

## Golden Days, Enduring Links

1940 – 1950

*What was the family's perspective on the war, the draft, and the NRMA?*

*Was this decade as golden for the Thurston's as it was for us kids?*

*How did Fred and Nellie view life in Canada after*

*they'd returned to visit Wales in 1949?*

THE YEARS FROM 1940 TO 1950 enclose the golden days of my childhood. My siblings and I spent holidays with our grandparents and with our aunts and uncles in their own homes. There was butter to be made, bread to be baked, fruits and vegetables prepared and preserved in quart sealers. Animals waited to be fed – chickens, turkeys, cows, pigs, horses and in the early days, sheep and a goat too. There were sweltering hot summer days, wasps and blue-bottle flies, as well as thunderstorms with pelting rain and hail. We ate unbelievably delicious food in unending supply. We had dust and grasshoppers but no running water or electricity. We know now that we were lucky beyond words.



A VISIT WITH OUR GRANDPARENTS began with actually getting there: the farm was 193 km (120 miles) southeast of my home in Edmonton. Sometimes, when we were very young, our father took us to the farm although I don't really remember much about those trips.

My dad drove an old car, a 1939 Buick, I think. "Weighs a ton," I remember hearing him say, "two thousand pounds." He'd been used to the good life first as a successful hotelier, then as a travelling salesman before the Depression set in and destroyed his income and his life savings. Perhaps that was what also destroyed his first marriage. He didn't seem to socialize much. I only once remember seeing him sit at the kitchen table on the farm, sharing tea and Welsh cakes with my grandparents. Our dad died in the spring of 1951 when I was not yet 11. He was 72 years old then, eleven years older than Grandpa. But I was a child, and adults' exact ages didn't matter. They were all old.

Since my father was busy selling real estate in the booming postwar Edmonton marketplace, Mom usually took us to the farm by train. Everybody rode the train in those days, it was cheap, it ran everyday although only occasionally on time, and it was easy. On the other hand, cars were heavy, mechanical, not always reliable contraptions – and Alberta roads were mostly gravel, not paved as they became after oil was discovered in this province in 1949 and royalties began to roll into the provincial coffers.

After our father died, and maybe sometimes before that, we took the train to the farm all by ourselves. What an adventure. Mom took us to the Canadian National Railways train station, a long, low red brick building centered right across 100th Street at 104th Avenue, where the CN Tower stands today. In those old days, the railway people allowed Mom to take us right onto the train, and the conductor let her get us seated.

"Ah, there's Mr. Jackson," she'd say, when she saw Jimmy Jackson, the Irishman who lived in Irma and who was a great admirer of our grandparents. He must have come to Edmonton frequently, as we



*Phyllis at the farm with Maureen and Jean, beside the old Buick she and Max owned, about 1943.*

often saw him, with his familiar bald head, on the east-bound train returning to Irma.

“Well, now, here’s the little girls, going to visit the grandparents, are ye? I’ll watch out for them, Phyllis, don’t you worry. I’ll make sure they get off at the right place.”

“You girls behave now, or Mr. Jackson has my permission to spank your bottoms.” Our mother bid us good-bye, got off the train, then retraced her steps through the station to catch the Number 8: Bonnie Doon bus home.

Travelling alone by train, even with Mr. Jackson to watch out for us, was really scary. We knew there was a huge risk of falling asleep and missing our station, or of the conductor forgetting we were supposed to get off at Irma, or of Grandpa not being able to come to the station to get us. So many terrors for young girls, none of which ever materialized, of course.

The train’s seats were hard, covered by some sort of woven, straw-like material. Just before departure, the conductor shouted “All abo-o-o-oard.” He retrieved the step-stool from the platform as the engine built up its head of steam, then he swung up into one of the

passenger cars as the huge steel wheels began to turn. We could hear the whistle blow. There was no turning back now, even if we had somehow got aboard the wrong train. What if this one were going to Camrose or to Athabasca, Calgary or Red Deer? Grandpa would never find us.

“Going to Irma, are you?” the conductor’s voice twinkled, just like his eyes. He punched our tickets, wrote “IRMA” on a little piece of paper, then slipped the paper into the clip on our window blind. Maybe we were on the right train after all. We relaxed a little as the conductor moved on down the corridor, his stance wide as the train rocked from side to side.

Our suitcases had been swallowed up by some mysterious process called ‘checking’. Mother had lifted the luggage onto the shiny metal counter in the station and a man swung it away onto a rolling track. Would we ever see the suitcases again? What would we do for clothes if the bags disappeared? We couldn’t wear our good dresses and shoes and white socks all summer.

We had a brown paper shopping bag with us to carry our books (what could we do to amuse ourselves on this four- or five-hour train ride but read, which we both loved to do), our sandwiches and some oranges. “You don’t need pop,” our mother told us, “you can drink water from the tap in the train.”

Our nervous tummies called for food almost as soon as the train left the city, at least by the time it reached Uncas, just a few miles east. We unwrapped our sandwiches, usually Prem or Spam with just a little mustard. We didn’t have peanut butter until my younger brother and sister insisted on using it; Mom didn’t like peanuts and loathed peanut butter. We ate one half and re-wrapped the other half in its waxed paper. Water was available down the aisle, cold water from a tap, poured into a small paper cup from the dispenser beside the tap. Then the bathroom, with its sign that read ‘Do not flush the toilet while train is in the station’. Years later, we figured out the reason behind the sign’s directive. At the time, there was just great caution to get off the toilet seat before flushing, else a small girl might drop

right through onto the tracks that rushed along when the toilet's flush valve opened up. Another frightful thing to deal with.

Our fears of being abandoned, alone, at the station never came to fruition. Grandpa was never late for our train, although the train was often late for him. It stopped at all the dark red water towers to take on water for the steam engine. The stations were never more than about twelve miles apart, spaced so farmers could get their produce to a station, then get home again, in one day's journey when horse and wagon was the only mode of transportation.

Sometimes the trains pulled off onto 'sidings', places where an extra set of tracks allowed the mixed passenger-and-freight train to get out of the way of the faster freight-only trains. Other times the stop was at a real station, where the name of the town or village hung from the roof of the station building. There were always people on the platform, waiting to get onto the train or to meet passengers getting off. There were cream cans, shiny steel cans with blue tops, clearly labelled with the name of the owner and of the destination creamery. Wooden crates carried fresh eggs to their destination then were returned for the next batch. The station's own wagon sat on large steel wheels, the wagon floor enclosed at each end and open at the sides to allow transfer of suitcases and boxes, the long pull-shaft with the handle at the end left upright so no-one would fall over it. If it was cold or rainy, the passengers huddled together under the wide low eaves, or stayed in the waiting room until the train's whistle signalled its approach.

I still feel the magic of the old trains, the steam engine followed by the coal car, the freight cars and then the passenger cars. The rhythm of movement, and the sounds – the clickety-clack clickety-clack clickety-clack of the big wheels as they hit the rail joints, whooo-whoop of the whistle at every level crossing. The smells and sounds of those trains still conjure up memories of travel, of being met by our Grandpa at the station, and of our carefree, golden days of childhood.

"Well, well, you had a good trip, did you? I've been waiting for hours." Grandpa was at the station, his pipe in his mouth, tweed cap

on his head. His eyes twinkled as he picked up our suitcases. "Here's Uncle Ted, now, he'll drive us up home."

"I bet you'll want to ride in the back, eh? Well, you be careful now, don't hang your arms out. You probably shouldn't tell your mother, either, that you're riding in the back," chuckled Uncle Ted as he loaded us into the truck box. There were no seat belts in those days, and no rules to prohibit kids from riding in the back of a truck. Everybody did it in the country. Every year, this back-of-the-truck ride was our first taste of freedom. We were careful not to rip our dresses, or let the skirts fall onto the dusty floor. Our mother made all our dresses, cotton prints carefully stitched on the old Singer treadle machine to which my father had attached an electric motor. We tried to be careful of her handiwork.

Gran was waiting for us at the farm, the kettle on the stove. "We'll just have a nice cup o' tea now, after your big journey," she'd say. "Maureen, you get the biscuits out of the pantry, you remember where they are. Jeannie, you get the cups, that's right now, five cups and saucers. Some little plates too, mind you don't fall over that Smutty now, he likes to lie beside Grandpa."

My sister and I soon fell into the rhythm of summer on the farm. We learned to split wood, feed chickens, gather eggs, haul water, wash dishes without running water, set the table the way they liked it done, and get the dirt off the floors without a vacuum cleaner. We learned to peel vegetables, and to make pies and butter and bread. We learned that nothing ever tastes as good as the food cooked in that wood-burning stove with the water reservoir on the side and the warming oven up above. And we got to know our aunts and uncles and cousins.



THE GRANDCHILDREN had begun to arrive only eight years after Fred and Nellie's youngest child was born. First came Mary and Bert's son Ted, born in Ontario on March 24th, 1938. Then my sister Maureen, in Edmonton, on December 27th of the same year. I came



*An old truck, similar to the one Ted used to pick us up from the train station; if we were lucky, we got to ride in the back of it. Behind the truck is Fred's first car. The vehicles are parked outside Fred and Nellie's home. As I look at this photo, I am again struck by the comparison of this small frame home on a prairie hill with the large stone house surrounded by lush vegetation, where the family had lived in Wales. Except...the title to this little house was in Fred's name.*



*Olive showed my sister Maureen and I how to handle the sheep, c1943.*



*Top: Olive was 12, Winnie 8 when my sister Maureen was born; they were part aunt, part playmate, c1942.*

*Right: The barn cats used to tolerate our handling, the kitten and I, c1943.*





along sixteen months later, then Mary and Bert's son Bud, followed by nine more grandchildren in the 1940's.

Each of us Thurston cousins remembers his or her grandparents with huge affection, with respect, and honour – sometimes tempered with just a smidgeon of fear. We chuckle over tiny pictures taken with someone's Kodak Brownie or with my mother's bellows-type camera. We each have our own internal image collection, too, memories from our childhood as indelibly printed as are those recorded by the cameras.

Fred and Nellie revelled in the birth of each child. Nellie added the new baby's name to her calendar, and each year chose a birthday card from the boxed, generic birthday cards she bought at the drug store or from the catalogue. She taped some coins or a small-denomination bill inside the card, money taken from her Old Age Pension. Every grandchild's birthday card was signed "Your loving Gran and Grandpa".

It wasn't just the grandchildren who received birthday cards – every one of her sons and daughters and their spouses also found a card in the mailbox, usually on time, sometimes a day or two before the actual birthday. The adults' birthday cards often included the weekly letter – "We'll save a little postage, now, won't we?" Gran would say as she tucked the letter inside the card. "We'll just stretch that money out a bit."

My sister and I liked being part of Gran's Sunday evening letter-writing routine. "Here, now, Jeannie, there's a pencil you can use. You can have a bit o' this paper, Maureen," Gran might have said as she opened her box of writing paper, envelopes, and pens. The supper dishes were washed and put away; the families had all gone home, Grandpa was doing accounts at his desk in the living room. Sunday evenings were always the same, Gran wrote short letters on thin blue airmail paper, just a page or two in scrawling longhand, never any ink-blots from the maroon coloured fountain pen with the gold clasp. Letters home to Wales, to Bessie and Bill and Bert and George and all the rest of them, letters filled with family news: "Mary and her little

boy Teddie left today on the train, a long trip to Ontario but Bert will be glad to see them home again”, or “We had the most wonderful rain today, soft and warm just like we used to have in Wales. The crops were so dry but they’ll be fine now,” she would have written. Photographs were often included in the letters, images of the children and grandchildren, the horses and cattle, the great wide fields without fences or styles.

I know about those photographs, for several of them were returned to me in Wales when I visited the man who had been “dear little John<sup>41</sup>” and the cherished cousin who had been “Elizabeth, such a lovely girl<sup>42</sup>.” The people’s names, or the image descriptions, and sometimes the date, were written on the back of the photographs in Gran’s own distinctive scrawl.

There were letters to Mary and Len and Phyllis too, words about weather and crops and siblings and neighbours, as if Gran were the clearinghouse of family information. Every Sunday night, a pile of blue envelopes labelled with an “AIR MAIL” sticker, and a postage stamp in the upper right-hand corner, 3¢ for domestic letter, 5¢ or 6¢ or maybe 7¢ for overseas mail. Each letter was delivered to its Canadian recipient in a day or two, a week or so for the Welsh relatives.

Not one of those blue-paper letters exists today.



I WONDER if the farm’s rhythms changed at all with the emergence of the grandchildren. Sometimes I view my own knowledge of the farm, my grandparents and all the relatives, as a slideshow – snapshots of life taken on a particular day, a specific instant, a smile or a sound or an action. Has my imagination filled in the spaces between the pictures, or do the frames fly past like a movie film, the images following one another in such quick succession that I see life on the farm as my own private showing? Does it matter, one way or another? Regardless of the display method, my memories are mine to cherish, as are those of each sibling and grandchild.

Now, as an adult, I ponder the relationship I had with my grand-

parents. They never played games with me. Neither did they ever read to me, not that I can remember. They didn't teach me to milk cows or to drive tractors – those were 'man things' that girl grandchildren from the city were allowed to watch but not to actually do.

Neither my grandmother or my grandfather was given to demonstrative affection – there weren't kisses good-night or ready hugs in the morning. They didn't expect me to hold their hand as we walked the barnyard or the village street. I didn't think they watched me very closely but perhaps they did. How then did I know with unquestioning certainty that, in my grandparents' eyes, I was welcome, loved, and precious? For each one of the grandchildren knew exactly that – each one of us was made to feel as if we were the most special of all the grandchildren. And even more importantly, that we would always be loved, regardless of what we did or didn't do. Perhaps it was the warmth of their welcoming smiles, the gentleness in their voice when they spoke to us, the energy that enfolded us, all together, when we were anywhere around them.

Perhaps it was simply that they seemed able to accept each of us for what we were, without a need for us to be more of anything.

It's funny how the idealized grandparents are often created at the instant the first grandbaby is born, how women and men are immediately transformed from the person that had been to the new person, the grandmother or grandfather. The man who had been a gruff, insensitive, and perhaps even cruel father emerges as a loving, almost sentimental individual. He becomes 'grandpa', the person who takes his grandchildren for tractor rides, boosts them up onto the broad back of Babe the workhorse, squirts them with fresh milk directly from the cow's teat, and laughs when they slip on a fresh cow-pie in the pasture or do something silly like looking for the refrigerator in a house without electricity. The woman who had had fractured relationships with her own daughters often instantly bonds with her granddaughters, teaches them to feed chickens and collect eggs, make tea and serve Welsh cakes, wash clothes and set the table for dinner. The woman who may have withheld affection from her own children

*Right: Nellie with Maureen,  
her eldest grand-daughter,  
c1942.*

*Bottom: Grandpa used to  
load my sister and I into the  
cart, then he walked beside  
the horse up to the garden or  
down to the barnyard, c1944.*



*Every new grandchild was welcomed; here Gran holds my sister Colleen, about 1947.*



may, if she is lucky, be able to unreservedly bestow love and affection on her grandchildren, uphold and support their dreams and their goals, watch over them and give them absolute confidence. At least, that's how it was with my grandparents.

Gran kept a supply of these cookie-like biscuits in the pantry. We kids loved them, and were surprised when we realized that, although Welsh cakes were common to our family, none of our friends or their parents, had ever heard of them. Every one of the grandchildren remembers Gran's Welsh cakes. She must have converted her Welsh recipe with its weight-based measurements into this Canadian version, for this is the one we found in her cook book:

### **Welsh Cakes**

Mix:

3 c. flour

3 tsp. baking powder

pinch of salt

½ c. sugar

Cut in (actually, Gran used to use her fingers for this part):

1 c. butter or lard or shortening (Gran often used part bacon drippings or chicken fat)

Add:

1 c. currants (sometimes I use raisins instead of currants, other times I mix in a few bits of candied peel – I’m sure Gran used whatever was available)

1 beaten egg – or 2 eggs if they’re small

Milk – about ¾ c., enough to hold the mixture together (Gran used the skim milk left after the cream had been separated out)

Knead the mixture together for a minute or two, then roll out on a floured board to about ¼ inch thickness. Cut with a small glass dipped in flour.

Bake on a griddle over medium heat until golden brown on one side; turn over and bake the other side.

Set on cake racks to cool.

Grandparenting, I’ve learned, is pure fun. What more does a grandparent have to do but love the grandchildren? That’s it, just love them. The grandparent doesn’t have to intentionally teach responsibility or manners, or simultaneously struggle to build a career and learn to be a parent. A grandmother can laugh at her grandchild’s foibles; she knows that no matter what the child does the sun will rise again the next morning. And she knows that a secret shared is love built. She knows her grandchildren understand that the sweater she’s just finished isn’t just a sweater – it’s a virtual hug, ready and waiting to wrap the grandboy or grandgirl in love. I suspect my own grandmother knew all about knitted grandmom hugs – she kept her grandchildren supplied with mittens and scarves and hats and sweaters as well as butter

*Top: Gran ready to go to town, or to church c1944; she seldom left the farm without a hat.*

*Bottom: Grandpa in Edmonton in the mid-1940's, the ubiquitous cigarette in his mouth.*



and cream. Perhaps she taught each of us some of her grandmother secrets and prepared us for our future state of grandparenthood.



GRANDPA WAS A MAN OF AVERAGE HEIGHT, stocky and muscular. He had a fringe of grey hair, with a few wisps on top. He was always clean-shaven except for the bristly mustache. He walked with a bit of a stoop, his feet heavy in work boots, woolen pants held up by wide suspenders buttoned inside the waistband. His arm automatically reached out to take his woolen cap from the nail beside the door of the back kitchen. He had long arms and hands with square, angular fingers. Grandpa always wore long-sleeved, cotton shirts, usually tan-coloured, never printed or patterned.

Our grandmother was soft. She had long, mostly-black hair. Every morning, after she finished the tea Grandpa brought her in bed, she twisted her hair into a bun and fastened it at the back of her head with hairpins. My sister and I loved to watch Gran do her hair. How could it stay in place, we wondered; she just twisted it. She didn't braid it as our mother did. Mom had the most wonderful dark auburn hair, so full of electricity that when she sat on a stool in a dark room and let us brush it, the sparks flew out and danced together. Gran always did her own hair, she never invited us to brush it for her. She used the fancy brush and comb set from the tall bureau that stood in the bedroom she shared with Grandpa, brushed her hair a few strokes every night and morning, and finished off with her comb. She had the softest skin, she never seemed to lose what we in western Canada call an 'English complexion' – soft, fine facial skin with small pores. Gran's hands were soft, and so was her body. She was almost as tall as Grandpa, and probably heavier, at least when she was middle-aged.

"Mom, was Gran really a big woman, or is that just my childhood-memory?" In later years, my mother became my first reference source when I needed to verify my own recollections, or find out about things that, as a child, I couldn't possibly have understood in a mature way.



“Oh, she got so big,” Mom answered. “For a while there, she wore size 44 dresses. And then later on, she got it into her head she was diabetic, I don’t know why she believed that. But she stopped eating so much sugar and butter, and she used Sucaryl or some such sweetener, and she did lose some weight.”

Gran always wore a cotton-print apron, one she’d made herself, the kind that covered her whole front, with ties behind her waist and edges finished with coloured bias tape. That apron was used for all kinds of things.

“Now, now, let me wipe that tear,” she’d say to crying child, as she used the apron to wipe away the sadness. Or she might swipe the sideboard on the way by to remove any dust if she spied the minister or a neighbour coming up the driveway. I remember seeing her carry little chicks into the house in her apron, if they needed a bit of extra warmth or attention, or eggs collected from beneath the hens. The apron became a makeshift carrier for vegetables from the garden, crabapples from the tree outside, or kindling from the woodpile. The bit of fabric could be wrapped up over her arms if she was outside without a sweater or coat, or it could remove the perspiration from her face on a day when the stove heated the kitchen beyond tolerance.

When we were kids, all the people on the farm seemed big. So did the animals. My siblings and I were told where we could and couldn’t go – not out in the pasture where the bull lived, not into the small pasture with the sheep because it was surrounded by an electric fence. Stay out of the well-house. Only go to the pigpens with someone else. We could enter the hen house to collect eggs, and the blacksmith shop to watch Grandpa heat a piece of iron then hammer it to fit the machinery he was repairing. We could go to the barn when the cows were being milked, but we had to stand very still in an empty stall so as not to disturb the sometimes skittish bovine creatures. We could go to the garden to get vegetables, and we could watch the chipmunks chase one another in and out of the logs in the woodpile.

My mother’s youngest siblings were still at home when we were children. Ivor, our youngest uncle, continued to sleep on his single



*Top: I don't remember ducks on the farm, but obviously there were some, for here are Maureen and I feeding them, c1943.*

*Right: Gran always raised chickens, Rhode Island Reds, good both for laying eggs and for eating; she and I are feeding the chickens here – always a treat! Today we'd say the chickens were 'free range' – then, we just cautioned one another on where to not put our feet!*



*Top: Maureen with the chicks. Behind her is the cutter – the family used to hitch the horses to the cutter in winter, light a fire in the small stove inside, and go to church or to school regardless of plummeting temperatures.*

*Bottom: Probably we're on our way to take 'lunch' to the field – Olive driving, Gran in back with Maureen and I, about 1949.*



bed in the far north bedroom until he finally married, long after his siblings had left home. He was big and strong, with shiny white teeth, a high forehead and thick auburn hair. Olive and Winnie were there, my youngest aunts, just thirteen and ten years older than I. Maureen and I became their constant companions. Both aunts had curly hair – the result of Toni home permanents and rag curlers. They had dark eyebrows and eyelashes and dark eyes. We thought our aunts were so beautiful. Winnie especially smiled and laughed all the time, except when she thought Grandpa was going to get mad at her for something. Then she became quiet, even a bit timid. Our aunts taught us lots of things.

“Come on Maureen, get your shoes on Jeannie, we’ll go get the eggs.” My aunt Winnie was dressed in blue denim pants, wide-legged and soft, not the heavy blue jean with triple stitching down the sides that we wear now. More often than not she went barefoot, but not when she was going to gather eggs from the hen-house. It was grotty in there, even though the chickens spent most of the day outside. Chicken poop was really sloppy, dark greenish-grey, smelly stuff. You never knew where your feet would find it.

My younger sister, Colleen, reminded me about her favourite egg basket, the same one Maureen and I had used. It was an old wooden basket, about ten inches (25 cm) long and perhaps six inches (15 cm) wide, with a 1 inch (4 cm) wooden handle – it was really light, probably made of balsa wood. Concord grapes used to come in those baskets, the big plump purple grapes that Gran made jelly from. Grapes that you could squeeze at one end and the jelly-like insides popped out, then you could eat the skins – a dozen grapeskins made good chewing, almost like gum for a while, then you had to swallow it down. But the baskets were wonderful – one each for Maureen and I, Winnie took a 1-gallon (4.5 l) lard pail, metal, with a wire handle. As we stepped from the sunshine into the henhouse we saw only black.

“Just stand there a minute, don’t worry, there’s nothing to hurt you. No light switches here,” she chuckled.

Through the dimness we could see the hens' nest boxes, wooden apple crates that had been nailed to the wall at just about our eye-level. A brown hen sat in each nest box, each one looking at us with beady little eyes. My older sister was always braver than I, not hesitant to stick her hand under a hen. I envied her bravery.

"Just walk gently now, Jean," Winnie coaxed, "none of these hens will hurt you. See that speckled one that's walking around over there? If you see her on the nest, you have to be careful, she'll try to nip you, but these other ones are fine. See, just put your hand underneath like this. You'll feel if there's an egg. There, you did it. Put it in the basket, careful now."

Bla-a-a-ckkkk, bluck bluck bluck. Maureen and I leapt backwards as noise erupted from a nest box. One of the hens had laid her egg and exploded from the box, her wings a frenzy of flapping. Neither of us ever got used to the hens' unexpected and seemingly unpiloted flights.

We retrieved one, sometimes two, eggs from under each hen. The birds took turns in the nest -- whenever they felt an egg coming on they'd just fly up into the nest and lay it.

"Now we'll give them something to eat. Would you like to feed them?" Winnie opened the lid of the barrel outside the henhouse. A wooden lid, it and the barrel painted green, the lid hinged halfway across so you could just push it up and reach inside for the chop. It was easiest for our short arms to reach the pail inside if the barrel was almost full -- otherwise, we had to almost do a headstand to get it. No, we didn't want any help. We could do it ourselves, thank you. The chopped oats left a layer of white on our skin and our clothes, but we didn't care. The hens ran toward us from all over the barnyard. How did they know we were putting out food for them? We hadn't called them or even made any food noises. Their soft brown feathers brushed our legs, their feet scratched ours a little as they skittered about, frantic to get their share of the food. How many there were, we didn't know. It seemed like hundreds but was probably only about fifty or seventy-five, maybe less.

Winnie took us back to the house, set the basket on the table, poured some warm water from the stove's reservoir into a basin, and gave us each a soft rag. We washed the eggs and dried them, then Winnie placed them in the cardboard layer of the wooden egg crate. The crate held fifteen dozen eggs, a dozen and half to a layer. It stayed in the cool basement until all the layers were filled, then Winnie nailed the lid on and Grandpa took it in to the railway station on his morning trip to town. I never really knew where the eggs went, but I knew they were important to my grandmother.

Gran kept a few hens over the winter for eggs and for fresh meat. Each spring, a new batch of baby chicks arrived, packed closely together in a cardboard box with holes in the top and sides, holes big enough to provide air but small enough to prevent the baby chicks from getting out. It was a treat to see the babies, little balls of yellow fluff, scurrying about on spindly orange legs, peep, peep, peeping incessantly. I was only lucky enough to be on the farm once or twice when the baby chicks arrived.

"We'll just put a bit of this yellow stuff into their water now. It keeps them from getting sick. We don't want them to die, do we?" Gran showed Colleen how to refill the chicks' water bottle, add some antibiotic, then upend it into the dispenser.

Neither Colleen or I were ever asked to deal with the old hens, the ones that became Sunday dinner's roast chicken. The blood-stained log beside the woodpile, next to the log that held the axe embedded for safe-keeping, told the story that no-one talked about. Sometimes we watched Gran sear the de-feathered chickens over the open stove to burn off the few remaining hairs. We were never asked to clean chickens; in fact, we only occasionally watched this smelly, distasteful process. We did enjoy eating the chickens though, after they'd been stuffed and roasted in the oven.

Just about the only thing we didn't like about our days on the farm was the outhouse. That first visit outside in the morning was a trial, walking past Gran and Grandpa and Ivor, outside and along the path, the smells and the flies, back in and remember to wash our hands with

red Lifebuoy soap at the basin in the back kitchen. It was a privacy-less gauntlet for shy city kids.

“There, now, did you have a good sleep? I didn’t hear you cry, did I? No, well, come and have some breakfast now, there’s good girls.”

Ivor had finished eating his corn flakes and the two eggs Gran had fried for him. Grandpa had eaten the two rashers of salt pork he’d set out to soak in the enamel basin before going to bed the night before. Gran had toasted thick slices of bread in the wire toaster set onto the shiny black stove top, then buttered each slice, and put them into the warming oven until we were ready.

“Would you like a drop of milk? No, well, we won’t tell your mother. She likes you to drink milk. Maybe a bit of grapefruit, here you can have some of mine. There it is, that will do you good.” Gran’s quiet, gentle patter went on throughout the meal. Soon Grandpa and Ivor got up, put on their work boots in the back kitchen, and went off down the barnyard to do whatever men do on the farm.

The women’s work got underway. “Let’s get these dishes done, Geenie-Goil,” said my Aunt Winnie, using her favourite nickname for me. She took the cream-coloured enamel dish pan from the nail in the wall in the back kitchen, set it on the stove, and dipped water from the reservoir for dishes.

“You remember where the drain tray is, don’t you?” she said, sending me scurrying into the pantry to retrieve the cookie pan used to drain the dishes. “I’ll wash, and you can dry,” she directed.

In the meantime, someone had already put the big copper boiler on the stove and filled it half-full of water. “It’s getting hot, Mum,” Olive reported. “Another half-hour maybe, then it’ll be ready for the whites.” All the white clothes, the towels and dish towels, had to be boiled before being washed. Then the heavy work clothes would go into the boiler, and the hot hot kitchen would become redolent with the smell of clothing worn to birth calves, clean barns, and mend fences.

Laundry was a major undertaking in those days before electricity. When I was a small girl, my grandmother’s washing machine was

a copper tub supported by four legs, with a set of hand-cranked wringers above the tub. Inside the washer was a dolly, or agitator, pretty much like the ones in washing machines today. But to make the agitator work, a person had to push the long upright wooden handle – just like a broom handle – that stuck out from the side. Maureen and I loved that job – push pull, push pull, not too fast, push pull, back and forth, push pull, push pull, first use our right hand, then the left. When we tired of the task, one of our aunts took over. Water had been hauled from the well and heated on the big stove, then dumped into the washer. Only a little soap was needed – usually Ivory Snow – because the water was so soft. Too much soap and the washer overflowed with suds.

Gran or Olive lifted the whites from the boiler on the stove, using long wooden spoons or sticks. Into a bucket they went, then into the washing machine, swish swash, push pull on the handle. Lift each item out individually and push it against the wringers, turn the wringer crank to feed the clothing through and squeeze out the water, then watch as each item dropped into the tub of rinse water. Two rinses, one clear water, the other with a bit of laundry bluing in it to bring out the white, each item fed through the wringers between rinses. As soon as one load was out of the washer, another load went in. One person on the dolly handle, one on the rinse detail, a third to take the basket of clean clothes outside to the clothes line, a strong wire attached at each end to a tree, a pole in the middle to keep the line from sagging too low. Don't let the clothes drop on the ground, stay on the side that the breeze is coming from, keep those wooden clothes pins in their cloth bag until the aunts are ready for them. An hour or two on a warm day with a stiff breeze and the clothes were dry and ready to be taken down, folded or ironed, and put away.

“Doesn't it smell good, Jeannie, I love taking the washing down,” Winnie chuckled, her arms full of clean laundry, careful to keep her bare feet and the clean clothes away from the chickens' fresh droppings. “We're going to need some more wood pretty soon, though,



we've used almost that whole woodbox full today. Can you take some more in?"

My sister and I loved to carry in the wood. We weren't allowed to split the logs until we were about nine or ten, but we could carry in the ones that Winnie or Olive or Ivor had already split. It was wonderful to watch them split wood, their arms and the axe joined as one, each move smoothly rhythmic. Take a log from the big woodpile, set it upright on the big flat log, raise the axe and let it fall, right in the centre of the upright log. Crash! Split! The log fell apart in two equal pieces. Take another log and split it, then another.

If Ivor was splitting the wood, he'd do a dozen or more logs, then say "That enough for you? Alright then, carry it in."

We learned to load one arm with the freshly split wood while picking up another, yet another, split log. Then into the house, over to the green woodbox beside the kitchen stove, dump the wood in, make sure it's all straight, not higgledy-piggledy, back out for more until every available piece was in its place. And always make sure there was kindling available for morning, little small pieces of wood, one large piece split then split again and again until the pieces were no more than half an inch thick. Ivor used only the big axe, never the smaller hatchet. He seemed to enjoy splitting the wood smaller and smaller, with the surest stroke you ever saw, never missing, always hitting right in the centre of the upright wood. Perhaps he did this all the time, perhaps he was showing off just a bit for the 'city kids'. We were a willingly fascinated audience.

The fire in the stove seldom went out completely, except on very hot days. Gran baked in the morning, pies and cookies, bread every third day. Roast beef or pork or chicken for noon dinner, with potatoes and a vegetable, usually some homemade beet pickles or perhaps some dill pickles. Saskatoon or rhubarb pie for dessert, sometimes apple or peach, in the late summer a pie made from the gooseberries we picked from the garden. Always a pitcher of thick, rich cream to pour over our pie.

As soon as he finished eating, Grandpa pushed his chair back towards his desk and lit his pipe. After one pipeful of tobacco, always Old Chum, he loosened his boot laces and let his head drop to his chest. He was asleep within seconds. Soft snores were occasionally interspersed with more dynamic sounds for ten or fifteen minutes, when his head came up and he looked around. He rubbed his eyes with the back of his angular fingers, shook the sleep from his head, tightened his boot laces, and stomped outside.

In the meantime, the women washed the dishes and put them away, then we also lay down for a short nap. Gran lay on her bed. Maureen and I tucked down on our bed or on the chesterfield, sometimes on the old Winnipeg couch out on the front porch or on the shady east side of the house on the grass.

By 2:30 or 3 o'clock Grandpa was back in the house looking for a cup of tea. Or, if he and 'the boys' (Ivor, Ron and Ted) were out in the field, we prepared the tea and took it out to them.

"Get the milk pail, Jeannie, and put a towel in the bottom of it," I was told.

My aunts had the fire going again, they boiled the kettle and made tea right in a half-gallon sealer with several tea bags and a few lemon slices. They tightened down the lid and put the sealer into the milk pail and patted the towel around the jar. Into the pail went some mugs, a small bottle of milk and some sugar, a tin of cookies.

We climbed into the old truck, a blanket underneath us, Winnie in the driver's seat. We drove with all the windows down, the breeze blowing through the cab and the dust along with it. The milk pail sat on the floor between our legs. We'd travel north for a mile or two, sometimes more depending on where the men were working, then we'd turn off the road and bounce over the field toward the closest bluff. The fields were dotted with bluffs, groves of aspen and black poplar trees, high bush cranberries, saskatoons, buck-brush and wild rose bushes, intentionally left to protect the soil from wind erosion.

The men saw us coming, and brought their horses or tractors over to the bluff, sat down in the shade and waited for their tea.

“How’s it going today, Ted,” Winnie would ask, “is that mare’s foot any better?”

The talk was of horses and equipment, days left to finish the field – the mowing or haying, summer-fallowing or rock-picking. Then the men rolled cigarettes, Grandpa had a pipe or sometimes a cigarette, then it was back to work. We took the empty tea things home.

Olive had the ironing board out when we got there. The sadirons were on the stove heating. As the iron she was using cooled, she put it on the stove, unclipped the wooden handle, and replaced the cool iron with a hot one. Only the cotton tablecloths and dresses were ironed, Grandpa’s and Ivor’s shirts, and the girls’ blouses. Around 1950, the sadirons were replaced by a gas-fired iron, a contraption that burned high-test gas held in a small reservoir on the side of the iron. My aunts marvelled that they always seemed to get a headache when they used that iron...

Hardly anyone ever seemed to get sick at the farm. Doctors and hospitals were a last resort, consulted after the home remedies failed. Gran made a mustard plaster for Grandpa when his lungs got bad – two thick layers of flannelette slathered in between with a paste of powdered mustard mixed with water. “Not too thick,” said Gran, “we don’t want to burn Grandpa’s chest, do we?” The heat from the mustard seemed to draw out Grandpa’s congestion.

Scrapes and scratches were treated with Watkins Medicated Ointment™, or with green Zambuk™ salve. For mosquito bites, we made a paste of baking soda and a bit of water, then applied it gingerly to each bite. “Don’t scratch them, now, or they’ll get infected and you’ll always have a scar,” we were told.

Wasp stings were another matter. I remember the day my mother, Maureen, and I went to pick pin cherries down the lane beside the garden. Pin cherries are small, bright red berries with a hard pit in the centre. They grow on trees, not shrubs like saskatoons, and they grow singly rather than in bunches like high-bush cranberries or choke-cherries. The best pin cherries always seemed to grow in the most

inaccessible places, on the other side of the rock pile or on the top of the hill beside the barbed-wire fence.

My sister, by far the more adventuresome of us two, climbed the rock pile to get at the beautiful red cherries. She carried a yellow, one-gallon lard pail. Suddenly, from beneath the rock pile came a horde of wasps. They attacked my sister, converged on her ankles and swarmed above her head. Maureen screamed, tried to run from the furious creatures, and got part way down the lane, Mom and I racing behind. Halfway to the house, Maureen crumpled to the ground. Our mother picked up the limp body, ran to the house, and dropped her on Ivor's chair.

Quickly, her face tight with fear, Gran grabbed the cube of laundry bluing<sup>43</sup> and dampened it till the blue started to run out. "Here, Phyl, rub this on her. We'll put a cold cloth on her head, that will bring her 'round."

Gradually, Maureen revived. The rest of us hovered around. "Let me see those bites, now, there see, there's the stinger. I'll just pull it out, then it won't hurt so much." Gran used a pair of tweezers to gently pull the stinger from each of the angry red spots on Maureen's ankles. "There, now, those wasps will be dead. They can't live without their stingers. Winnie, let's have a cup o' tea now, we all need a little tea after that fright, don't we?" Maureen got extra sugar in her tea that day, and another cookie when she felt better. The stings took several days to heal, but she didn't faint again.

The wasp incident wasn't our only fright that summer. My sister was brilliant, artistic, and musically creative, but not calm. She often had nightmares and sometimes walked in her sleep. That was enough of a problem at home, but here on the farm the doors were never locked.

The click of the door being opened wakened Grandpa. "Who's there?" he called out. The thin wall between the bedrooms only slightly muffled his gruff voice. When there was no answer, he climbed out of bed, hurriedly pulled on his pants, and padded to the door in his bare feet. He could see Maureen walking down the yard toward the barn.

“Hey, hey, come back here,” Grandpa shouted, but Maureen didn’t stop. Grandpa went after her and guided her back to the house, into the bedroom where I lay mostly asleep, helped her back into bed, and covered her up. In the morning, she remembered nothing of her adventure. After that, they put a chair against the back door to prevent it being opened during the night.

The rhythm of the days at the farm was governed by the weather, the crops, and the day of the week. Monday was wash day, Tuesday was bread-baking day, Wednesday there was ironing and mending, Thursday and Friday had their own chores.

In between chores, there was time for a bit of pleasure. One of our favourite times was when Winnie or Olive would say, “I think we should do our hair.” That was the signal to dip a couple of bucketsful of water from the barrel outside, the one that caught rainwater as it ran out the eavestrough’s downspout. We’d heat the water on the stove, pour a little into a washbasin, lather up our hair with castille or coal tar soap – shampoo would have been an extra luxury. The warm water was so soft, a tiny amount of soap produced huge mounds of lather. Then we’d rinse with more water, the next person in line used the rinse water to wash her hair, and so on until we all had squeaky clean hair.

Late Saturday was bath time, extra buckets of water had to be hauled in from the well and heated on the stove. In the early evening, right after we’d finished a cold supper, the round galvanized bathtub was placed on the kitchen floor and filled with warm water from the stove. The children bathed first, then the women, while the men stayed in the sitting room. While the women dressed, it was the men’s turn in the tub. We girls dressed quickly – dawdling would mean being left behind when everybody else went to town.

Maureen and I went with Gran and Grandpa, either in their 1928 Chev ½ ton, or in the 1938 Dodge car they bought sometime in the 1940’s. Ivor went in his own truck, sometimes he took Winnie with him but she always came home with her parents, not her brother.



*Grandpa waiting with the car, perhaps to take us to church, c1945.*

The stores and cafes all stayed open late on Saturday nights in Irma. Everybody went to town: the women met one another in the Co-op or in MacFarland's General Store. They gathered the mail, bought groceries, picked up fabrics and notions for their next sewing project, purchased feminine products and patent medicines from the drug store. The men discussed equipment purchases with Carl Anquist at the John Deere Ltd. dealership, bought hardware and horse liniment, then met in the pool hall or over coffee and ice cream at Pond's Irma Café. The evenings were long – the sun doesn't set until close to 11:00 pm in mid-summer on the prairies – and there was no hurry to get back to the farm.

My sister and I stayed close to Gran. "These are Phyllis's girls," she said as she introduced us to her friends, Mrs. Charter or Mrs. Dootson, Grace Archibald or Minnie Jackson (the wife of Jimmy Jackson, the man who often watched out for us on our train trip from the city down to Irma).

"Of course they are, Mrs. Thurston. We remember them. My, haven't they grown? They must be feeding you well up at the city, eh?" the ladies would respond.

I don't remember ever hearing my grandmother addressed as anything but "Mrs. Thurston" by her friends, the shop keepers, the minister, travelling salesmen such as the Watkins man, or anyone else.

Neither Maureen or I quite knew how to reply, so we just stood there, shyly, close to our grandmother as the adult talk of crops and illnesses, shops and church, swirled above our heads.

Sunday was 'going to church' day. The minister came from Wainwright or Viking, depending on the parish's boundaries at the time – there were at least three churches to be served. Service times rotated among the churches served by the minister of the day – the Reverends Trendell, Moorhouse, Comely and Flagler were some of the ministers. I don't really remember them – like all adults, they were just there.

Church attendance had its own dress code. Gran donned a nice dress, fastened a brooch at her collar or neckline, brushed and braided her dark hair then wound it into a bun just above her neck at the back of her head. She put on fresh lisle stockings and her better shoes, then a coat and a fancy black or blue hat. And she made sure that Grandpa's suit and shirt were ready for him.

Meanwhile, Grandpa sharpened his straight razor on the heavy dark strap that hung from a hook beside the door, whip-whap, whip-whap along the heavy brown strap until the razor's edge was just the way he liked it. He took warm water from the stove's reservoir, dampened his bristle shaving brush, worked the bristles over the Old Spice shaving soap in a mug, and lathered up his face but not his moustache. He watched in the mirror as he stretched his skin taut then dragged the razor over his cheeks. Maureen and I were fascinated, incredulous that a man could shave off his facial hair like that, without leaving any nicks or cuts. Sometimes we had to jump quickly out of the way, as Grandpa spun around, his brush fully lathered, ready to swipe the frothy white brush across our noses.

Uncle Ivor watched this game, a grin all over his own deeply tanned face. "Better watch out there, you'd look pretty funny with your faces lathered up," he chuckled.



*Grandpa's Hereford bull; we kids were never allowed near the bull and certainly weren't allowed to hear anything about cattle breeding activities. Neither Mum or her sisters were ever allowed to witness an animal birth.*

Ivor didn't go to church. No-one ever asked why, and he didn't volunteer the information. I never knew when he stopped attending, but he must have gone to church when he was a boy. The family's Anglican beliefs didn't seem to be a debatable topic. And we would never have thought about discussing or challenging the rightness of Anglican doctrine.



THERE WERE MANY THINGS we didn't see or hear, as children. "Little pitchers have big ears," I remember hearing if we joined Grandpa and the uncles when they were talking about cows being 'serviced' or 'covered'. There'd be a momentary lull in the conversation, then a switch to some other topic. No-one ever explained if we asked about the strong disinfectant smell around the pig barns where the latest batch of pigs had been castrated, or why Uncle Ivor's pony (we later learned the definition of 'stallion') was so rambunctious sometimes.



Our grandparents' farm seemed to be a breeding ground for more than animals. There were millions of bugs around, or so it seemed to us. Flying bugs and crawling insects, bees and wasps, blue bottle flies in the house and barn, warble flies that laid their eggs under the cattle's skin. Mosquitoes by the million wherever there was shade or a bit of stagnant water. Horse flies and deer flies and regular old house flies.

Gran used to put fly papers up in the house. They started out as a round cylinder, 12" in diameter and perhaps 3" long. Gran held the cylinder tightly with one hand as she yanked hard on the end tab. Out popped a length of sticky brown paper, curled round and round, with a tack at the top. Gran shoved the tack into the ceiling inside the back door, or in the corner of the kitchen above the breadbox. Within a few hours the sticky substance was covered with flies, huge blue bottle flies and smaller house flies, sometimes black flies and occasionally mosquitoes.

My farming cousins probably don't even think of the insects that we city kids considered huge pests. They more likely remember the grasshoppers, flea beetles, and Bertha army worms – pests that destroyed crops or at least damaged them severely.

In retrospect, my siblings and I know that summer-time, with a few bugs as the worst of our worries, was a gift that permanently shaped our lives. During those summers, no-one ever talked with us about the 'other' side of life, the realities that every human being has to deal with, the sadnesses and the ugliness that leaves few lives unscathed.

As I look back on those days, I realize there were so many things we didn't know, actions and reactions from which we were shielded, sibling rivalries and upsets, unhappinesses and irritations. In the era of the 1950's, many things were never ever discussed, especially if sex were involved. Unmarried women who became pregnant were at the top of the 'shameful' list, followed by extra-marital affairs, incest or molestation, spousal abuse or alcoholism – few communities escaped some or all of these darknesses but they were never talked about in our presence.

Neither did we hear anything of quarrels among the relatives in the old country, or of quarrels among our own aunts and uncles. I still hear comments like “What’s happening in this country? No-one ever used to behave like that,” and I wonder if the behaviour has actually changed, or if people simply grew up having never heard of those behind-closed-door activities. Whichever it was, we were happy in our innocence.

There are many family situations I know only from conjecture or their depiction in photographs. As children, we didn’t know how lonely Mary was in Ontario, far from her parents and siblings. We didn’t know that Len, the second eldest son, had suffered a terrible accident in the Hamilton steel plant about 1941 or that he’d married dainty Jean Rudd after he recovered. No-one told us that Ron had been called up for army duty during the war, and that he hated every minute of his service time. I don’t remember his marriage to Florence Pugh on October 14, 1948. Or that Leo left the farm shortly after the war ended, went away to take theology at St. John’s College in Winnipeg then spent his summers driving trucks for Len and Bert (Mary’s husband) in Brampton, Ontario. We weren’t at Leo’s wedding to Joyce Warrener in Winnipeg on August 19, 1950 – and neither were Fred or Nellie, for an early August frost wiped out their crop that year and left them with little income. We only knew that Uncle Ted and his wife Molly lived close, that they had children a few years younger than us, and they stopped by for tea every time they went into town.

We knew about Olive, because she boarded with us in Edmonton while she went to university, then she married George Pugh on August 1, 1950 and went to live on his home farm north of Edgerton. Their farm became our other summer refuge, a place where we were teased and talked with, made to feel valuable and loved. Winnie seemed to come and go – she was on the farm still when we were very young, but by the late 1940’s, she had gone away to college and then to work. Sometimes she returned home to the farm on weekends.

Still, the farming continued. The men’s jobs of plowing or harrowing, seeding, fertilizing, and harvesting changed during those



*No saddles for the work-horses but we didn't care; Maureen and I, c1946.*



*It was a thrill for we city kids to ride the tractor; Maureen, Colleen and I, c1948.*



*Somehow, Grandpa seemed more at ease with the horses than with his tractor; the horses always responded to voice commands, unlike the tractor. c1946.*

years from 1940 to 1950, as farming became mechanized. But when we were small girls, in the early 1940's, most of the farming was still done with horses. Grandpa treated his horses with respect. Their job was to work, and so was his. He kept them fed with grass or hay, and an extra ration of oats when they were working hard. He made their shoes in his own blacksmith shop. And he treated their aches or injuries with liniment, cleaned their feet, and trimmed their hooves. Sometimes he put Watkins ointment into their ears so the flies couldn't get inside and bite the tender flesh.

My sisters and I loved the feel and the smell of the huge horses. As a special treat, Grandpa would lift us up, one at a time, and place us gently on the back of Babe or Pet or some other big work horse.

"Steady now, Babe," he'd say. "Hold still, come on now then, you in front, Maureen. Jeannie, hold onto Maureen so you don't fall."

With the reins in one hand, he gently clucked and the horse carefully walked beside him, down the barnyard, sometimes up to the garden, always at a sedately ordered pace. My sister and I clung on as best we could with our spread-out legs – a saddle would never have fit across that wide back. The person in front clutched the horse’s mane, the person behind grasped her sister tightly around the waist. We never ever fell off.

Just before war broke out, as the Depression ended and commodity prices rose, Fred bought his first tractor, a John Deere AR, the first rubber-tired tractor the company manufactured.

Leo, who was neither robust or good with horses, drove the John Deere™ tractor hour after hour, up and down the fields, harrowing and seeding and, later, swathing and binding. I don’t really remember the tractor, but I do remember watching, fascinated, as Grandpa drove a small gray tractor straight toward the house. I could hear Grandpa shouting: “Stop, damn you, stop.”

Perhaps he had forgotten how to disengage the engine, perhaps he panicked momentarily, who knows? The tractor came to an abrupt halt just outside the white picket fence that surrounded Gran’s flower bed. Grandpa sat for a moment, then threw the tractor into reverse and eventually got to his intended destination.

Threshing was an annual challenge. We were never on the farm at threshing time, in late fall – we’d long since returned to the city and to school by then. There were stories, though...The grain had to be cut and tied in bundles with the binder, then stooked by hand – seven bundles per stook. When it was the Thurston’s turn to be threshed, a crew of a dozen or more men in addition to the Thurston boys was needed. Some of the crewmen picked up the bundles and loaded them onto hay ricks and hauled them over to the threshing machine. They were joined by other men who forked each bundle into the open mouth of the thresher. Men were needed to run the threshing machine and to haul away the grain and the straw. Other men managed the horses, changing teams as needed. It was a mammoth operation.

Every man had to be fed. They ate huge meals – eggs and toast and porridge and coffee and perhaps potatoes for breakfast, meat and gravy and potatoes and vegetables and bread and pies for dinner, more of the same for supper. At least one, if not two, ‘teas’ in between their meals. There was no electricity, no refrigeration, and only occasionally some help for the ‘missus’ of the household. The men slept in the barn or in an empty granary. There were no showers.

The 1940’s were prosperous years. Farmers had become valuable – and the food they produced was essential both for domestic use and to feed the thousands of men and women serving the war effort at home and offshore. Fred bought more land, a quarter here and a quarter there; he rented pasture land and raised prime Hereford beef cattle. Economically, the war was good for farmers, both during the 1939 – 1945 years of war and after the fighting was over. Western farmers had crossed a huge economic hump. The Thurstons’s were able to buy land and decent equipment as well as good breeding stock, and to farm more efficiently than in the pre-war years. Grandpa kept a few nondescript range cows for milking, but moved into pedigreed stock for his beef herd.

I remember Grandpa cautioning my sister and I to “mind, you stay over there now till I get this bull into the other field”. Grandpa marched alongside the huge animal. In his hand was a walking stick with a hook in the end to catch the bull’s nose ring, should the animal become obstreperous. We never saw an animal give Grandpa any trouble.

Fred and the boys raised pigs too, in pens on the south sidehill below the barn and the well. They were probably Yorkshires – large, white-haired, pink-skinned, noisy creatures. There was a separate pen for the boar, “Now, mind you don’t upset him or he’ll come right out at you,” and other pens for the sows and their huge litters of tiny pink piglets. Once weaned, the pigs were turned into a fenced area. Twice a day they were fed chop – chopped up oats – as well as the household discards of potato peelings, cooking water from the vegetables, leftovers, and all manner of other leavings.

When a pig was the right size, it was sent off to market. Or, if the family needed the meat, they butchered the pig themselves. I remember wandering out of the house one sunny day over to the top of the hill above the sheep pasture.

The terrified squeals from down by the barn shot through my body, shrieked into my blood and my bones, and bolted my feet to the dusty ground. I could not move. Neither could I stay. The screams were coming from a pig, a live pig, suspended by its hind legs from a chain on a tripod. Eventually, the shrillness gurgled into silence as the pig's throat was slit and its life flowed out.

I tore my feet from their moorings and retreated indoors. Gran's expression was enigmatic. It was the last time I disregarded her gentle advice to "stay inside just now".

Tough as it was for us to understand or accept, slaughter was an integral part of farm life – it was, in fact, a simple reality of life. Through harvesting – be it animals or vegetables – my grandparents kept their family alive and together, regardless of the nation's economics. They shared the food they had – we never left our grandparents' without butter or cream, vegetables from the garden, perhaps a chicken or two. They sent food to the relatives in Wales too, all through the war years when rationing was so severe, and later on, after the war, as rationing continued in Britain long after it came to an end in Canada.

Grandpa bought land in those years. He'd already added to the one quarter-section purchased from the government in 1927; by the mid-1940's he owned eight or nine quarter sections.

We went to the farm every year except, perhaps, the summer of 1949. Maybe that was the year we stayed with Uncle Ted and Aunt Molly, or with Uncle Ron and Aunt Florence. I don't remember anyone telling us that Gran and Grandpa went 'back home' that summer, for the first time since they'd left the old country.

Fred and Nellie left Irma by train on April 23, transferred to the R.M.S. Aquitania at Halifax, crossed the Atlantic and docked at Southampton on May 5th, eighteen years and one month since they'd sailed from Liverpool.



*Fred and Nellie returned to Britain in 1949 aboard the Aquitania.*

ABSTRACT OF LOG OF THE				
Cunard White Star R.M.S. Aquitania				
CAPTAIN R. B. G. WOOLLATT, R.D., R.N.R.				
FROM SOUTHAMPTON TO HALIFAX, N.S.				
Date, 1949	Dist.	Latitude	Longitude	Weather, etc.
		N.	W.	
Wed'day, Aug. 3				At 15.25 hrs. (B.S.T.) Left Berth, Southampton.
" " 3				At 17.40 hrs. (B.S.T.) Nab Tower.—Departure.
Thursday " 4	371	49.56	10.07	Fresh breeze, rough sea, low swell, cloudy, & clear
Friday " 5	399	49.26	20.33	Strong gale, rough sea, heavy swell, o'cast & squalls
Saturday " 6	439	48.13	31.31	Mod. breeze, mod. sea & swell, clear & fine
Sunday " 7	491	45.28	42.46	Mod. breeze, mod. sea & swell, o'cast & clear
Monday " 8	499	43.06	53.34	Mod. breeze, slight sea, low swell, clear & fine
Tuesday " 9	453	To Chebucto	Head Light	
Passed Chebucto Head Light (Halifax), on Tuesday, August 9, at 11.27 hrs. (A.D.S.T.)				
Distance—Nab Tower (Southampton) to Chebucto Head Light (Halifax)—2652 nautical miles				
Passage—5 days, 21 hours, 47 minutes				
Average Speed 18.71 knots				
Boat Mum & Dad returned to England in 1949				

*The postcard record of the Aquitania's return journey from Southampton to Halifax, August 1949.*





*With Fred's brother Bill and wife Bessie, their son Roy and grand-daughter Jacquie, likely at Dinas Powys, South Wales, July 1949.*

Nellie kept a diary of that trip, a couple or three paragraphs every day, noting the people they visited and the trips they took, their impressions and their joy at seeing brothers and sisters, nephews and nieces, friends and former neighbours. “We can’t express our feelings”, “the tears do come at times like this”, “the trip to [Cardiff, or Dinas Powys, or Treherbert] was just grand”. Nellie recorded the letters from home, the cards and telegrams received on June 28th (their 39th wedding anniversary), and even a cake sent over the ocean to Fred for his birthday on June 30th, sent so the relatives wouldn’t have to use their precious ration cards to buy eggs for a luxury cake.

They visited with Fred’s brother Bert and his wife Jenny at Swanbridge, and noted the fine old furniture they had, including “the suite we sold them at Cogan Hall many years ago”. Fred and Nellie went by bus to visit another brother, George, and his wife Marie; on the way, they “went through Cardiff and saw many familiar spots including the old Cardiff Castle, Canton Bridge and all the lovely old places in Llandaff. We arrived at Many Trees just before dinner and how well George and Marie look, also John who is a perfect little

gentleman<sup>44</sup>...the dear old church [Caerau] is still there, but the old homestead just a ruin. We stood at the graves of our dear ones and remembered our childhood days...Dad and I walked down the old path over the hill and down to the village even remembering the very steps (stone) the older boys had placed many years ago...picked out a few old houses including my old home, then on down 'Watery Lane'... all seems a dream still."

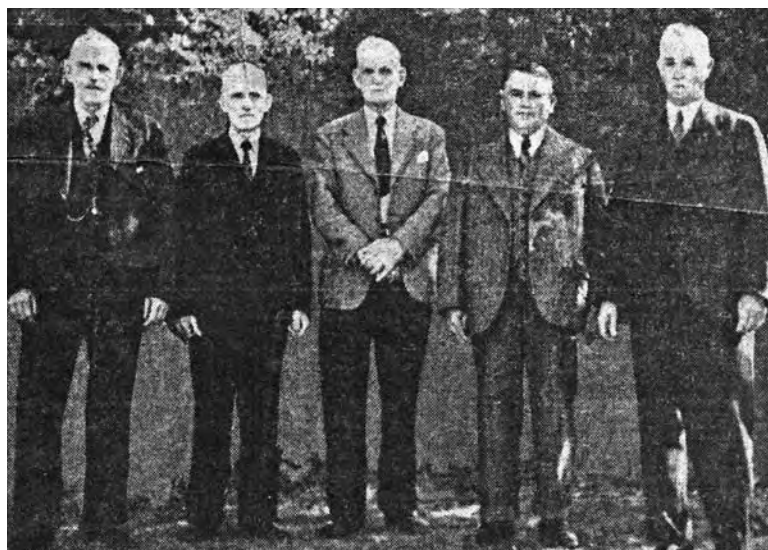
Fred and Nellie took a ViewMaster<sup>TM45</sup> and several reels showing the prairies and the Rocky Mountains, and other views of Canada. They took the ViewMaster<sup>TM</sup> everywhere, and found that "they are all interested in the ViewMaster<sup>TM</sup> and the snaps [photographs]". Fred and Nellie took the bus to Treherbert, up in the Welsh coal-mining valleys, to visit Fred's sister Alice and her husband George. Another day, they went to Trowbridge to visit another sister, Het, and her husband Tom Pursey. They went to Edinburgh and stayed with Will Dryborough, whose wife Blanche (Fred's sister) had died some time previously – Will and his sister Aggie were "impressed by Win's [Fred and Nellie's youngest daughter] likeness to Blanche; Will says he would think she was her twin".

On Wednesday, June 1st they went to Barry, to visit Milly (a niece) and to see All Saints Church, where they'd celebrated Holy Communion on their last Sunday before leaving Wales in 1927.

All through the war years, and for a long time afterwards, Nellie had sent 'care packages' of butter and jam and canned chicken and other foodstuffs to the family in Wales. Now, in 1949, the couple who was so used to plenty of food faced rationing. Each week, they were allowed "four eggs, bacon, cheese, butter, lard and margarine. The meat ration for the week is four small chops." Fred bought his first English tobacco at 4/2 ½ [4 shillings, 2 ½ pence or about \$1.00] per ounce and swore he would burn his pipe if he had to continue paying that much for tobacco (he actually didn't stop smoking until many years later). Visitors were able to get tourist-issue petrol [gasoline] coupons – Fred and Nellie got coupons for 12 gallons of petrol, enough for a drive to Tintern Abbey, northeast of Cardiff, with Fred's brother George.



*Fred and Nellie in Barry, South Wales, July 1949.*



*The five Thurston brothers, together for the first time in 35 years (July 1949).*

Thursday, July 28 – “the day of all days I think” – all the uncles arrived and had their photos taken in the garden – the first time they had been together for about 35 years.

I wonder why the brothers had not congregated for that long? Thirty-five years previously would mean their last time together was thirteen years before Fred and Nellie emigrated. And yet, they all lived within a fairly small geographic area. I can’t imagine that the brothers were unable to make time to visit one another, not for that many years. Another mystery, perhaps a tale of family tensions, perhaps they simply hadn’t considered visiting together important.

By August 2, Fred and Nellie were set to return home. They travelled by train to Southampton, stayed overnight in the hotel – where they finally received the family’s gift of a brass cross for St. Mary’s, Irma (its completion had been delayed for who knows what reason?). They boarded the *Aquitania* the next day, where they again were housed in separate, ten-person staterooms<sup>46</sup>. They docked in Halifax five days later, transferred to the train, retraced their path across the country with a stop in Ontario to visit Mary and Len and their families, and on Wednesday, August 24th “We awoke early this morning and realized we are back in ‘God’s own country’ again as we see the grainfields all cut and some threshing is being done...everything is fresh and green.”

Ted and Molly and children, Ron and Ivor met them at the train in Irma at 3:45 a.m., took them home for breakfast with Olive, Win, Leo and Joyce and Florence. “Everyone talking at once and such a lovely breakfast awaiting us and did Dad and I enjoy the home-made bread? So ends one of the happiest holidays we ever had in our lives and what a lot of memories we will always have of it all.”

I can only imagine how difficult, and how easy, it must have been for them to leave their extended family, the familiar places, and the old customs, and return across the ocean to their own loved ones and the country where land was owned by the men and women who worked it. Family webs spun on both sides of the ocean, each with individual but interwoven silks, invisible connection between continents, aging

silken threads, aging people. Which of the Welsh relatives would still be alive when Fred and Nellie returned? Which of the Canadian Thurstons would attempt to keep the connections alive? We grandchildren didn't understand any of those conflicted emotions. No-one talked with us about their feelings.

And yet...the silken threads of the family web remained strong.



No Corner Boys Here Volume 1 Chapter Six by [Jean Crozier](#)  
is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No  
Derivative Works 2.5 Canada License](#).

Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at  
<http://awmp.athabascau.ca/contact/>