pump-pull-away were not sissy games as we played them, and only bodies were required, plus a few rules. These games could get hilarious, too.

Other uses for our muscles we found in tug 'o' war, follow-the-leader and 'May I?'. We batted flies and played catch when not enough on hand to form a team and played ball when there was.

Our merry-go-round lasted as long as I was at home. I suppose the old stump rotted away in time and the

plank along with it. One thing I know is no grass grew very long inside that little circle when we were kids in the good old days back then.

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Make Merry - on Canada's 121st birthday - July 1

Long years ago, when I was a kid, we didn't call it Canada Day - it was referred to as the 1st of July, just as in the States **their** day was the 4th of July - and everyone knew what those days referred to. If we wanted to get fancy, we called it Canada's birthday, but in fact, not much attention was paid to it, since most of the people I knew were still considering themselves "Americans" so made their obeisance to the American birthday.

I should have said "Yankees" there, rather than Americans, as 'Americans' is a newer moniker adopted by the Yankees to describe themselves, since technically we are all 'Americans' - inasmuch as we live in one or the other of the Americas.

I admit it is harder to say "United Statsians" than Americans.

So we early Albertans held our sports' day, school picnics, ball games, etc., on July 4th - naturally. I remember

one summer - I was about in grade three or four - the teacher found we had missed so many days with rotten roads and cold weather in the winter and spring, that we would need to put in a few extra days - I think it would have been two weeks - in order to get all our work done that we should get done before calling it quits for the summer. This was near the time when the big change-over began, whereby we had summer holidays, instead of staying home through January and February, when it was cold and stormy and the roads were so heavy with snow drifts, and compensating for this by going to school all summer. (And we had lots worse winters than we do now!)

Of course, the powers that were had decided to have a sports' day on the 4th of July, and we all wanted to go to that - for me a chance to win 10 cents in a three-legged race - but we were to have the 1st of July off. After a consultation with the teacher, and she taking a vote, we all agreed to go to school on the first, if we could have the fourth off.

All this was decided on June 30th. Home we went, to give the happy news to our parents. Ha! Ha! "No way!" says our mother, the English-cum-Canadian. "You do not insult our country's honor by 'working' (she meant going to school) on the 1st of July!" So we stayed home and weeded the garden.

However on Monday, the 4th of July, our father, the American-reluctantly-turned-Canadian, who had unremittingly worked all day of the first, determined that he deserved a day off, and would go to the sports' day, and

we as his bounded duty, would be allowed to go to sports' day also.

Mother wasn't about to sit home alone, so she made up a bunch of lunch, we packed it into the democrat, along with our many bodies, and off we went to the sports' day - which I think was over on the Sand Plains that year (now being the golf course and considered eventually as a recreation grounds). It made an excellent sports grounds, as there was very short grass (no need to cut it) a few clumps of poplars here and there, used to sit under while we had lunch, and the further away ones to tie the horses under, where they could munch their oats in relative comfort from the flies.

Here the ice cream stands were set up, where one could also buy hot dogs, pop, pie and other junk food - IF one had the shekels. Adults had to pay to get in - what, a quarter? - but I think kids got in free. Dad would hand us out each a dime or two, or a quarter to the older ones (boys!) but for the rest of our splurge we were encouraged to hustle some funds for ourselves. Which meant competing in the races.

I could never run worth a hoot, and was not up to wolfing down a pie in seconds flat, or beating an opponent off a suspended pole with a bag of feathers while perched on the other end of said pole. No one in their right mind would let me on a ball team, or tug-of-war rope. I couldn't jump - either broad or high - so what was there left to do?

I could con some other unsuspecting girl, who also needed a boost to her "wad", to enter the three-legged races! In this we didn't need only to be fast, we had to co-

operate. Our legs tied together (that is, one of hers to one of mine) with a scarf, so we stood side by side, then at the "Go!" holler, off we went, wobble, wobble. Some fell, some rolled, others bounced back and forth - but we! I guess even then I was a born dancer, as I could synchronize my gait to hers, whatever it was, and we hot-footed it down to the finish line, winning far oftener than not. No need for speed, just a nice matched gait, so you didn't end up with your face in the dust. And the lovely cash at the end! Sometimes first place got a quarter, so then we were rich all day.

Imagine a big slab of homemade raisin pie on a paper plate for 10 cents! Or the heaped up ice cream cone for 5 cents! Suckers or candy canes for 1 cent, popcorn for a nickel. Ah 1928, you were many ages ago!

So! Back to school the next day, and try to explain to the teacher how come you missed BOTH days - after promising to come! And you find she sat here all through the first of July with three kids present, and they only came because they didn't know about either of these great important days, having come from some 'foreign' country like Norway or Denmark - or Russia, where there wasn't a "4th of July" day of any sort. It was nice on that occasion to be able to blame the parents, "They wouldn't LET me come!" - when sometimes it seemed like they had to chase us to school with a switch.

So I hope you ALL have a lovely, surprise-filled Canada Day, complete with a bit of ice cream, the sun to shine upon you and lots of flag waving. Don't try so hard to "have a good time" that you end up bone-weary or

sloshed, run-over, or lose any kids. (Even if they sometimes make you feel like it would be a good idea).

On this Canada Day of 1988, I will be far from home, and the home town, hopefully enjoying a sunny day on my son's farm near Fairview, along with great numbers of my family, from far and near. My son Dennis, whom I've not seen in a year, will be there, with his family, as will my other kids. Lots of grandchildren, great grandchildren, aunts (a few) and uncles (a few) and one family I've never met before, up from the States, my father's brother's granddaughter (how's that for intricacies?) from Seattle, with her husband.

My father, youngest of a family of 10, was the only one of his family who came to Canada, and I have never met a single one of his side of the family before - so needless to say, I am looking forward to this meeting. Not that I've been short of family to meet. There are some 300 that I am aware of, mostly my mother's folks, or my husband's family, here in Canada, so we have a good reason to make merry - on this - our Canada's 121st birthday. And I intend to.

June 29, 1988



Musing

All day my busy fingers fly,
I mend the sox and bake a pie;
I sweep the floors and make the bed
And shoo the cats and punch the bread;
I trip on toys and slip on beads
And worry 'bout my kiddies' needs -
Sometimes I feel I'll ne'er be done,
With rushing round from sun to sun!

I'd like to sit and read a book
Or loaf beside a gurgling brook
Watching the snowy clouds float by
Smelling the woodland violets shy;
In winter I would find a hill
And try my long-lost skiing skill;
Or walk o'er glist'ning slopes of white
And dream away a moonlit night.

For all these things in bygone youth
I reveled in; but now in truth,
With myriad duties to perform
I'll stay and keep my kitchen warm.

1952

1st published poem



I'm Twelve Again and it's Saturday Night

Saturday night is a good time when one is a kid. All day Saturday is great, but evening brings the culmination of activities peculiar to Saturday. This really is the good time!

About a quarter to seven, I'd wake up and I'd lay there, thinking, "What's different about today? Why do I feel so unusual?" As my soggy brain got into gear, it would hit me. "Saturday! No school! Freedom for a day!" Snuggling into the covers, I'd shut my eyes and will myself to go back to sleep.

Of course, I didn't go back to sleep, my mind already hop-scotching about, checking what momentous event was highlighted for today. A trip to town? A swim in the old mud hole? Company coming from the city? Berry picking? If it was winter, then off to the hills with the neighbor kids, our home-made skis, toboggans and sleds.

Five minutes later up the stairwell would come the familiar call:

"Come on, get up. Daylight in the swamp! No need to loaf in bed just because there's no school today. The chores still got to be done."

My dad was an early-to-bed, early-to-rise man. Being up late the night before was no excuse for lying abed of a morning - - be it week-day or week-end. In fact, my brothers suspected that he called a bit earlier on those mornings after they had been up late, just to stiffen their spines.

Dad would have been up long before, building up the fires, if it was cold out. The big copper kettle would be on the range, spouting steam, the heavy black cast-iron griddle heating slowly at the back, readying itself for the mountain of pancakes - or griddle cakes, as my father called them - which invariably followed the dollop of oatmeal, cornmeal, sunnyboy or cream of wheat, awash in creamy milk and brown sugar, with which we started our breakfast.

Mom got her call to arms a little differently than we kids did:

"Kate, time to get up!" was her daily hail, "Kettle's boiling to beat the band!" That slave-driving kettle, bubbling so furiously, could wrench my mother from her slumbers and out to the lamplit kitchen in short order. Why she didn't occasionally tell him to just take it off the stove, I don't know.

I guess there was something inexorable about having thirteen healthy, hungry kids to feed three or

more times a day. In those deep Depression days there were no convenience foods or mothers' helpers available to us. We lived a strictly do-it-yourself or do-without routine. Despite our large family and Dad's low-paying work, I can truly say we never went hungry; we did, in truth, find a good many extra pairs of knees tucked under our long table, friends, relatives and passing strangers. Their theory was that Mom had to cook all that food anyway and there was always room and enough for one more.

Spuds came up from the cellar by the dishpanfull. Roasts were gigantic. Our stew pot was a great cauldron, afloat with fist-size, belly-filling dumplings, chunks of beef or rabbit in generous measure, vegetables and barley swimming about. Mother baked bread every second day, in twelve-loaf batches. The yeast came in little square cakes in little square boxes, and the dough was set overnight, the big covered bread-pan of batter wrapped in blankets and the sheepskin coat to ward off a chilling, which could flatten and kill the yeast and ruin the whole batch. Dad had baked his own bread while bacheloring [living as a bachelor] on his homestead before he met our mother. He recalled his baking as close to perfect. It could be cause for chiding and cynical remarks about "women can't do much right" if Mom's bread turned out poorly.

In my memory of Mother's home-baked bread it was nothing short of heavenly. Coming in from school, after our two and a half mile walk, with those great brown loaves dumped out of the pans onto the

tabletop, butter or bacon drippings lavishly coating their crusty sides, the aroma penetrated right into the marrow of my bones. One of Mom's mottos was "Use up the old first", but she never really denied us our slash at the fresh-baked bread. The knife squashed the lovely loaf down and sogged our slice, but we didn't complain. When you have an inch thick slab of steaming bread, butter melting into it, a generous coating of brown sugar on top, perhaps a sprinkle of cinnamon, when you are hungry, at ten or twelve or six, it doesn't matter, this is truly the stuff of life.

Mom would be cautioning, "One slice only, now," or "Don't spoil your appetite for supper!", but we thought we could still hold our supper, and only with a firm hand and voice could she stem our ravenous onslaught. Perhaps it was habit, perhaps the human instinct against seeing that which one has created being devastated, which gave Mother the reluctance to see us cut into the hot, fresh bread. We always did it and she always protested. I think she didn't mind so much after the Christmas when she got the breadsaw, which allowed the slice to remain somewhat in the shape of the loaf it came from, the old butcher knife doing no such delicate job.

On Saturday morning, if it was a bake-bread day, I liked that, too. I could get a wad of dough and mold it into cinnamon rolls or cloverleaf buns or cornucopias, and perhaps a few doll-sized loaves on a jam-tin lid for a doll-party later.

Saturday morning was clean-up time, over and above the endless stacks of dishes to be washed.

Being the eldest girl, dishwashing was my lot in life. I hated the water which got cold and greasy all too soon. I resented my sneaky younger sister for being born later than I, so she was allowed to dry while I washed. And I hated the black, sooty bottoms of the pots and pans my mother would put over the open holes on the cookstove, in her effort to hurry things along. But it gave us a time to talk and argue and sing a few songs as I slopped along in the biggest dishpan. And, Oh how that water affected our bladders! I wonder if we ever got through doing our dishes without a trip each out to the often cold and clammy closet (Mother's name) or outhouse (Dad's title)? Probably never.

At last, dishes are done, table wiped off. The boys are off to outside chores, wood to split and carry in.

"Three armfuls each will do," Mother decides, "Hurry and clean out the woodbox first." Guess who gets to do that? Oh, well, it could be worse. A few dustpanfuls of bark and shreadings, chips and paper, which all goes in the cookstove, with a few bits on the side to smolder and smell. They bring pails of water from the well over the hill to fill the thirsty reservoir at the back of the range and a few in the copper wash boiler to heat for the cleaning-up.

Sometimes we used rain water from the barrels at the corners of the house, but if rainfall was scanty this was reserved for shampoos, bathing the baby, and to wash the precious woolens, Dad's underwear and sox, baby's undershirts and our school

sweaters. Our well water was hard and tasted wonderful. It curdled the Pearl bar soap, the Lux and Palmolive fared no better; only Fel's Naptha with washing soda or lye could really move much dirt out. Our hands were perennially rough, chapped and dry, as were our knees, elbows, heels and wrists.

There was "his" and "hers" work all over our place, in some ways I didn't mind. The boys' choring included feeding and milking a cow or two, feeding our few pigs, and the team of horses Dad used in his daily work, and cleaning out the barn for these same animals. They got to fix fences and put up the hay for winter, to cut trees in the bush for our firewood supply. They were encouraged to hunt for partridges and prairie chickens and ducks and rabbits. In winter they could trap or snare rabbits, weasels and coyotes for their hides, sometimes muskrats and skunks, too. All this augmented the family income and food supply. Girls usually only did things of no value, like housework and gardening.

On my Saturday, by 9 o'clock, with water heating, small kids banished outdoors, or to a bedroom if too cold to play outside, and sister set to mind the baby, I could commence my task of cleaning-up. First, make all the beds, and Saturday is change-the-sheets-and-pillowcases day. In the process I'll be on the lookout for all lost socks, in the beds or under them, for funnies and mislaid schoolbooks, for feathers and beads and marbles. Even a spindle of apple core will turn up now and then, or a mouldering half-sandwich dropped from a late-night snacker's

hand as its owner drifted off to dreamland. I'd punch and fluff up the straw-filled ticks, filled every fall with fresh, clean straw, or pungent hay. . .now, that was a treat to sleep on for a few nights!

Now, sweep the floors, upstairs, down the stairs, Mom's room, living room, lastly the kitchen. Don't forget the closets and porches, under everything, behind and between! Sometimes a lot of dust would fly and I sprinkled used wet tea and coffee grounds, or torn up wetted newspapers to lay the dust. It was the sweeper's privilege to request any bodies in the way to move, sometimes in no uncertain terms, with a swing of the broom for emphasis if it were one of the kids, more civilly if an adult. Pity the poor cat or dog banished with no regard for their wishes.

As I sweep along I have gathered all the chairs into a line down the big kitchen, handy for their scrubbing-up. Everything is wood, the floors, chairs, tables and cupboards, even some of the beds and dressers, guiltless of paint or varnish, all requiring scrubbing. Plenty of hot water, soap and lye or ashes would whiten and clean them. The scrub brush was an indispensable tool. Rinsed off and wiped, the chairs and benches went out on the porch to dry in the sun. I'm talking summer now- -in winter they stood by the homemade barrel heater at the end of our long kitchen-dining room. Again the scrubber - I - was queen for the hour. No one was allowed to walk over my scrubbing area until it was dry - or sit on my chairs. Fur would fly if anyone dared.

and forth with various dishes that end zone diners got their just desserts, to say nothing of butter, bread and gravy.

Dad seldom looked up from his plate, so considerable hanky-panky went on among the small fry, who knew he wouldn't see but most certainly could hear. Very silently they could punch, poke, pinch and hassle each other, Mother occasionally shaking her head or frowning disapprovingly at their antics, but she, too, was loath to bring attention to the recalcitrant rascals unless one was being pummelled too briskly.

Scrubbing the kitchen floor, back-tiring and knee-crunching as it was, gave one such a sense of accomplishment. It would be so dirty and get so clean as patch by patch one worked toward the back door. It was fir flooring, emitting its subtle firry odor when the hot suds hit it. The lovely reddish grains were beautiful to see, and only really visible when wet and my eye was so close. One could also pick up a nasty splinter under a fingernail or in a knuckle, so I used caution. We had a long handled mop for spills and splashes, but it didn't do the clean-up as well, and I admired the results of my scrubbing.

At last, I reach the door, scrub it down, and the jamb and sill, and the porch with the old broom. I'm finished.

Now I lay the newspaper paths across the damp kitchen floor to the table, the cupboard, past the stove to the woodbox and on to the bedroom door. I would protect my handiwork from muddy

Having worked from upstairs down and from bedroom to kitchen, it would be time to "Come and get it!" just before I got the kitchen floor in sight. This was fine. It gave a rest period. Dishes could be washed and put away before getting back to the scrubbing.

Mom would have been busy all morning baking and cooking, bathing and feeding the baby, washing his tiny white garments. So our lunch would likely be a big pot of soup or make-'em-yourself sandwiches. We could already smell the subtle aroma of supper's baking beans with the salt pork and molasses slowly simmering away in the oven. The bread and buns would be rising on the warming oven and all over the flour chest.

In would troop the gang, laughing, shoving, teasing, hurrying to wash up and then sliding along the bench behind the table 'till they came to "my place", that little niche at the feeding trough each of us had laid claim to and none dare dispute.

The men, Dad and any visitors, were served first, then the kids, Mother usually sitting to feed the baby, if he were old enough to eat at the table. Guess who ran for coffee or tea or more bread or to fill an empty salt shaker? At least, I sat at the end of the table next to Mom so I could get out easily. Dad – we all forgave him because he was very nearsighted – never passed anything to anyone, excepting visitors sitting next to him. Since he always sat halfway down the long table on the one side and my lazy brothers opposite on the bench along the wall, it was mainly due to my sisters' and my own nimble running back

footprints, that it not be in vain. Saturday night that floor would be clean!

Cleaning the windows was not done every week, but most summer Saturdays it was. Our panes were small and numerous, the windows low, so many fingerprints and noseprints, too, splashes of water and food decorated their glassy faces, to say nothing of the spots of flies and the haze of smoke from the wood-burning stoves. With a bucket of water, a couple of tablespoons of kerosene, a cloth to wash and newspaper to polish, and with lots of elbow grease my magic wand brought shining results.

It is now 3 o'clock by the Big Ben on the high shelf of the range. Have the boys finished their choring? Has Mother's inspection of my cleaning passed me to the O.K. class? All signals say "Go!" So we are off to the lake about 2 miles away over the hill.

"Mind you are back no later than six", Mother admonishes, "to help with supper and chores. And you've all got to bath and wash your hair."

"Ha, ha!" chortles brother the Beast, "I'll wash in the lake enough to suit me!" But I know the thick greenish water won't really clean us, it will only wet us. I wouldn't put my hair in it; I might collect some moss or bugs! Grabbing a few towels, we are off.

What matter the blazing sun, the dusty road, the ravenous mosquitoes? We are going swimming, 'though the way be long, the water murky, the bushes sharp.' No one has a watch so how to estimate the time to leave? We splash and splutter and scream. We paddle and dunk, or be named a sissy if we don't. At

last the little ones are turning blue, the shadows are long and the shivers take over. It's time to go home.

Off we straggle, the bigger boys leaving us far behind. The small one cries and needs to be carried and pushed and pulled up the long steep hill. At last we are home, dustier than when we left. The scurry for supper is on.

The beans have baked to a rich dark brown, almost dry in their fat brown clay pot. The bacon is crisp. The lettuce from the garden sloshed with thick sweet cream, sugar and vinegar; cinnamon buns still warm and gooey. The milk is cold and delicious.

Mother has the boiler of water heating at the back of the range as we are eating. When supper ends the wash tub is filled and in goes the youngest. Mother starts washing his hair and scrubbing him down. Sister and I do the dishes, brothers go to chore.

In summer we bathe in Mother's bedroom; in winter she hangs a blanket from the mitt-drying clothesline by the big heater, to shelter us from cold drafts and peaking eyes. Here we steam on one side, goosepimple on the other as we scurry through our bath. We are not encouraged to loiter, for the water would soon cool too much to suit the next one; five minutes is our average run-through time.

Dad has brought mail and groceries picked up in town when his day's work was finished. Now he sits by the coal oil lamp on the kitchen table reading the Family Herald. Each child gets his or her ablutions done and into a clean nighty or underwear. They comb out each other's hair, soggy and bristly from a

brisk rub of the towel, soon settling on the sofa or on the floor, scrubbed, still damp, by the fire. We take turns holding the baby. Big brother puts a record on the phonograph, which is old and must be wound twice for each record it plays, and which we dearly love.

At last it's my turn to zip into the tub and be thankful we had a rain so the water is soft and sudsy. I have washed my hair in the basin earlier and made two braids. They are slippery and dank against my neck. I slip into my nightgown, which is an old cotton housedress of mother's, with the sleeves cut out. It smells clean and fresh from the outdoors. I sneak a bit of baby talc to dust myself with. It is a luxury I love, but which is reserved for baby only. It's very expensive, twenty-five cents a can.

Now the end of a lovely Saturday. We sit or lie on the clean, piney smelling floor and listen to the haunting Hawaiian Hurricane, the Carter Family and Gene Austin, Abdul Abulbul Ameer and Springtime in the Rockies, Jimmy Rogers and Wilf Carter. The boys wrestle a bit and squirm and shove, but even they are tired and content to settle down. Finally Dad looks at his gold-clad pocket watch, with the snap-open case and gold chain, which he brought with him from the States, in 1909.

"Nine o'clock," he says, "Time to hit the hay. Off to bed now, you younguns. Morning comes early."

Nobody moves for a few minutes and the record draws to its close.

"Get going, now!" Dad lowers his paper and gives us a look. "When I say scat, I mean scat!"

In twos and threes we wander off to bed, knowing we have clean sheets tonight and a new day tomorrow. Mom has gone off to bed to feed the baby, who still sleeps with her and Dad, as I guess we all did while she was nursing us. Dad wants to have his bath in privacy.

"I'll play a tune for you to get to sleep on." He promises, in a mellow mood. We think he feels Saturday night is a good time, too. As we snug into our bed, my two sisters and I, we can hear the Wreck of the Number Nine wafting up the stairwell. . . .

"On a cold winter's night
Not a star was in sight - "

But I can see a whole ocean of stars from my bedroom window - - each one winking at me.

1977



I Remember Billy the Kid

One of the most trying periods of my youth commenced the day our father brought home a strange new pet. We children and I believe mother, too - thought Dad had been sold a bill of goods.

"He'll go between the rows in the garden," these false friends told Dad, "and eat the weeds. Oh - he'll never touch a vegetable! And he'll make a great pet for the youngsters!"

So much for honesty and truth from goat peddling friends.

Dad plunked that little black kid down in our kitchen and repeated the above far-fetched statements. Well, the kid was kind of cute, and the time was August, some months before our pet would have to prove his worth in the garden. He was promptly named Billy and given a bottle of milk. We patted and petted him while he slurped it down.

Once full to bulging, his bright eyes rolled. He checked for the nearest ladder - a chair-to-table-top sprint. The table had been freshly set for supper. This gave Billy no pause. He leaped gaily about, dishes flying and crashing, food splattering and spilling, eluding our clutching hands until havoc was complete.

This proved to be the pattern of Billy's career. Anytime he could slip into the kitchen, he did so. With a round dozen in our family, opportunities to dash past and into the house as the door opened were many.

Once inside, Billy headed for the highest place he could get - on the table, the cupboard, washstand. Even once or twice into the big wood burning range. The commotion caused and the messes to be cleaned up were legion.

As winter set in, Billy was confined more to the barn. Alas, he spent all his time in growing! He grew very sharp hooves, he grew a straggly beard; a forehead of solid bone and a pair of wide curved horns, suitable for nothing at all but to bunt us with whenever he saw chance. I dreaded the coming of spring. Billy would be ever present, ever vengeful. I was sure he hated me. I certainly grew to hate him!

For many months I had been ill, slowly recovering from fractured vertebrae. My best speed was a slow walk. Our plumbing was in a small building about 200 feet out back of the house. There I must wend my slow way several times a day. I walked in fear, the glance over my shoulder.

That goat could hear me open the door. I strived for silence. He could smell my presence, I'm sure. There I would go, tip-toeing in my snail's pace, terror in my heart. Sometimes I wouldn't see a sign of him, and I always gulped with relief I made it inside and shut the door.

But! We have to go back, don't we? I might sneak halfway to the kitchen door, hoping I'd made it this time, then clickety-clack came the rattle of sharp hooves on the

path, galloping at me for all he was worth, head down, a gleeful "Baaa-a-a!" deep in his evil throat.

I could not run. I couldn't bear to have him hit me. It hurt where he bumped and the jar to my spine was excruciating. All I could do was face him, brace myself and prepare. At the exact split-second before he hit me, I would grab him by his horns and hold him helpless at my rigid arms length while I screamed my head off until mother or brothers came with a broom and whacked him away.

Perhaps I have been unduly harsh in my thoughts of our old pet, Billy. Perhaps, had there been others of his kind around, he would've been less belligerent towards us humans. Truly he developed few endearing traits. He could strip the clean wash off the line as fast as we could hang it. He nibbled and gnawed at the horse-collars and sweatpads until he had the mohair coming out in shreds. No fence we had could hold him, so he roamed at will, unless locked in the barn; even so he learned to crawl out over the half-door. Billy was on top of everything, the woodpile, the lumber pile, the bundlestack Dad kept for the horses. His favorite stance in the farmyard was atop the sod-roofed chicken-coop which was dug partly into the ground. There he posed endlessly, sharp hooves close together, nose in the air, shaggy beard bobbing rapidly as he chewed his cud- and no doubt thought deep and wicked thoughts.

Oh. I must mention that Billy did not go between the garden rows, placidly nibbling out the weeds; and it turned out vegetables were his prime diet.

One day Dad arrived in the yard just as Billy had succeeded in out-maneuvering me and knocking me to the

ground. I had missed my grab and he got me in the knees. There I sprawled, screaming, as Billy backed off, trying to decide where to whack me next. The toe of his boot and a few hastily chosen but colorfully descriptive words, Dad drove the spiteful little beast away.

Next day there was no Billy around our yard. I gloried in my freedom, and started to enjoy the outdoors again. I never really asked, but somehow I knew Billy had not gone to a neighbor's to visit, nor had he run away from home. Justice to outlaws, especially animal outlaws, was swift and deadly in those days.

Circa 1980



A Glance Back - From the Ironing Board

Standing here, smoothing out the very few pieces I find in my ironing basket, collected over several weeks until I have enough to bother heating the iron, it's easy to recall the mountains of ironing of bygone years. Two days a week, and often long evenings, too, I spent at the ironing board when my children were all at home and in school.

No stranger to ironing when we started housekeeping on our own, I, as eldest girl in a family of thirteen, had ironed blisters onto my hands for years.

Would you believe, the heaviest demand some ironing and pressing skills were made by my older brothers - "how can I go girling with my pants not pressed?" and "Get my white shirt ironed for the dance tonight, eh?" And, of course, for my heroes, I did it.

As I got to my teens, I'd make a mean trade -- like "No more pressing if you don't dance with me!" A terrible burden for a brother to do, but that didn't last too long. I soon had lots of boys asking for dances; no need for brothers to save me from being a 'wall flower.'

But - Oh the heat! You stood there, shoving wood into the range with every change of iron, to keep them properly heated, even in mid-summer, sweat pouring down your back and off your nose to drip on the board before you.

In those days, I favored a folded blanket and sheet on the big kitchen table. You could get up some speed that way. I probably inherited that quirk for my Mom. And Dad had made her a fold up ironing board once, and it was OK

for small things, like baby dresses and ruffles, but she soon banished it into an upstairs closet, as being too 'piddly'.

Irons came in sets of three. We had a fancy wrought-iron stand for the flatiron to rest on as we arranged our work, and we always kept an old catalogue under it to 'test' on - if the paper turned brown the clothes probably would, too. So we pressed with a damp cloth when the iron was too hot, until it cooled a bit. That didn't take long!

One picked the iron (actual name -sad-iron - and I know why!) off the range with the interchangeable handle, which had a knob-lift lever, or thumb-push lever, depending on which kind one had. This was usually quite efficient, but occasionally one got a poor one - - or perhaps long use weakened the spring - - and it was always a surprise when the hot iron fell off halfway to the table. You could really jump fast to get your feet out of the way, and to get it up again before it burned a fancy pattern on the floor. Of course our olden days floor was wet, and not linoleum, so that scorched slower.

Irons were made to remove wrinkles from cotton, wool, silk and linen and, later, rayon. They succeeded in putting wrinkles into a lot of female faces, too. At home, my mother, with her brood, cut corners. We didn't iron sheets, underwear or nightwear. We didn't press knitted garments, socks or towels. There were plenty of dresses, shirts, petticoats, aprons, etc., to iron, with pants, shirts and suits to press. I gladly went along with her rules.

Then I went and got married. In the homes of my mother-in-law and sister-in-law I saw them iron sheets,

shorts, towels, stiffly starched shirts, dresses, aprons, table linens, pillow slips. Aha! I thought. Now learn the PROPER way to be a good housekeeper - a very important attribute for a girl in those days.

I watched them press sweaters, woolen underwear, socks, blankets. They even pressed the blue jeans! But I do less and be acceptable? Of course not.

So I ironed. Endlessly, unremittingly, painfully. As my children appeared, I ironed their gowns, their barrowcoats, their belly-bands. I pressed their jackets and booties, ironed rompers and multi-frilled dresses, tiny overalls, bonnets. Ah, my kids were neat when we went to town! I didn't get much else done - - but then I hadn't much else to do besides the housework, carrying in the wood and water and a few barn chores and in summer the garden, of course.

So I ironed. And I sang while I ironed. I even leaned a proper book on the window ledge and read while I did the 'flat' stuff, if the children were content, or I told long-winded, made-up stories to the children at my feet to distract them from crying or fussing for my arms and my lap, so often unavailable to them.

About fifteen years after we were married my husband bought me a Coleman gas iron. This was a self-contained beast; you filled a little tank with hi-test gasoline, then pumped like crazy with its little pump to attain a good pressure, then lit the thing, standing well back in case of a flare-up. It had a generator, a little tube, which could and did get clogged with soot and rubbish from somewhere (I always suspected the gas had dirt in it),

then it would go out or flare-up alarmingly, and you had to shut it off and clean the generator or get a new one. I had a gallon jug of hi-test gasoline on the back porch. It's a wonder we didn't blow our heads off!

I liked the Coleman iron, as I could let the fire go out on hot summer days, and I could use the coolest part of the house to work in. It maintained a more constant heat, when it was working properly, so I could do a better job. But it was heavy and awkward, with that tank on the back, and I soon noticed that I was always ending up my ironing day with a roaring, nauseous headache, which I finally traced and had to blame on some fumes or emissions from the burning gas.

Even with open windows, I suffered. A breeze or draft would cause the gas to flame up and singe my hand, and the handle paints and became blistered and rough. My hands did too.

I was glad enough to graduate to an electric iron, a steam iron at that, when the power finally came to our farm. No more sprinkling all those clothes the night before ironing day and rolling them up into tight rolls to dampen evenly. No more black mildew spots when the dampened clothes didn't get ironed for a few days, as happened now and then.

But much gladder am I for the wonderful labour saving fabrics of today! Happy for the frilled and pleated garments which go straight from dryer to hanger, the creases which stay in the pants, the fluffy that stays in the towels. A few pieces, of part cotton or wool, which I still 'touch-up' with my iron are no chore, and merely give me

pause to think up long stories like this one, of days gone by. Science has given me time to write them down.

December 30, 1980



Our Snow-Bound Trails

I'm sure some people were inconvenienced by the snow-filled roads after the big blow we had last week. But also sure that few found themselves snow-bound for more than a day or two. In one way we are fortunate, for we have large snow plows and, apparently, money and men to drive them. If we had to go out today, and dig a route through those massive piles of packed snow, with the equipment of forty or fifty years ago – well, I think the going would be slow.

Of course, it snowed forty and fifty years ago, as hard or harder than it does today. And often along with it the 50 and 60 below zero Fahrenheit (when everyone knew

how cold that was!). Now we have to fiddle around and decipher it up or down, with this silly Celcius. But it simply is not as cold as it used to be.

The reason we never got anywhere in those days, was that we didn't have the drifts to contend with that we have today. When there was bush alongside the roads, and the fields weren't so large, winds didn't have a chance to get up so much speed. Now, under the scorched-earth policy of our local governments, we cut down all the wind-resistant growth along the roads, and if any dares lift its head again, we blast it with poisonous sprays. Of course, this is termed 'progress'.

I was noticing the corner east of where I live, it's been called the "17 mile corner" for as long as I can recall. There were some nice fat drifts there. No one lives up that road, so it will be one of the last to be cleared – or should be. I remember the winter after we were married, in 1934-35, we lived up along that road.

Our means of transportation was a team and sleigh. I know we had drifts every bit as high then, since the field west of that corner (now mine) was open then, and the north-west wind drove snow into that corner in huge piles, just as it did last week.

No one would have driven those 7 or 8 miles to town for the Free Press Prairie Weekly, but we did have to go now and then for food, but especially that winter, for straw. Crops had been dismally poor, hardly any hay, and Clif went about once a week to a farmer south of the river, with our team, sleigh and rack, for a load of straw, and had to be loaded with a pitch fork.

He would leave at five or six in the morning, take a few sandwiches along. Horses couldn't be trotted much, in the bitter cold, so the trip took a long time. He walked behind when he got cold. It could be six or later in the evening before he got back. Sometimes I took my baby, and went with him as far as my parents' place, which he had to pass, and stayed there for the day. Yes, we took lots of blankets.

Going home, he would boost me up to the top of the load, hand up the baby in her bundle, and we'd burrow into the straw a bit. It was a comfortable enough ride.

But when we came to that corner, especially if the wind had come up through the day, there were those drifts. The horses would lunge in them, plodding along. The load was not immense, but awkward, and it was quite possible to tip the whole thing over if the trail got too sideling.

Clif would get down off the load, if he wasn't walking already, and guide the team in the best place to go. If it got too grim, there was the scoop shovel tied to the back of the rack. And he would use it, sometimes for an hour, to get the outfit through the drifts.

Only once do I recall, the rack tipped off, not while I was along, spilling the straw out on the snow. Somehow he righted it, and came on home with what he had left. Next day he went back and scraped up as much as he could. Feed was very precious that winter, and not to be wasted.

I don't remember who he got that straw from, over there in the King George area, but whoever he was, had a

lot from the year before. He sold it to Clif for a dollar a load. And it was used for feed, along with the little grain we could scrape up, and none of our cattle starved that winter. Some others' did.

It's a long time since I've seen a load of feed going up the road behind a team of horses, and I'm glad for the farmers who don't have to do it that very hard way, anymore. Farmers still have lots of worries and hard work to do, to make ends meet, but they are of a different variety today.

The elements are still there, and we have to respect them. Still, I'm glad the big plows come along to open our roads, even if I don't have to drive them with a team.

I also would like to thank the county, and the operator, who comes in and opens my driveway – and those of the other seniors who live in the country – without me having to go out and stick flags along the road. I feel a lot more secure, when the north west wind blows.

Alberta Trails
January 28, 1987



Suppertime Conversatio- - -

(Note: In the original, Grandma used each of her family member's middle names for each character. For clarity, proper first names have been added.)

(A memory of one family's conversation, over the evening meal, including radio. Mom has two ears, hasn't she? Can she sort it all out?)

"I wonder how we'll get that nut to hold?" Uncle Jack (Harold) muses deeply.

"Mom, make Robert (Charles) move over!" Wails Grant (Denny)

"Please pass the salt and pepper." gently interjects Carol (Lyn), then, excitedly, "Oh, let me tell you what happened in Math today! See, Inky was explaining how to work a problem and - - "

"We could try a jam nut." Bill (Clif) points out. "That might fix 'er."

"Yeah," Uncle Jack (Harold) spoons gravy onto his mashed potatoes thoughtfully. "Of course, if we took the pinion gears out and had them built up - - "

"Mom, do you know what year McKenzie discovered the Pacific Ocean?" This from Cliffy (Melvin), carefully reaching out and spilling his glass of milk.

"Well . . . Lily and I were whispering, and Inky thought we weren't listening - - "

"Mom, what's H₂O? Teacher says a fish takes oxygen out of it with its gills." Robert (Charles) helps

himself to some bread and joggles Grant (Denny)'s arm in the process.

"Mom, Robert (Charles) keeps poking me!"

"Henry Ford sure liked to hide things well," Uncle Jack (Harold) continues. "You have to take out twenty-five bolts, to get at the rear end. A car should have a zipper you could pull and open the whole thing up when it needs fixing."

"So Inky said 'Why aren't you girls paying attention?' and Lily stage whispers, 'Do we have to pay that, too?' Everybody laughed, and Inky looked so hard at Lily . . . "

"It was in 1763. It took him one whole year to cross the prairies and the Rockies - - "

"I told you I WON'T eat onions!" Grant (Denny) hisses at the meat on his plate. "It STINKS!"

"Oh, hush, Grant (Denny). It has only a small bit in, for the flavour." Mom gets her first word in. "Take a small piece and don't complain so."

"Mom, what's H₂O? Teacher says a fish takes oxygen - - "

"Trying to fix something, with farmers' bolts, a man skins up his hands every time he - - "

" - - and Lily got so red! I guess Inky thinks - - "

"Do you know how to tell an Indian's tracks from a white man's? It points - - "

"We took the flywheel out and changed the bell housing. Of course there were a lot of other things to take off first - - "

"Mom, what's H₂O?" Robert (Charles) has a single-track mind.

"H₂O is water. It's composed of 2 parts hydrogen," Cliffy (Melvin) condescends to explain. "-- and 1 part oxygen."

"I wonder why the horn doesn't work?" Bill (Clif) is still trying to probe the mysteries of the old vehicle. "It goes past the cut-out and the vibrator is in the relay. That makes a circuit --"

"I sure think Inky is cute! That little mustache -- golly gee!"

And through it all, Wayne Kings' Sweetest Music This Side of Heaven has continued beating against the air, trying to get a note in edgewise. Now the announcer tries to add his pleas to the din. "Use Motorola TV! The widest LOOK in TV! Wider vision, bigger eyes ----!"

"I supposed you could drag it out and chip it in, if you could get the grinder --" The men are now into cattle feed.

"Mom, I know there's onions in this stuff!" The soft wail is accompanied by a ferocious frown from the seven year old Grant (Denny).

-- an Indian walks with one foot in place of the other . . ."

"But how do you KNOW there's 2 parts of hydrogen and 1 part oxygen?"

"We'll have to use a different differential! And that pulley is all out of kilter. I wish we had the right kind of nuts --"

"You only need one eye to see this new, wider screen, reserving the other one - - - - "

"Then, in Science, Bertha had to make an experiment. It made the awfulest stink! We all went around with clothespins - - "

"Mom, where's some more milk?"

"The 2 beside the H means it's 2 parts Hydrogen and since it only holds 3 parts - - "

"And a white man uses his other foot. You can tell by the way they walk."

"But a socket wrench won't do it. We should take the timing cover off, but by turning it the other way, we - - - "

"I don't LIKE cabbage! Not COOKED cabbage! I don't see why - - "

"- - the other part is Oxygen."

"Hey, why don't you listen to what I'm saying? You don't seem much interested in what we do all day!"

"Louise wears the queerest color schemes! Today she had on a green skirt - - "

"What river is the Kitimat Project on? I have to write a paragraph-"

"Mom, do you know a crocodile isn't the same as an alligator?"

"Richard asked me to stay at his place tomorrow. Can I, Mom? Can I?"

"And an orange sweater with a red scarf- -"

"A crocodile is shorter and fatter and a alligator - -"

"An alligator."

"- - but the timing gear was bent. And the belt pulley was split up on one side. I think we could take - - -"

"- - and red socks! She's sure a dope!"

"Meanwhile, Joe and Marilyn are splitting up. She claims she will sue for eight million - - - "- - to Richard's. Can I, Mom? Can I?"

"- - so what river is it on?"

"- - is darker green. They live in swamps and lay eggs. Crocodiles"

" - but with pot-metal nuts - -"

Aw, nuts . . .

end

1992



Mother of the Bride

The day itself is over and I weary rest.
My heart knows not to break or to be glad!

So radiantly she stood there, poised and proud;
So blithely went this perfect thing I had.
What dreams possess her soul? O well I know!
Those same sweet dreams that once were mine;
A challenge felt, a will to make of this
A marriage wonderful, divine.

I knew she had been only lent to me
To hold and cherish for a fleeting while ...
My pay? A pixy fairyland unrolled;
My gifts? Her love, a kiss, a smile.

Her trusting eager quest into this world
Has been my greatest privilege to guide;
She goes her way; she'll build her nest safe
In harbor of her new-discovered pride.
My wish for her? As years flit by and as
Her love and ever-joyful dreams unfurl
She'll know the happiness I've known
On being lent her own sweet baby girl.

1956

The Tired Tires of World War II

World War II affected people around the world in many different ways. One aspect here in Canada was the rationing of gasoline and automobile tires.

We had a very old, very decrepit 1926 Model-T Ford acquired, as I recall, from my brother for \$35 when he left home to look for work in the shipyards of Vancouver. We mailed him payments of \$5 a month until it was ours.

This was around 1942, well into the rationing era. We never had difficulty getting sufficient gasoline (except to find the 25 cents a gallon to pay for it), since we seldom travelled over 20 miles from home. A trip to St. Paul (20 miles away) or to Lindbergh (about 12 miles the other way) were, to us, major outings.

It was the tires which tried to be our downfall. Before the war and rationing, tires were made of nice stretchy rubber, with inner tubes you could cut up in strips, after they were discarded, to make slingshots with, and other useful things like garters, and to slip over your rubbers so they wouldn't come off in the mud.

Now natural rubber had to be imported, since it certainly didn't grow in Canada. Should Canada risk ships and lives to bring rubber from India, Ceylon or South America merely for civilian use? Indeed, no! Convoys had a tough enough time fetching in the needs of our armed forces.

For civilians, if one had a vital job such as a doctor or, perhaps, delivering beer, one could be allotted tire-purchasing permits. For good tires, we hoped! The rest of us used whatever we could find.

Old, long-discarded tires were scrounged up around the countryside from long grass and rubbish heaps, and these were contributed as salvage to the war effort. Presumably, these were melted down, remolded and sold

to auto and machinery dealers. These recycled tires were not readily found either.

My husband worked on a farm a few miles away and drove to his job, but there were times when I wanted to use the old car. First, I learned to drive and got my licence for \$1 (no examinations then!). Soon I was delivering my man to work, returning home for my four little ones, then be off to sew at my mother's house (she had a sewing machine and I did not), or to pick berries in the woods, to shop or help my neighbor for the day. In the evening, I'd pick up my husband after his day was done.

All of this was simple, even cranking the Model T and learning not to run over things as there were no brakes. It was the flat tires which threw me. Although I could jack up the car, remove the lugs and then the tire – complete with its rim - and I was successful now and then in finding the leak (you spit on the suspected hole and wait for bubbles forming to show you the exact spot). I never, *never* was able to return the tire onto its rim. Just lacked the brawn, I guess.

So, my man told me, "Don't drive on a flat! You'll wreck the tire. Take it off. Drive home – *slow* – on the wheel rim."

Many a mile I covered crunching along on the gravel or dirt roads of the day with one tire off – and a considerable number of them with two tires off. But I never drove a foot on three wheel rims. We'd have left it and walked home, I'm sure.

Of course, I had to go and pick up my husband on my naked wheel rims, flat tire – or tires – piled in back. Our

Model T had no trunk, rather a sort of hatch-back affair since it started life as a roadster. My brother had built a top and we put canvas curtains on the sides. It was easy enough to throw the offending tires in.

To his credit, Clif took it all quite calmly. After working hard in the fields all day, to sit hunched over a leaky inner tube, patching in hand, lighted only by the smoky lantern while he pried darned, repatched tires onto their rims, prying those darneder rims out until they snapped in place, then jacking up the car, replacing the rims onto the wheels, was trying. Knowing he could face the whole routine all over again the next night was disheartening.

They also served who only endured aggravations.

We had other methods of extending the life of our tires. If there was a worn spot on the face or wall, we put a 'boot' inside – a piece cut from an old tire as a patch, placed between the inner tube and the tire. Or as reinforcement, we used straps of harness leather wrapped around the weak place, threaded through the spokes and buckled up tight.

On one occasion, I drove into town. It was late autumn and bitterly cold – November, I think. As I entered Main Street, I felt the air oozing in a hurried swoooosh out of my front left tire. I know the tube was a wreck, patches all over it. I had a couple of dollars in my pocketbook, so I went to a garage and asked the man to have a look at it. He did, and swore it could not be fixed. I asked if they had a new one my size in stock.

"Well, no," he says, but there was one just a notch bigger.

"It will work," he says. "Bill Smith, down by the river, he uses them O.K." So, dumb me, I paid him the \$2.50 for the tube and they put it in.

Well, about two miles up the road on my way home, I pulled over and stopped to check the tires, as I often did. There, on the left side of my left front tire, like a giant gumboil growing, was a swelling popping out at me. The too-large tube had found a weak place in the tire and was trying to get out.

Snatching a bobby-pin from my hair, I pressed down the valve with it and let as much air out of the tube as I could. The swelling receded. I jacked up and removed the rim, in my usual labored fashion, with fingers freezing, and thumped home.

Husband Clif was out hunting and didn't come in until late that night.

Next morning, I told him of my experience and advised returning the tube at once. But he figured the garageman should know what he was talking about, and that I had got too excited about a little bulge.

So, he pumped the tube up inside its tire with our little hand-and-foot pump. It got nice and plump, no sign of a bulge – at first. As he turned it in his hand and started a "See! Nothing wrong with that" tune, out popped the swelling. Though I frantically urged "Let the air out!", he had no bobby-pin at hand – and the darn tube blew out with a big "Pow!" right in his face, splitting the tire and spoiling any chance of returning it, of course.

When he spoke to the garageman about it later, the man just shook his head and said, "Well I thought it would work. Wartime rubber, you know!"

Clif patched the tube I had considered ruined yet again, and we continued to use it until we found one the proper size.

This recycled – or synthetic rubber, as we started to call it – also responded to the temperature. It would be cool in the evenings. We would patch the tubes, put them on and pump them up. In the early morning, still cool, I'd drive Clif off to work. Still early, I might go for the drinking water we had to haul from a neighbor's, perhaps run into town if I had errands or shopping to do.

During the warmth of the day, as the old vehicle sat by the house in the sun, some – or several – of those dear little patches would loosen, so when I went out in the evening to fetch my man home – flat tires!

It became routine. Take them off, drive on the wheel rims, pick him up and home for supper. Another evening spent in patching!

It took us a while to realize the sun had been melting our patches off, there in the southside heat. We learned to park in the shade and cover the tires with sacks or cardboard to keep them cooler. This helped some.

Yes, that war had many effects, one of which brought out our 'rubber-stretching' ingenuity.

Published Nov 1982



December 7th, 1941

Only couple of weeks ago radio announcers were asking "where were you on the day John F. Kennedy was killed?" And what were you doing, what did you think, and feel, etc., etc. Many of us were able to pinpoint the exact act we were committing when the news came over the radio.

And why not? It was a momentous event and only happened 20 years ago.

Today, think back a little further, to forty-two years ago. Of course, many of you can't. You were too young, or weren't born yet. Others of us recall only too well.

It was a Sunday, and we had taken advantage of a fairly mild day to load up the kids and go off to visit my husband's brother Lawrence and family for the day.

With a houseful of healthy kids playing, who would turn on the radio? So we had no inkling of the event until we returned home and got around to listening to the 8 o'clock news. I thought for a while that the announcer had made a mistake on the place bombed, when he kept saying Pearl Harbor and Honolulu.

These places couldn't be being bombed. They weren't in the war, I said. But it wasn't long before we knew very well they were in the war, along with Canada and most of the rest of the world.

In those years of the war, I must admit that while I was very much aware of the conflict (four brothers and a

sister served in Canada's Armed Forces) and we followed the news closely (remember the 'Voice of Doom' - Lorne Greene - and the 8 o'clock news?) my own day-to-day life was to see that our kids were fed and clothed, to chop and carry wood, and haul countless pails of water from the well needed for the endless laundry.

I try to match the strange names to the geography I'd learned in school, and I had no encyclopaedias to check. The Free Press Prairie Farmer once offered a map of the world along with a one-year subscription, and I sent for that. It hung over the tiny battery radio we had, and made a little more sense of the events as we heard them.

So—now Pearl Harbor, a naval base about 6 miles from Honolulu, the city of shining beaches and girls doing the hula, of swaying palms and steel guitars, had been dragged into the war, even while talks were going on between Japan and the United States.

Pearl Harbor had been used as a repair and fueling station for American ships way back in 1884. Later in 1898, when Hawaii had been annexed by the US, improvements were made to the harbor, dredging and widening the channel to a depth of 35 feet. Maximum depth of the harbor is 60 feet, making it useful for even the largest of ships.

A few miles away stretched the US military Airbase full of planes. Much of the US Naval Fleet was at anchor in Pearl Harbor that bright Sunday morning when over 100 Japanese aircraft-carrier-based planes roared in out of the sun, bombing and blasting the fleet and the airstrip.

Eight battleships were sunk, with some of them still to be seen underwater there in the harbor. Ten other crafts were either sunk or so badly damaged they may as well have been. Two hundred American aircraft were destroyed, and a total of 3000 military and Navy personnel were killed or wounded, as well as many civilians.

The attack was so unexpected, and so unprepared for, but very little defense was possible.

On December 8, 1941, the United States declared war on Japan. The already warring countries of Germany and Italy then declared war on the US. On December 11, America joined the Allies and declared war on Germany and Italy.

This massive struggle between many nations of the world continued on with terrible destruction and loss of life for almost 4 more years, ending finally following the defeat of Hitler Germany and member countries of the Axis in the spring of 1945, and the never to be forgotten explosions of the first two A-bombs, first on Hiroshima, August 6, 1945, and the second one on Nagasaki, August 9th just a few days later.

Countless thousands lost their lives and all they had strove for in a senseless struggle for mastery over another nation, certainly caused - not by the ordinary people, but by power-hungry leaders, who themselves did not have to go out and shoot and die.

I can remember the ending of that war, too. The news came in the forenoon of that last day. I was bathing my baby, only a few months old, while our five-year-old played about the house. The other children were in school.

I had no one to shout with, to share relief I felt. I gave my baby his bottle, and put him to bed, told the older boy (Charles) stay in and mind him and then I ran the mile or so down the road to the field where Clif was working, perhaps during summer fallow, and waved him down as he went by.

We shared a few moments of quiet thankfulness, for the war-torn countries, for the soldiers and sailors, all, for the Allies and enemies alike, and for our own children. It was over. Then I raced back up the road to my waiting boys. They were fine. And they have remained fine - that is they have not had to go to fight in any wars - and I'd like it if their children and grandchildren didn't ever have to go out with arms to fight either.

Alberta Trails
December 7, 1983



After Forty Five Years

Tonight I watched my darling
I see as I watch him there
The furrowed brow of my darling
And the silver crown of his hair
I see that time has left its mark
On face and hand and brow
But the man I see is the man I loved
Long since – as I love him now.

I think of our years together
The path of life we've trod
The depths of grief – and summits high –
He has been my staff and my rod.
I've had the hand and the heart of a man
To cherish and call my own;
A man who is good and kind and true
 Like a seedling reaching up into the blue
Our wondrous love has grown.

Though troubles come
Or wild storms whine
I know I've the heart
Of this man of mine
To my eyes he is now as he ever was
By the passage of years not beguiled

He raised his eyes from the book he read
And looked at me, then he smiled.

Circa 1981



Untitled Family Reunion Article

Here I am once again. I was thinking about you all, but there was no time for me and my typewriter to get together these past few weeks. And the reason for my neglect was a delightful one - for me, and I hope for others, but just between us I'm glad it's over.

We had a family reunion! It was at our farm, on the old Paramount School grounds, with bits and massive chunks of the old foundation still laying about, made in 1930 by my father and help, before he moved the schoolhouse from its former location about 3 miles east of here. That school was moved over the Christmas holidays in midwinter, by several teams of horses, and sleighs. And then we trotted the two-and-a-half miles to and fro from home. It is where I obtained all of my formal education, all six years of it, and I have my Departmental Grade VIII diploma to prove it.

It is also where most of my 12 brothers and sisters started their educations. And some of them remembered a few of the good old days, and where the ball diamond

used to be, and remarked that it seemed an awfully small place to play ball in. But then - they WERE somewhat smaller then!

When my final count was made, from the signed guest books and from my memory, we had a total of 211 guests, only 8 of them not true relatives by blood or marriage. And that is only part of the gang. I'm sure if all of them had come, we would have had twice the numbers. But there are always some who cannot get away and some who prefer not to.

My invitations called the gang to assemble on July 5 & 6, but they started to arrive on July 1st, the last ones leaving on the 15th, so have to believe it was a successful gathering. Some made their way to Moose Lake after others left and had a few enjoyable days there, fishing and bathing. Some returned for the Elk Point Homecoming, which was July 11, 12 & 13.

Our guests came from as far away as Wichita, Kansas, and Montréal, Indianapolis, Indiana and Havre, Montana. They came from the Peace River country and from all over B.C., as well as from Saskatchewan. The large Ontario contingent never made it out here, but then maybe next time they will. It is a long way, and haying time for them. The family from Spokane, Washington brought us a sample of volcanic ash.

I think the Kodak company should give us a bonus or percentage deduction of some kind, as multi-pictures were taken, with about 50 camera wielders in hot action. My own turned out delightful, as what could help but be, with our glorious blue Alberta skies behind and the green

of summer as a backdrop? The whole schoolyard, between the trees, was a mass of wildflowers, with tiger lilies, daisies, pyrolas, yarrow, clover and the wild roses in profusion.

Our squirrels, put in a good showing, and even the rabbits, now with babies, were not frightened away by the crowds, and wandered perhaps a bit bewilderedly, through the yard from time to time, to the delight of the city folks, and ourselves. Fortunately no one ran afoul of the family of porcupines who occupy the old buildings across the way . . . they may have felt it was a good time to lay low.

So this is my excuse for having no Tid-Bits in Reflections for a couple of weeks. I mean to try to get back in gear soon. Have a happy summer!

Tid-Bits
1980

Her Wisdom



One Step at a Time

Take one step
One step at a time
Climb your stair of life –
Though you are tired, ill or lonely –
It's just one step to take.
Don't look to the high-up landing
Or back down the weary way –
Do today those tasks required
Smile the smile, hold out
That helping hand –
Take sustenance from the love
Of those around you
Brush shoulders with the ones
Who climb with you –
There won't be too much pain
Nor miles too long and dreary
If you but take one step
- - One step at a time.



Learning – Living

There are two things mankind is meant to do, after surviving the strain and stresses of birth, as I see it, and the pain and pressures of growth. These are learning and living.

Learning must be the first step, for there is much to learn. But we are strangely resistant to learning. We fear the responsibilities “knowing” will place on us, for we can (or least we think we can) hide behind the fence of “I didn’t know” and somehow shirk our responsibilities.

It is easier to “stay put”, to not accept change. We can do the same things, in the same way, once we have learned a little doggerel, and not have to stretch our brain cells to learn more, or new. Sometimes we put on false blinders, for “none is so blind as he who will not see.” We learn best and fastest in our youth - why not? “Children’s heads are hollow!” - or so I read in a long-ago poem. Some things we never question, we do them until they become habit, and these tend to stick with us. Some of us make little effort to learn until we are middle-aged - or after.

We learn better from those we admire, and may want to emulate. And certainly we learn faster, better, more surely some subjects than others. Take farmers: (I feel I can speak of them, as I was one). Their resistance to learning their own trade can be prodigious. They will go to great pains to understand guns, or boats, or sports, or how to complain, yet stubbornly refuse to use the help and guidance available. It becomes habit, to be the underdog, to blame others, to cry for help or concessions. They are not alone.

Having learned, or what we are able, or have access to, we come to the Living part. As I see it, there are three parts to living. (a) To earn one's bread and comforts - work of necessity. (b) To enjoy one's leisure, recreation, play, rest; and learning for the sake of knowledge and understanding; the enjoyment of family and friends. And (c) Work - for love of the work.

These last are the artists, writers, builders, musicians, counsellors, planters, sculptors, who may not need to work for his bread, but toils on for the work's sake. This includes those who only have time for these works after his day's toil to earn his daily bread are finished, designing to merely follow (b) above. These workers are not just out for self-aggrandizement, but rather have a need for self-expression, communication.

That these works are expressions of many men's emotions is not always understood. Perhaps each of us can express in some one way better than in any other, so we sing or sculpt, or build, for many others. In some this drive for self-expression is fanatically intense - so much so that (a) and (b) will be neglected - or even dispensed with.

Since all men cannot sing or dance or search the depths or study the stars, we turn with admiration and praise to those who do these things, thrilling most to those who do what we could do - if we could.

Those who have small love of work for work's sake take less notice of the great ones, giving less praise, until at the bottom of the scale there are those who cannot even tolerate the works of others, who cannot express themselves through understanding or acclaim. They do not

acknowledge excellence. There those who cannot even smile.

How wonderful if we could all dancelike ballerinas when we are happy; to sob like a virtuoso's violin when we are sad. To build a skyscraper, a mighty dam, or pyramid, when we are strong; to paint like Picasso when we are troubled or upset, like da Vinci when we have visions, like Rembrandt or Gainsborough when we wish to imprint on our minds forever the features of a loved one; to plot the universe when we are wondering, or to take to outer space when we are weary of the sinful world. Could we all be Shakespeare or Grimm when make-believe titillates us, Lincoln or Churchill when affairs of state displease us?

You and I cannot hope to reach these heights in any field, much less at all. These were the chosen few, the great ones. Most of us live and die, never having learned if we are brave or cowards. No test has confronted us.

Still - we can look at captured beauty, on canvas, page or bust, and know that it is beauty seen by many men. (I count myself a 'man' in that I am of the race of man).

We can open our ears to the sounds of glory, rage and hope, to the stirrings of love questing or love serene. We can admire the works of man, down through the ages, damaged, yet built again, for the work's sake. These were built for you and me. Lister and Pasteur, Banting and Salk worked not for themselves alone. They worked for you and me.

Let us do whatever we are able, that labor of love beyond the call of our own needs, be it planting a tree,

feeding a child - creating a masterpiece or composing a concerto. We will be doing it for those not able to do it for themselves. I will be doing it for you, and you for me. Someone is singing your song, flying your jet, painting your vision, realizing your dream, whatever it may be. Seek him out - and see your work done well.

Alberta Trails
March 1, 1989



Small Successes

Today I knew that spring is really coming! The sign - I was able to pour my 7 AM coffee without putting the light on in the kitchen. That was my second cup, I'd absorbed the first one over the preceding hour while loafing in bed, radio bringing me up-to-date on the world's affairs, mingled with my new Writer's Digest trying to teach me how to write horror stories.

These articles don't so much try to *teach* us how to write - no one, apparently, can teach another how to write - as they ask us to help celebrate the success of one special writer who has 'made it big' on a certain book - or series of books.

In this case it was to writers, collaborating from a considerable distance, using their word processors (and their collective brains) to grade a horror story. The name of which is "The Talisman", a tale of such fantastic bone-chilling spine-tingling gruesomeness that it 'sold' before it was bought, winning a huge advance from the publishers, and one of the biggest film 'deals' ever consummated.

Meaning that a lot of people know that a whole lot more people will shell out vast amounts of cash to have their brain cells battered with ghastly tales and ghostly visions.

All of which makes me vaguely jealous because I couldn't possibly do all this. Nor do I wish to. But it is always interesting to read of the writing careers of those who must be termed 'successful' by standards.

To me success means we have accomplished whatever we set out to do. Sometimes (as Peter Straub and Stephen King, who wrote *The Talisman*) we accomplish much more than we set out to do. Maybe that, then, is just good luck. It would more likely be the result of hard work, plenty of talent, good guessing and willingness to concentrate all one's time, energy and effort toward a certain goal.

My own belief is that we can do *anything* we want to - *if we want to strongly enough*. That means giving up

anything that stands in our way - time, family, friends ... whatever - in going to *any* lengths to reach our desired "anything". If we fail to reach our goal, it means we didn't wanted above *all* else.

Many of us reach our goal in life without ever noticing it. Perhaps what we want is a nice quiet life, safe in our own home, with family and friends around; and an income to meet our day-to-day needs and a car to drive. Nothing wrong with that. Surely, we dream of fame and traveling the world, tank full of money and a following of devoted admirers. But it is only a dream - not our real goal in life.

We simply wouldn't give up our peace and quiet for it. We don't want this dream to the exclusion of all else.

So I say - most of us *are* successful. We have what we want, what we set out to achieve. We have used almost every known method to get where we are. We should be more content, happier, once we realized that we really have exactly what we set out to get, exactly what we have worked for -even if it isn't the big bucks of our dreams or the fame of our fancies.

Which is not to say we shouldn't dream - but we can reach a better state, a more realistic state, of contentment and reconciliation with our lot in life once we accept that we *are* successful; that we have reached the goal in life we really desired, done the things we really wanted - very much - to do.

I have had several goals in my life. A minor one, but one which I have much enjoyed - is to be outside, wandering through the woods, along a lake in summer,

over the fields and meadows, out under the sun or clouds, close to nature in all her large - or small -glories. So far I've been successful in this goal almost whenever I've wished.

Some friends ask me why I don't move to town. I could walk to the store (no car to worry about), visit neighbors more easily, and would only have my walk to shovel. I'm aware of those attractions. But I am also aware that I would probably lose contact with my out-of-doors as I now know it. I'm in no hurry to do that.

Yesterday, as I slid - not exactly effortlessly - down to the woods on my skis, I saw the great gray owl again. I seldom see him sitting in the concealing branches. It does take a bit of attention to follow my drifted-in tracks, to not fall down (I'm not the world's greatest skier!), so he waits unmoving until I get near enough to pose a mythical threat - possibly laughing in his fat feathered throat as he watches me flounder along - then flaps off in giant measured beats of his huge silent wings, down from his tall perch, across the open space and off in between the sagging spruce until he disappears as silently as a shadow while I stand and watch.

I am so glad he is there. I'm so glad I am able to invade his domain far enough to glimpse now and then. Glad I can see the giant drifts along the field edge, caught in the bushes we had brains enough to leave, and to know the Earth will be replenished with its melt with the sun gets high enough.

These are small successes - but they are things I truly want to do, and work toward doing. Not as hard,

perhaps, as you worked for your ticket to Vegas - but hard enough that I enjoy my (however small) success.

Alberta Trails
February 27, 1985



Who's in Charge?

My granddaughter said to me one day, "grandma, you're so sure of yourself! I guess you know everything, so you don't have any doubts about what to do or what you believe in or who you are. I wish I could be like that!"

"Oh, darling!" I hugged her thin little body close to me. "I'm not so sure I'm always right, dear," I told her. "But decisions have to be made. I just make them - and then stick to my choice - unless events prove me wrong." I thought about her remark a bit more.

"Yes, I do know who I am - and what I believe in. I didn't always know this, so I'd say the years have helped."

We went on with our tasks, but the thoughts lingered in my mind. I remembered when I was a child nearing my teens. I was filled with self-doubt. I did not know who I was - what anyone expected of me.

Sometimes I couldn't talk to strangers - even the neighbors. When I went to town and saw the town girls with their curls or braids or bows in their hair, well my scraggly chopped off mop - to me - screamed "country bumpkin!"

Their pretty stylish dresses with matching socks and patent shoes seemed inalterably removed from my hand-me-down made-over too long or too short skirts or out of fashion dresses. My black cotton stockings always bagged, there was a hole in the heel or the knee and my fleece lined bloomers always showed. My knees, elbows and wrists were always rough and scabby - I had dark hair on my arms and freckles on my face. No need for my brothers to tell me how ugly I was - which they did at length - I knew very well.

In those days I spoke to no one I met - gave my list over the counter, took the bag and the change went home. If anyone spoke to me I would nod or shake my head - how could I open my mouth? I'd only have put my foot in it! I just knew everyone was much smarter, prettier, better, richer and *nicer* than me.

When I see the self-assured, confident, articulate little persons of my small grandchildren wade into intricate conversations with their peers - or their elders - so certain they have a right to have their say - I am proud and warmed to my inner pit. The world is theirs today. Will the years bring them self-doubt? It is so needless.

Long ago I learned that I cannot please everyone. That was a milestone for me. I tried so hard to be what those around me wanted or needed; at times the more I tried the less I pleased.

At a fairly early age I cast out certain activities as 'not for me'. I began to know who I was. At first it didn't please *me* at all - there must be improvements possible, I thought. And there are. We can improve our dress,

language, actions, education - many things. But it better be *changing yourself* - not others changing you.

Sets standards for yourself. Yours. Be yourself - good or bad, just yourself.

Try to decide what is important to *you* - where *you* want to go, what makes *you* happy. Or sad. Or excited. Do you have to have booze to make you happy? If not, reject it. Yourself. If you want to sing - sing. Sing your own song.

Think about your time. The only time you'll ever have on this earth. Yours. Are you doing with your time what you want to do? Are you happy or satisfied in your work? Does *your* leisure time do as you would have it, or do you just sit and watch TV or spineless you follow those about you as they pursue *their* wants? If you *must* do something you don't like, do it fast. Don't dwell on it, or pre-hate it before you ever get started.

Consider your actions. Are you an angel? No? Of course not. Face that fact. We are not one of us perfect. Don't expect others to be - nor yourself. Get over your 'guilt' feelings. Start liking yourself.

Do you imitate others? Cheer up, we all do - even others we dislike, sometimes, copying their ways and mannerisms. But - no crime to mimic others... maybe other patterns are good for us to try. But work towards being yourself. Unique.

Do a stock-taking of yourself. Who are you? What do you have? What do you look, act or feel like? Step back, do an analysis on yourself. Maybe you are okay. Maybe you can improve. *You* alone can change *you*.

Start on the decisions. Make small ones - what you will wear or eat - maybe a new hairstyle, or how you will sit - or where. Practice listening to your own ideas, thoughts, whims, or wishes. Face up to your hang-ups (like being afraid of thunder or cats - or always touching wood). Show them who's boss. You are the one in charge here!

A sense of *self* is precious. Self-respect, self-esteem, all mean being proud of yourself, or liking yourself, being pleased to occupy the territory of your own body, to be inside your own mind, your soul.

Then define yourself. See what kind of person you are, and what you stand for. Then when you know this, don't let *anybody* try to bluff you out and make you change to fit the image *they* have of you. Don't allow anyone to make you go against your own convictions and beliefs. You will not like yourself much if you do - and you'll no longer be YOU, but merely a shadow of THEM. Be *yourself*.

Once you 'get on your own side' and start to look out for yourself, you'll seem to see all sorts of possibilities you never noticed before. You will free yourself. You will be free to notice and savor new things, and to try challenging things - things you alone can accomplish. Then if someone doubts you, you can know you don't have to deal with *their* fears and doubts, only your own. You can attempt problems and deeds with *your* mind, your muscles, your perseverance. And you KNOW where you stand, who you are, what you're capable of, what your standards are.

You can now put your own abilities to work - conquer your own dragons, be your own woman.

Somehow this concept of self-assurance and self-confidence must be shared with my granddaughter. I am thinking and wondering how to make it clear. How to explain it to her, without preaching, that those same old rules still hold: that one be true and honest, not hurting others - but to one's self be true and honest, too, and one will feel a lot *less* like hurting others - because you'll know you don't have to.

You'll be friends with yourself - and running your own show. Will you read this, my little one?

Now is a good time to take charge of your life. It's never too soon; sometimes it can be too late. Whatever you really want to do -BEGIN IT NOW!

August 19, 1980



Trails in the New Year

We all might wonder what kind of trails (or marks) we will make in the fabric of the new year ahead. Wouldn't it be nice to know we will do something unique, something that will stand out, for all to see, as we pass this way on our one and only trip?

Perhaps science will solve some of the mysteries of medicine and disease, making the lifespans of we humans longer and more enjoyable and pain-free. Perhaps someone will really solve the Diabetes problem, either with a cure or prevention. Perhaps a simple inoculation will be

found for the common cold. Perhaps we will start to use brain-dead person's organs for transplants where needed as a matter of course, rather than waiting around for grief stricken relatives to make these difficult decisions.

But it is not alone the big things, the great life-altering discoveries we should look for, and welcome into our world. What if someone invented a sealed plastic bag or bubble with an attached pair of disposable scissors? Then one might reasonably get the crackers or glue or buttons out of the bag, before we (a) starve to death, (b) break all our fingernails or (c) went berserk with frustration. A simple thing - but one to effect huge segments of mankind.

Trails on the fabric of life in the coming year, which would be followed and enjoyed by many, would be an end to the arms race and the threats of nuclear war. Someone - or some government - come up with a reasonable, workable way to solve the differences and problems that would involve getting us blown up or disintegrated if there was a minor disagreement? I'm sure that would be a highly visible mark, one that would stand out and be noted.

There will be people all over the world who will engage in climbing the highest mountain, try to run the fastest mile, jump the highest, skate the fastest, and so on. And some will accomplish their goals. Their tracks will show up, until someone else comes along and surpasses them, in some coming year.

Records are like that. They are made, then made to be broken. Some achievements are more enduring, as for instance a really good writer who will write a book, and it

will endure - no matter how many other good books are written, they will not overcome it or surpass it. It will remain a great achievement, there for countless readers to enjoy down the years. That is one of the marks I would like to make, but of course I never will. Still it's nice to dream on.

Many other human efforts are similar to that. A great singer will be enjoyed for years; even if another great singer pops-up, they will not necessarily surpass the other - but all may be enjoyed, and receive acclaim. Great artists fit into this group, also.

Perhaps our goals for recognition are much less grand. How about the kid who would like to make her bed just one morning - and have Mom say "Great! It looks good." And then leave it alone. Wouldn't she feel a great sense of accomplishment? A 100 percent mark on a school paper - even once- might turn a kid from a sloth into a doer. Kids need to do something "right" once in a while. It is a miracle worker on confidence.

I will request the weather to continue in the good work it has done so far this year (around here, at least!) and to refrain from showing us any extremes it is capable of. Moderate and medium, even dull, will do me just fine. I want no Maximums and Minimums out of the weatherman. We can do without ANY records at all, in that department. Even if it would make good copy for future issues of the Weather Trivia Calendar. Let us enjoy mediocrity.

Probably most of us will leave no mark at all on the face of time, no trails carved in the bright new year, no

touch of greatness or even leadership. We will just carry on, being our ordinary normal selves - and I'm sure there is nothing wrong with that. The world is full of nice ordinary people, who make the wheels go round, teaching what they know, sowing the seeds, doing their jobs, raising the kids. And if a star flashes overhead now and then - well, we can enjoy that too -but needn't be envious.

But if some of you have a special star you would like to hitch your wagon to, some great trail you'd like to leave on the face of this New Year, then I wish you well, and success in your venture. Your moment of glory should not be denied.

January 14, 1987



No Weeks Left in '92

What are we thinking and feeling, as we come to the end of this – for some – long and weary year, perhaps for others, a bright and fulfilling year? Do we sigh, and think “Thank goodness it’s over!” Or do we say, inside us, “This was a great year! Bring on the next!”

I’m afraid I’ve not viewed it as an out and out success. After so many years, centuries, millennia, humans have not learned to love and respect their fellow man. They have not learned to share and care and reach out a helping hand. Of course, a few have; but for every helping hand, it seems there are two holding a gun or sword, demanding surrender and death from his neighbor.

It’s gloomy to talk so, and that is not my purpose, which is just to make a few observations on the past year, as everyone who sits at a typewriter (or microphone) will do in this last week of the year.

Christmas is over, and I hope for all it was a joyful one. I hope as many families as wished to were able to ‘go home’ for Christmas, whether in reality or by phone or letter, or only in their dreams.

Here, in my area and town, the BIG DEAL of the year was the celebration of the Bicentennial of the first white people to the area. That they didn’t do

anything very great is not their fault, they did as they were urged, and I guess they deserve praise for that. Anyway, a lot of effort went into making it a memorial year, and we now have two new parks to show-off for the effort. Three, including the Mural Park, which was dedicated and turned over to the town of Elk Point on July 1st by the instigators, the Elk Point & District Historical Society.

Also in our area, we have had continuing dry weather, creeks, lakes and sloughs drying up, and a flurry of dug-outs made, in hope of collecting rain or snow for thirsty livestock. Prayers for rain seem to be the only thing to help the thirsty crops-to-come. Little snow has fallen, much of it blown off the fields, and now this last cold spell has bitten deep. And no, the August snowfall didn't help at all.

We waded manfully through a series of polling days; for local councillors; a Referendum on national internal policies; and for a new Premier for our province – which ran to two tries. You'd think our opinion was important, the times we are asked for it. Can it be?

I get so tired of everything having to be a *competition*. It seems like all the sports, the art, the work or games has to be in competition, to prove, somehow, that we are better than our fellow man. It is like the subtle form of war, even in our living rooms.

How much tension and rage is generated just by a ball game, or hockey, a race, or even figure skating or dancing, the most graceful of all human activities?

One night I watched a skating show. It featured the best of the past few years' skaters, and it was *not* a competition. There were the greats, Brian Orser, Brian Petrinko, Elvis, Kurt Browning – and so many more, beautiful pairs skaters, flying over the ice, spinning overhead, turning flips and spins. Even Toller Cranston joined in, his magnificent grace and power seemingly unimpaired as he performed his breathtaking leaps and turns.

The wonder of this show was that they were not competing. They were skating for the sheer joy of it; to please an audience, surely, but more to please themselves. It was a *giving* show, to raise money for research for a cure or prevention of mankind's most fearsome disease – AIDS. And, true, one of their 'own' had succumbed to it. They were asking for donations in his name – but not to help him. They were asking for all mankind.

The very real pleasure of doing what they do best, just for the joy of it, shone in their faces, from their eyes and from their lips. Think of how many things there are in life, that we can do, NOT to compete, but for the pleasure the 'doing' gives us! We can skate, dance, run, swim, fly, create art, music,

sing! Games are much more fun, when we hardly notice the final score, but can say “that was a great *fun* game!”

There is a little song my Mother sang, and we learned, so long, long ago. It goes something like this:

“Jesus bids us shine, with a clear pure
light,
Like a little candle, burning in the night
In this hour of darkness, so we must
shine,
You in your small corner, and I in mine!

“Jesus bids us shine, first of all for Him,
Well he sees and knows it, if our light
grows dim,
He looks down from Heaven, just to see
us shine,
You in your small corner, and I in mine.

“Jesus bids us shine, then for all around
Many kinds of darkness in this world
are found,
Sin and Want and Sorrow – so we must
shine,
You in your small corner, and I in
mine!”

Author unknown.

Shine (if not for Jesus, then for whom you will). I don't think there is truly a great man or woman, now living or dead, who would not bid us the same. So draw from your heart a little light for the world; a smile, an uplifting word, a helping hand. Your light is needed *now* as much as at any time in history. Take a little of the glow that you have for your own life, and spread it around. You know what you can give. It's needed as much now as at any time in history. Shine now, as we ease out this dreary old year and turn to face a new.

December 20, 1992



The Wings of June

In June - we should all be very happy, if our environment has indeed had any bearing on our disposition. If the complaints of winters colder equal by praise of spring's largess - well, today we should be singing.

There above is the vast blueness of eternity,
swathed at times with soft wool clouds, caressed by gentle
breezes. Over all floods the warmth of sun, to melt our
grouches, dissolve our aches and pains, soothe our
loneliness, and caress our skin with its healing kiss.

On every hand the poplar trees, the balm of Gilead,
willows and birches sway in the arms of the breeze, tossing
their new green dress and constant flutter, shedding us as
if we are too warm, warming our souls with the new leaves
of hope. Nesting birds in their niche and branches shelter
safe from prying eyes.

From high in the same trees bursts of song trill
forth - as soon-to-be fathers warble their joy - and stake
out their territory for all to know.

Tread softly, winter weary feet - there on the new
resilient grass. Tread carefully, too, avoiding violets and the
many tiny white flowers, each so perfect, each so sweet.

Inhale deeply, cramped lungs, of heady lilacs, of
silvery wolf willow pouring ripe-banana perfume from its
tiny flowerlets, of pale pink-scented joy from our own wild
rose.

Breathe deeply, a flowering plum and cherry, of
apple trees, of good black earth, and growing things. Laugh
with children..... counting hours now, 'til school is done
and freedom for the beckoning swimming hole.

Flitting butterflies of golden brown, blue and
orange rejoice in their brief span in time - some taking
wings only for this one glorious month - June.

Wander by the water's edge, you who may,
observing bouncing spray - or the calm and mirrored blue.

Waft across it, in your red and blue and snow-white skulls, drifting to its rhythmic soothing swell, - or cutting sharp through waves, sending beads of water sparkling in a million glistening jewels of churning wake. Sit quietly, gently cradled, safely near to shore and open your soul to the haunting quavering call of the loon - or watch the wings of white gulls gliding in soaring grace.

Share, from your backyard, a dark spaced row of wild geese, practicing adult honking in lazy summer adolescence across the morning sky long after their elders are in busy domesticity off in the far reaches of the tundra. Let your spirit soar with them - can't you feel the flutter of your invisible wings?

June - delectable June - when the days stretch and stretch into infinity - when it seems the darkness will never come - it when it does, if we are still astir - there in constant silent splendor float the stars - permanent, same and unending.

The full moon of June is the moon of lovers, when only the warm fresh air contains them, when life is eternal, happiness forever when music escapes the housings round it and floats on the winds, when feet are made for dancing, hands for holding, hair for a soft caress.

In June one could reach wide their arms and embrace the universe. If you have a God to whom you pray, a God who looks after you, treat him well in June - for surely then - if ever - He smiles. In my own way I offer thanks - that I have been allowed another June - here in my Alberta.

June 10, 1981



The Music of This Land

O hear the music of this land!
When blackbirds shrill and cluster to be gone
When long nights through the straining, grumbling
 Combines gobble grain
Racing the rains, the snow, the time;
When far across the evening sky the swishing wings
 Beat fast
And soft the rustling leaves of aspen fall.

Chill with the music of this land!
When from northwest the wind gales whine
And frozen pellets bite our cheeks;
When the coyote whimpers his sorrow – then in
 Loneliness he shrieks!
When buildings draw in, crackling, snapping,
Protesting in the bitter, crushing cold.

Hear the laughter of skiers and skaters
On the brittle crystal air ...
While through the moonlit night far-fielding
The line of homing snow-track motors roar!

Thrill with the music of this land!
When tattered winter wanes and waters flow in frothy
 Flood;
Frogs skirl, birds sing – and sweet the chinook calls out

"Spring!"

The newborn bleat and bawl and mew 'til once again
Night-time blends with day, and all is sun.
Tractors roar long; and to and fro the boats are hauled
Who cares to whence, so long as it be far away?

List the music of my loved land;
Gently summer sways the trees, while bees drone nigh;
Downtown the bands boat for the dusty sports' days
And high the squeals of children on the rides!
When thunderheads pile dark along the skyline –
Feel the crash and tremble of Thor's hand!
Wild torrents slapping windows, drum of hailstones –
All sing the ringing music of this land!

Once having heard and felt the living beauty
Stirring from the harps at her command
You'll not forget her e'er, or cease to wonder
At the glory of the music of this land!

Will They Always Sing

Spring has sprung and the rowdy crows have
been about for weeks. Today we hear a robin has
been sighted in Edmonton - our turn will be soon. Last
week we thrilled to a bevy of bluebirds, brilliant
males, great females, unseemly against the fresh
fallen snow, but oh, so welcome!

On the still snow-crueted fields and pastures cheeky gophers (or more properly, Richardson's ground squirrels) sit on their haunches like short posts and sniff the breeze, while farmers mutter and threaten extinction of the durable little pest.

What will our next 'returner' be? Will the robin hop in, pulling early worms out of the lawn? Or will we see the long pulsing vees of geese peace across blue sky -- or the smoke thick swirls of cranes rising higher and higher, almost to disappear in the spring cloud-puffs, gathering altitude for the next long haul north-westward to those distant lands where they will mate and nest and summer?

When do the juncos pop in, with their twittering, darting mating games, oblivious to the vicious window panes, broken necks and bodies?

And when come the hawks, the gulls, the loons? Or the vireos, sparrows, and blackbirds? Each in its time and turn, they come. We don't know their flight plans, but they know. As surely as the sun comes up, they will make their long, long journeys. All we have to do is leave them a tree to nest in, a bush to rest in, a seed to pick and clean water to drink.

They won't ask for welfare, or set traps to catch us. The small foods they consume, we can well afford and the insects they take are to our gain.

So don't cut and burn needlessly. Leave them a bit of our world, which was once exclusively theirs. We need them. And they need our consideration.

When I was a kid we had a meadowlark. He perched on a tall tree just a few yards from the back door, and when the sun came up, he sang his soul out. I would get up, early --- at four or five and go out in my nightgown, just hugging myself with joy to hear his songs.

One day, a neighbor boy came to visit my brothers. They had their 22's ready to go gopher hunting or whatever. My bird sang. He raised the gun and shot it dead. "How's that for a good shot!" he chortled, grinning as he watched the shattered feathered morsel fall.

We stood silent a moment, my brothers and me. Then I struck him again and again with my fists, screaming, "Murderer, Murderer". He was surprised and hurt, that we didn't praise his shooting accuracy. He had never listened to a meadowlark sing.

We no longer hear meadowlarks where I live. I would so love to tape one song, to hear it again. If you know where one sings, this spring, please tell me. I will record him, with love and no shots fired.

April 22, 1980

Tid-Bits



Let's Try to Help Each Other

The world is so full of news of people hurting each other, killing, robbing, insulting, doing terrible things, destructive things, merely to hurt their fellow man, sometimes for profit but often just for sheer meanness, (such as burning the oilwells in Kuwait) and I think – whatever could we accomplish if all this cruel and bitter energy were put to doing good, helpful things for other humankind?

Without going out of our way at all, we could do many kind and helpful things for others, and for the good earth beneath our feet, to preserve it for the future inhabitants. Then just think what wonders we could perform if we all tried, just a little harder, say an extra ten minutes a day, to make life easier for someone else.

Of course, many of us already do a lot. Many of us would like to do more, but are hindered by circumstances of one sort or another, from doing all we might. There are financial fetters, time fetters, distance fetters – designed to hinder our efforts, plus the ever-present fact that we don't know just what the other persons might need or consider helpful. Money is always great stuff to give, and almost universally acceptable, but not always what we have to spare. Then again there are many things money cannot buy but which we could give freely and without pain, that would be appreciated.

This last category would include time, thought, sympathy, advice, encouragement, for some – prayers, love...and many more. We give of these gifts to our families and friends, freely and with smiles. We might try sprinkling some around to strangers, even those in far countries, if the opportunity arises.

They say smiles are contagious. A smile is cheap, easy to deliver, feels good to the donator, needs no packaging or refrigeration and is readily acceptable by the receiver. Also a smile needs no interpretation, is understood by all nationalities (even multiculturals), is as easily delivered in hot, cold, wet or dry weather, universal to young and old, and needs no time at all to prepare. A smile is a good gift. Pass one along.

A little time out of your busy day, for someone who is lonesome, hurting, ill – for a chat, a phone call, a visit – is often enough to lift the straw about to break that camel's back, and get the other person back on track again.

I am not going to list all the many, many things we, as caring humans, could do for our co-inhabitants of this weary old world. Your knowledge of them and your imagination of what they might be is as good as mine, or better.

But I was thinking of a few helpful hints, as I prowled around the yard this morning, little items that could have saved me a bit of back-work over the years. I'd like to pass them along to you (if there is anyone who hasn't thought of them already) and perhaps they will be of some help to you.

Nearing the end of the gardening season, as we are, perhaps this tip will work for you: When the peas and beans in your patch are no longer producing, pull out any sticks or whatever you used for them to climb on, then take your lawn mower and go in and reduce the vines to useful mulch. Far better than pulling them out, and offering them to the garbage dump. That stuff returns to earth, if allowed. The mower will also handle excess spinach, chard, cabbage leaves (after you take out the cabbage head), beet tops, carrot tops, old lettuce...anything not too tough. I've even chewed up the corn stalks, but you'd still have to remove thick stalks.

Do not use on potato tops – I'm not sure they should be returned to the earth. These can be piled over winter to shrink away, then burned – if possible, or hauled to the dump then. (Not so heavy!) I've even got rid of old strawberry plants with my mower. Tops, I mean. Then you can rototill the rest.

I have only a small electric mower, and it handles these tops fine, so a larger one should have no problems

One more item I'd like to pass on to any gardener – and perhaps you know it already, but I gardened for fifty years before I knew of it. It's a "D" hoe. A gardener's best friend. (I hope that's the right name for it – I go by the shape.) Some people have called it a "push hoe" in my hearing, but please, do not PUSH it. Pull it toward you, and easily slice off weeds, loosen the top soil and have a nice clean garden.

Do not use it when the ground is very damp, a waste of time, as those intelligent weeds will just stick their roots in the soil and go on growing. But a good slice at them when it's hot and dry spells 'finis'. Then, with this handy tool, you can hoe a lot of garden without dropping in your tracks, like the old blade hoe will do you. It's a good idea to sharpen it up with a file now and then; as any tool with a blade, sharp is better than dull. As Clif used to say, you don't cut your fingers with a sharp knife, it's the dull one that slips and gets you.

If you have any handy, useful hints, tell me. Between us, we could pass them along, and maybe help someone a little.

August 14, 1991



A Friend

The Arrow and the Song

I shot an arrow into the air
It fell to earth, I knew not where,
For so swiftly it flew, the sight
Could not follow it in its flight.

I breathed a song into the air
It fell to the earth they knew not where,
For who has sight so keen and strong,
That it can follow the flight of song?

Long long afterward, in an oak.
I found my arrow still unbroke.
My song from beginning to end.
I found again in the heart of a friend.

- by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.
From the Canadian Reader -
Grade 3 (1920s/30s).

Do you remember this gem? With some help from a good friend we call 'Persy' (perseverance) I have ran down a few lines missing from my memory of this little poem of early years. What a neat concise way H. W. Longfellow had with analogies - his arrow, his song. Both, to all intents and purposes disappearing into thin air - then reappearing - where? In an oak, in a friend.

Many things may be found in a friend, if they are the real kind, the tried and true, the friend may be called upon for trust and understanding - without explanations first. The friend who will hear a nasty tale about you and does not say "Did she really?!" but rather, knowing you, says "No. Not really." long before she hears your side.

I have such a friend. And I know her well; her faults (a few), her virtues (many). She is the one among all I knew, who came to me with outstretched arms when my first loved one died - not waiting to send a cold formal card two weeks later. She who came again and again, letting me pour out my rage and grief never saying 'do not cry'.

We together shared her sorrow and my own when our lives again were wrenched by death's uncaring and indiscriminating hand.

She can come away and lunch with me on a moment's notice - or I with her - knowing instinctively an urgent need the other feels for company - or we remain apart for months, yet feel no slight, when busy with our separate lives of day to day.

Years past, when our frivolous flivver broke down, hers was there to move my kids to parties, shows, graduation. When necessity or pleasure called her from home, my house housed her kids for as long as the occasion kept her away. The two flocks were almost brooded by interchangeable mothers. Now flown, they still return to her house - or to mine.

How many times we shopped together, picked berries, plucked chickens, planned sewing projects or

picnics together - and talked, talked, talked! Now far apart,
I miss her - yet she is with me.

A friend will listen. Sometimes offering advice, a
friend doesn't rant if it isn't taken. A friend laughs with you
- and cries with you. And you know a friend is **there** for you
- even when you can't see her or ask for her help.

Friendship - like love - needs nourishment and use
to thrive; once established, it lives long, if not abused.
Friendship sees human faults and failings but is not
dismayed, and can survive crosses and neglect. It does not
expect perfection.

True friendship doesn't bloom in every face, no
matter how sweet the smile, nor is it easily seen. Slow,
sometimes in growth, and often, like a spring violet hidden
under withered leaves, must be searched out carefully - yet
what a wealth one has in a friend, what a bulwark against
life's stings!

Treasure your friend, when you recognize him. You
may find your song in his heart.

Alberta Trails
February 4, 1981



Precious Possessions

About the time we reach our allotted three score years and ten – and often sometimes before then – we start thinking about the “things” we have. Did we do as well as we once hoped? Have we accumulated as many of the comforts and prizes of life as we had worked for, saved for, and some – prayed for? And what, exactly, did we pine for, skimp, slave and whine for?

We often become surrounded with “things” we no longer can use, or want to use. Collections are bad that way, as our homes get fuller and fuller, of those little items we once fancied, and would go to great lengths to accumulate. What shall we do with them all? Who will look after them when we are no longer able? And most things do require some ‘looking after’, even if it’s only to dust them now and then.

There are ‘live’ things, like plants and pets, gardens and trees that require a lot of looking after. It’s easy to fool ourselves that someone will look after these things for us. Well – of course they will – if they love us, right? But it doesn’t work out that way. My dearly treasured odds and ends, my prized collections, may be just a bunch of junk to whomever will follow in my footsteps. It will probably be a good idea to trash as much as we can, give the good stuff away to some younger ‘collector’ and otherwise dispose of as much as we can do without, while we are still able to make these decisions. Kind of breaks your heart, doesn’t it? Even thinking of it.

But I think I have found what we can have, at not too much stress to ourselves to look after – and the certain knowledge that someone will carry on cherishing them after we are gone. They will continue to be dusted and washed, watered and fed, whether we are able to do it or not. Sound good, so far?

Grandchildren! And when they grow out of the cuddle size, great-grandchildren. Lots of them. Ours to have and hold – for as long as we want – then off they go to their moms and dads, leaving us the memories.

We don't have to teach them manners, or morals – their parents will probably get mad at us if we do – we don't have to fix their teeth, or haul them to the ball game. That's their parents' job. We *can* – if we want – but no one will criticize us much if we don't.

But what we can do, is love them. We can play with them, and admire their cute stunts and smart sayings, and brag about them to the neighbors, and buy them junk, and in general spoil them. We can miss them too, when they live far away, and when they get old enough to find other things and other persons to fill all their thoughts and time.

We can miss them terribly, but we won't ever really lose them, for we can keep them in our memories. We can collect up all those pictures their parents give out so generously when they are small, and look at them again and yet again.

Maybe we can imprint on their minds so strongly that they will write us the odd letter. This is an excellent way to see how their minds are developing, even if it's only half a page, and their mother made them do it.

The really great letters are the ones they write all by themselves, with no prompting or coercion. These are the letters you **MUST** answer, for they usually come from the heart, and often contain a hidden question, something they might ask their parents, but don't want to. *You* have been trusted, and you'd better live up to that trust. It may not be turned to again – if you flub it.

I have lots of grandkids. Fourteen head, all told. A mere pittance compared to the grandchildren my mother amassed – she had 44 and 60 great-grandchildren, and some triple-grands – lots of 'em! So far I only have six great-grandkids, but I expect that to change, as time flies by. I only see these kids a few times a year now, most of them are off on the careers of their own lives.

I wouldn't want it otherwise. And they are learning to speak a different language, they live in another time, their values may not be the same as those I thought important long ago.

But in my heart – I have them! I have pictures of the days when they were tiny, when I carried them around, sometimes far into the night, on those odd baby-sitting occasions. I have them all spiffed up, when their parents brought them for a birthday, or for Christmas; and sometimes got to keep them for a summer week or two, to show them the farm, the animals we used to have, to push them high on the swing.

I have them in the berry patch, not lasting long, but eager for a sweet taste of sun-warmed fruit...cracking a crisp green pea pod...chomping a carrot fresh from the garden, washed under the tap.

I have – in my mind – grandchildren making squeaky music, scrawling giant letters, drawing lopsided cows, picking wilted dandelions to give their mothers (and sometimes, one for me).

Today I got a letter from a granddaughter, and with it, a story she has written – just for me. She signed her letter “Love, forever and ever, Joy”, then (over). I turn the page, “P.S. I miss you!”

It’s nice to know somebody cares. And I wouldn’t trade my lovely grandkids for all the gold in Peru. Even if mostly they are memories. They will surely outlast all my owls and books and other junk.

Alberta Trails
April 20, 1988



satisfying task as can be, too, especially if we're successful in finding the information we seek. And, once in a while, an unknown live one.

In the case of families which sent one or more members off to explore, homestead and settle the 'new lands' (such as our Prairies were), often only one or two came here, and the rest of the family stayed in The Old Country, whatever that was, Great Britain, Europe, the United States, etc., etc., and unless a real effort was put forth, many of those families lost touch over the years, and can usually only be found again with some difficulty.

However, many families DID keep in touch, and when finances and the time grew amenable, visits to the native lands have taken place. My own Mother, who came with her parents to Canada in 1900, at the age of seven, was able to return to the ancestral town in Sussex, England, where she found cousins, some as old as she was then (in the early 70s) who remembered her, and took her about to see the old churches, castles and such that she recalled over all those years.

These people were still her family, sharing the same ancestors and they greeted each other with ready-made welcome and hugs of joy. Many of Mother's generation are now gone, but here am I, still writing to their off-spring, and talking 'family' affairs. They are part of my family. As a few of them have, over the years, traveled to Canada, so I have visions of one day journeying to this segment of my "roots," to visit the old cemeteries, and meet these cousins (however many times removed), and walk on my ancestral sod.

This is a journey many of you long to make - and one many of you have already made. Two of my Mother's brothers made the journey, both in a far different fashion,

as they went to participate in the First World War. As did two of my own brothers, defending our principles, in the Second World War. And others of my family have visited Britain. I believe they all visited the 'family' there, and the turf of our forefathers.

By the osmosis of marriage, we have family in Sweden, and all over the USA, and every province. A good many of them, I know about and have met; many more, I still hope to meet one day.

And isn't it strange, I like them all, that I've met. I plan on liking all the others, too, if I get a chance. I would say this is a trait of families; we are prepared to like - even love - our many members. I don't know how I would manage, if I were an orphan. Perhaps 'adopt' a family?

We have had several Family Reunions, all highly successful, the largest in 1980, when we had 213 names in the guestbook. Others were less well attended, and for some of us traveling is costly and difficult. Writing is an excellent method of 'keeping in touch' with our extended families. As is the telephone. I've long been an addictive letter writer, but even I pall on my list is over a hundred long. Many of our family use the 'copied' letter (some call it a 'form' letter) (write one out, photocopy as many as required). I've used this method, quite without shame, for some years, sometimes make it up like a newspaper, with whatever family news of the past year, I can find. I love the ones I receive.

For with our family, we not only want to know **that** they are, we want to know how they fare, married, became parents, or passed on. I am always glad to get the notes, letters, phone calls. And of course, the visits. These are often far between, but they come now and then, and with

God shows His magnificence in many ways and often unexpected ways but never I believe more deeply and gratifyingly than in the heart of summer when all living things are swelling with their fruit and the very earth seems to sigh with the effort of giving; when the fathomless black of the heavens is pitted with myriad stars and a hush hangs over the world as all things are replenishing their stores of life for the weary winter which must inexorably prevail.

I knew now why I had been uneasy, for with my momentary proximity to my Maker my soul had been renewed and lightened and I could feel my doubts and troubles melt away. I would greet the tomorrow with the sun and each tomorrow would hold no more pain or demand of effort than I could bear for I always have a Helper.

As the silver disc of a full moon slid up between the trees, to cast its eerie wash of dream-beams upon me and the earth I made my way homeward, the mass of fairy blooms in my hand held before me that I might partake of their heady fragrance from time to time, my heart light and singing deep inside of me, for I was alive on God's good earth, on a warm summer night. I could ask no more.

1951+



My Choice

What use to live - - if living
we cannot enjoy each breath?
Why wake - - if with the dawn
no sky of blue we see?
What use the birds to sing, or music sweet
if we unhearing close our senses
to their plea?
We have one body to reside within while we are here
upon this only earth. Without it though our
mind be strong
we cannot linger here for long.

Expelled red, wet and squalling from the womb
we are perfection to the eyes of love;
and perfect many of us come.
And yet, ere long, we find the ways
to damage and destroy, bend it
for small pleasure, that which we had,
so new and clean and pure.

Then we will justify and say, 'tis mine . . .
'Tis mine to pick and choose how I will
use this residence wherein my soul abides.
This in part only holds; for as we love and as in love
These others cleave to us, then if we pain
adoring minions pain. And if we die
these beloved with us die.

For me, I choose my mind alert, not dulled by
drugs or alcohol; this wondrous fact'ry of my body

lean and keen, ready to meet antagonist or lover --
and give my all. And that which pulls a single rafter
from this edifice where in I house my soul
I will weed out, that time I now spend in living
will be joy. And some may say
she loved to live.



The Joys of Music

It would seem, from all we can learn, that humans are the only species on our earth who are capable and willing to make music just for our own pleasure. And what great pleasure it can bring!

Of course, many other species do make music, as in the case of birds – or the whales – very beautiful music. The thing is, they don't just do it for fun and enjoyment. They are not even necessarily singing to please a future mate. They are warbling away to locate others of their species, perhaps, but mostly to establish territory, to let others of their kind know they are about to set up housekeeping, and that they should not intrude.

Humans seldom sing for just that reason. We burst forth for many reasons, some to praise their Maker, some for pay, most for the sheer joy of the music. And this doesn't matter whether we are on key or in time, and never mind the frogs in our throats – when the mood hits us, (and we think no one is within listening distance) we let fly.

I include in the loose term “sing” all the instruments man has devised to create music with, for all of these I take to be an extension of our own human voices. Don’t we especially admire and are most emotionally moved by a violin – the instrument most akin to the human voice?

We do not have to be educated or sophisticated to enjoy music. The most primitive tribes still had their drums and whistles, and some form of singing, to lift them to efforts in war, or lull the child to sleep in its mother’s arms.

The complexity of music today covers all human emotions. The heavy beat, screams and ear-splitting noises do exactly what they are planned to do – raise our hackles and get our nerves twitching, so we no longer care what goes on around us, we are mesmerized by the throbbing, until we could be run over and hardly notice, or so it seems to me.

There is the heavy stamping beat of martial music, which makes us want to keep in time, to follow suit with whatever the others do – perfect for armies to march to, when complete obedience to leaders is essential. There is the loose-gaited rhythm of the cowboy and western songs, just right for riding the range to, easy listening when the stars are out and the coyote wails, disturbing nothing, but letting us feel we are not alone.

The soft human voice, with no accompaniment at all but a soft patting hand, is known to babies all over the world, as a parent croons to hush the child, to bring on sleep, to sooth pain and fear. There is really no need for words, or skill, just the lull-alull-alulla sounds, spelling love

and protection. We all like to hear this sound, even when we are far from being children – but adults find it harder to bring out the trust-me-I’m-here-for-you-always sounds after we are older.

There are the foot-stomping, toe-tapping sounds, the come-dance-with-me sounds, and if we once knew them, we are never too old to be stirred again. Sometimes we can’t respond, but I think our adrenaline will still flow, our toes will twitch, and our souls will sway to the music for dancing – forever and ever, amen.

Some make music better than others. Some make music so great we could give our souls to hear it again, and again. They do it with voices they were blessed with, voices trained by many years of hard work, or voices with no training at all. They make our hearts rejoice with trills, trebles and basso profundos that put no food on our tables, no gas in the car, no cash in our bank accounts. But we are immeasurably enriched with it just the same.

They are humans – like us – who nourish our lives with music. In ages past a method was devised to write symbols that spell music, surely one of the greatest accomplishments of mankind, yet we really don’t know who to thank for that. Probably the method has been improved on and added to so many times that there is no one person we can point to and say – “He did it.”

With this method, the works of geniuses have been immortalized, we can hear them again and again, we add to them, record, replay, re-enjoy. The truly great musicians will live forever.

But we should not forget that we can each enrich our lives, let our emotions speak, express our joys – or griefs – with our own songs. We do not have to be great musicians, or even mediocre, to make our own music. When I am all alone – as we all are at times – I sing the old songs I learned as a child, or the songs from school, or from my records – or I make up my own – and I let them go out of me. Even when I'm crying-sad, there is a song to fit. And a feeling of release after.

We humans were meant to sing, and to enjoy the songs of others. So don't be shy to open up your throat in song, or your ears to listen. (Besides, it's good for your lungs!)

March 4, 1987



The World is a Mess

Everything is in a downswing today. The World is a mess. Man's inhumanity to man seems as apparent as it ever was. Politicians rant and rave, and play at war with people's lives ... over little or nothing at all.

The poor are always with us, I've heard it said. This fact is driven painfully home when children, pitiful, starving, skin-and-bone, hopeless, helpless wretches, are shown on the TV screen. How can civilization justify the vast expenditures on arms and military maneuvers while people are actually - **now, today** - dying of hunger, and the diseases of poverty, and lack homes and shelter?

Here in our so-far safe and secure Canada probably very few go hungry. In fact one of our 'big' problems is overweight - overstuffing, over-drinking, over-indulgence.

Economically, we are in a situation where it is more profitable to leave our money (if we have any) in savings accounts than to put it to work where it just might create jobs, consume goods, or divide and multiply.

In the Great Depression of the 1930's, Canada had little or no social security to offer the needy. There was no Unemployment Insurance, no Children's Allowance, no Welfare and very minor pensions for the aged or ill.

These were brought in one by one, and developed, and today stand as a bulwark against a like tragedy occurring. How long will this bulwark stand in the onslaught of rising unemployment, continuing unnecessary (and unnecessarily greedy) strikes and lockouts, with countless businesses going under, and the frustrations of

the young facing a continuous 'no job' situation: Could the goose that lays the golden eggs just topple over under the spiraling demands?

We may have a government that cares. If so, it has been kept a dark secret from many of us.

Our beautiful province, with its gentle name, with skies as blue as our flag, is beset by threats of pollution, heedless developments, aggravated by the forced idiocy of metrics, bursting at the seams with newcomers from other provinces and other lands ...

We must suffer unemployment and strikes, skyrocketing fuel costs, the destruction of lakes and wildlife. Assaults on farm income are matched with ever-higher costs, while our natural assets are yanked out from under our feet.

Smalltown, Alberta, has many things to offer - quiet dignity, parks, schools, bridges, stores and businesses, food for the hungry, entertainment, gas for the cars, paved well-lit streets. You'd think that would be noticed and appreciated, wouldn't you? Of course it is, by most. But to others, it doesn't look quite right.

These are the midget-brained night prowlers who spray paint on walls, smash windows, steal cars, break and defile and destroy.

These are the mindless cretins who pull up plants and flowers, scatter their litter of bottles and other garbage along the streets, on lawns, in parks, anywhere it should not be. Their vacuum-packed minds are incapable of seeing beauty, admiring cleanliness or order, or respecting the rights of others.

On the farms, the late cold spring has made field work a drudge. Dust swirls and billows. The calendar says 'hurry, hurry!' while the weatherman offers little encouragement. Every tank of gas is costlier than the last, while bits and pieces of repair metal are worth their weight in gold.

Market forecasters chant, 'Wheat will be lower, barely also, while oats are wanted by no one. Flax and canola are about to be struck by forty-seven new insects and diseases, and it's far too dry to expect results from grasses and legumes. We are in for grasshoppers and forest tent caterpillars, and those other larvae will eat your fruits and shrubs. Have a good day.'

As for my own personal woes - how dare I mention them? They are just like yours. A family member languishes. The house needs painting. The rabbits are chewing off all the hollyhocks; and I'm too fat. Worst of all - our one lone partridge has died.

There is no justice. Our guilt nags us, for it would seem she has struck the powerline out by the barn, perhaps during that last snowstorm. We found her near it, by the wellhouse, next day. The drummer in the woods moves farther away each day ... since he gets no answer he will soon be gone.

High wires are another man-serving trap, too intricate for simple birdminds to fathom. I am as depressed as if she were a favorite dog or cat. How awful to sustain through this long cold winter, only to die on the first day of spring.

With so much doom and gloom hanging over me, I should sit and cry - and I did, for awhile. Then I wandered out into the yard.

Here, in spite of the howling wind, the sun shines brightly through the tattered catkins. There are shreds of green among the shabby brown grass, while along the wall columbines are bunching.

The crows and blue jays, rowdy in the distance not long ago, are silent now, busy with their family matters. With timid dragging feet May has come - and is half gone before we notice its arrival. I hear a song sparrow far off, and two pairs of pink-feathered purple finches lunch at our seed dish.

Perhaps there will be no war, and some of the hungry will be fed. Canada will survive, in spite of governments, if not because of them. Alberta is still 'the best of the best'. Perhaps the immature and heedless will grow up, smarten up, clean up. Life really is worth living.

My bread has butter **and** jam on it. Who said it always has to land jam side up?

Alberta Trails



With Open Arms

Welcome, Life!
My entrance to this world
is pain and stress. . .
and I have much to learn.

Welcome, childhood!
When I am no longer cradle-bound
will run and traverse free the meadows
and the woods . . . will delve in books. . .and
meet a million friends.

Then – Welcome, adulthood –
and mating love. . . and labor.
Maturity is yet full of dreams,
of reaching ever toward the pinnacles...
a time of accomplishment and growth.

And Welcome – when they come –
the sunset years
let me accept without bitterness
the closing of my doors, my fading dreams...
the hills I'll never climb, nor oceans cross. . .
my loved ones lost, the
tasks undone – that I may

Welcome, in the end, surrender
to the dark – when I shall slip into
that unknown from whence I came
-fully having lived
and loved the living of my time
here on this earth.



Thanksgiving – Once Again

Just flipped the page on my calendar – and there is Thanksgiving marked out, plain for all to see. The only other markings, besides the numbered days, are the tiny black or white moons, and the word, Thanksgiving. On my private list, are many days marked, birthdays of my children and other loved ones, anniversaries, and many memories. But I will speak only of Thanksgiving, for this we should all share.

We have **so much** to be thankful for, here in Alberta, in Canada, in our towns and in our homes. Pick another country, any one in the world: would you want to trade it for good old Canada? Would you go there to live, taking into consideration all the aspects of difference?

Surely, there must be places where the weather is better: where the rains fall as needed, the wind only blows when our sail is set, snow falls only when we wish to ski. Where the cold is never more than enough to allow a snowman on Christmas Day, and the heat is the only perfect degree for swimming. Surely?

Then there are the wonderful peoples of the earth, so kind and loving and friendly at all times. Eh? Would we exchange the exotic plants and animals of Africa (and the calm, peaceful politics) for a minor paper-squabble such as our coming referendum vote?

Somehow, I can't see it. I love the weather here, most of the time, and if we didn't have "off days", cold, snow and wind, what would we have to complain about? Sure it would have been great to have more rain in the

summer, but we can live very well without the hurricanes and the floods and the earthquakes. I have no problem finding a multitude of reasons to be thankful.

We've enjoyed a fabulously colorful few weeks this fall, as the leaves put on a major show. Perhaps a bit of snow in August is just what we need, to get the showiest colorfest from our leaves! They've taken their time about hitting the ground, too, so it was a nice long show. We really needed that exercise, too, of raking up; it will let us enter the winter scene in better shape, and better able to handle the broom and shovel, when the flurries start.

With the long fore-warning of early snow, gardens must have been cleared in good time, and even the hoses rolled up, the tools in the shed, the storm windows on.

This long weekend of fall will see many families gathering to share a wonderful time of togetherness, time to check the kiddies' growth, to recount adventures and jokes – even sad events – to be **together**. Together, we renew the bonds of family friendships, and a turkey alone will never taste like a turkey shared, no matter how well stuffed, how golden brown, how artistically decorated. And how about those pumpkin pies!!!!

Speaking of pumpkins, I understand we have one, and perhaps more than one, whopper, just now being groomed and mooned over, in readiness for the Giant Pumpkin contest. Will 'we' win? ('We' being the entire area, if this honor comes to roost in our community!)

But I wonder if those big fellows would actually make the most divine pie???

My ideal Thanksgiving would be; roasted turkey, with cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes, with turkey gravy, peas, carrots, and turnip veggies, (or sweet potato casserole would do fine); a green salad or coleslaw; to finish off with – pumpkin pie (or lemon, or apples, or raisin or blueberry pie), any, with whipped cream, or ice cream or Dream Whip. All of this cooked by someone else, and served to me graciously, over a period of time, with interesting conversation and laughter abounding. I wouldn't even mind washing the dishes after, but am very thankful that dishwashers were invented.

However, I would still be thankful, if I got a baked potato, a fried egg and a tomato – which I'm sure would be better for my health, as long as there was someone to share it with . . . Or a peanut butter sandwich and a phone call, and sunshine in the morning.

I think we can all be thankful for the sun in the morning and the moon at night, as the song suggests, and also for the stars, and the winds and rain and snow, for peace in our land, and the abundant harvests of our gardens and fields. We, as farmers, do complain when weather and climate go against us, and the individual has a struggle to meet bills and costs, or to receive normal compensation for the labor and input of a crop year. Still, the land will produce what we need to survive – at least, it always has – and there will be another year, another day.

If we look beyond the horizon, we can see many lands where this is not so. I am thankful for what we have.

So – I will be thankful if we don't get a big snowstorm, and some of my kids can make it home. I'll be

thankful if I get the bird in the oven, on time, without forgetting just what to do to make his last hour memorable; if I remember to buy some pies, and peel the spuds, and where the big tablecloth is stored. And if I wake up that morning.

So join with me now, in giving thanks, for health, and love, and life, for family and friends and good earth, to our loving Father Which Art in Heaven, for the year past, and the year ahead.

September 29, 1992



My Home in Alberta

Oh, I was born in the heartland of Alberta
 And grew up in the country, wild and free
Though I have roamed since then the whole West over
I've not found a place I'd rather be!

I've watched blue water lapping at the lakeshore
 Smelled the evening's flower-scented breeze
Gazed in wonder at the awesome Rockies
Flown o'er those countless miles of pointed trees.

At home I'll find the greening hills of summer
 The grass so soft and tender to my tread
Around me I will find my friends, my loved ones
On a pillow that is mine I'll rest my head.

Now far stretch out the flowing sea of wheatland
 And over spills the golden summer sun
Clean skies puffed with clouds of snowy white wings
I'm home again – my journey has been run.

Alberta – favored spot in this our great land!
Alberta – vigil o'er me keep!
Alberta – may your leaves long whisper o'er me
When in your earth I lie in my last sleep.