

ELLA'S STORY

Yorkshire, England

I was the third child of seven born to Violet Eva Roberts (née Harrison) and John Edmund Roberts. My name is Ella, just Ella; I was given no other name. I was born Jan.19, 1902. My husband, Maurice, was the eldest son of three born to Florence Maud Hirst (née Sykes) and Ernest Edmund Hirst, otherwise known as the Major. His name was Maurice Thomson. His birthday was November 1, 1899.

The Roberts family owned a brass foundry but after the first World War the British economy slumped and John Edmund (Dad was always known as John Eddy) sold the business, remaining on the staff as the manager. The Hirsts were wool merchants and Maurice, as the eldest, was expected to take over the family enterprise. The wool business was brisk during World War I with the British Army fitted out in wool uniforms. The Major could always sell his wool at a good price, some of it imported from Australia. However, when the Armistice was declared the Hirst firm had a boatload of wool in the harbour in Liverpool. It had been paid for but he couldn't sell it and subsequently went bankrupt, never to work again. Florence was an heiress of sorts and they lived on her income, traveling round the world by ship twice to visit their sons. But I am getting ahead of myself. So, with no business to take over and a deep post-war depression in England and Europe, Maurice took whatever job he could find. At one point, when we were courting, perhaps we were already engaged, perhaps we were even

married, I really can't remember, he worked at the Roberts Foundry for awhile.

By 1923, when I was 21, Maurice and I were going out together, seriously enough that his parents took us on seaside holidays to Filey and Whitby, on the Yorkshire coast of the North Sea.



Maurice

1923



We were engaged for a long time, mostly because we didn't have any money and Maurice's prospects were not good. But finally, on June 1, 1927, we married at Highfield Chapel in Huddersfield and honeymooned on the Isle of Man. Everyone in both our families was there.



Back row, from L to R:
Grandpa and Granny Harrison, the minister's wife, Kathleen Roberts(née Junk), Douglas Roberts, the minister
3rd row:
The Major, Violet Roberts, John Eddy, Mary Bedforth(née Roberts), Gilbert Bedforth
2nd row:

Tony Roberts, Alfred Hirst, Maud Hirst, Geoff Hirst, Francis Roberts

1st row:

Claire Roberts, Maurice, Ella, Delia Roberts

Times have certainly changed. Letter writing was a common activity and while we were on our honeymoon, we received letters from my parents and from Maurice's mother, just chatting about what happened after we left the wedding party, and the next day when friends and relatives came to bring gifts and see the ones we already had. Names of the people who dropped in and any gifts that were brought were recorded in a book which they gave to us when we got home. We were only gone for a two weeks, but we received and sent several short letters.

We lived with the elder Hirsts at their home, West Croft, for a time and then made the decision to emigrate to Canada. I was keen on the idea but it took some persuading to get Maurice to agree. There were posters all over England encouraging Englishmen to come to Canada to farm.



Probably some of Maurice's reluctance was due to the fact that he knew nothing about farming, not in England and certainly not in Canada. In any case farming in the Canadian west would be nothing like farming in England, but we didn't know that then. Maurice had served in the Royal Air Force for nearly two years during WW1. He joined in May, 1918, and was in Egypt learning to fly when the Armistice was signed in November. He was discharged in August 1920. Under the terms of the Empire Settlement Act, he and I were entitled to assisted passage to Canada which meant we paid about 25 pounds each. To encourage immigration to farms in the west, the Canadian Government allowed immigrants to opt to stay with an established farmer for a year to learn the ropes before moving onto their own place. Since we were city folk and had never farmed, we signed up. We were to spend a year with the Newsham family, Jackson, Mary and their four grown sons, in Alberta, west of Innisfail, in the District of Oklahoma. Our own land was nearby.

The journey to Alberta

We sailed from Liverpool on the S.S Letitia on November 3rd, 1928, with all our wedding presents packed in trunks and boxes to bring to our new life: monogrammed silver cutlery, separate fish knives and forks, silver bowls, crystal and a 68 piece set of china, complete with settings for 12 and all the serving dishes and platters. There were sheets, wool blankets and linens, with cutwork embroidery and cloth labels, lovingly sewn by me in preparation for my marriage. The labels said Ella Hirst in fancy red script. We packed velvet curtains and glassware, including wine, champagne and sherry glasses. How could I know how

incongruous some of it would be in our life as prairie farmers?



We arrived in Quebec City on Nov. 11th.



We were lucky that November. The Atlantic crossing was smooth, and we were good sailors. And the adrenalin was running high as we left our familiar life behind to go adventuring. We

never noticed the occasional rough sea!

We disembarked in Montreal. There, because of his father's connections, Maurice had an opportunity to join a fabrics firm. He declined. He'd given his word and he subscribed to the popular saying, "An Englishman is only as good as his word". Over the next decade we wondered more than once if that had been a good decision, but Maurice said, much later in our lives, that it was "better to be on the farm during the Great Depression than it was to be among the unemployed in Montreal. There was always something to eat on the farm". He was right.

In Montreal we boarded the train for the four to five day trip to Alberta. We were unbelieving as the vast unpopulated countryside rolled endlessly by day after day after day, with very occasional towns and a city or two rolling into view. Then, even the cities were small, hardly cities by English standards and they looked very different from the well-established Yorkshire towns we'd left behind, with their stone houses and shops, street lamps and traffic.

Sometimes we looked out the windows with sinking hearts. It looked pretty bleak and forbidding in Canada in winter across Northern Ontario and the prairies. And it was cold! But we were young and optimistic and together so..... we had little choice but to carry on, in British, stiff-upper-lip fashion.

Imagine the culture shock. Both of us brought up in class-conscious England on the sunny side of poverty, living in large houses with all the amenities, including servants. Maurice and his brothers had a nanny when they were small children and he and his brothers went away

to a private boarding school at thirteen. My sisters and I had to do some chores in our childhood home; assisting the maid with dusting, for example, but no real housework. Imagine the two of us, Maurice and me, getting off the train in Innisfail and being taken, by horse and wagon, over snow-covered unpaved roads, to the Newsham house where there was no electricity, no indoor plumbing, no running water, no telephone. In November!

The early years

The experience at the Newshams was disastrous. We were treated like the hired help, the adult sons were rude and unfriendly and the woman of the house was overworked and unpleasant. We both worked hard at menial tasks with not much guidance and absolutely no TLC..... none. It was not a happy time and a very bad beginning to our life in Canada.

In 1929, the Major and Mrs. Hirst, whom I called Poppie and Moppie, came for a visit. They didn't come to the farm, maybe because the house wasn't built or maybe because we were still with the Newshams. Something else I can't remember. In any case, they stayed at the Macdonald Hotel in Edmonton and we joined them there.



What a treat that was for us rookie farmers. At dinner in the hotel, the Major asked for the wine list. When told that there wasn't one because there was prohibition in Alberta. The Major was horrified and wondered what kind of barbarian country his son had emigrated to!

On the Terrace of the Macdonald
Hotel, Edmonton - 1929



Robert and Mary Gibb were friends of my in-laws. Robert was one of the City Commissioners. Sometime in those early years, Maurice suffered from sciatica and we came to Edmonton where he was treated at the Royal Alex Hospital. After he recovered Mr. Gibb gave him a job with the city, labouring on a city road crew. Wielding a pick and shovel he helped build the road that comes down the hill from the Legislative Building to the Royal Glenora Club. He refused the offer of a permanent job, once again because he'd given his word to fulfill the

terms of the Empire Settlement Act and chose to keep it so we returned to the farm. I think he should have taken that job. An intelligent man with a connection to the City Commissioner might have done well in the city administration. But there he was with that “Englishman's word” again!

In 1929-30 we built a house on our 160 acre homestead. Imagine us having 160 acres of land! It was a very small house, about 500 square feet, one all-purpose room and one bedroom.



A lean-to was added later with a second bedroom. It was frame construction with a rounded garage roof and no insulation! Heat was provided by a big wood-burning cook stove and a pot bellied heater on the other side of the room. Like everyone else, we had no electricity or phone, no running water, an outdoor privy and Innisfail, twelve miles away, was the nearest town.

Some things worked out and a lot of things didn't!

Francis Michael (called Michael, but he also became known as Chubby) was born on December 17, 1931. Sadly, I had given birth earlier to a stillborn daughter whom we had called Dorothy. Because of that tragedy, the second baby was born by C-section, performed by a doctor who had never done one before! I was in hospital a month, mostly in bed, before I was allowed to go home. Then I was sent back to the farm to cope with everything, as before, plus a baby. And there were no instructions about feeding or baby care. "Oh, just get on with it!" accompanied the assumption that women instinctively knew how to look after a newborn.



In 1950, Mike was working as an insurance adjuster trainee for Earl Bragg. One day on the way home from work, Earl asked him if he was born in the Innisfail hospital. When Mike said "yes", Earl went on to say it had been one tough birth which had caused the doctor, medical staff, mother and baby a lot of stress; it was definitely a touch and go situation. Asked how he knew all this, Earl said his wife was the Head Operating Room nurse and she recalled my name and the difficulty they'd all had bringing the baby boy into the world successfully.

In 1932, my mother came to visit.



Granny Roberts with Michael

She had been widowed not long after we left England. Dad had gone out to post a letter to me when he had a heart attack and died instantly. Mother came intending to help me with the baby but it didn't work out that way, I think she had, what we now call a nervous breakdown, but in our family, "we don't talk about things like that", so I don't remember exactly what was said. Perhaps just that she was poorly. It wasn't surprising. I'm sure she was very upset that we were living in such primitive conditions. She had to be taken to Calgary to stay with friends until my sister, Claire, came from England to take her back to the safety and gentility of England.



Claire, Granny Roberts, Ella
Claire is holding Michael



Claire, Ella, Michael

We never saw each other again. We wrote to each other faithfully, if not every week, nearly

every week, until she died in 1946. Of course, it took about 3 weeks then for a letter to get from Canada to England and vice versa. After Mother died, my sister, Claire, picked up where she left off, and wrote frequently to keep us abreast of family goings-on. It was amazing, after the war, Claire and I could each send and receive an airgraph (those one page blue airmail letters) within a week. Other family members on both sides of the family wrote also but those regular letters from mother and Claire were a gift. In 1965, when Maurice and I visited England for the first time in 37 years, we knew exactly what was going on in our families because of the letters. We fitted right back in. I'm sorry now that I didn't keep any of them.

At about the same time we emigrated to Canada, Alfred, Maurice's brother, went to Australia intending to make it his home. He met Ann on board ship and married her soon after. They also came to us in 1932 with the idea that the brothers would farm together and help each other out. We built a nice little house in the meadow by the slough for them.



Maurice, Michael, Ella, Granny Roberts
standing in front of the little house
built for Freddy and Anne

Maurice and Alfred used to entertain at gatherings of the farm families with songs and skits

they wrote together. In this one, the attitudes of we farmers, and especially my Maurice, come through loud and clear in the lyrics, sung to the tune of “Who Killed Cock Robin?”

Who robs the farmer

I said the Elevator Man

I rob the farmer all I can

I rob the farmer

I rob him with the dockage, and I rob him with the weight

I rob him with the shrinkage and I rob him with the grading

In all the ways I can, I rob the farmer

Who robs the farmer

I said the packer

I'm no blooming slacker

I rob the farmer

I never cease to wonder at the profits I am making

I buy em cheap as butcher hogs and sell em out as bacon

And in all the ways I can I sure rob the farmer

Who robs the farmer?

I said the implement maker

There's nobody wide awaker

I rob the farmer

I sell him stuff at a fancy price and take his notes and then

I pay my banker 5% and charge the farmer 10

And in all ways I can I rob the farmer

Who robs the farmer?

I said the weather

Taking it all together

*I rob the farmer
I drown him out or dry him out and freeze him out as well
And then I add a hailstorm just to make his life a hell
I show the world how to rob the farmer*

Who robs the farmer?

*I said a million other pests
I take all that he invests
I rob the farmer
The cutworm and the grasshopper, the caterpillar slick
They all feed on a farmer's wheat and make his garden sick
So a man must be mad who becomes a farmer*

Who robs the farmer?

*I said the great RB
Many farmers vote for me
But I rob the farmer
I put a tax on everything the farmer wants to buy
And when the price goes boosting up I wink the other eye
So you sure must agree that I rob the farmer*

Repeat chorus:

*Now who is it does all the sighin' and a-sobbin'
when he hears of the profits made by those who do the robbin'
It's the guy that they all love so much
the Farmer*

It was such a delight to see Maurice and Alfred rehearsing and then to watch the reaction of
and listen to the laughter of the folks in the audience. They enjoyed it so much. The skits were

mostly about English lords, servants and crooks or entertainers, the humour was pretty plain and the accents, proper English for the lords and broad Yorkshire for the rest. There was one where one fellow challenges the other to use a metaphor in a sentence. After much parrying back and forth, he says with some pride and in his best Yorkshire accent, "I'm going down the street and I see a nice looking lady on the other side who looks sort of lovely. I go up, I raise me 'at and I says, hello dearie, haven't we met 'afore?"

1932 was a busy year! The Major and Maud visited while Alfred and Anne were here and this time they did come to the farm.



Front: Ella and the Major
Back: Maurice and Alfred





After Poppie and Moppie left, Ann rarely left the house. She was very unpleasant. Maybe she hated the weather. Perhaps she was homesick for Australia. Maybe she was jealous of the easy relationship between me and Alfred. I don't think she wanted to be a farmer's wife. She found Michael amusing and I saw her smile more around him than at any other time.

She had relatives near Alix and would sometimes disappear for weeks visiting them. The three of us, Maurice, Alfred and I, had some happy times but one day the pair of them just packed up and left without a word, a note or anything. They went back to Australia. It created a huge breach between the brothers which was only mended in the 1960s when they came to visit us in Edmonton. Maurice was very reluctant to have them come and although he was pleasant enough, he never really forgave Anne for the way she treated me back on the farm.

My brother, Francis, came to Canada too in the early thirties. He worked out of Calgary, driving a truck for Canada Dry or maybe it was Coca-Cola. When one of my children asked

why I didn't have an engagement ring, I told them, "I gave it to my brother, Francis, to pawn so he could pay his passage back to England. He had to leave in a big hurry." I've never been sure if he stole money from his employer or if he got a woman pregnant but someone was after him and he had to get out of the country fast. He never paid me back. He never sent a replacement ring. Nothing. Imagine! In the 1960s when Maurice was working for the Department of Veterans' Affairs in downtown Edmonton, he prowled the pawn shops at lunch time looking for a ring like the one he'd given me many years before. And one day he was successful. It wasn't a replica, of course, but it was similar and I was delighted. It was a very romantic gift from my usually undemonstrative husband.

When Michael was just a toddler, a Russian prince, working as a hired hand, was so taken with him that when he was leaving he offered us \$500 for him.



We declined!

Farm life

1935 was a banner year! On February 19, Mary Elaine (called Elaine, and also called Lainey) was born, also by c-section. That meant the doctor had now done two c-sections!



AND we got the first crystal radio set in the district. Saturday nights were wonderful. The house was filled to overflowing with neighbour men come to listen to Foster Hewitt broadcast the hockey games from the gondola at Toronto's Maple Leaf Gardens. Foster Hewitt's, "He shoots, he scores!!" is seared in my brain. I prepared "lunch" for everyone and served it when the game was over. Lunch is a prairie euphemism for a huge plate of sandwiches, as well as cake and coffee with fresh cream. The crystal set also brought us music and news which lightened our lives and kept us connected to the world. Saturday Afternoon at the Opera was a favourite of mine. Elaine used to sing herself to sleep when she was little and to my surprise she sounded like she was singing some foreign language. I guess she picked up the sounds from those Saturday afternoons at the Opera!

Friendships developed over the crystal set, the threshing season and the school. It's no surprise that the single, female teachers became our friends, sometimes lifelong friends. They had more education than many of our neighbours and they were lonely, usually coming to Oklahoma from somewhere else. While we were there, two of them married local bachelors from the hockey crowd. We were also befriended by the jeweller in Innisfail, George Ingham

and his wife Vira. We often dropped into the store when we went into town – a nice little store with oiled floors and sparkling jewellery in the showcases. Lainey was fascinated by the jeweller's magnifying glass he'd put right on his eye to do the fine work. We'd visit at their home sometimes, and when Lainey had her tonsils out at the hospital when she was four, it was Vira who sat with her in her lap, feeding her tea and raisin toast! Toast, in spite of her sore throat.

Hockey played an important role in winter life. Besides the Saturday night hockey games on the radio at our house, we used to watch a local team play those from other districts on a makeshift river rink. The boards were made of snow piled along the edges of the ice surface. Occasionally, Maurice would go, with a neighbour, to Drumheller, sixty-six miles away, to watch the Drumheller Miners play. Five Bentley brothers played on that team and three of them went on to play in the National Hockey League, so it was good hockey and such a treat for Maurice.

When Michael was five or six, we ordered him a pair of skates from the hardware store in Innisfail. When Maurice took him to pick them up, they had not yet arrived. Mr. Fox, the hardware man, gave Michael a puck to temper his disappointment. After the skates arrived, we made the trip to the river rink enough times so that he learned to skate. However, we cleared a space in the yard and Michael coaxed his father many times into playing “hockey” with him out there. He'd run around stick-handling and shooting the puck at the hapless goalie, his Dad. Michael would laugh as only a child can, when his Dad pretended his shins had been cracked with the speeding puck. We used to joke that I had front row seats at Maple

Leaf Gardens west!

Much of the 160 acres was unbroken land, so the first task was to clear it ready for ploughing and seeding. Our farm became a mixed operation; grain, some cattle, pigs, chickens. We had a garden. Over the years a barn, garage and milk house were added. All rough hewn but serving the purpose.

We worked the farm with horses. There were five. King and Prince were the principal team. There was a skittish sorrel which was hard to catch. Maurice sometimes called him "Come-Here-You-SOB". Then there was Bess, a little black mare, a saddle horse. Mike will always remember Bess because he fell off her when I was trying to take his picture sitting in the saddle. Instead of being on Bess's back, he was on his own, underneath the horse, much to my dismay. Working the farm with horses meant walking behind them or riding on the plough, harrow, seed drill or binder for eight to ten hours a day eating dust, and oh.....the boredom. One has to be a certain breed of cat to get enjoyment out of that kind of work and my Maurice was not the right kind of cat.





A neighbour's story illustrates Maurice's unusual approach to farming.

"I was passing by and stopped to watch Maurice cutting some grain. He was close to finishing. A binder turns out sheaves bound with binder twine. To my horror, I saw that the crop was coming out in swaths, unbound. The swathed crop would not be able to be threshed. This waste offended my Scottish nature and I bounded across the field yelling in my best brogue, "Maurice, Maurice, stop, stop! The binder's not turning out sheaves." When I finally got his attention, Maurice stopped the horses. I told him again that the grain was coming out in swaths, not sheaves. Maurice gave me a look that said, 'Jack, why don't you tell me something I don't know?' and replied, "Of course it's not coming out in sheaves, I'm out of binder twine!" There wasn't much of the crop left to cut and he bloody well wasn't going to shut down, get a ball of twine, thread it through the mechanism for the little bit of crop there was left to do. I could hardly

believe my ears."

Jack went on to sum it up like this:

"Farmers have to respond to nature. When it's time to pick rocks you pick rocks. When it's time to plough a field, you plough. When it's time to cut hay or grain, you cut. Your husband did things when he was good and ready and it didn't always fit with Nature's call."



Harvest time was exciting for everyone but a lot of hard work, for the men and for me. A thrashing crew of about 15 men moved into the grain fields with a tractor, threshing machine, 3 or 4 bundle racks and a fuel wagon. They worked from dawn to dusk every day till the crop was in. The crew had to be fed three times a day; huge breakfasts – mounds of eggs, potatoes, toast, jam and coffee - and suppers – great helpings of meat or chicken, more potatoes, vegetables, puddings and pies, more coffee and tea. I remember one such evening; the table groaning with food and the threshing crew tucking into it. My little girl, just getting over the whooping cough, had to leave the table because of her cough. Afterwards, she was too embarrassed to come back to the table. Imagine that. She wasn't more than four at the time! Lunch, mid morning and mid afternoon snacks were taken out to the field where they were working. Lunch was piles of sandwiches, cookies and drinks. Snacks were sandwiches and cake, lemonade and tea, and gallons of water. When they were done at our place, the whole crew would move on to the next farm. Luckily, the district women, too, moved from farm to farm to help each other. No woman could have done it alone, especially me in the first years. I didn't know the routine and my goodness, all that food! Getting together like that provided a welcome opportunity for us women to socialize and the children could play together while we worked. I was glad when the season was over though.

One evening, Maurice and a neighbour took our son out to a field of oats near the house that was to be cut the next day. It was tall and healthy. It was a great crop, the first crop on a piece of land that had been broken over a two year period with back breaking, gut wrenching labour. Trees felled; teams of horses pulling out tree stumps; picking roots and stones; breaking the ground surface with a breaking plough, probably subcontracted at a cost they could ill afford. Looking at that crop, anticipating what it would yield and looking forward to the

cash it would bring in was a high point for all three of them. Later that evening, a twenty minute hailstorm reduced that field of oats to a valueless mass of broken matted stalks. Two and a half years shot in twenty minutes. We were heartbroken! and wondered how we would manage through the year.

Before the hail



Lainey woke up terrified one night thinking she heard rocks falling on the roof. It wasn't rocks,

of course, it was hailstones, huge hailstones. With no insulation they sounded like rocks that might come right through the roof at any moment. Frightened, she came out where we were sitting, and I wrapped her in a blanket and held her tightly while we all listened and waited for the storm to pass.

At one time we had a French Canadian hired hand, idolized by Chubby. He remembers three things about him. First, he traversed hand over hand the ridge pole in the under-construction barn. Although terribly impressed, Chub was smart enough to admire him but not to try it himself. Second, Pierre could really eat. The boy thought he could beat him at that game. Pierre was served a mound of fried potatoes the size of two fists, smothered in four or five fried eggs, toast on the side and then dessert which he polished off without so much as a pause. Chub asked for the same. To his chagrin, he foundered about a third of the way through. Third, Pierre was a wizard with an axe and other building tools. He seemed to solve carpentry and mechanical problems by looking at them. He'd stare at the offending problem for awhile figuring out his strategy. Then he'd spring into action and soon the problem would be solved.

Maurice was not blessed with that talent. He had to struggle to get a rafter to sit at the proper angle or restore to running condition a motor or a piece of farm machinery. Even the most basic and simple carpentry or mechanical problem caused perspiration, increased blood pressure, huge frustration and significant cussing. It must have been tough for him, tackling such problems on a regular basis during his decade as a farmer. For the rest of his life, he would say that when he had a nightmare, he was back on the farm. Later, when we lived in the city, I would come along after Maurice had struggled with putting something together

unsuccessfully, read the directions and have the thing put together in minutes!

Housekeeping

It wasn't easy keeping house in our little farmhouse, and I, of course, tried to bring a little bit of England and the family we'd left behind, into it. We had no money to buy other dishes so used the wedding gift china and glassware we brought with us. Curtains at the windows and pictures of the family made the rough shack more homey. Later, the crystal set and then the radio had a place of honour on the shelf.



Look closely on the shelf and you'll see the picture of Maud and her three sons, a picture of Delia, my sister
and in the place of honour, the radio!

The cookstove, which burned wood, had a warming oven above the cooking surface and a water reservoir beside it. That made my life easier. The water had to be hauled from the well

in the yard, then heated on the stove in large amounts for laundry, cleaning the house, and baths but small amounts of water for cooking or washing hands could be found in the reservoir. In the hot weather when the cookstove made the house very hot, it was used as little as possible. Then we washed our hands in cold water!

I learned to bake bread, very good bread, and one of our favourite meals for the rest of our lives was boiled eggs, fresh bread and butter. To make butter, I'd put fresh milk into the separator, then I'd turn the handle round and round watching milk and cream come out two different spouts. Some of the cream would be put into the churn. Up and down, up and down, I'd pump the handle until the cream turned into butter. None of this could be accomplished in a short time. Just putting food on the table took hours. I remember Lainey used to enjoy standing on a chair by the table to watch me clean chickens and bake bread or cookies.

We had a productive vegetable garden and I picked wild raspberries, chokecherries and saskatoons, when they were in season. Raspberries were our favourite. But it was a bit scary out there in the woods picking berries by myself. Bears were not unknown in the area and I was an English city girl. Of course, the children came with me but that just made me more anxious. I never told them I was more than a mite frightened. I wonder if they knew? Then I'd preserve for days, not just the berries but fruit and vegetables, putting up sealers and sealers of food for the winter, jars and jars of jam. Talk about being hot. Some people had an outside kitchen they used in the summer, but we never got around to that so when it was time to preserve the produce, I had to fire up the stove. But saskatoons in January made it all seem worthwhile. And raspberry jam – fresh bread – mmmmm.

The chickens were all killed off in the fall and that was another job for Maurice. Once, our little girl inadvertently watched a chicken being killed and was terrified of the chicken “running around with his head chopped off” spurting blood all over the yard. I certainly understood that saying a lot better after watching the chickens being killed. And then they were preserved as well, so another round of canning would occur. By fall, it was a little cooler so the house didn't get so hot.

In winter, oh my goodness the house was cold, really cold. Neither of us wanted to get up to light the fire! Usually it was Maurice who reluctantly stepped out of bed into the frigid room. Once the fire was going the house would soon warm up but the it had to be fed all day and banked at bedtime so that it stayed warm for as long as possible during the night. Even so, it was really cold in the morning. It was important to make sure the wood pile was big enough for the winter. So chopping down trees (which we did all the time to clear the land) and splitting wood were endless year round tasks. Wood had to be brought in daily, cows had to be milked and the horses, pigs and chickens fed. Maurice did most of that, of course.

Doing laundry was a full day's work. Haul the water, heat the water, wash everything by hand with a scrubbing board – sheets, towels, dirty work clothes, everything – wring it out by hand, hang it outside, summer and winter. In winter it would be frozen in very short order and then I'd have to bring it in and let it melt and dry. Oh, it smelled so good after being outside, frozen or windblown, it didn't make any difference. Sheets smelled like heaven.

The irons had to be heated on the stove but that was for another day, another day to have to light the stove, summer and winter.

One big end-of-winter job was cutting huge blocks of ice from the river, hauling it back to the farm on a stone boat and piling it in a shed, surrounded by sawdust. It was our farm-style refrigeration and if the blocks were big enough, the sawdust thick enough and the summer not too hot, it would last for several months, keeping our food safe.



The blocks of ice in the ice house

Once a week, or so, we'd heat a batch of water for baths – one batch, four baths! When the children were little, I'd put a wash tub on the table and they'd sit in it one at a time. Lainey

liked to pretend the lather in her hair was ice cream, pretend to lick it and laugh. Store bought ice cream was a go-to-town treat but I learned to make it at home too, and we loved that. When they were tucked into bed, Maurice and I would bathe.

My treadle sewing machine was a god-send. I picked apart hand-me-down clothes and used the good part of the fabric to make clothes for the children. I turned bed sheets and shirt collars to extend their lives while worn out pillowcases became tea towels and dishcloths, all tidily hemmed on my trusty Singer. I made curtains and mended clothes.

That's how it was in our first Canadian home. Hard as it was, I never hankered to go back to England. Never.

The car

1937 brought the purchase of a 1926 Chevrolet coupe. If it hadn't been for a couple of gifts from England we probably would have seen no more than \$100.00 cash money during the years 1932-39. After all, during the depression, high grade wheat brought 12 cents a bushel. And those hailstorms..... did us in more than once. The gifts were from his mother. Dad left Mum in a very poor way when he died so she would have had no extra to send us.

The car was a big improvement over the team and wagon for the 24 mile round trip to Innisfail. Maurice was often entertained by his son, standing on the seat and doing a running commentary of what he observed as they made their way to town. Herds of cattle, barns, farmhouses, other vehicles, all received his attention and comment. Maurice proudly told me

about it when they got home. That car was the only motorized vehicle we ever had on the farm. At least one we owned. On cold winter days Maurice used to light a fire under the motor so it would turn over and eventually start. There were no block heaters in those days.

The dirt road to Innisfail crossed the Little Red Deer River and there was a significant hill on both sides of the river valley. Rain turns dirt roads into slippery, deep mud and many times the little green Chev had to be pushed up the hill going into or coming home from town. In some ways it was better using the horse and wagon - the horses could always make it up the hill!

School and other lessons

Michael started school in the one-room Oklahoma schoolhouse that mirrored many rural schools in Western Canada at the time. You've seen one you've seen them all. Grades one through nine were taught. Grade I students sat in the first row, grade two in the second row and on back. For some of the older students education was hard come by as they'd be pulled out of class at harvest time and other busy times on the farm to help with the work.

It was a two and a half mile walk to the schoolhouse. With Lainey in my arms, I used to watch him setting off down the road until he disappeared from sight behind the trees. Just before he disappeared, we'd wave a last good-bye. In the cold weather, I hated sending Michael off to school but what choice did I have?

My little boy usually walked to school with the neighbour boys, the Hockens, who were much older and alternated between scaring the pants off him with threats of what they'd do to him if

didn't do this or that, and being given information not suitable for the ears of a 6 or 7 year old. He learned a lot walking to school and recalls a lesson about his mother's love. He tells it like this:

"One winter's day we were walking home in a severe blizzard. It was snowing and blowing like blazes. Visibility was probably no more than 75 yards. It was a white-out. As I'm starting out for home, out of the blowing snow I see my Mother coming towards us, piloting Bess, the little mare, pulling a stone boat. She'd decided to come and pluck me from the clutches of the storm. Quite a feat for a lady who a few years previous, had never experienced a blizzard, had never harnessed a horse and had never heard of a stone boat!"

Years later, Michael told me something else he learned:

"I tried smoking when walking home from school with the Hocken boys. Not cigarettes but dried leaves. Ugh! Once they got the darn leaves lit, which seemed to take forever, I took a big drag. Following instructions, I inhaled. I felt like I'd swallowed an anvil. It delayed my smoking career by several years!"

Although Maurice was an Anglican and I was, what they called in England, a non-conformist, I sent the children off to Bible School in the Nazarene church in the summer of 1938. It was down the road a ways. Many of the people of the Oklahoma District were members of this fundamentalist group. My son was a reluctant participant and he didn't like it that he had to take his little sister along! Here's what happened, according to him:

“We had just started out on our mile and a half journey when the Hocken clan came by in a large car. Mr. Hocken stopped and asked where we were going. He knew and I knew, but I was embarrassed to tell him and his sons that we were headed for Bible school. So when he said, "Where ya goin?" I said, "Nowhere." “ I guess you don't need a ride then if you're not going anywhere,” he said, and drove off, leaving us to walk the rest of the way. Lesson: don't let false pride get in the way of a ride to Bible school!”

Other memories

In the 50s, Mike took his new wife, Jean, to the Oklahoma District, calling on Jack and Lila Nimmo, old neighbours. Jack was a great fan of ours. He told this story in his thick Scottish brogue:

“I was a bachelor living in a humble cabin with a dirt floor. No amenities, of course. My housekeeping was negligible. I cleared my 160 acres in the summer and worked in lumber camps in the winter. One winter I came down with some ailment that led to a very high temperature rendering me delirious for most of a two week period. I was in a sleeping bag on the dirt floor. During my lucid moments I'd roll over, grab some wood and feed the fire in the stove so I wouldn't freeze. Early in my illness, Ella caught wind of it and the conditions under which I was living. I'd come to with her ladling hot soup or medications or tea or some such thing into me whether I liked it or not. She continued to nurse me until I was able to fend for myself. When the fever broke and I returned to this world I wondered if I'd really died and gone to heaven. Ella had cleaned my place

to the point where I barely recognized it. The crowning point was that she'd put curtains up at the windows. Of all the things she'd done during my illness that touched me the most.”

Jack went on to say that If it was possible to be a cultural icon in the Oklahoma District in the 30s, that's what he considered us to be. He said several times that “the people in the district were much the poorer when Maurice and Ella moved to Edmonton”. He spoke almost in awe of our contributions to district functions - picnics, sports days, dances and Christmas concerts. We were just glad for the opportunities to get together for some fun with our neighbours.

Elaine remembers a Christmas concert:

“It is 1939. I am 4. My brother is 7. As is the custom, the one room schoolhouse is used for the Saturday night dances and tonight's Christmas concert.

You have to know that for me to go to the Christmas concert, even for my brother to go to the Christmas concert is a very big occasion. My mother believes that children should be in bed no later than 7pm. NO EXCEPTIONS! So when other families pack up the kids and go to the schoolhouse in the wagons or sleighs for the Saturday night dances, my mother stays home, like a good English mother, and her children are in bed at the regular time. Other kids fall asleep at the dance, at any hour, under the benches, on the piles of coats, in the wagons (in the summer) but me and my brother, we sleep in our beds! I think of my mother, a woman who loves to dance and is good at it, and what she misses. There is precious little to make her happy here on the farm. Perhaps staying at home with her children makes her happy. She knows she is doing the right thing. Who am I to judge? My father, on the other hand, is much in demand for

the dances. He plays the piano. He plays “by ear” and can play for hours at a time. For him, the dances must be evenings of pure joy and an escape from the endless anxiety and failures he experiences as a farmer. There is no piano in our home, so the dances are opportunities for him to do one of the things he loves best.

The Christmas concert begs an exception to the bedtime rule and we are there. The women of the district had rigged up one set of curtains for us to dress behind and another to be drawn open and closed at the front of the stage. There is no stage – only a section of the room.

The air is electric with excitement. And my excitement is heightened by the fact that it is past my bedtime. This is my first time in the school at night. The room glows with the light of more than one large, hanging kerosene lamp and the wood stove at the back of the room has done its job – too well, now that it is crowded with families. Small brown paper bags, one for each child are stacked on the teacher's desk. There is an orange, a Jap orange as we called them then, and some hard, peppermint Christmas candy in each one. We get to take one home at the end of the evening. An air of festivity surrounds us.

Jackets, scarves, hats, ski pants, boots, mitts are piled in the makeshift dressing room. It looks a jumble to me but the mothers know which pile belongs to which child.

Mike and I are dressed in our best; he in a shirt and tie, I in a jumper, sweater, and long ribbed cotton stockings. My mother has used the curling iron to persuade my very straight, quite short hair to curl. When our turn comes, after the introduction, we push

aside the curtains and stand in front of them, facing what looks, to my four year old eyes, a huge audience. I am not afraid. After all, my big brother is at my side. The music begins. It is the introduction to our song. It is my father playing so that gives me confidence. I see my mother, watching us with pride. We practised a lot at home. I know my part and I'm sure my brother knows his too.

We sing, Little Sir Echo, or rather Mike sings Little Sir Echo. I am the echo. He sings, "Little Sir Echo, how do you do, hello" - I sing out, "hello" - he sings "hello" and I respond, "hello". It ends with, "you're a nice little fellow I know by your voice, but you're always so far away" - "away" pipes I. When we are finished, we bow, just like our mother taught us.

The applause is genuine and enthusiastic. It always is. We bow again and disappear behind the curtains. My performing debut is over. And it's well past 7 o'clock! What a night!"

At Christmas, I brought out the treasured English decorations to cheer up our simple home. There were garlands of red and white cellophane and strings with red and silver tin circles attached so they would spin and twinkle in the light of the kerosene lamps. Even when we moved to the city I chose not to have lights on our Christmas trees, only the spinning red and silver globes. When other kids would say scornfully, "You don't have lights on your tree", Elaine would defend our ways, saying in a superior way, "We like it like this. You can see all the decorations better without lights." I baked traditional Christmas fruitcake and carefully kneaded, rolled and cut shortbread into shapes, scoring each with a knife, then pricking each

one four or five times with a fork before baking in a slow, slow oven. I didn't have any cookie cutters, you know. Imagine being able to control the temperature in a wood stove so that it turned out shortbread that was the best in the world. That's what Maurice called it.

And once we had the crystal set, we'd participate in that wonderful British tradition of listening to the King's Christmas Day message broadcast from England at noon, Greenwich mean time – 5 am in rural Alberta. We decided some things are worth getting up for, although we were up pretty early most mornings to get the fire lighted.

Good-bye Oklahoma, Hello Edmonton!

In June, 1939, King George and Queen Elizabeth visited Canada, the first reigning monarch to do so. We all stayed with the Gibbs in Edmonton for this historical event. All dressed up, we joined the hundreds of others on the bleachers along Kingsway waving our little British flags and cheering as the King and Queen drove by. Kingsway was so-named in honour of that visit.



September 9, 1939, Canada declared war on Germany and Maurice immediately left the farm for Calgary to enlist in the army. He had some hope that he would be posted overseas where he might see the family we had left behind. I was left to do what had to be done to sell the farm and get ready to leave, although Maurice came back on furlough to help when he could.

In the summer of 1940, I drove to Edmonton with the children and one of the hockey-night-in-Canada friends, Doc Lewis. Doc was meant to share the driving but he was blind in one eye and didn't see well out of the other so I drove most of the way. The highway was a two lane, dusty, winding gravel road and there were four of us squeezed into a two door coupe that was then 14 years old. It took about 8 hours to drive the 120 miles. It wasn't an easy trip.



There was a housing shortage in Edmonton, as there was everywhere, so the three of us stayed at the Gibbs for a couple of months, leaving the car parked on the street in front of their house. One morning it was gone. It had been picked up by a city tow truck and impounded. I never retrieved it and we never again owned a car. Shortly after that, we rented

the third floor of a big house in Rossdale. The “kitchen” was the landing between two rooms, and the bathroom was shared with the people living in the two suites on the second floor. We only stayed there a few months until a better place was found, just up the street, where there was big kitchen, a living room and two bedrooms upstairs. This time the bathroom was shared with the family who lived in the other part of the house; a family with 6 children! Maurice was too old to be sent overseas but he was stationed in Trenton, Regina and Nanaimo, teaching gunnery, for the duration of the war. Furloughs were infrequent and I missed him. Money was not plentiful but the regular cheque that came to me from the Army was a welcome change from the days on the farm when we were so broke.



On an Edmonton street

1941

It was the end of an era and the beginning of a new phase of life for us. There would be many more changes in our lives, but none so dramatic and overwhelming as the move from middle class England to unbroken land in central Alberta in 1928.



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