

It Snowed a lot the Winter of '55-'56

The big yellow buses pulled up almost before we got outside. My teacher had been distracted all morning. He kept glancing outside and when he was called to the principal's office the kids in my grade nine class ran over to the window to get a better look. Thick, heavy snow was falling and blowing into drifts along the edge of the bike rack and onto the street. The teacher came back with a pronouncement. "All the bus students are to go home right now. The buses are coming--get your coats on and get outside so you don't make them wait."

The schools in Vermilion served a large rural community and about half the students were bused to school from farms as far as 20 miles out. Our farm was 12 miles out and I went to school with my sisters Dorothy and Ruthie and my brother Lloyd as well as our cousins Kenny and Jimmy. We were all on the same bus, and we headed for it the day of the storm. The driver, Mr. Mueller, was more given to grumbling and wild threats than effective discipline. He looked over his passengers, herding the strays into their seats. "Sit down," he yelled, "I have to see that everyone is here. Quit your fighting over there or I'll put you all out."

Finally satisfied, he rolled the bus past the school and onto highway 41 going north. Lloyd and Jimmy played around with the other little kids, enveloped in the general commotion of a busload of students excited at getting out of school early. The rest of us were just enough older to worry a bit and watch the snow. Snowflakes were making patterns on the windshield, and from my place half way down the bus I couldn't see anything out the front windows. Now and then I felt the bus slow to force its way through a drift piled up across the road. We seemed to be going slower and slower. I

wondered how the roads near home would be if we were having this much trouble on the highway. I guess Mr. Mueller was thinking the same thing. We were only a few miles out when he turned the bus around and drove us back to town.

Gradually, kids got sorted out. Most had relatives in town and when the teachers figured out where they were going they were allowed to leave the school grounds in family groups. We knew where we were going, and when we got to Grandpa's house he opened the door really fast. He got right into the business of welcoming his six grandchildren, as well as Archie, a neighbour's son who didn't have anywhere else to go.

We tried to call home but we weren't surprised when we couldn't get through. The line was down. The heavy snow in a storm like this would bend tree branches down on the wires and short out the telephone service. Or, more likely, with the wind the way it was, a tree would have fallen on the line and the wires would be broken. Dad was the trouble man for our rural telephone company and we were used to hearing about all the things that could go wrong with the line. When the storm was over Dad and his cohorts would probably be away from home for a few days getting it working again.

Grandpa was 76 that winter and he had a little two bedroom house. That didn't make any difference to him or to us. I hadn't taken any psychology courses back then, and I'd certainly never heard of unconditional love, but we all knew that Grandpa, who was critical of the morals and work ethics of just about everybody, somehow exempted his grandchildren. Grandpa liked us, and he liked excitement.

Meals followed a predictable pattern at Grandpa's house. We'd all been there overnight many times. When we wanted to go to something after school we'd stay at Grandpa's instead of taking the bus home. We knew that he delighted in offering Scotch

broth and graham wafers. When it was time for dessert the graham wafers were spread with strawberry jam. He always told us how good they were. A few years ago my cousin Ken told me that after moving away from Vermilion to live on his own it was several years before he could face Scotch broth again. There were other menus, too. Sometimes suppers were sliced Prem, boiled potatoes, and vegetables, mostly canned peas or corn with canned fruit, peaches or apricots or pears, for dessert. For breakfast we helped make oatmeal porridge. No reasonable person, in Grandpa's world, would start the day without oatmeal porridge.

When supper was looked after, there was TV. We didn't have TV in the country yet so we watched with great enthusiasm. The background to the TV shows was pretty much the same for the whole evening. Grandpa provided a running commentary on the immorality of the clothing worn by the actors and the impropriety of the subject matter.

Getting everybody to bed was another noisy business. There was Grandpa's bedroom, a second bedroom for the girls, and a couch in the living room. Blankets were pulled out of the cedar chest, adding the smell of mothballs to the household. I don't remember where we all slept but I do remember Grandpa putting the back all the way down on his old Morris chair for Lloyd and Jimmy. They were six year olds in grade one and when they got together in the chair they giggled and wiggled and finally talked themselves into sleep.

After the storm ended it took a couple of days to clear the roads. Bus routes were a priority for the snow plows but it still took time. I didn't like wearing the same clothes for four days but mostly we had fun and it was all OK. It was only after I had a family of my own that I asked my mother if she had been worried. She was matter of fact. "Daddy

and Uncle Bert went up the road as far as they could and they didn't see any tracks so they figured the bus hadn't come. We knew that as long as you were in town you'd be at Grandpa's and you'd be fine."



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