

Introduction to Aunt Lena's Story - by Myrna Reeves

It wasn't unusual for my phone to ring on September 21, my birthday, to hear my Aunt Lena's voice. Not one to waste words, her message always started the same. "I remember the day you were born like it was yesterday, it was a beautiful fall and we finished harvesting the day before your mother went into labor".

My Aunt Lena McCullough Myhre came out to Alberta in August, 1936 shortly after her twenty-first birthday to help my mother handle the arrival of me, her first child, and to help care for my ailing grandmother. Since finishing school she had worked as a hired girl near her home in Manitoba, close to her family and available to assist her own mother when necessary. Aunt Lena was the third daughter after my father, the oldest. The depression had hit that part of Manitoba hard and my father had moved to Alberta in 1932. He had been able to find work as a farm laborer, and though the first winter he had worked for room and board only, his experiences here had lead him to encourage his brothers and sisters to make the move as well. Aunt Lena was the first.

Aunt Lena and my mother formed a close relationship which continues to this day, so she was never far away. They continued to go on berry picking adventures as elderly ladies. She was the interesting person in my life as a child. I remember coming home from school one day to find a table full of pies in the basement. She had come to help my mother with harvesting, and the threshers had pie for dessert. Years later, her freezer was always stocked with pies in case of company for lunch, which was always a full meal.

After her marriage in 1941 she lived on the South Hill in Red Deer, it was one row of houses and a corner store on the west side of the gravel highway, a farmer's field on the east side. The corner store grew as Red Deer grew and I think Aunt Lena shopped at that store until the day she started getting Meals on Wheels. Similarly the friends she made in 1941 have remained her friends all their lives. She was the 'go-to' person for information about her extended family, and she was always interested in the activities of the children and grandchildren of all her siblings, of which there are many.

The family never owned a car, but Aunt Lena liked going places. It was quite an adventure for her to travel to Australia once her daughter Sonja settled there. And it is a lot of fun for the rest of us to hear the adventures of cooking an Alberta Christmas dinner at +30 C, and making pies without Alberta wheat flour. Her observations about her day to day adventures

and her enjoyment of life are an important part of who she is. I am so pleased to introduce the story of her early life as she has told it to my cousin Sonja, mostly over the telephone, I'm sure.

Woman's Work is Never Done

Monday is wash day

Tuesday, the day to iron

Wednesday, to mend and sew.

Thursday, to churn the cream and go to town,

Friday, to clean the house and change the beds.

Saturday is time to bake for the week

and Sunday is to rest.

The routine for generations of farm women was so set that there was a song about it. Some variations of the song even included what was served for dinner that day. Monday was soup. The housewife of the thirties (she didn't become a homemaker until much later), was responsible for keeping her house clean, caring for her children and preparing three substantial meals, breakfast, dinner and supper for her family every day. In addition to her immediate family there may have been older family members requiring care and a hired man that helped with the farm work.

She was also responsible for planting and harvesting a large garden, looking after the chickens, turkeys and geese, helping to milk the cows, and churning the cream into butter to sell to the store to pay for her groceries. She coped with the seasonal responsibilities of a mixed farm by nursing orphan lambs, setting the hens, feeding the threshers and spring cleaning her house. Her work was physically taxing as she did it without electricity, without modern conveniences and often without help.

She sewed the layette for her babies, dresses for herself and her daughters, shirts for her husband and her sons, the family's underwear and night attire. She might have had a treadle sewing machine, but if not she did it by hand. She knitted the family socks, winter hats and mitts, carded the wool for the family quilts and made those quilts from patches of fabric from worn out clothing. She shopped from the Eaton's catalogue, a wonderful convenience, for shoes, overalls and winter underwear, coats and for her fabric. She bought flour and sugar in

cotton sacks that could be bleached and dyed to make tea towels, underwear or other small items.

She carried out her social responsibilities by entertaining, among other things, the Ladies' Aid from her church. This entailed a pot luck dinner for whole families from all over the district prior to the meeting. Her self-esteem was tied to the quality of the meals served, the whiteness of her linen, the length of her stitches, the cleanliness of her house and the helpfulness and manners of her children.

She had learned her job from her mother and taught it to her daughters, and as they grew they could help take over and help with the many household tasks. The farm wife was not expected to work out of her home, in fact both she and her husband would have been judged harshly if that became necessary. It was acceptable in some homes, for her daughters, once they had finished school, and if they were not needed at home to go out into the community and work for a wage for another family. These jobs were usually temporary, short term and confined to busier times of the year. The 'hired girl' remained near to her own district so she could go home between jobs. She was employed in this way only until she was married.

The hired girl was hired help who performed the tasks that were delegated to her. If she was a good cook she prepared meals, did the family's baking and made the bread. Even so, she was expected to assist with or perform all the other tasks required by the housewife, willingly, competently and happily. If she failed to measure up to expectations, she was quickly 'let go' so the successful 'hired girl' was popular and rarely had to look for work. Her status also gave her some control over her working conditions and she could move if it was necessary.

The end of the thirties and World War II changed how young women could earn their living, and home help became an option fewer and fewer chose. The hired girl of the forties was more likely to be a schoolgirl who helped out briefly between school terms and on Saturday, than a young woman ready and waiting for marriage. Electricity alone, when introduced into the farm environment began to lighten the load of the housewife. The rituals of earlier generations that allowed the housewife to get through her tasks each day were no longer necessary and now meant the eventual end to the job of her helper, the 'hired girl'.