# PIECES OF STRING TOO SHORT TO SAVE:

# DISCOVERING OUR SELVES THROUGH OUR STORIES

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Dedication:

For my mother

"Am I as I am--who I am, what I am, how I am--because my mother lived, or because my mother died? The answer, we decide, is both (Edelman, 1994, p. 214).

Abstract

This writing is about the impacts of widely divergent worlds on the cultural and emotional development of a girl born in a rural, Southern Alberta setting. Its purpose is to identify and sort out the effects imposed by the conflicting values of Russian-born maternal forces and American-born paternal forces on a post-World War Two child. The author's thesis is that an individual's voice, or capacity for independence, can be greatly influenced by the people and places of his or her formative years. The scope of this paper extends from an eighteenth century Russian village to twentieth century Southern Alberta, with the major emphasis on the time-frame 1949 to 1977. Most of the writing is based on the recollections and observations of the author. The quoted published source is from writings by Sam Keene and Anne Valley-Fox concerning creating our own mythic journey. This writing concludes that it is useful for individuals to examine closely the influences that formed them, with special implications for the conflicting forces experienced by many first-generations Canadians.

Acknowledgements

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# Chapter One
## Introduction

*We shall not cease from exploration*
*And the end of all our exploring*
*Will be to arrive where we started*
*And know the place for the first time.*
*-- T.S. Eliot*

This text is about my life from 1949 until 1977. It is organized into sections that deal with the *People* and the *Places* that have impacted me most deeply. The final sections, *Conclusions*, reflects on the implications of and applications for this knowledge about the people and the places within my life. The question that guided this query was: *"What is the importance of the little stories that make up a life?"*

There is much talk in public education circles about "retirement." There are many teachers who began their teaching careers during the 1970s, and who are now approaching the age and years of service that suggest retirement from this profession. In so many ways it seems as though I just began teaching, and now it is time to ponder the end of teaching. How can that be? Where has the time gone? What do I have to "show" for the work that I have done? Who even remembers me? Is it important whether anyone does? I have many little stories about students whom I have known and about events that happened. I'm certain that the students do too. So what?

I am also at a time in my life when my own mortality is more imminent. I find myself remembering that I am approaching the age when my mother contracted cancer. Will I? As I live the second half of my life, what do I have to show for it? Is it simply

made up of little stories? Is that enough? Are the little stories important?

As I thought about my stories, I saw them as individual pieces of string, like the ones that my mother saved. I thought of my life as the resultant big ball of string that was made up of these individual pieces. My mother, having lived through the 1930s, saved a variety of things "just in case." One of the things that she saved was pieces of string which came from boxes in which groceries were brought home. Herronton General Store did not pack groceries in bags as stores do now. Instead, the boxes that the goods were shipped to the store in were used to pack customers' groceries. String was tied around the upright lid flaps in order to hold them secure and thus make room for more groceries in each box.

At our house, these individual pieces of string were saved by winding each segment together to form a big ball of string. Whenever we needed string for anything, it was taken from this ball. I would often ask my mother why we kept these pieces, why we couldn't simply buy a ball of string. My reasoning was that then, when we needed a piece of string, we could be guaranteed that it would be the length that was required instead of finding pieces that were much too long or much too short. My suggestion fell on deaf ears. We kept winding string onto the ball. We kept the ball. We kept string that, in my mind, was too short to save. Pieces could be knotted together if a longer string was needed. Pieces could be cut if a shorter piece of string was needed. Eventually a use was found for all the bits of string.

Now, like the lid flaps of a cardboard box, if I need supporting, strengthening, or need to be able to hold more, I recall stories from my past. Because so many of the people I cared for the most aren't here in the physical sense anymore, I use the stories as

a way to reconnect with them.

During the three years prior to completing the writing of this document, I searched for affirmation of my ideas through reading the books listed in the Bibliography. These readings helped to inform my thoughts surrounding the value of personal story within an individual's life. Although these sources are not directly quoted from within this writing, the reading and the reflection about the reading was invaluable for affirmation.

Sam Keen and Anne Valley-Fox's work in Your Mythic Journey validated for me that the stories of a person's life are important.

> Just as our primitive ancestors sat around fires carving spearheads, eating blackberries, and telling stories which became the first encyclopedias of human knowledge, so each person today can find within him/herself a replacement for the myths and stories that were lost when we ceased living in tribes.
>
> Stories of long ago told the people of a tribe who they were, where they had been, where they were going, and how to stay friendly with the spirits. Their stories explained where the world came from, why there were people, why snakes have no legs, why corn smut stops birth hemorrhages, why conch shells are sacred, why coyotes howl at night, and why the gods put fire and death on earth.
>
> Within each of us there is a tribe with a complete cycle of legends and dances, songs to be sung. We were all born into rich mythical lives, we need only claim the stories that are our birthright.

When we forget our stories, leave our heroes unsung, and ignore the rites that mark our passage from one stage of life into another, we feel nameless and empty. We can rediscover the uniqueness of the person if we reassemble our myths and stories which have been homogenized into business, education, politics, and dissipated in the media (Keen and Valley-Fox, 1989, pp. 1 & 2).

# Chapter Two
# People

*You have come*
*here to find what*
*you already have.*
*-- Buddhist Aphorism*

There are several people or groups of people who have impacted my life either because of their familial relationship to me or because of their geographical proximity. These people are: my maternal grandparents Conrad and Mary Lahnert, my parents Leo and Katherine Cooke, my aunt Clara Anderson, our neighbour Nellie Walker, my sisters Mary and Sheila, my brother Grant, and my teachers Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. Truss.

## Grandparents

My maternal grandparents, Mary and Conrad Lahnert, were Germans from Russia. Their ancestors had moved from Erbach, Germany to Jagodnaja, Russia during the time of Catherine the Great's reign.

After the Seven Years War (1756-1763), Catherine II, a former German princess, ascended to the Romanov throne in Russia. In 1763, the new Czarina implemented a policy which would act as a catalyst in conquering the frontier areas of her new nation and ultimately transform the southwest portion of Russia into one of the most productive areas of the world in both agriculture and industry. Some of the policy's enticing points included freedom of religion, immunity from all taxes, draft exemption, and land possession 'for time eternal.' This was also at a time when the country people in Germany were faced with higher taxes to help Germany after the toll that the war had

taken. Farm families were finding that dividing the land for inheritance purposes was making the parcels of land ever smaller. Diligence no longer spelled success.

As a result, many people from Germany took up the promise of the Czarina and traveled to Russia, to make a new home for themselves and their families. Jagodnaja, the village where my grandparents lived and where my mother was born, was one of the villages that resulted from this pilgrimage of German people.

As was the custom in German villages once the crops had been harvested and stored and other preparations for winter were concluded, the people relaxed with feasting and celebrations. The result was that December became the time for young people to be married. My grandparents, Mary Lautenschlager and Conrad Lahnert, were married on December 19, 1906 in Jagodnaja, Russia. Their two eldest children, Adam and Katherine, were born in Russia. My mother was the child Katherine. "During this time many of their friends had left Jagodnaja for America. One of these friends, a Mr. Stang, had immigrated(sic) to Canada. He sent $50.00 to Conrad and with these funds the young Lahnert family were(sic) able to go to the new land as well. On March 17, 1912 they left their parents, brothers, and sisters in Jagodnaja. They traveled first by wagon, then a ship to Glasgow, Scotland. There they boarded a larger ship, the Ultonia, for the journey across the Atlantic to Halifax, Nova Scotia. Continuing their journey, they traveled by train almost the breadth of Canada, arriving in Calgary, Alberta on May 12, 1912" (E. Unterschultz, 1981, p.2). This excerpt was taken from three pages type-written by my aunt Elsa Unterschultz in an effort to recount the basic details of her parents'/my grandparents' early lives for The American Historical Society of Germans from Russia.

Upon arrival in Calgary, Mary and Conrad settled in the Riverside/Bridgeland

community north of the Calgary General Hospital because other people from their village and other people of German origin lived there. It was there that they could speak their German language, go to the Lutheran church, and thus maintain cultural ties that were not available in other areas of the city. In Calgary, Grandfather found work at a box factory and eventually worked with the Canadian Pacific Railway as a machinist's helper. Grandma helped out the family finances by cleaning houses for other people. Many of Grandma's friends did the same and friends took turns working and looking after each others' small children. In later years, Grandma would tell Aunt Helena about cleaning apartments in The Devonish, once an upscale apartment building, now full of boutiques.

With the family growing to include two more boys (Alex and Conrad Jr.) and another daughter (Elsa), Grandfather thought that the best place for them to grow up was the country. My mother Katherine wrote in Fencelines and Furrows, the history book of the Blackie area, that she could still see the "Land for sale" advertisement which Grandfather answered. "He finally chose the Blackie district and purchased one half section of land from a Mr. Goodman. Mother was not in favor of country life, but her objections were overruled and we arrived in Blackie by train. We were met at the station by the late O.W. Bowlus who drove us out to our destination one mile east of Blackie" (Fencelines and Furrows History Book Society, 1969, p. 228).

A part of this story that my mother didn't mention in the history book was Grandma's embarrassment that she could not speak English, that the family did not have any money, and that all she had to feed Mr. Bowlus after the ride to the farm was "dumpling soup." This dumpling soup was known to us in the family, and still is today, as "German bullets" although we were forbidden to use this name outside of family

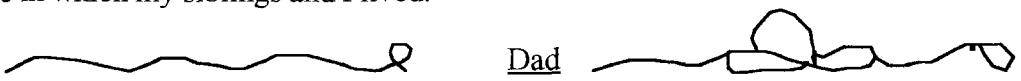
kitchens. The German name is klees. Klees were made from a mixture of flour, eggs and water enough to make a harder-than-bread dough. The dough was kneaded a lot, then snipped off by scissors into bullet-sized pieces and dropped into boiling water until the dumplings rose to the top. A diced potato would also be added to cook with the dumplings. Some of the dumplings would be left in the liquid for soup, others would be scooped out and fried, maybe mixed with an egg, or mixed with apples for a special treat. On rare occasions my mother would make these and other ethnic "treats" such as krebble, gahocktus, kraut kuchen, flatbread, and rye bread. Most of the times that I remember eating these foods were at Grandmother's house.

Once the family was established at the farm near Blackie, my mother attended Blackie School until the eighth grade. At that time, her father insisted that she quit school in order to cook for his threshing crew. Grandfather's threshing crew was a group of men, some of whom were his sons and some were the sons of his friends from Calgary, who did custom threshing for other farmers. A bunk-house-like structure on wheels accompanied the crew from field to field. This was the cook car. It had a stove, cupboards, and a supply of dishes and pots and pans. It also had a table and long benches that the men sat on when they came to the cook car for eating.

Mother did this cooking for a time, but eventually "escaped" her father by marrying Leo Cooke in 1933. Mother had always wanted to become a school teacher. This dream was never realized. Instead, she married a man who was everything that her father was not. Leo was a slight man, not too tall, an American with British roots; he worked as a bartender for his brother-in-law, he smoked, he danced, he took a drink, he played cards, and religion was not a big part of his life.

During the first year of their marriage, my mother and father traveled to Indiana to visit Dad's parents. Mom and Dad lived with Grandma and Grandpa Cooke during this time. Mother became close to Dad's four sisters and one brother during the year's stay. Two of his sisters later came to live in Calgary. His youngest sister, Mary Brookshire, came from the United States to visit us often. Dad faithfully wrote extensive letters to family in Indiana at Christmas. One of his sisters living in Indiana sent him the local newspaper, The Hoosier Democrat, weekly. Although my paternal grandparents had died before I was born, we kept close connections with the remaining family in Indiana.

Upon returning to Canada, Mom and Dad lived with Grandma and Grandpa Lahnert at the farm near Blackie. Dad took work as an elevator agent's assistant and my parents rented a house two miles north of Blackie on the Harris farm. In 1941 Mom and Dad moved to Herronton where Dad bought grain for the Searle Grain Company. A year later, they bought the Kabeary farm two-and-a-half miles north of Herronton. This is the house in which my siblings and I lived.



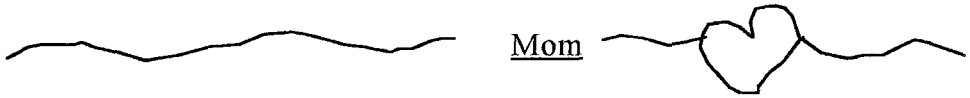
Dad

I was born when my father was forty-six years old and when my mother was thirty-eight years. I am the youngest of four children. I have two older sisters, Mary and Sheila, and an older brother Grant. They were all attending school when I was born. As a result, I spent a lot of time by myself or in the company of my parents and their peers. I had playmates nearby but I didn't see many of them on a very regular basis. I liked it that way. As a youngster, I might go for a walk in the coulee. I might lie on a hillside watching the clouds float by, or I might watch a hawk soaring on the up-drafts. When I was a teenager, I would spend countless hours riding. Just my horse and I, and the symphony

of the prairie -- gophers, meadow larks, magpies, hawks, wind.

As a small child, I spent a lot of my time with my Dad -- going to farm auctions and cattle auctions. I loved the standing around and the schmoozing with the neighbours. I loved the hot coffee and the homemade pies. I loved the excitement of the bidding. I became actively involved in auctions, myself, as a result of my grandmother. When I was about seven years old Grandmother gave each of her grandchildren a handmade quilt, a set of handmade feather pillows, and fifty dollars. These were to be her wedding presents to each of us in case she died before we were married.

I decided to use my fifty dollars to go into the cattle business. Dad thought that it was a good idea, too. My theory was that he would pick out the calf for me to buy, he would do the bidding, and I would pay for it. Not so. At the first auction when we went specifically to see about buying a calf for me, I panicked when Dad told me that I would have to do the bidding myself. I was terrified wondering how I was going to make my bid known as a serious bid to the auctioneer. Who would expect a small seven-year-old girl to be bidding at a cattle auction? All the experienced cattlemen had established subtle signals for their bids, which the auctioneers knew. What was my signal going to be? I decided to raise my hand much as I did in school. It worked. I felt that I had entered a masculine domain by bidding at the cattle auction. I never saw any other girl doing this.




My mother was a caring, hard-working woman devoted to her family. This devotion took the form of three meals a day of delicious food: home-grown fried chicken in the summer with a flavour that no chicken-farm-raised bird can ever come close to, fresh vegetables from a huge garden, preserves of fruit and pickles to be savoured over

winter, and homemade bread and cookies. Clothing was washed and ironed every Monday. For most of my years at home, Mom would be the first one up in the morning to stoke the fire in the huge round furnace in the basement and the wood stove in the kitchen. Steaming coffee and frying bacon would be the smells that roused us in the morning. Coffee with cream meant just that.

Mother was selfless in everything that she did, always putting others before herself. Her manner was quiet and reserved. Mom's days were lived on the farm, doing work that living on a farm demanded: caring for her family, gardening, helping to raise animals, and helping with chores. She did not spend time shopping unless items were an absolute necessity. Most shopping was done from the Sears catalogue rather than from shops in High River or Calgary. Forays into Calgary were reserved for visiting with Grandmother along with special errands or business that could not be completed in Herronton, Blackie, or High River. Mother never drove in Calgary, so trips there were always accompanied by Dad. After I got my driver's license, Mom and I would go in to the city more often. Times were changing, and shopping at Chinook Centre, in what was then the south side of Calgary, offered a larger selection of shops in one location rather than having to drive into the centre of the city for The Bay or Eatons.

I saw Mother as the glue that held the family together. Mom was courageous, hopeful, and positive. I never heard her being being critical of anyone, but she did have definite views about the way that I was supposed to conduct myself. I believe that the high ideals in terms of behaviour and education that Mom had for me were connected to her idea of the "American Dream" that she may have had for herself. Education and proper conduct would ensure my successful place within the North American/Canadian

culture.

Mother didn't allow herself much idle time, although after Dad died she did add painting and ceramics to her other "hobbies" of knitting, and crocheting. Aside from the activities within the community which involved couples, such as playing cards and going to dances, Mom engaged in few activities with women friends apart from her involvement in the Herronton Community Club and the Farrow United Church Ladies Aid Society.

One of Mom's friends from her school days in Calgary was Mary Hergert. Mary along with her husband, Fred, would visit us on Sunday afternoons during the summer. Fred was very particular about his car. When they came to visit, he insisted on parking it on the shaded side of the house so that there was no possibility of it fading in the hot sun during their visit. The thought of driving it out to the country during the winter along with the accompanying salt and slush was not anything that Fred would even consider. Margaret Coy, who was married to a farmer in the community, was also a good friend while the Coys lived on their farm. When they moved to High River, we didn't see them as often. When the young couple from Holland, Andrew and Katherine van Bussel, moved to Jack Walker's farm to help with the farming, Mother befriended Katherine. Mom was able to communicate with the young Katherine in a combination of German and Dutch until the Dutch family became conversant in English. Dad's sister, Clara Anderson, was a friend of Mom's, although they were the antithesis of each other. Clara was able to engage Mom in lively discussions. Maybe it was because of their differences. Clara, in her outspoken way, would initiate subjects for discussion. Mom would refute.


Aunt Clara and Uncle Les had no children. I don't recall Clara actually labouring in

the physical sense that I saw work being done on the farm. She and Uncle Les managed apartment buildings in which they lived. Clara would collect the rent and would over-see any physical labour that had to be done in connection with the upkeep of the building. Uncle Les was a school janitor and wasted most of his life with alcohol abuse. Aunt Clara's cooking was a guaranteed disaster. Something that seemed effortless for my mother, even when done on a wood stove in her early days, would be fraught with emergencies and ruins for Clara in her city apartment with its modern appliances. I remember one particular Sunday when the whole turkey flopped onto the kitchen floor during carving! I was able to see this event first-hand from my vantage point on the needlepoint-padded foot stool that I had to sit on. (Children were to be seen but not heard in Aunt Clara's world). The resultant yelling between Aunt Clara and Uncle Les was a common occurrence. Any food preparation or tasks in the kitchen would be accompanied by facial grimaces and jittery movements on the part of Aunt Clara. I think that she knew that cooking wasn't her strength, but she felt compelled to entertain at some level. I don't ever recall eating a home-baked anything in Clara's home. We could usually be assured of a Safeway-bought pineapple pie. Coffee was always instant Maxwell House boiling hot, hot enough to ensure burned lips on my part, and strong.

Clara had sharp, angular features. Her face could never be described as beautiful or even attractive, but she tried everything to make it so. "Everything" included face powder, rouge, bright red lipstick, and "arched" eyebrows. My mother's features were softer and more rounded. My mother wore very little make-up. My mother's nails were seldom manicured. My mother's hands would often be stained from working with vegetables or from working in the garden.

When Clara and Les would come from Calgary to visit us on the farm, I saw a completely different kind of woman from my mother. Their arrival would be viewed with trepidation by all. As children, we would shrink from the certain kiss by red lips that would leave their mark on our cheeks. They would arrive in a spotless car and Clara would be wearing her "city" clothes. These city clothes were often a dress or perhaps a pair of sharply creased white pants in the summer. Les would arrive in a white shirt, suit pants, and with boozy breath. If Clara were going to do any "work" such as go through her things that were in storage upstairs in our house, she would change into "country" clothes -- dark pants, a man's shirt, a scarf covering her hair, and possibly cotton gloves. She wouldn't want to damage her nails. Aunt Clara read the newspaper and picked saskatoon berries while wearing white gloves so that her hands would not become dirty and/or stained. She would eat only chicken. She had once watched a television show on the slaughter of calves for veal and thus would never eat beef after that. Chicken was so white and so "clean" -- no bloody mess during the preparation. She was always watching what she was eating and would eat only the tiniest of portions. She was obsessed with maintaining a trim figure. She was very outspoken about children, that would be Us, and she was expert at finding fault in everyone she knew.

Before her return to Calgary, Clara would take a round mirror with chromed edges and skinny curved-wire legs. It was magnified on one side. She would set this up on the kitchen table, magnified side up, and stretch and narrow her eyes critically while applying face powder from a compact. That would snap shut, her big comb (not a rat-tail) would glide through her smooth wavy hair and aim it straight back from her face. The final touch: deep red lipstick. Her silk-stockinged legs would slide out of her "trousers" and into her

dress. She had a penchant for dressing and undressing in front of us -- anyone -- men or women, boys or girls.

Clara wrote all cards and letters in Parker turquoise ink. I always viewed this as another way that she used to set herself apart from the mainstream. She liked being different. She liked to think that she was superior to others. She unofficially changed her name to "Claire" rather than Clara because she thought that Claire sounded more sophisticated.

## Mrs. Walker

My parents were older than most of my peers' parents. Most of our neighbours were older than my parents. As a result, I was surrounded by a large collection of people who were senior-aged. There was an air of dignity about my parents' friends: Mr. & Mrs. Jack Walker, Mr. & Mrs. Charles Malmberg, Mr. & Mrs. Albert Swartz, Mr. & Mrs. Joe Leslie. The women always wore dresses. The couples lived harmoniously. It never occurred to me to call these people by their first names; that would have been a sign of disrespect. I thought that, as the daughter of Leo and Katherine Cooke, I had a responsibility to be above reproach in my behaviour, my actions, and my deeds. I could not bring shame and embarrassment to my parents.

The people of the neighbourhood who played the biggest part in my memory of childhood were Mr. and Mrs. (Jack and Nellie) Walker. They lived down our lane and a short walk down the gravel road to the south. They lived in a big old white house with red trim. They had one daughter, Charlotte. Charlotte had one daughter, Heather. Charlotte, her husband, and her daughter lived in Calgary and came to the country some Sundays to visit her parents. Sometimes Heather would come to our house for a visit.

Mr. Walker had the face of a cherub and a very strong Scottish accent. He drove his shiny black Oldsmobile to our house every Sunday morning for a visit and a cup of coffee. He would send my mind into spasms of giddy nervous laughter as he would greet my sister and me with a hearty "Good morning girls," but to my little-girl brain it sounded like 'girdles' because of his brogue and that would be the cause of my internal mirth. At the age of seven or eight, I knew nothing of actual girdles except that they were something that I saw in the Simpson-Sears catalogue and that I hoped never to wear. Hearing proper Mr. Walker say the word in his Scottish accent was more than I could bear on some mornings, and I would have to run upstairs to my bedroom and have a big giggle. My first knowledge about the Titanic came from Mr. Walker. He had missed boarding it on his voyage to America because he was in too much of a hurry to wait for its departure date.

Mrs. Walker's face was longer and thinner than Mr. Walker's. Mrs. Walker had a mole on her cheek that, as a little girl, I thought looked like dried gum. I questioned Mom about it and told her what I thought it looked like. Mom drilled into me the idea that I was never to question Mrs. Walker about the mole. I never did, but I still couldn't help wondering about it every time I looked at Mrs. Walker's face closely.

My early childhood walks to the Walker's farm were my first forays into independent travel. I might stroll over in the morning, the afternoon, or during the golden, long-shadowed summer evenings when black birds filled the power lines. I would sit out on the long bench beside the back door and chat with Mrs. Walker while she plucked a chicken or shelled peas. I might chat with her while she baked cookies or prepared supper. I might watch her cut out clippings from the newspaper in the evening. I might watch her playing Solitaire. Or I might follow Mr. Walker around the barnyard as he did

his chores of milking the cows or feeding the chickens.

Mr. and Mrs. Walker held parties. Mr. Walker moved the furniture out of the house and onto the verandah. The house was full of friends and neighbours, standing, visiting, and laughing. Events such as this seemed to me like the kind of occasion that fairy tales were made of.

Each year my Mother recognized Mrs. Walker's birthday by having it announced on CFCN radio station. It was a special thrill for Mrs. Walker to hear her name over the air waves.

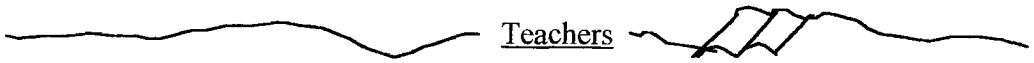
## Siblings

Being the youngest of four children, I was influenced both by my older sisters (nine and twelve years older than I) who were mostly gone from home for as long as I can remember, and my brother who was six years older.

My oldest sister Mary married a Catholic. There was much family turmoil around Dad's refusal to attend the wedding. He did, finally, but not before many tears on both my mother and Mary's part. But he took no part in the ceremony. Grant, my brother, escorted Mary down the aisle of St. Mary's Cathedral. I don't know any real specifics about why my father held such strong negative views toward Catholics. Because it was such an emotionally-charged topic, I never ventured to inquire. Perhaps it was because of his Irish Protestant roots. Perhaps it was because of Dad's involvement in the Masonic Lodge -- an organization forbidding membership to Catholics.

My second oldest sister Sheila became pregnant and married at age seventeen. I witnessed the tears surrounding her wedding first-hand because she and I shared a bedroom. I remember her sitting at the top of the stairs, in the dark, listening to Mom and

Dad's conversations. This was after all of us children were in bed, supposedly asleep. Mom and Dad were downstairs, talking in the kitchen, and Sheila was listening. Crying. I listened to her. Crying. My big sister crying had a huge impact on my six-year-old psyche. I watched and listened, and promised myself that this kind of unhappiness could not be brought into our house as the result of my relationships outside of the family. I felt that my two sisters had disappointed Mom and Dad, especially Mom. I knew early in my life that I would become a teacher, that I would fulfill my mother's personal dream.




Until I attended eighth grade in Mossleigh School, I had only two teachers: Mrs. Murphy for the first four years and Mrs. Truss for grades five through seven. Mrs. Murphy was stern, but warm and understanding at the same time. She was a member of the community. She and her husband had lived in the community for years. She knew everyone's parents. This idea helped to keep me polite and studious. I didn't want to act out in stupid and mean-spirited ways because my parents would inevitably know about it through discussion with Mrs. Murphy. I don't know if this was really true, but as a child it is what I believed.

Mrs. Truss came to Herronton School as a new teacher when I was in fifth grade. She lived in Brant, a community about ten miles away. She was from Britain. She had children who went to school with us. Her ideas about what was important to think and do, and her views on the importance of writing and reading were radically different from Mrs. Murphy's.

We would have Reading Weeks. During these weeks, we would "forget" about all other subjects and we would read. Mrs. Truss placed a huge importance on reading and

she would read at the same time as we did. Mrs. Truss brought novels from her home for us to read at school because the library at Herronton School was tiny both in size and in volumes. She introduced us to Dickens, the Bronte sisters, Shakespeare, Hemingway, L.M. Montgomery, Pearl S. Buck, and a vast array of other authors. By the time I had completed seventh grade, I had read most of the current works by the above-mentioned authors.

Her classroom was different from Mrs. Murphy's in other ways too. We listened to classical music while we were working on other subjects. We sang. We competed in music festivals county-wide and took first place. We devoted all of Friday afternoon to art studies. We mostly drew and painted. Mrs. Truss painted and drew alongside us. I found both these activities difficult because I had not done much of either, but given the time and the direction I developed the courage to risk doing both kinds of activities. We wrote every day. We learned about "the writing process" long before it came into vogue in public education classrooms. We didn't use textbooks or workbooks. I'm not certain whether this was because Herronton School was so small (about forty students in eight grades) with a resultant small budget or whether it was because it was Mrs. Truss's teaching style to not use workbooks. I recall her berating the idea of "filling in blanks" on numerous occasions. English and European history were taught as though it were a story. Again, no textbooks were used. I remember writing notes, both from Mrs. Truss's "lectures" and from her ideas on the board.

Most of my knowledge about history, art, reading, writing, music, and science came from the three years spent in Mrs. Truss's company. As a person with a frog phobia, an event very memorable for me was when we dissected a frog and I actually held

down one of its legs during the procedure. This was the first and the last time that I have been that close to, never mind touched, a frog.

A consequence of "having" Mrs. Truss for a teacher for three years was that she set me to thinking. Mrs. Truss encouraged me to travel, to do things, to become whatever I wanted, to go to university. She filled my head with possibilities outside of the farm.

# Chapter Three
# Places

*In today already walks tomorrow.*
*-- Samuel Taylor Coleridge*

Looking at my past must include a look at places that have been important in my life because I have always been strongly affected by my physical surroundings. My surroundings have played a role in my emotional state of mind. My physical environment is not something from which I can easily separate myself. Having always lived very close to the community in which I was raised, there were only a few structures that were important to me, but important they were. These structures were: the Herronton farm, the Herronton farmhouse, Herronton School, Herronton Community Hall, Herronton General Store, the Royal Bank in Blackie, Mossleigh School, County Central High School in Vulcan, the University of Calgary, and Lomond School.

## Herronton Farm

If I were to return to a time of my childhood when I felt that I could run endlessly, when there was no tomorrow or yesterday, when everything in the world was just right, it would be when I would step off the school bus and begin my walk down our lane toward my house. I would feel a wonderfully warm, secure, comfortable sensation overtake me. I would know that my parents would be home -- Dad might be in the field but he was somewhere nearby. Mom would most likely be in the kitchen preparing supper. My life as I had known it for the first six years will resume. Until later years of homework days, in these early years time after school would be for being me, for riding my horse, for talking with Mom, for going outside.

When we had milk cows, one of my jobs when I got home from school was to bring the milk cows up to the barn for milking. I would leave the steps of the house and run the half-mile to the East End fence line. This fence line divided our coulee pasture into two parts. The stock cows grazed in the East End, the milk cows in the pasture closest to the house and barn. Our dog, either King or Cookie, would come with me. Because of my aversion to the frogs along the creek, I needed the dogs' company when walking, and they were key to my avoidance of the coulee bottom. King and Cookie could both herd the cows by verbal commands from me. Thus I was able to keep to the tops of the coulee even if the cows were grazing in the bottom.

If it were spring, the crocuses would be in bloom, blanketing the pasture in their soft, pale, mauve beauty. A few weeks later, the buffalo beans would supply a yellow carpet to the same pasture. The sun, the wind, the grass, the clouds, and the indigo sky would be all the company that I would need.

In years when pasture was short or scarce due to a lack of rain, I would spend my Saturday and Sunday mornings on the back of my horse, Vicki, eating an orange and watching the cows drifting as they grazed in the alfalfa field to the west of our house or in the ditches alongside the road. This was very quiet lazy herding because the cows didn't stray too much; they were mostly interested in eating. My job was simply to make sure that they didn't get onto the road.

These are good memories of a very secure and a seemingly endless time in my young life. I wasn't concerned about friends, fashion, or the future. I was blissfully content in my tiny world.

## Herronton Farmhouse

When the farmhouse of my childhood was built in 1904, it was considered to be one of the "mansions" of the area. It was built by Mormons for a large family.

Entering the house as a child, I would come in the back door on the east side of the house and enter a porch. The porch would be a collection of jackets hanging on big brass hooks along the left side and an assortment of Dad's work boots, Grant's riding boots, maybe a pair of Mom's garden shoes, and rubber boots of mine. If it were summertime, there would be a washstand with a basin on it that we used for washing our hands. There might be a painted wooden chair to sit on for the putting on or the taking off of shoes and boots. There was a big window that made up the east wall, along with the wooden screen door. This porch was always bright. It was a real mud and dirt collector, which I suppose was its purpose.

On the west side of the porch was the door leading into our kitchen. This was a big wooden door which had raised paneling for decorative purposes, as did all the doors in the house. It also had an ornate brass knob and a window in the top quarter of the door.

When I was very young, the kitchen was painted yellow and green. A round oak table sat under the two small-paned windows that faced north. To the east of the table was a tall skinny door that opened to reveal a drop-leaf ironing board. To the west of the table was a cream and black shiny wood stove standing on ornate chrome legs. The stove was, naturally, beside the chimney. On the end of the stove beside the chimney was a reservoir that kept us supplied with warm water for washing. Mom always ensured that it was kept full. I would sit on the reservoir, nestled against the chimney. It was the warmest spot in the house and I loved sitting there. I could watch Mom creating tasty

dinners and I could listen to and take part in conversations at the dinner table -- the hub of the family activities. Around the corner of the stove on the north wall was another of the doors that were throughout our house with the lovely old brass knobs. This door led downstairs to the cellar. The cellar was a place that I avoided at all costs because it was home to mice, salamanders, and frogs.

On the west side of the kitchen was a door that led through to a foyer. This foyer had big brass hooks for coats. A board had been attached to the bottom of the slope that the banister created. Smaller hooks were attached here so children could hang their coats too. These would be our "good" coats or the coats of guests. A wooden bannister and stairs leading up to the bedrooms were here, along with a door leading out to the verandah on the west side of the house, and a door leading into the parlour. Beside the door from the kitchen was our International Harvester refrigerator. This item arrived at our house with much fanfare. Dad had traded grain to the International Harvester implement company for a refrigerator, a marvelous electrical innovation to farm families accustomed to keeping food cool and fresh down a well, or in a basement, or in an ice chest.

The complete south wall of the kitchen was solid, except for the doorway into the dining room. Back to the east wall, beside the main entryway from the porch, there was a door that led into the pantry. The pantry had a counter top on the left and tall, tall cupboards that went to the ceiling. These cupboards were painted white on the outside with a deep burgundy-red on the inside. Below the counter top, to the left, were three drawers. The top one was for silverware, the middle was for tea towels, and the bottom one was for recipe books. I used the bottom drawer as a step to the white enamel bucket and pitcher which held our drinking water, ice-cold from the artesian well with which our

farm was blessed. To the right of the drawers was a deep metal-lined flour bin that pulled out in a big wedge shape. Beside it was another bin like this for sugar. The south wall of the pantry had similar ceiling-reaching cupboards. Below them were two doors behind which were stored Mom's Wear Ever aluminum pots. On the east wall of the pantry were windows and another counter top with more cupboards below. These cupboards held the Pyrex mixing bowls of graduated sizes going from blue the smallest, to red, to yellow, finally green. Various other bowls and serving dishes were kept here. On the west side of the pantry were double doors that opened onto shelves of the built-in china cabinet of the dining room. During the winter, the wash stand and basin that had been in the porch were moved in to the pantry so that we could wash our hands and face in less frigid conditions. The smell in the pantry was of spices and flour and sugar. I was fascinated watching the black and white Sunbeam mix master turn sugar and butter and flour into cakes, cookies, cream-puffs, Christmas cakes, loaves, and squares.

Through the arch-way on the south side of the kitchen was the dining room. It was designed for this purpose with a built-in china cabinet having leaded glass doors. We used this room as a combination living/dining room.

This was a sunny room with a bank of windows in a bay facing south. We called this the Front Room. I remember most vividly the decorating scheme of my childhood. The wooden floor was covered in a piece of linoleum designed to look like an area rug. It was dark green with silvery-gray leaf designs on it. The drapes were a heavy fabric with grey background and a big floral pattern in shades of deep wine, white, and chartreuse. Two walls were painted burgundy and one of the shorter walls was painted chartreuse. The wooden sliding doors between this room and the parlour covered the fourth wall. We

had two tri-light floor lamps, one with a chartreuse shade and one with a white shade. In 1958 we bought a television, a square screen held on four straight legs decreasing in size at the bottom. Each leg was finished with a brass base. The television was only turned on in the evening when the whole family would sit down to watch the news and weather. We watched shows in the evening: Country Hoedown, Don Messer's Jubilee, Perry Como. Sundays I watched Lassie, which inevitably made me cry, and Walt Disney, which inevitably made me cry if it was about animals. I became totally engrossed in the pathetic lives of the animals on these shows and wished that I could help and save all of them. I always wanted to save every dog, cat, or critter that needed rescuing.

I abhorred a stuffed and mounted cock pheasant that sat on our television. It collected dust and I wouldn't touch it to clean it. The piano on which all of the girls took piano lessons was in this room. Mom's Duncan Phyfe dining room suite with the four delicate chairs was in this room. My favourite pieces of furniture in this room were the big, heavy, burgundy-coloured sofa and matching chair with a cut velvet design in the fabric. Most wondrous for me was the way that the bottom of it pulled out and made into a bed. I used to plead with Mom to allow me to sleep there. There was a wing chair with dark green brocade fabric.

Big wooden sliding doors separated this room from the parlour. The parlour had tall windows facing west, looking onto the verandah, down our lane, across grain fields and west to the mountains. This room had curved corners. Because the number of children and the number of bedrooms didn't match, Mom and Dad used this room as their bedroom. The furniture consisted of their four-poster bed, a modern version made of walnut and a curving shape for the head board that I loved to trace with my fingers when I

would be allowed to sleep in their bed. Whenever I was sick I "got" to be downstairs in Mom and Dad's bed instead of by myself upstairs. This privilege and comfort eased the trauma of the childhood chicken pox, mumps, measles, flu, and the common cold. It also kept Mom from having to climb up and down the sixteen steps up and down to minister to my complaints, wants, and needs. There was a chest of drawers that matched the bed. It had a big round mirror attached to the back. There were two small drawers at the top: one for Dad's things, one for Mom's things. Mom's things consisted of face powder, lipstick, and hankies with lace edges. Dad's things were old coins, his Masonic Lodge book (forbidden territory), and garters for his dress socks. The middle drawer was the length of the chest, fairly shallow. and contained Mom and Dad's underwear. The bottom drawer fascinated me because it was the deepest drawer that I had ever seen. It was deep enough for me to hide in during a game of hide-and-seek. It held a few sweaters, scarves, and gloves.

At the foot of the bed was Mom's cedar chest. I loved to open this and suck in the smell of cedar. It preserved my grandmother's fine, black, wool babushka that she brought with her from Russia. She had worn it exclusively to church. She never wore it in Canada. The cedar chest was never full to the top. It contained other items such as a linen tablecloth, Mom and Dad's photo albums, and some doilies. Mom's Singer treadle sewing machine was in this room. This machine was a never-ending fascination for Grant, who loved to pump the treadle as though he were in a race and watch the needle pound up and down until Mom heard it.

In later years, when the children were gone from home, Mom and Dad moved their bedroom upstairs. The parlour then became the site of Dad's collection of antique

furniture and curios.

Sixteen stairs led up to the bedrooms. The first two stairs lead to a landing which opened to a walk-in closet. This closet was meant to be used for coats (the foyer did not originally have the hooks for coats that we used) but Mom and Dad used this closet for their clothes because of its proximity to their parlour-bedroom. I loved to play in this closet. It was quiet and dark. I loved to look at Mom's good dresses, feel the taffeta and the fine wool and the rayon. I liked the formal look of Dad's suits. One of my favourites was a double-breasted charcoal suit that he wore with a pink shirt -- a popular combination in the 1950s. I liked Dad's heavy brocade robe with the heavy black tasseled rope belt.

From this door, eight stairs led to the next landing where a window looked north out onto Mom's garden and the grain fields. The steps turned ninety degrees and lead up to the hallway. The first bedroom on the left was shared by Sheila and me. It had the unique feature of a clothes' chute in the corner. This chute wasn't simply a hole in the wall, but a structure about two feet off the floor. The lid lifted up. I would sometimes lift the lid and gaze down into the dark depths and frighten myself with thoughts of tumbling into this dark narrow abyss and landing on the hard concrete basement floor. The same thoughts coursed through my child's brain when I used to sit on it, but that never kept me from sitting on it! In later years, the lower half of the chute was converted into a set of shelves accessible from a door beside the stove in the kitchen. These shelves held an assortment of things: cans of tobacco and cigarette papers for Dad, ledger books from Alberta Wheat Pool in which Dad kept cattle and grain records, glycerine for Dad's dry cracked fingers, and pieces of string that I thought were too short to save.

This room that Sheila and I shared had light blue wallpaper with a big floral design. Beside our bedroom door was a linen closet. Mary had the next bedroom all to herself. It had pink wallpaper. When Mary and Sheila were teenagers, they had matching blue and pink reading lamps that attached to the headboards of their beds. These lights were curved in the rocket shapes, popular in the 1950s. A little chain pulled the light on. At the end of the hall was a room which would be classified as big if it had been used for its intended purpose, a bathroom. But the builders of the house hadn't put running water into the house. We used it as Grant's bedroom. It had a big walk-in closet. When I was very young I used to like to sleep with Grant in his room because he told me bedtime stories about hunting bears in our coulee. I was both fascinated and terrified by these stories.

The room that ran the complete west side of the upstairs area was originally designed as the master bedroom. It had a door leading out onto a balcony. When I was very young, the balcony began leaking down the walls into the parlour below during rain storms. This resulted in the balcony being removed and big windows to the west taking its place. This big room was used by Mom as a storage area. Aunt Clara stored some of her things here, too. This space was used by me as a play area. By most standards, it would have been considered a crowded mess, but it was where I spent countless hours playing with friends and by myself with books, dolls, and games. It was here that I would pretend to be a princess with a train made from the sheer curtains that were being stored there or dressing up in Mom and Dad's old clothes, creating personae for myself. Since my sisters and brother were all in school when I was born, I spent a lot of my time by myself, some time with my friend, Murrell Westertsund, who lived across the coulee, and later with the children of the Dutch family that was hired by Mr. Walker to help him

with farm work.

The dreaded cellar ... This cool, dark place housed damp mops under which frogs crouched and then jumped out and frightened me. It housed the dank wooden bin which stored potatoes, and carrots, as well as salamanders that scratched and moved and also frightened me. It housed the dirty coal bin which meant the work of shoveling coal into the big, hot, round furnace at the centre of the basement. The loved cellar... This hot centre of the house was home to the coal-burning furnace. I loved it for the heat and for the fascination of pulling open the door and gazing into the white-hot embers. I loved the many shelves of preserves which lined the west wall. Mom would have prepared these in a sweltering kitchen during July and August. Raspberries, peaches, and apricots were preserved fruit from British Columbia. Scrumptious canned chicken was made from our own home-grown birds. Deep purple pickled beets, tiny bright orange pickled carrots, and small sweet pickles were from our own garden. All these colors and tastes lined the shelves. It was magic. These jars, emptied during the cold months of November through March, were sweet, delicious reminders that summer would arrive again. The cycle of growth and of harvest would return. Some things would never change. Change was in the seasons and in the activities that each season required and allowed.

In the evenings on the farm, sitting on our west-facing verandah, I found the most peace. I loved the long shadows that the setting sun created. I liked the quietness of a windless evening and the way the dust hung in the air after a vehicle had smoked down the gravel road. I liked dreaming of riding my horse in the mountains. I liked reading out here.

## Herronton School

I ventured out from the Herronton farmhouse with a mixture of excitement and regret, to begin school. School changed my life from being free on the farm with Mom and Dad and the cats, dogs, and horses to being part of a different group. Having spent the first six years of life mostly amongst adults or by myself, I was ambivalent about spending my days with children. Murrell Westersund was a good friend whom I liked playing with, most of the time. But I also liked to be solitary. I liked to play and think in my own mind. I liked to read books. Games with children didn't interest me much. Besides, when children visited our house they always seemed to make a mess of my bedroom. I hated that. I would have been content to remain at home, with my parents or older siblings teaching me whatever I needed to know.

For the first seven years of my schooling I attended the last two-room country school in the area. It was a lovely, warm, old, wooden sanctuary smelling of oiled wooden floors, real ink, newly-sharpened pencils, and eraser rubbings. The complete east wall of each room was floor to ceiling windows, offering a panoramic view of the prairie, a place to escape visually and spiritually.

At the front of the school, big double doors opened up to a wide wooden stairway leading left to the "little" room (grades one to four) and right to the "big" room (grades five through eight). On either side of this wide wooden stairway there were narrower steps going into the basement. In the basement, there were two play rooms under each of the classrooms. We didn't use these rooms much, usually only if it was too cold to be outside. Each Hallowe'en the grade eight class converted the "big" playroom into a Ghost Chamber for the purpose of terrifying students in the younger grades with sound effects

and tactile effects. All this terror was administered with the "victim" being blindfolded. The basement was also where the big crock holding the school's drinking water was located. A spigot released the bleachy concoction. Beside the "drinking fountain" was a long narrow table. This was where we washed our hands. We used ice cold water dipped from buckets that also stood on the table. We washed in metal basins. Slippery bars of hand soap were available. Instruction by Mrs. Murphy in grades one to four and by Mrs. Truss in grades five to eight had a very relaxed and family-like atmosphere about it. Because there was no gymnasium, athletic activities would be games of baseball, prolonged for the afternoon to make up for time missed in "gym," or it would be afternoons spent skating on the outdoor rink whenever the temperature permitted. On rainy days, we played games in the playrooms downstairs.

In the "little" room, we sat in desks that were attached to one another by interlocking wooden skids. Each desk was really a seat with a desk top behind it that attached itself via the skids to another desk top and seat. Each desk top had an ink well; even the smallest desks had them because in grade two we learned cursive writing with a straight pen and nib. Underneath the top of the desk was where we kept our books and pencil boxes. The sides of the desk were black wrought iron.

The desks in the "big" room were individual. They were made of oak. The top extended into a narrow piece of wood that joined the back. The left side was open. Below the seat, a drawer, which we used to hold books and pencil boxes, pulled out to the left.

The library in each of these rooms was a small room, about ten feet long and about five feet wide. There were bookshelves on one long wall and the rest of the room was for storage. In the "little" room, the space was occupied by a sand table, which I remember

never having sand in it. The table sat there, empty, filling space.

Memories of being in the "little" room for four years include "being the teacher" for Jack Laycraft. My job was to listen to him read. This was my first introduction to seeing someone struggle with something that I found so effortless. My breakthrough in my own reading came in grade two. I missed a lot of school because of being afflicted with the German measles followed by chicken pox. Dad brought me two books from the Herronton General Store: Roy Rogers and the Brasada Bandits and Trudy Phillips New Girl. I still have these books. The paper in them is pulp but the covers are hard, layered in a thin cellophane veneer melted onto the coloured cover picture. These were the first novels that I remember reading. Before these two books I had read stories from my reader or stories from a set of books we had at home that had come with the purchase of the Encyclopedia Britannica. There were twelve books in the set. Each new book was increasingly difficult. The colours ranged from light to dark green for the first six volumes and then from light purple to dark purple for the last six. Roy Rogers and Trudy Phillips revealed to me that the purpose of reading was to make sense of a text, a story line. This was my breakthrough in reading. I remember a few poems that I learned during these four years. One of these, by Emily Dickinson, I think, began..."There is no frigate like a book to take us lands away... ." After Roy and Trudy, I never stopped reading. I don't know if Jack Laycraft ever developed a love for reading.

Chalkboards covered the front (south) wall of this classroom. A map of the world hung on the west wall. It had pictures of Neilson's chocolate bars in the corners of the Pacific and Indian oceans. It had to be rolled up by hand and tied with two cotton bias-tape ties that were attached to the top.

We hung our coats in a cloak room. This was a fairly narrow room lined with heavy brass hooks. Here we also kept our lunch boxes and our boots -- neatly placed on the oiled floor under our coats.

Between the two classrooms, there was a room which the teachers used to sit in during the noonhour. It also housed a bed for sick bay.

Moving into the "big" room was a much-anticipated change. We were now a part of the elite group, as stature in school went. Mrs. Murphy always assured us in grade four, however, that although we were "big toads in a little pond" we would soon be "little toads in a big pond." This was a bad metaphor for Leslie, the frog hater.

## Herronton General Store

My early visits to Herronton were as a preschool child, with Mom, for the purpose of buying groceries. The Herronton General Store seemed huge. The floor of the store was oiled hardwood. The door was in the north-west corner of the store. A pop cooler was immediately on the left upon entering. It was the type where the pop stood in water and, when you put in your dime, it allowed the pop to be pulled through the metal clip that was otherwise in a locked position. Beside the pop cooler was an ice-cream freezer. It was small and had white, plastic, hinged, lids that you could open either from the front or the back. To the right of the door was the cream and red painted, metal chocolate-bar display case. It opened from the back with a tiny little "doorknob" twisting mechanism. The top shelf held Wrigley's gum, Dentyne gum, and licorice pipes. Beside the chocolate display case was the wooden counter where the groceries were placed until their prices were written in the little charge book that had our name written on the front of it. The groceries were packed into cardboard boxes before being carried out to the car. If

the volume of groceries was bigger than the box, the lid flaps were held up by a piece of string to make more room within the box.

Each of the side walls in the Herronton General Store was lined with tins and dry goods on wooden shelves. The back of the store was home to the local post office. The floor of the post office had a huge trap door that was opened by pulling up on a large circular steel ring that was embedded in the top and the middle of the door. I always wondered what was below that door. As the storekeeper stood there and waited on us from behind the post office counter, I was afraid that the door would somehow mysteriously open and the storekeeper would disappear into the cavern below.

Herronton General Store was the destination of my first horse-back ride, by myself, off our land. I rode my brother Grant's buckskin gelding, Peanuts, there one summer day at Dad's urging. I thought that I was too small. I was eight. I was unsure of what might happen along the way and that nobody would be nearby to help me. There were no houses near the road between our house and Herronton. With Dad's assurance that Peanuts wouldn't do anything "bad," I was off. Bareback. Dad always insisted that I ride bareback when I was young because if I did fall off, that was all that would happen. I wouldn't be "drug" with my foot entangled in a stirrup. This excursion on my own was the beginning of years of riding throughout the countryside, mostly by myself because most of my friends weren't interested in horses.

## Herronton Community Hall

When I was growing up in the Herronton community, the community hall was the centre of all social functions and activities.

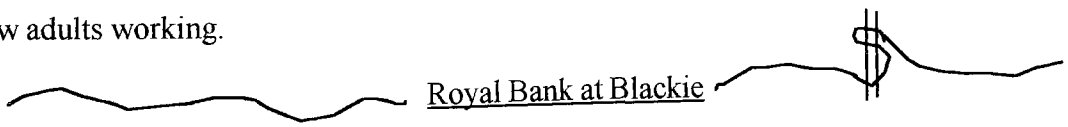
It was where the Herronton School Christmas concert was held. We skipped

through waist-deep snow on cold afternoons to practice on the stage. A huge moose head hung on the back wall. We were given instructions by Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. Truss to focus on the moose and not worry about the audience in front of us.

"The Hall" was the site of dances for all the boys from the community when they were married. The girls had bridal showers hosted for them at the hall as well. This seemed to be the rule in the neighbouring communities, too. Showers for the girls. Dances for the boys. Odd, I always thought, because the boys never enjoyed dancing. What they did enjoy was sneaking out of the hall to smoke cigarettes or to indulge in illegal drinks.

Community dances were held to honour seasonal events and to bring the people of the community together. Dances were regularly held to celebrate the end of the harvest season, to bring in the new year, and to celebrate spring. Turkey suppers were also held to honour these same times.

Being a child and attending events in the Hall was exciting. It was a time to see both children and adults whom I hadn't seen for a long time. It was exciting to watch parents and other adults dancing and socializing. It was exciting to dance with Dad and to watch Mom dance with Dad. It was exciting to go downstairs into the low-ceilinged basement and eat egg salad sandwiches and cake at midnight. When the evening grew too long for young eyes, the Hall was a place where you could sleep on a pile of adult coats and it was okay. It was good to see adults having fun. Most of the time on the farm, I saw adults working.



## Royal Bank at Blackie

The Royal Bank of Canada in Blackie was the bank my parents used. It was the bank where I opened my first bank account with the fifty dollars that I received from

Grandma Lahnert as a wedding present.

The outside of the two-storied bank was brick. To me, as a child, the ceilings inside the bank seemed as though they were a hundred feet high. In reality they probably were sixteen feet. Entering the bank was like entering a sanctuary. It was deathly quiet. The doors, the walls, the chairs and benches, and the wickets were all dark oak. The glass in the door leading in to the manager's office was frosted -- to ensure privacy. The bank had the air of solemnity and serious business. I felt tiny and insignificant in this building. I believed that all my money, plus all the money of every customer, was kept in this bank. The barred security doors leading into the vault were frightening in their coldness and their prison-like look.

What I liked about the bank was the sound and the look of the teller counting money with a rubber finger and rhythmically pounding the date stamp on all papers that were being transacted.

## Mossleigh School

During my seventh year of school, the County of Vulcan decided that it was not economically feasible to keep open the Herronton School, one of the last remnants of pioneer days within the County system. All the students were transferred to the neighbouring school in the town of Mossleigh and, after completion of grade nine, were sent to County Central in Vulcan for high school along with the rest of the Mossleigh students.

The Mossleigh school building was a modern structure built to accommodate the rising population of baby boomers. Indoor plumbing removed the opportunity for a stroll outside in the afternoon sunshine. The small windows placed at each end of one wall in

these classrooms removed the visibility of the prairie. Electric buzzers announced when classes were to change and recess was to end, replacing the brass handbell, which was rung by a student leaning out of one of the huge floor-to-ceiling windows that filled the eastern wall of the small old school.

As the structure of the small school had been warm and personal, so had the teachers. As the structure of the modern school was more utilitarian and antiseptic, the teachers there were likewise more "efficient and business-like." School became less of an endeavour that students and teachers were all in together and more like an agenda that had to be completed as efficiently as possible. Structure of the school day, instruction, assignments, and evaluation all took on the air of a job to be methodically and antiseptically accomplished. This atmosphere within the school and of the teachers within the school was repeated and echoed in the days of high school at County Central.

## County Central High School

My three years of high school at County Central High in Vulcan are indistinct in my memory in terms of any academic stimulation. What I do remember is being a cheer-leader for the school basketball team in tenth grade, dating the same young man during these three years, participating in curling bonspiels, decorating the gym for school dances and attending school dances, attending community dances in Carmangay with my boyfriend and his friends and family, socializing with friends, talking on the phone, and doing just enough homework and studying to ensure that I completed twelfth grade with what was termed high school matriculation. Matriculation was the key that would open the door to university for me. Attending university and convocating with a Bachelor of Education degree would give me the financial security to be independent -- an idea that

Mom cemented in my head. "You never know what will happen to your husband, and you want to have something to "fall back on."

## The University of Calgary

Except for a few days in the summer when I would visit with cousins in Calgary or with Murrell Westersund at the home of her grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Albert Swartz, university was my first experience at living away from home. I always hated to leave home for any reason. I was one of those children who didn't ever go to summer camp because it would involve leaving my parents for an extended time. I even had a difficult time staying overnight at a girlfriend's house.

While riding in Mom and Dad's car on the way to register in Women's Residence at the University of Calgary, I cried. It was a Residence rule that first-year students couldn't return home until Thanksgiving weekend. I cried knowing that any returns to the Herronton farm would now be as a guest, not as a permanent resident. I cried for the end of a life that I loved. I was embarking on a new life experience. It was exciting but I did it reluctantly. I thought that going to university was necessary because a post-secondary education was something that neither of my parents had attained. It was very important to Mom. She would like to have been a teacher. She couldn't. I could. Having to quit school when she was in eighth grade to work for her father's threshing crew had broken my mother's heart at the same time that it cemented in her mind the idea that her children would be able to receive an education. By the time I was in third grade, I had my dreams set on becoming a school teacher. I liked being a student. I liked the work that I saw teachers doing. I loved reading. I had already "practiced" being a teacher while I was helping Jack Laycraft with his reading in second grade. In my home and within my

community, teachers were spoken of in esteemed terms. The work that teachers did was valued. Teaching was honourable work. I never envisioned myself teaching in a city. I always saw myself teaching in a rural area. Teaching could/would become my method for returning "home."

## Lomond School

After four years at the University of Calgary and convocation with a Bachelor of Education degree, my first teaching job was at Lomond, Alberta. My assignment was teaching grade five. The year was 1972.

While I had been working for the Royal Bank during the summer after my last semester at university, I received a phone call from the Superintendent of Schools for the County of Vulcan informing me of my teaching assignment at Lomond. Again, I cried. Not tears of happiness. I remembered visiting my childhood friend Murrell in Lomond during the first summer of her first marriage. It was one of those dog days of summer. The only life on the streets was, indeed, two dogs shuffling along. I also remembered tales that Dad had told of his days during the 1930s when he was buying fox-meat horses as a way to augment his income. He had worked in the Lomond area. He spoke of it as a dry, desolate area which it was before irrigation.

Lomond was the community within the County that was the farthest away from my parents. Although Lomond seemed like it was the end of the earth, it was really just the end of the pavement. I was informed by the Superintendent that there was a teacherage that I could rent. I would be sharing it with another teacher, Vonnie Malmberg. Now I had a job in a town that I didn't want to be in, sharing a house with someone I didn't even know. The end result of all this pessimism was that Vonnie and I became and

stayed very good friends. Even though she now lives in Australia, we still keep in touch. I made some wonderful friends within the community of Lomond and within the ranks of the parents of the students whom I taught. I remained there for four years and then I resigned from teaching to go back to Herronton and live with my mother during her last year of life.

It was while I was living and working in Lomond that Mom and Dad both became ill with cancer. Dad had lung surgery in January of 1973. He came home for a short time, but eventually lived the rest of his days in the Vulcan General Hospital. He died on July 13, 1974. He had always said that thirteen was his lucky number. Dad was seventy-one years of age. I had turned twenty-five years of age a week earlier.

Mom had undergone breast surgery in the spring of 1973. She never regained a clear bill of health. I resigned from teaching at the end of June in 1976. My heart wasn't in it anymore. I wanted/needed to be near my mother. Lomond was too far away from her while she was ill. I wanted to live at the farm near Herronton.

While living in Lomond, I had met Al Bertram. He was a construction contractor in the County. He owned a farm near Vulcan. As a Christmas gift in 1975, he gave me a diamond engagement ring. In my grief-stricken haze, I accepted the ring and the commitment. We didn't discuss whether or not we wanted to marry each other. With my mother's increasing ill health, Al and I were married in April of 1977 instead of during summer vacation from school, as had been planned. I wanted my mother at my wedding. She wanted to be there. She told me that the dress she bought for my wedding would be the one that she wanted to be buried in. She was. Mom died on August 7, 1977. She had always said that seven was her lucky number. Mom was sixty-six years of age when she

died. I had turned twenty-eight years of age a month before she died.

# Chapter Four
# Conclusion

*No good asking what is the meaning of life because life isn't an answer,*
*life is the question, and you, yourself, are the answer.*
*-- Ursula Le Guin*

Through the stories captured within this writing, the memories that these stories have elicited, and the knowing that has come out of this process, I have revisited my childhood through the people and the places of that same childhood. I have widened and strengthened my understanding about myself as a person and as a teacher. By preserving these stories, I have validated my mother's premise that pieces of string, no matter how short or how insignificant they may seem, are worthy of saving.

In the ball of string that is my life, the death of my parents was a huge knot. But knots are not all bad. Knots can serve a good and useful purpose when they hold something together securely so that it can't fall apart. The foundation for my life, my childhood, gave me the security, strength, and tenacity to survive and to carry on after my parents' deaths. This persistence, coupled with flexibility, was a gift from my parents that has been invaluable throughout my life.

Through the on-going experience of coping with the death of my parents, I have come to understand what is important to cherish and what must be set free. Sometimes there are knots that are just too tight to undo. One solution is to cut out the knot. I cut the knot that was Al Bertram out of my life. With him, my hope for a happy life was impossible. My experiences had taught me to value relationships. His had not. This difference was too big to live with.

Through the process of revisiting my life as I was growing from child to young woman, I have discovered that what I was searching for and hoping for in going back to teach in the county in which I was raised was the security and safety that I had known as a child. When my parents died, that safety and security was lost. Gone was the advice from Dad that had fueled my independence: bid at auctions, raise cattle, be different from other girls. Gone was the warm safe home that Mom had provided which made it possible for me to take risks in other areas of my life. What happened to me when this safety and security disappeared? I jumped into the abyss of a disastrous marriage. It was a marriage that offered security and safety, but at a huge price.

The price was my independence. My work was trivialized. My views were trivialized. My education was trivialized. I quit teaching. I lost five years of teaching experience. Relationships with my family were trivialized. Any connections with my family were kept strong only because of my persistence. I was alone in celebration times with my family. I was kept small by being kept, living in a one-room log cabin with the promise of a big house on the horizon. It was impossible to have any family in to my home for gatherings if there was literally no room. Just as my grandparents had hope and courage when they left their homeland to travel to another continent, and as my father had hope and courage when he left his homeland to travel to another country, so I had hope and courage when I moved away from the safety and security of this bad marriage.

After five years, I returned to teaching. Like the Highwood River after a winter of cold temperatures and high snowfall followed by a warm spring, I was flooded with memories about "Leslie Cooke" as I remembered her during her childhood, her teen years, and her beginning teaching years. I recalled the values that were important to me:

relationships, personal integrity, and ethical behaviour. These were absent in my husband. These values had been evident in my grandparents, in my parents, in our neighbours in the Herronton community, in my family of siblings, and in my teacher/mentors. I had these same values and I carried them into my classrooms. There they were necessary and valued.

Other knowing that came to me through the process of this writing was that I realized some things about my self that I hadn't known before simply because I hadn't reflected on them before now. I am a first-generation Canadian. My mother was an ESL student. She was always extremely proud of her grade-school spelling tests. Correct grammar and usage of English were priorities with her and she stressed their importance to me. I never realized until now why these things mattered so much to her. Language is a powerful tool for moving away from an undesirable culture into a desirable one. It explains why my entreaties to learn to speak German were dismissed. Being a first-generation Canadian means that I am finding connection with my mother's homeland through learning to cook the German food that I experienced as a child. I am also connecting with German food and culture through my marriage to Randy. His Russian/German heritage is similar to mine. Through sharing stories of our lives, I learned that a large part of his young life had been like mine. Living with him *is* like coming home.

I am learning to understand that my love for the land and for life in the country is tied to the love my grandparents developed for the same things. This rural background with all the solitudes and vistas shaped me as much as anything else, but it was an accident. It was a piece of string very early in the ball that absolutely changed the worlds of each of us to follow. I might just as easily have been born in Bridgeland, Calgary or in

Jagodnaja, Russia, or anywhere else. What I am is largely based on an immigrant's (my grandfather's) impulse to buy land near Blackie.

Recognizing that I am a first-generation Canadian helps to explain some of the difference that I felt as a child. I felt different because my grandparents spoke German; because my grandfather butchered hogs and made his own sausage; because my grandmother's kitchen always smelled of onions; because my grandmother made lye soap in a huge black cauldron; because my father didn't go to war. Being different is an emotion that I am comfortable with. I was different when I was bidding at auctions as a young girl. I was different when I was twenty-eight and without parents. These differences gave me the courage and strength to believe in myself, to have achievements that underline my differences, because these are not activities that any of my school girl friends did. I made the decision to leave my first marriage, enter school administration, buy a house, and change jobs after twenty-five years of teaching with the same school board.

The divergent characteristics of the two cultural backgrounds that shaped me helped to give voice to my thoughts. My mother and my aunt Clara were opposites in everything: countries of birth, appearance, marriage partners, dress, activities, habits, personal grooming, and personal beliefs. My mother and my father were opposites, too. Mom had an open mind and was always a nice person. She was not overly concerned with her physical appearance. Mom's Russian/German background was unlike that of a brash American, as was Dad's. Dad was stubborn, narrow, opinionated, and concerned with his physical appearance. The buttons on his shirt and the waistband on his pants had to be perfectly aligned. His Stetson had to be at a certain rakish angle. I see the heritage from both of these backgrounds in me every day. Do these conflicting qualities

seem contradictory? Yes, but my mother's empathy helps to temper my aunt's arrogance. Aunt Clara's outspoken views have given voice where my mother's silence would have been deafening.

What have I discovered about myself as a teacher as a result of the people and the places mentioned in this writing? Schools have remained a constant in my life, as has the Royal Bank. School is my work. I have been a loyal customer of the Royal Bank since opening my first account when I was eight. My first paid job was with the Royal Bank. I continued to work there in summers between university terms.

In life, as in the work of teaching, I believe that the relationships with the people are critical to success and happiness. The relationships from my childhood that I developed with family, neighbours, and teachers gave me the skills and the values necessary to build and develop meaningful relationships with my peers, my students, their parents, and staff. Throughout my teaching career, I have often thought of Mrs. Truss, my teacher for three years during fifth through seventh grades. I know that some of my views about what is important in teaching, some of my methods of approaching a topic of study, and my thoughts about the importance of reading and writing come directly from being a student of hers. Mrs. Truss was an extremely important person and mentor within my life. Apart from my mother, she was the most important influence in my decision about my choice of work.

While I was writing this document, I shared the process with my class of grade eight students. I took in the many drafts, measuring about one foot deep! I showed my students the revision suggestions of my advisor. I revealed the gamut of emotions that accompanied each version of this writing. Vicariously, they shared my angst, doubt, joy,

and hard work. I shared with them the lived experience of being a writer. I explained my growth as a writer, as a teacher, and as a soul. They listened very quietly. They asked important questions. Because of this, they now take their own writing more seriously. They know that I am speaking the truth when I talk about writing.

My stories, the pieces of string that I thought were too short to save and to share with anyone, have quite simply underlined for me that the constant in life is that things change and things stay the same. In my teaching style, I am still working at going home in the sense that I attempt to recreate what I had when I was a student and loving school. In my life, I am still working at going home in the sense that I attempt to recreate what I had when I was a child and loving home. Like the string that was saved and reused, my stories recreate for me the ball of string that is my life.

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