

GOING TO THE BUSH

In the 1930s and early '40s 'going to the bush' was a very familiar activity in Northern Alberta. Nearly all homes were heated with wood stoves as natural gas was not commercialized until the late '40s in this area. There were miles and miles of crown land on both sides of the Wapiti and Smoky rivers which produced many types of trees used for firewood, building logs, fence posts, rails, lumber, etc. This wood was free for the taking plus a lot of hard work to cut, load and haul it home.

Money and jobs were very scarce during these years and people did whatever they could to earn a few dollars. Many farmers cut and hauled loads of wood to town during the winter months for firewood at prices around \$5.00 a load. This took probably two men plus a team of horses and sleigh, saws and axes from morning until night, traveling quite a few miles for this amount of cash. Yes, it was a job and 'times were tough' as the saying went and money precious indeed.

Our family had moved to a homestead in the early '30s with very little money. We surely started from scratch as this piece of land had no house, barn, fences, or well and not an acre broken. Poor Dad had his hands full to provide for the five of us and certainly made many trips to the bush to harvest whatever was needed. I accompanied him on many of these trips, sort of a junior hired man. Dad wouldn't venture out when the temperature was below -20F or blizzarding and would wait for a better day. It was rather a plus in a way that Grade VIII was the end of public school in our area and there was no way to continue on in town at the high school so I was available to help on these trips to the bush now any day in the week. The following two years we were taking our high school by correspondence at home. Lesson time could be juggled to suit the farm obligations. I can well remember Mother waking me up half way through an evening lesson after being outdoors and really active in the cold all day – it was very difficult to stay alert in the warm house after a day in the bush.

Dad would go out to the barn first thing to do chores before breakfast. It was always a bit exciting when he would announce that we should make a trip today for firewood or whatever building materials were needed. Lunch had to be made for us and oat bundles for the horses and axes and saws fastened on the sleigh bunks. Our dog 'Spot' knew what was happening and pranced about while we were getting ready to leave as he loved these trips too.

We would be on the road by around 9 a.m. and home by 5 p.m. if possible. The distance varied by what kind of timber we were after in different areas. Traveling on the road allowance where there would be some sort of a trail was rather uneventful. When we got closer to the timber we would go across some sloughs and make our own trail as everything was frozen. The ice would crack with the weight of our outfit and this would upset poor Spot to no end. He would jump up in the air and pounce and follow the cracks under the snow and through the bulrushes barking and yelping and never seemed to learn he couldn't find them.

Once we arrived at the spot where we were going to cut our load Dad would trample the snow down and plan his day. It was my job to unhook the horses and tie them up out of the way of

falling trees. Dad would never let me use an axe except to limb a tree once it was felled. I guess my aim wasn't that accurate. This was before chain saws of any type and lots of strength and expertise was required. However I surely knew how to use the cross cut saw to top the trees, cut them in lengths or whatever. Sometimes a tree had to be 'snaked out' closer to the sleigh and this was also my job. Our horse would be used with a logging chain to pull the tree out - if the snow was deep this was quite a task but necessary as the horse was stronger than we were.

In 1934 Dad decided he had to build a new barn from logs of course. This project required far more searching once in the bush for suitable trees. Also the rear bunk on the sleigh had to be lengthened out with logging chains to accommodate the longer logs. This was a pesky nuisance in many ways plus more work and it took longer to load these heavy green logs.

The crack of the axe and zing of the saw hitting the tree plus the cry of "Timber" as it came crashing down echoed all through the bush as many neighbours were working within ear shot. About 11:30 a.m. Dad would say it was almost lunch time. I'm sure the dog understood him too. I would build a fire, and sometimes had to dig through a lot of snow to get closer to the ground. Our coffee in a syrup pail had to be heated, lunch spread out and horses fed too. As we were eating or as soon as there was any smoke from the camp fire several 'whiskey jacks', sometimes called 'camp robbers', would appear. We would throw a piece of our sandwich in one direction to them and in the other direction for Spot. The latter detested these birds and would sometimes leave his piece and dash in the other direction to grab their piece, then come back to his. There were numerous squirrels chattering away to further annoy the poor dog and he never seemed to learn he couldn't catch them. Dad and I quite enjoyed the circus anyway. We were always very glad to get the load on the sleigh chained down, and the team hooked up and ready to go home. Spot was ready too but he always seemed to have the energy to chase a frightened rabbit and follow the ice cracks again across the sloughs. The trip home was slow with the load on and many times we were quite wet from the snow and took turns walking behind and driving the horses just to keep warm. The clothes then were a far cry from the wind and water proof fabrics of today.

It was usually getting dark by the time we arrived in our yard having traveled from five to ten miles back from the bush. The horses had to be looked after plus other animal chores and our load unloaded. It was quite a long hard day. We were one of dozens of outfits doing exactly the same thing to either add to the firewood pile or whatever other project needed logs. No one needed to go to the gym or use a treadmill to keep fit in those days. However, I must admit I quite enjoyed these 'trips to the bush' despite the hard work involved. Incidentally we did build our log barn during 1935 and '36. Although the bottom row of logs is deteriorating, it still stands fairly straight and square and is in use today in the next millennium. How proud my father would be to see his barn in use over sixty years later.

THE DAY THE TRAIN STOPPED AT OUR HOUSE

The Christmas season of 1930 was very exciting and almost unbelievable as I remember. As was stated previously, we were real homesteaders living beside the railroad tracks. Our new farm was progressing, more land cleared and broken plus more crops and garden planted every year. Times were very hard, farm produce was of very little value if one could find any markets at all. I realized, in later years, just how worried Mom and Dad must have been trying to make payments on the land and feed us. My sister and I were far more interested in our annual Christmas concert – and Christmas period. After all, a 9 year old doesn't really understand too much about payments and finances in general for a homestead.

The railroad track made a curve around the north end of Flying Shot Lake, then traveled up quite an incline as it proceeded west past our log house. Even the passenger train never traveled very fast on the curved grade and the old engine really chugged along huffing and puffing. There was also a cross road which required several blasts on the train whistle. We kids always waved to the engineer and fireman, then scooted down to retrieve Dad's papers that were tossed out on special delivery days.

One day shortly before Christmas we could hear the train coming and it was giving out the shortest, oddest little whistle bursts at [sic] it proceeded up the incline towards our house – it was slowing down. We ran outside wondering what the problem was and gave our usual wave. Lo and behold, the train stopped and the engineer opened the engine door. He came down the steps with a big Christmas package which he put on the snow bank beside the track. We were speechless, and I can see that dear man in his striped overalls and engineers cap coming down those steps to this day. He gave us a big wave and climbed back in the cab, then the train proceeded on its way. We raced down over the snowdrifts to retrieve the package, after all it had to be meant for us! We carried our unexpected box very carefully to the house.

Excited or what! True, it was a day or two before Christmas but Mother let us open it there and then – I think she was just as excited and inquisitive as we were. There was a cute little card on the top which read “For the two little girls who always smile and wave to us – Merry Christmas to all”. There were two lovely dolls in this box, one blonde dressed in mauve, and the other had dark hair dressed in yellow; they were beautiful indeed and we adored them. The parcels also contained other smaller gifts plus candy, nuts, and some magazines for our parents.

Now the big question was how to thank these very kind gentlemen. We had no names or addresses and Mother was very particular about us children writing thank-you letters – and promptly too! On Dad's next trip to town he went down to the train station and managed to obtain the engineer's name, a Mr. Brain. We hoped this was the correct engineer as shifts changed then as well as now. We decided to assemble a box of "goodies" for the train crew and take it to the station after Christmas. Mother was a wonderful cook and the box contained some of her scrumptious fruit cake, shortbread, mince tarts, etc. Barbara and I each wrote or printed a thank-you letter to Mr. Brain letting him know which doll we had claimed as our own. I might add

that the name Mr. Brain really posed questions for us, it was so different from any of our neighbours' names.

Dad and I went in to town with the horses and cutter on the day that Mr. Brain was scheduled to be the engineer. We visited the train station with our box of treats. I was so excited being right beside that steaming, hissing, growling engine as it came to a squealing stop. I can remember holding Dad's hand ever so tightly as well as our parcel. The man in the baggage car said we could go up to the engine and speak to our Mr. Brain – yes he was the engineer today. I can see him still, he was a really big man, very jolly, and looked old to a 9 year old. He wore glasses and of course was dressed in his striped overalls and peaked cap. He showed Dad and I inside the engine, and then we met the fireman but I can't remember his name now. Mr. Brain and his wife lived in Edmonton and had no children he told us. He had watched our little homestead progress over the three years and so enjoyed our friendly wave. Our visit was brief as the express and passengers unloaded and reloaded – it was time to continue on. Mr. Brain thanked us so much for our thoughtfulness and promised to share the parcel contents with the train crew and Mrs. Brain. We again waved as the train disappeared down the track.

Dad and I finished our errands and shopping down town and returned home with a very happy, satisfied feeling. We always waved to any of the train men until we moved to another homestead south of Flying Shot lake and away from the railway tracks the following year. We continued to wave to any train crew when we were close to the track but never actually met Mr. Brain again. He had certainly created some very happy and unexpected moments for our family, and just before Christmas too.

My Brother, Charles Frederick

Charles arrived in early Oct, 1930. My sister and I were so excited to have a baby brother. I was nine and my sister younger. Mother had told us about the expected arrival a few months earlier. This was a difficult pregnancy and Mother was in the hospital one month before and two weeks afterwards. Snow came early in September that year and we travelled the seven miles into the hospital to visit first with horses and democrat and later on in a cutter. Crops were all out under the deep snow, some in stooks and some grain uncut and squashed flat. The depression or "dirty 30's" had definitely begun and what an anxious time this must have been for my parents.

Mother and Charles eventually arrived home in the cutter on a cold blizzard day, we girls were delighted. I wanted to pick him up every time he even squeaked. Mother diplomatically changed this of course. All speed records were broken, I'm sure, when returning home from school to see that precious baby.

Our household gradually settled down, he was a very happy and contented baby. Mother gradually got her strength back as the days sped by. Weather also improved, wind turned west, snow all melted, grain in stooks dry enough to thresh. My parents must have been relieved to have the grain in the bin despite the fact that prices fell lower and lower to about 35 cents a bushel I believe. Yes, times were tough all over the world which I didn't quite understand but remember how concerned my parents were.

Winter slid by with very little more snow falling and not too cold as it had all come in September and early October. However, economic times got worse and worse. No market for grain, cattle, pigs, eggs, butter or nearly all farm produce, least we weren't hungry as dozens of city dwellers certainly were.

Charles was growing very quickly, now smiling, laughing, gurgling and cooing and we adored him. In July, Mother had a severe kidney infection and was confined to her bed upstairs for several days. I was in my glory as I had Charles to fully take care of. I bathed him, changed and dressed him and just took him up to be nursed and back down with me. Dad was in and out with the farm and garden work. Charles loved the feel of the green grass under his bare chubby little feet as he learned to walk, giggling and squirming all the while. Boots and shoes were a real nuisance to him for several years I recall. Typical boy!

He created numerous laughs as he learned to talk and communicate with us. One choice moment we all enjoyed was when Mother was doing the washing on the scrub board and Dad was working in the green house close by. They were sending him back and forth with silly messages till Mother had to attend to another duty and said "Tell your father the discussion is now closed." Charles toddled off to the greenhouse with this message, "Dad, Mother is cussing the clothes."

We had a fenced house yard plus a larger barn yard and grain fields beyond. Charles was confined to the former with his little wagon, trucks, cars plus a big collie dog. Alas, one day he

was missing and we were all frantically searching for them both. The gate was open to the barn yard – why, who knows. I suggested to Mother that I would climb up into the hay loft in the barn for a better view. Sure enough, he and the dog were wandering down through the tall grain. I could just see the tip of the dog's tail. He was soon rescued and scolded but difficult to be cross with the cutest little blonde blue-eyed boy! How he escaped through both yards unseen remained a mystery.

One spring after a very heavy winter snow fall we had quite a natural dugout full of water in the pasture. No real swimming pools within miles in our area then so this was our chance. Mother sent for little cotton bathing suits for us from Eaton's at 50 cents each I believe. One sunny afternoon off we went to our own wee pool. My sister and I on one side to get undressed in the bushes and Charles on the other side. Suddenly a frantic shriek of "Betty, come here." Horrors [sic], he had stood on a very active ant hill to undress and was covered with the creatures and they really do bite. They were quickly washed off in the water but somehow our swimming adventure had a sour note.

The spring he was five he wandered away once more briefly in the pasture. We could hear him calling, giggling and making quite a racket and rushed out to investigate. He had found a batch of wild baby ducks in the grass and had picked them up in his hat to come and show us. They were the cutest, softest, squirmiest little creatures and had got down inside his shirt and were scrambling round his waist tickling and scratching him as he struggled along. What a sight and what a shot for a movie camera which didn't even exist then of course. We quickly rescued the ducklings and put them back in the grass where he thought they had been. Another scolding but he maintained they were so cute and cuddly and he wanted to keep them.

Charles was alone quite a lot while we were at school and invented an imaginary little friend "Porgy." Dad made a small play house in the tree border in the house yard and he and Porgy spent hours together in the wonderful world of make believe. He would come to get cookies from Mother for them both – somehow they all disappeared.

He started school in the little country school 12 miles from home. Long before school busses and my sister and I were finished public school and were taking our high school by correspondence at home. He seemed so little trudging off by himself and we would go part way with him, or go to meet him at day's end. Two other little boys lived either side of our farm and the three had great fun together and were affectionately called the "Three Musketeers."

Mother suffered a heart attack the following fall and was gone, we were all devastated to say the least. Charles seemed so young and lost and depended on me more than ever. I stopped correspondence and agreed to manage the house as best as a teenager could. My sister continued on with the lessons. The winter seemed long and dreary and I felt so sorry for my father, being a widower with three children to support was quite a task. Charles really missed Mother and in the spring Dad got a tiny fox terrier puppy from [sic] a breeder in town. Badger was his name and he was cute, all white except black spots over his eyes. What a pair those

two were plus what mischief they managed to indulge in. Now Badger occupied the tree house with Charles and Porgy.

As the years slid by Charles joined a Scout troop organized by the Presbyterian minister. The boys had a wonderful time and I'm sure there wasn't one complete uniform amongst them all as finances were still a problem. They went camping for a few days down by the Wapiti River. There [sic] standards were almost non-existent compared to today's rules and laws. It was a great experience, the boy thoroughly enjoyed the camp and Charles certainly did justice to our meals on his return.

Our district organized whist drives in the school house once a month which were well attended. One occasion Charles begged Dad to let him come with me to the card party. So off we walked to the school house on a cold snowy night. All went well and we were home after midnight and he was tired. Saturday was always [sic] busy at our house. I was baking bread, Dad bagging potatoes in the root cellar. Charles was pretty sleepy in the A.M. and was trying so hard to prove to Dad that he could be up late and still carry out the jobs assigned to him. After lunch I had the bread in the pans rising in the warming oven on the wood stove. Dad needed assistance in the root cellar, down I went leaving Charles with specific orders to keep the wood stove stoked, put the bread in the oven at a given time. I would come back and take it out an hour later. As I started for the house, there was no smoke coming out of the chimney. Also the fire was nearly out, some of the bread was collapsed in the oven and Charles was asleep on the couch. He insisted he had stoked the fire as he put the pans in the oven. With further investigation we found that he had put two blocks of wood in the water reservoir on the stove and left one pan in the warming oven. Poor Charles – this took days to live that episode down.

Every once in a while Charles and I would have supper early and walk the six miles into town to see a movie. Spencer Tracy and Boys Town pictures were enjoyable and he loved them. We sat down for the two hours and rested, out at nine, sometimes get a lunch and walk home, One night in March, a terrific blizzard came up while we were in the theatre but we didn't hear it inside. What a shock when we walked out as the temperature had drastically dropped plus a strong N.E. wind with heavy drifting snow faced us. Now what to do? Dad hadn't a phone and we could come on two different roads home and how would he know where we were. We quickly started out and decided to go the two miles on the highway as when we turned south the neighbours field was fenced and we could be guided by this if visibility worsened. The wind was howling, blowing snow and walking more difficult every step. Luck was with us as Mr. Thompson was driving out to his farm home close to the airport and stopped beside us. I called him by name and he said "You know me but I don't recognize you and what are you two kids doing out on a night like this?" We quickly identified ourselves plus where we were going and he knew Dad well. He told us to get in and he would drive us home. We were so grateful as we had only walked about half way and were really tiring. Now we were concerned that he might get stuck getting back to the highway, he took it in his stride anyway. Dad was so pleased to see us and quite frantic when the storm blew up and didn't really know what to do. Needless to say we didn't attempt to walk into another show that winter.

As time went by I was married and lived in town. Charles now had to attend high school in here, biked back and forth on a gravel road in fair weather and stayed with us when necessary. He adored Margaret, our first daughter and loved to look after her every chance he could. He enjoyed high school, social life and was really growing up with after school jobs. In summer holidays he had employment cutting brush on the road allowances and helping Dad on the farm. He was really interested in joining the R.C.M.P. He submitted his application, had several interviews, passed his medical and personality test required then. However, he was 12 inch too short and the doctor who performed his medical suggested he go out to a lumber camp for the winter to work. He was just eighteen and being outdoors working in the bush, living and eating in a bunkhouse would add to his height. He was with Ross Lumber Co. out towards Nose Mountain, home over the Christmas and not again till spring break-up. Worse luck as he hadn't grown at all and was so disappointed.

Off he went to Edmonton and found employment with the Journal working nights. Housing was scarce and he had a tiny room on the third floor of an old house. It was hot and uncomfortable trying to sleep during the day plus batching which he had never done.

He wasn't happy at all there and joined the Navy as an electrician apprentice. His comments were "They don't care how tall I am." He was stationed at Cornwallis, N.S. for basic training and later on in Halifax. He really enjoyed the military life and also his electrician's training. He was posted to the "Ontario" and had some wonderful trips while learning the trade at sea. One three month excursion right from Halifax down the east coast of the U.S through the Panama Canal and all around S. America with shore leave at several of the large ports en route and back to home base. Charles wrote very interesting letters home describing so many humorous incidents sigh seeing etc. He was also stationed at Esquimalt in B.C. for several months and while there sailed to Hawaii and had ten days in port as guests of the American Navy. He had so much to tell us when he did get home on leave several times. He met and was engaged to a little girl in Halifax and planned to be married the following year. Tragedy intervened and he was killed in a motor cycle accident in October. He was twenty three. He is buried in the Fort Massey Cemetery in Halifax with a full military funeral. Such a drastic blow for our family, especially Dad as he was so sad and upset for months. Who says life is fair? I couldn't help but think what a waste of a young life that the family enjoyed so much while he was with us.

We did meet his fiancée, who was a legal secretary and she spent her summer holidays with us here in Alberta the following August. We have kept in touch down through the years and she passed away last winter in Winnipeg and was a dear wee soul.