

## Sketches of Two Lives

By

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I came to Edmonton in April, 1967 with my husband and three children, two boys aged seven and five and a daughter aged two. I think of this as my second life.

My first began in England in 1934, two months earlier than it should have. Despite having been born at seven months gestation I was what would now be called 'a late-born child'. In my case I think I was a 'nuisance'. My twin was born dead which no doubt precipitated my entry into the world. I weighed in at one and a half pounds on the kitchen scales and was immediately taken in hand (literally) by my maternal grandmother. When the midwife called in a doctor grandmother refused to let him take me to the hospital and set about lining a straw washing basket with hot water bottles and blankets. This was placed in front of a coal fire - in the middle of August. Every morning when the midwife came to the house she asked my twelve year old sister, "is she dead yet?" which sent my sister into floods of tears. The doctor never returned.

My grandmother also visited every day to wash me. She didn't actually bathe me in water. My sisters told me that she smothered me in olive oil except around the eyes. As a result of the oil and being in front of a coal fire her administrations resulted in my face becoming black with white rimmed eyes. I must have looked like a coal miner coming off the night shift. However, I survived and I have felt a lifelong gratitude to my grandmother. At the time I was born babies who were put in incubators in the hospital were likely to be blinded by an excess of oxygen.

My mother breastfed me and used to say that she "sweat like a pig" doing so because my head was about the size of an orange and she was terrified she would smother me. I was dressed in cotton wool until a neighbour knit me a set of baby doll's clothes. I still have a complete set of these clothes, including a belly binder and a

diaper cut into four pieces, which I keep in a baby's shoe box. Despite the medical prognosis that I would not walk or talk or I would be damaged mentally I grew, albeit slowly, and developed normally. Legend has it that at two years of age I would stand on my grandmother's table and sing "The Lady in Red" and "In Her Sweet Little Alice Blue Gown". I do know that when mother enrolled me in school a month after my fifth birthday I could already read. I remember it clearly because when my mother told the teacher that I could read the teacher became very cross and said it was wrong to teach a child to read before school because parents did not do it properly. How times have changed. I felt sorry for my mother because she had nothing to do with me learning to read. My elder sister used to read to me from A. A. Milne's, "When We Were Very Young" and I picked up reading by osmosis or something. To this day I do not know how children learn to read. After I had been in school for a while the teacher was only too happy to have me listen to and help any child who was having difficulty reading.

I said I was a nuisance. My elder sister died in 2006 but up to her death she and my other sister delighted in reminding me that I had broken all their dolls! My two sisters were eleven and twelve when I was born and my mother had assumed that her baby days were behind her. She was used to spending every week day afternoon either with my grandmother playing cards or at a whist drive. I know my mother loved me but I put a severe crimp in her social life and my prematurity caused her much anxiety. She would complain that she was too old to have a small child running around her legs. Also in my hearing, she would tell anyone who would listen how it was that I was conceived. Apparently one night my father discovered that he had run out of "French letters" aka sheaths or in modern day parlance, condoms. He and my mother decided that after so many years there was little chance of mother conceiving so they took a gamble and lost. One might say I was given pre-school sex education. I certainly knew that there was no chance of me ever having a baby brother or sister, something that I would have loved to have.

I survived whooping cough at a year old but for the first seven years of my life I wheezed through every winter. My mother wrapped me in thermogene, a kind of red

coloured cotton wool that produced heat when placed on the skin. I remember being taken to the doctor one day toward the end of winter. My mother took off my top and under shirt so that the doctor could listen to my chest displaying a thinning layer of thermogene wool. The doctor's eyebrows rose. "What is that for?" he asked. My mother explained. "If you grow seedlings you don't put them straight out in the cold weather. You do it gradually until they are strong. I put this on her chest to keep it warm and take it off a little at a time as the weather warms up." I'm not sure if the doctor agreed but I went on wearing my cotton wool vest.

My entire elementary education took place during the Second World War. It started in September, 1939 and ended the year I sat my 11 plus exam to move on to Grammar School, the equivalent of Junior High and High School combined. I went through the blitz, the doodlebugs and the Rockets, sleeping under the dining room table during the blitz and in an Anderson shelter for the rest of the war. The Anderson was built of sheets of corrugated iron, sunk into a deep hole in the ground. It was supposed to be erected close to the house but my father put ours at the bottom of the garden on the premise that if it was close to the house and the house was bombed we would be buried in debris. To make it safer he put a layer of concrete over the whole thing and added a small entryway for our dog, Nellie, to sleep in. To me it looked like an igloo - we had been learning in school about the Eskimos as they were called at that time. As a result of the bombing there were lots of bits of broken roof slates in the gardens around us. I used these as arrow and spear heads and pretended to be an Eskimo hunting seals in the garden pond then taking the 'blubber' into the candlelit air raid shelter to eat.

Not long after this my father went into the Royal Navy so I did not see much of him until the war ended. His stint in the navy made him hanker for a life at sea and he soon disappeared from my life again when he joined the Merchant Navy and spent weeks and sometimes months sailing around the world. He was in New York the day I got married and I treasure the telegram of congratulations that he sent me from that famous city.

Marriage brought me three children. In the London area the only women who

could give birth in hospital were first time mums or women who had experienced problems the first time around. This did not bother me because I was only interested in having my babies at home. If I could survive without a hospital I felt sure my babies could. Repeating history, my first babe came a month earlier than expected. Weighing only 5 pound two ounces he was officially premature but the midwife decided that he did not need to go into the hospital. His paternal grandfather, who was a carpenter, was still building a crib for his first grandchild so my son spent his first nights and days in a drawer propped on two chairs. I think it was probably warmer than a crib because it was draught proof. He didn't have a name either because we thought we had enough time to do that in what should have been the last month of pregnancy. When the midwife came in every morning she asked, "Does he have a name yet?" We tried out a few but our son didn't give us any help. At one point we thought Simon would be nice until my sister said, "You can't call him that he'll get called Simple." He did get a name eventually, two in fact.

My second baby, another boy, managed to wait two weeks longer than his brother before popping into the world and my last, a daughter, went to the very last day. In some ways this was not a good thing because she was big enough to get stuck and I had to be taken to the hospital for a forceps delivery. Had my family doctor not been enjoying a day off he could have delivered the baby at home because he was an obstetrician who practiced family medicine. An x-ray showed that my coccyx does not have a bend in it and if the boys had been born at full term they would have got stuck too. The hospital doctor told me that if I had another baby I would have to go into the hospital for the birth, to which I replied, "In that case I won't have another baby, "and I didn't although I would have liked four children. However, I don't think my husband would have been persuaded to have another child anyway.

As I said at the start of this piece I arrived in Edmonton on 5 April, 1967; in a snowstorm. Every Edmontonian we encountered in the next few days insisted that "it's not usually like this in April". After a few years I decided that Edmontonians were either

liars or had very short memories; Edmonton was always like this in April. In 1967 it actually snowed on Victoria Day as well. Many years later my husband and I confided to one another that given our 'druthers' on that April day that we landed in Edmonton we would have got on the next flight home. However, we stayed and thus began my second life.

Before each of my babies was born I had attended pre-natal preparation courses in England; for the first two the Grantley Dick Read Method and for my daughter, the Lamaze Method. The latter had come to England from France and was very successful. I had become a member of the Childbirth Trust in England. This was a voluntary organization which promoted natural childbirth using Lamaze. I continued to be a member when I came to Canada and a few months after my arrival I received a phone call from a young Edmonton mother to be who had been given my name by the Trust. She wanted to know if I would teach her the Lamaze method. I said I would and before I knew it the word had spread and I had enough expectant mothers to form a class.

One of the mums-to-be was a Scottish lass who was determined to have her baby at home. In 1967 this was unheard of but she was adamant. The first woman who had contacted me told me of one doctor who had attended a home birth in the past. I passed this information on and in due course the Scottish lass gave birth at home to a beautiful baby boy. Another woman in the first class was an English midwife and she became my partner in providing classes for the ever increasing number of women who wanted to learn the Lamaze Technique. Every class produced women who wanted to become involved and eventually the Childbirth Trust Edmonton Branch became the ECEA, the Edmonton Childbirth Education Association. I was its first President and for several years wrote editorials and articles for the ECEA Newsletter which I also typed and reproduced on a silk screen duplicator with help from my children who stapled, folded and put the sheets into envelopes. The number of teachers increased as more and more women went through our courses and the classes spread out from our homes to the University Housing Unit on 119 Street and the Grant MacEwan Campus in Millwoods.

Having classes in the evening made it possible for husbands to attend and be trained as coaches for their wives in the birth process. Unfortunately, hospitals in Edmonton did not allow husbands into the delivery room for fear they would faint. In the case of one of our couples a security guard was sent to make sure the husband did not try to sneak into the delivery room at the crucial moment. He and the guard watched through the window in the room's door. It took a while but when our mothers started to go to a doctor in St. Albert who was allowing fathers to attend his patients in the delivery room, the hospitals in Edmonton got the message and opened their doors to the fathers. I don't know if a father has ever fainted in an Edmonton hospital delivery room but I have never heard of it happening.

In 1977, the ECEA hosted an international convention at the Hotel MacDonald which was attended by Childbirth Educators, nurses and doctors from across Canada and the United States of America. By this time I had gone from President to Secretary and at some time back to editing the Newsletter. I had started working part-time for the Public School System in 1970 in a Junior High School Laboratory. As the school numbers increased my job became full time and I decided that I needed to give up my work with ECEA. I was given a lifetime membership but unhappily I have outlived the ECEA. I don't know when it folded but I am pleased to think that because of the couples who attended our classes, fathers were allowed to be at the births of their children and the Lamaze technique was adopted by other childbirth preparation classes in Edmonton. The midwife who attended my first class eventually went to Australia where she taught the Lamaze method to pregnant parents there. She wrote me that she mentioned me in every class she taught so my name was known in Australia without my ever having been there.

In December, 1980 I became the Editor of the first edition of the University of Alberta Hospital *Volunteer Scene*. This newsletter I did not have to reproduce myself and through it I was privileged to meet many wonderful people who worked as volunteers in the hospital. In this first edition I wrote a Letter from the Editor which read:

“Dear Readers:

I really do not know why I volunteered to edit this Newsletter. My husband thinks I am mad. I certainly do not have a lot of idle time on my hands. I have a home to run, a husband and family to care for, a full time job in a Junior High School and two afternoons a week, after school, I spend an hour or two in the Library at the Aberhart Hospital. I am not a workaholic and can spend a whole day reading a good book without a twinge of conscience, so why am I doing this? Maybe my husband is right!

Anyway, wondering about why I am doing this led me to wonder about all you other volunteers out there. It seems to me that the public has an image of the “stereotype volunteer”. She (generally) is probably middle-aged, without young children at home, affluent and has time to spare....I have worked with many volunteers over the last ten years and I have yet to meet one who fits that description.....Wouldn't it be a good idea ....to find out and get to know one another? Get out your pen and paper and send me an article on YOU.”

This obviously did not have the desired result because in the next Newsletter I wrote; “I have discovered one thing about volunteers. They are very backward at coming forward. Not one of you took me up on my request for biographies. I had decided that if you would not come to me I would, like Mohammed, come to you. I hoped to write a piece on the hospital's longest standing volunteer but I discovered that the Volunteer Office does not know who that is. So if you think you may have been a volunteer at the hospital longer than anyone else please let the Volunteer Office know your name. I think I may have just launched the “Longevity Competition”!

It took until Vol.1 No 5 before I was able to put a volunteer profile in the *Volunteer Scene*. I interviewed Mr. George Hartley in his home where he lived with his wife and son, Peter. His volunteer designation was “Special Services “ which meant he said, “Everything that no one is available to do”. Mostly it involved driving patients around.

In 1976 he was admitted to the hospital when he suffered a heart attack and while recuperating he realized how much volunteers could contribute to making a stay

in hospital bearable. So in early 1977 he began his volunteer work taking patients on recreational or shopping trips. If a patient needed clothes for discharge from hospital but couldn't go to the stores Mr. Hartley would take measurements, discuss tastes in clothes and make the purchases. This charming, gentle man summed up what he did in the following words:

"Volunteering is living".

The second profile was also of a man. Joseph Matthew was 81 years old and he was interviewed by Marcia Godwin and Judy Searle. He was born in Aberdeen, Scotland in 1899 and visited Canada several times between 1968 and 1975. He took up permanent residence in 1978 and when he was hospitalized in Edmonton and was visited by volunteers he decided that he should "return the compliment" by becoming a volunteer himself. He worked at the Veterans Home helping to serve meals, helping at birthday parties, playing cards or checkers and records of Scottish music. He also went on outings and "came any time he (was) called" if it was possible to get on a bus. He felt that volunteering was worthwhile because "you help your fellow man and...help yourself because you keep fit physically and spiritually".

The first female was still in school. Christie Jane Sharp had become a volunteer during the summer holiday at her mom's suggestion. The rest of the year she was busy learning to play guitar and drums, dancing on roller skates, cycling on a trail bike, swimming, skiing, gymnastics at the Y.M.C.A. babysitting, (when she did her homework), bathing two dogs and walking the younger one and playing basketball on the school team despite being only 4 feet 7 inches - (I go through the other players legs). She worked in the hospital gift shop and delivered flowers and when the summer ended she decided to keep on volunteering. She went to the hospital on Tuesdays and "when needed". Why? Because she got to "meet many different people".

Many other profiles appeared in the *Volunteer Scene* over the next three years. Every one of the volunteers, be they 15 or 80 led busy lives over and above their volunteering and their reasons for doing so explained my own. By helping others we received as much and more than we gave.



In 1986 my grandson was born and I took up my knitting needles again. When he was about 15 months old he was taken to visit the relatives in England. Just before he left he had a fall and hit his face on the corner of a coffee table. He developed a beautiful black eye which was still fading to a horrible yellow when my son and daughter-in-law carried him onto the plane for England. My daughter-in-law was mortified at the thought that my relatives would question her abilities as a mother. I assured her they wouldn't and anyway the accident had happened when the babysitter was in charge. I also went to England that year and in a street market I came across a boy's sweater with "Here Comes Trouble" knitted into the front. I bought some wool and knit a toddler size sweater with those words on it. To go with it I wrote a story, illustrated it (very simply) and bound it. From that time on every sweater had to have an accompanying story. The number of grandchildren increased to five and the stories and sweaters increased along with them.

When I retired I took a writing course with the Grant MacEwan Minerva classes for seniors. The teacher was Mary Dawe, a beautiful lady and wonderful mentor. It was her encouragement that made me believe in myself and in 1998 I submitted an article to the *Voices* column of the Edmonton Journal. Between then and 2003 the paper published about a dozen of my submissions to this column. On one occasion they sent me a note to say that they couldn't publish two articles from the same person in such a short period. The last one I wrote was never published because they discontinued the column before I sent it. I often wonder if it is sitting in a file somewhere in the Journal building.

My working life had changed over the years and when I retired from the School Board in 1997 I had been working in school libraries for several years. The books for the grandchildren had reached double digits by this time and the children had grown too old for picture books. In 1999 I came across an advertisement for a competition for children's stories run by the Writers' Union of Canada. I decided to enter. I wrote a completely new story, *A Chicken For Christmas*, sent it in and waited. I felt that the story had been good but when the days passed without hearing anything I decided not

to hold out hope. I was therefore, delighted when I answered the phone one day and a person from the Writers' Union of Canada told me that she had good news for me and bad. Which did I want first? I opted for the good first and was told that my story had come second out of over eight hundred entries. I was amazed and couldn't think what the bad news could be. "The bad news is," the voice at the other end of the line said, "there is no

second prize". I didn't care. My story had come second. That was reward enough.

A few days later I received another phone call from one of the readers in the competition. She said that she liked my story very much and she would like to take it to the Children's Editor of Tundra Books, the Children's Department of McClelland & Stewart. Would I let her do this.? I was flabbergasted. Of course I would let her take it to the editor. The rest of the day I wandered around in a daze. I had hoped but I never expected this.

A few more days passed and I got another telephone call. This time it was the Chief Editor. She didn't want to publish this story but did I have any others? I had to go to my grandchildren and ask for the books back so that I could type them. Several were handwritten. I chose some half dozen and decided to include a story, *Wanda's Really Wild Hair Day* that I had recently written for a great niece in England. It was on the computer and didn't need typing.

More days passed and then a large envelope arrived from McClelland and Stewart. It contained a letter notifying me that Tundra Books were interested in publishing "Wanda's Really Wild Hair Day". It would not need much editing; however, they did not like the title. The Editor also made suggestions of things I might like to add. There followed pages explaining that I had to make a story board; that is set out the story as it would be when printed in book form. I had to get it onto 24 pages, page 1 being the title page, page 2 the copyright page, page 3 the dedication. The story started on page 4. Each piece of text had to be on one page of two to allow for the illustrations. I went to work immediately and discovered that with the kind of additions

requested I could not get the story into the 15 pages allowed me. I phoned the editor. "You'll have to make it 32 pages," was the response. Back to the computer.

I managed to stretch the text into the requested number of pages, suggested a couple of different titles and sent it to the publisher. The ubiquitous 'they' didn't like the suggested titles and decided on their own; "Wanda and The Wild Hair". I didn't like it but since I knew nothing about publishing I assumed that 'they' did and made no objection.

Then the waiting began. I waited and waited. Days turned to weeks and weeks turned to months. I phoned the editor and got an answering machine. I left messages which were not returned. A year passed and another. I began to think that the publisher had changed her mind about the book and didn't want to tell me. On a return trip from a holiday in England I found myself between flights at the airport in Toronto. I decided to phone the editor from there it being cheaper than phoning from Edmonton. Amazingly I got through to the editor and I explained why I was phoning from the airport. "Oh," she said. "I'll give you our 800 number." She went on to explain that she was having problems finding an illustrator for my book but was still looking. Comforted by her explanation and not knowing what else to do I went back to waiting.

Some months later I heard from my grand-daughter that Georgia Graham was going to visit her school to do a workshop. Georgia Graham is a talented illustrator and author of children's books from southern Alberta. I knew of her work from copies of the books in the school library where I had worked. I decided that if the publisher couldn't find an illustrator I would try to find one. I would go to the school when Georgia was doing the workshop and ask her if she would read my story and let me know if she would like to illustrate it. How was I to know that in publishing the author does not get to choose the illustrator?

When I approached Georgia at the end of her presentation she readily agreed to read the story. A few days later she phoned and said she would love to do the illustrations and asked, "What do we do now?" I didn't know but said that I would phone Tundra. I did and after some umming and arring the editor said, "Tell her to send

us some samples". I did and Georgia set to work. She sent me copies of what she had done and sent the originals to Tundra. I loved the illustrations and so did the friends and family to whom I showed them. But Tundra didn't. More months passed. The editor sent me samples from another illustrator she thought might agree to do the illustrations. I hated them and the editor realized this when I phoned her. She kindly did not press me and eventually I received another phone call from her. "I suppose we had better go with Georgia. Tell her to send some more samples."

Georgia went to work again and this time her pictures were accepted. Contracts were signed and the process of producing a children's picture book began. I had described Wanda's hair as being like a gorse bush and I was asked to change it because Tundra's office couldn't find 'gorse bush' in their dictionary. Later I received a request to write an additional piece of text because Georgia had added an illustration which went beyond the story I had written. There were a couple more minor changes but otherwise I was left waiting again for the publication date. It took two years from signing the contract and seven years from the time Tundra agreed to publish the story to having the book in the bookstores by which time any excitement I had experienced at the thought of being a published author had faded. But it was gratifying to hold the first copy of the book in my hands and I was able to enjoy the excitement of my family, friends and neighbours.

The icing on the gingerbread came when Tundra accepted a second story about Wanda and told me, "We will publish this story but only if Georgia will do the illustrations". Of course Georgia was as delighted as I was at this and she has also illustrated the third and last Wanda book, which will be published in August 2009.

The real bonus for me in being published is that I can visit schools again to read to the children. I have in my seventies embarked on what will probably be my last career and I am still writing.



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