

"What a lovely cottage." Mom exclaimed as she parked the pick-up in front of a small white two- room house with a porch, which was nestled in forest that still filled the schoolyard. In mid - August Mom and I went to "look the situation over" to see what was needed to settle me into my first home.

A sturdy board sidewalk joined the dirt road to the stoop at the porch. I couldn't help compare this rare lumber gem with the mud and ancient log house where I had spent my early childhood which was a mere ten miles down the road in this fertile valley that skirted the mighty Peace River. Unlike our lumber door with a latch, this "bought door" had a doorknob with my first ever house key.

Inside the porch of this "well appointed" house was a counter top on which stood a metal water pail, a beige enamel washbasin and dishpan. Below this counter was the slop pail into which both the dirty wash water and dishwater were emptied and dumped behind the house-just like the kitchen sink. Next to the slop pail was a gallon of coal oil that fueled my little lamp for the whole year. On the opposite wall was a row of modern screw type coat hangers instead of the sturdy long spikes (nails) in our log home.

Our farmhouse walls were plastered with mud mixed with straw and horse dung then painted with lime during house cleaning in the spring and fall. These walls were covered with rarely used gyprock, then painted with white kalsomine, which we called water paint.

Along with the usual oilcloth- covered wooden table and two wooden chairs was a surprisingly comfortable chesterfield whose broken springs were replaced with a sturdy platform. Mom opened the stylish white curtains with its pretty pink roses of the well- built cupboard or hutch. "Look, it has everything from pots to silverware," Mom gleefully revealed.

This stove was half the size of Mom's McClary stove at the farm. A large aluminum teakettle replaced the water heating reservoir of her model. The yard- square wood box insured an ample supply of dry wood. It had a real brick chimney while most log homes used stovepipes.

The unusual half brick chimney was placed on a well- crafted platform where wood and brick met at eye level. Only the well- established farmers could afford the fire protection of brick while most new homesteaders still used the more hazardous metal stove pipes.

Along with the chest of drawers and a double bed in the second room was the "must have" night table made of two wooden orange crates covered with ---yes, white curtains with pretty pink flowers. This treasure was probably left by the young daughters of Mrs. Smythe -the previous teacher.

Beside the half chimney was an often- dangerous box heater. "Watch the fires," Mom warned as she threw a worried look at that monster.

"It has everything except the linen and the bedding." Mom declared as we enthusiastically measured all five windows.

With the rain barrel full of water and some ice blocks under the sawdust in the icehouse, I knew that my water supply was assured until the arrival of the winter snow.

Mom called this a cottage: but I knew it was a palace!

Later in a fully loaded pick- up, Mom came to "settle me in". We lit the fire in that small McClary stove, hung up all the white curtains with the large pink roses made from the goods (fabric) that she had ordered from the Eaton's catalog. We unloaded the grub box with groceries that ranged from Nabob coffee, dried apples, prunes and raisins to many cans of canned pork called Prem. Suddenly we smelt the most delicious fresh roasted meat. We were puzzled. "I think the fire in the chimney not only burned the old leaves and junk but also roasted some baby mice," Mom surmised. With no cellar, Mom couldn't share her own cellar full of fresh

potatoes, carrots and beets. Instead, on weekend visits, she loaded me with sealers of wonderful stews and soups along with fresh bread and jams. These ample supplies were often enriched with sealers of fresh milk, cream and butter along with moose stews that were secretly placed on the front steps of my teacherage.

Most of the married women did live in the teacherages, while many young teachers boarded with a local family for fifty dollars. I paid ten dollars rent for the teacherage instead of half my monthly wages to board with a nearby family. I knew that I was living in the lap of luxury and I loved it!

That fall, while hitching the forty- mile ride home to Rycroft for the weekend, I visited with Charlie, a bachelor, who was one of the many first- world- war British vets homesteading in the area. "So you're living all by yourself in the teacherage," he commented. Then he continued, "You know I live alone and spend most of the winter on the trap lines. The one thing I learned when you are alone is that only thing to fear is your own imagination."

In the following months I settled into a comfortable routine of correcting books and lesson planning in school until it was dark. I then gathered my books and walked the few steps to my teacherage. I lit the coal oil lamp and stoked up the fire in the kitchen stove. In the bedroom I built a big fire in the little box stove. This oval heater looked like an oversized five- gallon tin pail. It was a quick but dangerous way of heating a room. Most of the local homesteaders used this practical wood burning stove. It was easy to start a fire but if it got red like an electric stove element it could spread up the tin pipes and start a fire on the black soot that coated the tin pipes, which could set the wooden shingles on fire. An extra danger was that a Chinook wind could suddenly whip the hot ashes into a flaming inferno in heater and pipes.

The homesteader's greatest fear was a house fire in the dead of winter. The thought of running to a distant neighbor's home in scant clothing spurred both

young and old to always be extra careful with fires. Mom reasoned that at least our mud and log house would take longer to burn while this fragile lumber house could burn like a tinderbox. Her worries were based on years of experience managing the intricacies of that dangerous heat source. My mother's warning "never put any wood in the box stove after seven" echoed in my head as I built the big fire to warm up the bedroom, then let the ashes cool down by seven. In the meantime a round log kept a slow fire in the safer kitchen stove with its thick firebox kept the place comfortably warm long into the night.

From my homestead years I had learned how to make kindling by shaving off slivers from the sharp edge of a block of wood with the butcher knife. These shavings along with the finely split blocks of wood and crumpled paper were a quick way to start the morning fire in a very cold house. A box of two- inch wooden Eddy matches was always kept in a metal holder on the wall "so a mouse would not chew it and cause a fire" Mom warned.

The Marconi radio, with a battery the size of a case of a dozen bottles of beer, provided the highlight of the evening. From the CFGP radio station (Grande Prairie) Jack Soars announced the news, played a variety of good music and aired such American programs as Fibber McGee and Molly. But on cold clear crisp nights Perry Como and Bing Crosby came crooning from the KING Seattle radio station, while lonely cowboys yodeled from Delreo, Texas.

Every Friday afternoon the older grade seven and eight girls stoked up my kitchen stove to make class treats of popcorn or hot chocolate. However, when fresh snow had fallen, they made either chocolate or brown sugar fudge which we drizzled on the snow just like the "sugaring off" parties in Quebec that we read about in our readers. But the best of the spring Friday afternoon treats was ice-cream. The older girls brought cream and eggs to mix with the sugar and coarse salt that was in my cupboard.

The big boys carried ice from the icehouse while the "little kids" took turns endlessly churning this delicious treat.

In early January storm after endless storm blew in so that we were in the grip of a month long "coldest winter in living memory". As it became colder I steeled myself with Charlie's advice that-- the only thing to fear was my own imagination. That wisdom calmed my rising fears when the coyotes howled in the cold silent forest that reached to the Arctic. During the deadly hush of those long winter nights I was convinced that there was no living being on the face of this earth. Then out of the stillness the old owl called down from the tall tree by my bedroom window, "tawoo, tawoo" -then I knew that all was well. Soon I put on my thick wool hand knitted socks, my brother's red Montreal Canadians hockey toque, rolled jelly roll fashion into Mom's thickest wool quilt and covered my head with the wild duck feather pillow and went into a deep peaceful sleep.

In the freezing morning the water in the teakettle and washbasin were blocks of ice, hoar frost covered the windows and the long thick icicle that cascaded down between the cracks in the gyprock just kept getting bigger. Our log home got cold but I don't remember ice in the water pail.

As the temperature plunged during that brutal month, fewer parents risked sending their children to school. However a few hardy students who lived within a half- mile radius managed to come. Wearing our coats and mitts we huddled around roaring fire in the large school stove but were unable to warm up. Quickly we moved into my warmer teacherage where the children sat on blocks of wood and used their laps as desks. I remembered that while at University, Dr. Lazerte livened up his math class with pearls of wisdom. He often emphasized that "everyday the students made a great effort to come to school and you as a teacher must make every day worth it." This advice was severely tested in the minus fifty below zero weather. Fears of the deepening cold increased when Jack Soars of the Grande Prairie radio station sadly announced that a young teacher was found slumped at the door of her burned out teacherage. I trudged the mile in the deep snow and cold to the Blueberry Mountain store to phone my frantic mother. "Please be

careful of the fire," she begged and we both wept. Every morning Jack Soars told us that the temperature hovered around minus fifty.

The Chinook melted the cold, winter changed to spring and life in my teacherage was comfortable. I discovered that I enjoyed being alone after a lifetime of four siblings followed by the last winter's experience of living with a hundred and fifty girls at Pembina Hall, University of Alberta.

During the picnic on the last day of school my teacherage was once again a beehive of activity. Mothers put their tired babies to sleep on my bed. They made coffee on my trusty stove, squeezed lemons and oranges for gallons of lemonade and mixed large pots of ice cream filling. The mothers arranged beautiful plates of delicious sandwiches, colorful decorated cakes and fancy cookies. Meanwhile every wooden hand cranked ice-cream maker in the district was pressed into service so that everyone could have all the ice-cream they could possibly eat. What a celebration.

It was now time to say farewell as parents expressed their appreciation while my guardian bachelors voiced their respect. Old Charlie proudly shook my hand and then declared "You are the first single teacher to make it through the winter in that teacherage since it was built twenty years ago." I stood tall as he honored me with this respectful complement.

Yes Charlie, in that teacherage I truly learnt to fear only my imagination. But best of all I learned to live with myself!

HALF A CENTURY LATER

After reading the above story to my Scona Seniors writers group, many were shocked about the tragic death of the young teacher. "Who was she? - they asked. I admitted that I was haunted by her death as I detailed the dangers of those airtight heaters and also wondered who she was. After class Ruth Grebs said she remembered that story and that she may be able to find more information. Later I

phoned Maureen Gerlach in St. Albert who was "snowbirding" in Palm Springs, California, sister of the deceased young teacher. My first question was "What did you heat your home with?" "Coal", she replied. Then I suspected that it was her unfamiliarity with the airtight heater that must have caused her sister Margaret's death. Margaret Courtney was the third in a family of four children who grew up in nearby Duffield, then went to high school in Stoney Plain. Tearfully her sister Maureen arranged for me to talk to her brother Jim in Lacombe because he was at the scene.

Margaret's mother suggested that she might try being a correspondence supervisor. Before Christmas she substituted in Eaglesham. In January she went to Grovedale which was south of Grand Prairie near the Wapiti River.

Working in a lumber mill in nearby Teepee Creek, both brothers came to visit their sister in her teacherage only a couple days before the tragedy. Her brother Jim's description of the teacherage, complete with the airtight heater, matched my long ago "palace". Margaret assured her brothers that she would not light that heater that was so close to her bed. "But of course she must have lit it up when it got so cold" surmised her brother.

Jim still marvels how quickly the Forest Ranger was able to find them. On the road he met an International Panel (hearse) driven by the compassionate Frank Oliver along with an RCMP officer and highly respected Stan Hambly who was inspector of schools for the district of Grande Prairie. They asked Jim to come into Grande Prairie to identify his sister. "She was not burned but her lovely hair was singed" he managed to utter. Margaret's brother Jim told me the story as follows: That extremely cold morning, using his horse and sleigh, a father brought his children to class but the school was cold and he saw water dripping from the eaves troughs of the teacherage. When the parent found the door locked he broke through the bedroom window, saw no one, but the floor under the airtight heater was smoldering and burning. So he grabbed some clothing and bedding and quickly climbed out the window. In the meantime a nearby neighbor brought his children. "She's not in there," declared the father holding the clothing. "She has to be in there -Margaret was at our place last night and went home." So both men

"crashed in the door" to find nineteen year old Margaret collapsed at the door. Those men managed to dash in and brought her brother Jim's trunk and "most of her belongings" before it went up in flames and "burned like hell." She died January 13, 1953 (confirmed by Jim's funeral announcement).

Brothers Jim and John had to accompany the coffin on the NAR train to Edmonton. The train fare in the 'sleeping car" cost twelve dollars each. Margaret Courtney is buried in the Duffield cemetery surrounded by her family and friends. Neither Maureen nor Jim could bear to write about their sister. I will send this story to her still grieving family to honor a fellow teacher.



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