

First Day of School.

Joan Margel

"Tomorrow is my first day of school. Tomorrow is my first day of school." I sang, danced and skipped around the house and into the yard.

For weeks we were preparing for this day. My new dad carefully pounded a nail into a square pattern on the lid of a 3 pound blue metal Burns lard pail. "Why does my lunch pail have to have holes in it?" I asked. "So your sandwiches don't go moldy." Mom replied.

Earlier in the summer Dad sold a calf, which paid for my "school clothes" that Mom had ordered from the Eaton's catalogue. Now on the chesterfield she proudly displayed my white petticoat (slip) that she had sewn from a flour sack, printed cotton dress, long sleeve woolen sweater, white ankle length bobby sox and pair of black patent shoes.

Outside in the yard Mom cut my thick brown hair with bangs in the front and ear length hair in the back. "Why are you cutting my hair outside?" I inquired. "So you're hair won't get into the food." When Mom was satisfied that my hair "looked good" she must have remembered that in Grande Prairie her own thick brown hair was styled and waved with a "Marsela" for she prided herself for being the original '20s' "Flapper Girl." We loved dancing the Charleston. Now she heated up rainwater in the teakettle and shampooed my hair with Castile soap. I loved her nimble fingers rubbing the suds on my head, along the back of my neck and temples. Then she beat an egg yoke with water and rinsed it through my hair to make it "nice and shiny." Over the years she drenched my hair with vinegar in water and later even beer. "Now let it dry in the sun" I knew that the sun made my hair "really beautiful."

We followed the current advice: "wash your hair every two weeks."

In the kitchen Mom filled the tan enamel washbasin with warm water from the reservoir of her wood-burning stove. She lathered her favorite Lux soap on my

face and upper body as "be sure to scrub your elbows and behind your ears" rang in my mind. After washing my upper body she dried me with the newer "good towel."

Adding more water to the basin, she carefully gently cleansed my itchy chapped legs scarred with the summer of scratches, bruises and bug bites along with the wind and hot sun that came with being barefooted from May to September. "Ouch, my legs." Tears welled with the familiar pain as Mom sponged my legs in warm water with no stinging soap. After lightly patting my legs dry with the old threadbare "foot towel," Mom dipped her three fingers into her large jar of Vaseline and carefully stroked it down my legs. "It feels much better" I smiled in gratitude.

With clean hair and a bath, I felt "as clean as a whistle." I slipped on my petticoat then took one last look at my beautiful school clothes. Contented, I cuddled under my wool quilt for a good night's sleep. Now all was ready for the greatest day of my life!

On this sunny morning I woke up to the sound of Mom making breakfast. I quickly wash myself in the basin of warm water, combed my no longer tangled hair, dress up in my magnificent new clothes while my feet felt restricted in my new shoes. Johnny smiled his admiration.

I felt like a princess when we sat down to a breakfast of home-cured bacon, fried eggs, homemade bread with butter and jam along with a cup of still warm Bossy's milk.

Mom looked out the window. "Oh, they're coming now." There on the wagon trail by our small field was Dad's youngest brother George along with his nieces Mary and Annie Lylik also wearing their best clothes and carrying their lunch pails. Later, our Lithuanian neighbor Tootsie Almon joined us. As she handed me the lunch pail Mom reminded me "there's an extra strawberry jam sandwich for you to eat on the way home."

Johnny, Dad and Mom holding her new baby Bob waved goodbye from the stoop of our beautiful log home of eight months.

George "showed us the way." We soon left the Spirit River wagon road, took a bush trail where we balanced ourselves on the twin log footbridge that crossed the now dry brook. After passing the edge of the slough, we trekked up the hill along the ancient winding bush trail that for centuries was used by wild life, probably Native hunters and now us "new arrivals."

As we stepped around a tree that fell on the path, Mary asked "why are you wearing your shoes -we're bare footed." With feet cramped in my shoes, I gladly took them off and placed them and my sox near the log, which would act as a landmark "to find where we left them." Now we ran, skipped and trotted 'like horses" along the bush trail under the tall trees until we came to a three acre clearing (field). There stood a lumber covered log school with a stoop and five large windows on the east side. Besides a long row of neatly piled cord wood were a two- part swing and two "one- seater" toilets. "That's the one for the girls," George pointed at the east one. The schoolyard was filled with happy laughing children. I quickly join in.

At the school door a gentle older man smiled as he rang the shiny school bell. Mr. Rockards, wearing a navy suit, white shirt and blue tie that matched his blue eyes, warmly greeted "his family" of 25 eager students.

I entered a huge room. There were two black boards-one on the front south wall while on the west wall hung a smaller board topped with two small windows, which looked like a two-eyed monster. Along the north wall, I hung my coat on one of the sturdy hooks screwed into a thick board then placed my lunch can on the floor. In the north -west corner was a large wood- burning heater made from a heavy steel gas barrel held up by four metal legs-just like a fat pig. This sturdy practical heater stood on a thick metal sheet to protect it from scorching the floorboards. On three sides off that stove was a protective guardrail that was solidly screwed to the floor. The long line of pipes rose up then crossed the room of that eleven-foot ceiling.

Now the students quietly took their "earned" desk. The oldest grades seven and eight students sat in the larger desks next to the west wall. Meanwhile the grade 4,5 and 6 pupils arranged themselves in the middle of the room flanked by the "two and threes" That left us "beginners" (grade 1) to sit on the row of smaller single desks next to the east window warmed by the morning sun. "You and Elsie can sit in these desks", Mr. Rockards gently suggested as he lowered the seats for us to sit on. I ran my hand over the top smooth hardwood of the factory- made desk and followed the decorative metal frame that supported the desk, which looked like Mom's new Singer treadle sewing machine. Our desks, which cost \$5 (a half - months wages), were anchored to a two by four boards for easier moving. Elsie and I became good friends and sat together for three years. Behind us sat the Dzoba twins Nellie and Kathleen (from a family of 16). We could always tell the twins apart while others got them "mixed up."

Later, about grade six, Elsie Zilinski (Lithuanian) was killed in the first-ever local traffic accident. Her older brother Bruno had just bought a used one- ton truck. Family and neighbors climbed into the truck box to go to Spirit River. On a level road he "hit the rhubarb" (ditch). Everyone flew out of truck box and fell on the hard ground. Bruno sobbed as he told me: "Elsie hit the ground. Quietly sat on the grass then just fell over and died." For endless days, I cried for loss of my first best "soul" friend.

At noon hours my second -cousins, the beautiful and talented Kushneryk girls came to sit with me while having lunch. Later Irene married an American soldier who worked building the Alaska Highway, lived in California and danced in the "chorus line" in many Hollywood movies.

The rest of the school day was a blur of teacher, big kids, pencil, scribblers, readers, chalk and recess. All too soon it was time to go home. Again George led the way as we frolicked on the trail until we came to the black log where I grabbed my shoes and sox. Then crossed the log bridge to the field where my brother was running to meet me. We shared my sandwich and raced to our home in the

clearing. "Didn't you wear your shoes?" Mom inquired. "All the other kids were barefooted so I took off my shoes." Mom smiled as she said "You will wear them when it gets colder."

I changed out of my "school clothes" and "had to do chores" which was to collect the eggs from the nest boxes in the tiny chicken coop.

At the supper table I babbled about the adventures of the greatest day of my life



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