

by
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Nipigon 1

My earliest childhood memories go away back to the "Homestead". This was a section of wilderness land (in this case mostly rock) on which you had to build a house and clear so many acres of land to get a patent or ownership from the government. The two-story log house stood on the east side of the rocky clearing. I can still see the blackened stumps jutting up out of grass in summer, like monuments to the strong, tall trees that had once stood there. Those trees now sheltered the young couple who had crossed an ocean, met here, were married soon after and decided to settle here.

My father had left me in the care of a childless couple, after my own mother had died of child-birth fever. They had to work hard and long hours, but always had time and more than enough love for me. I followed them around as they did their chores. The cows, calves, pigs, and chickens had to be fed and looked after, and the eggs gathered and packed into square wooden boxes which held exactly twenty-four dozen. We had a few pigeons who flew right into the chicken house and had their own little nests. I waited anxiously for them to lay their eggs and only once wanted to fry ^{the} tiny egg. The big white "Leghorn" rooster had it in for me and would dig his sharp spurs into my legs or back. I would go screaming to the nearest shelter.

When we had lots of cream, butter was churned. I could not reach to help with the big wood churns that stood on the floor and had to be plunged up and down. When the butter finally separated into golden yellow clumps, it was scooped out into

large wooden bowls (these and the wooden spoons or ladles were winter or rainy day projects for the men to carve and smooth out), washed in cold water, ^{and} worked with a wooden spoon or ladle until no trace of buttermilk remained. Then it was salted, and allowed to stand in a cool place overnight, unless you were out of butter. It was delicious fresh, but if you were particular, you worked it some more and drained every trace of water. Then you would have nice yellow butter without any discolouration in it. If you sold the butter to the store, it had to be packed into one pound wooden moulds and wrapped in wax paper marked 'butter'. Of course before you had cream, the cows had to be milked, and the milk strained through a clean cloth (carefully washed and dried) into milk pails with lids. The pails were then put into large tubs of cold water, which first had to be drawn from the well by hand, and the water changed until the milk was cold. If you had a cool place to store the milk, you left it to stand until the cream formed on top. This was skimmed off into glass jars or enamel pails when possible. When you had enough cream, you churned. The temperature of the cream was important too, at this stage: too warm, the butter was soft and hard to work; too cold and you churned and churned much longer. (Later on you had cream separators, of course. By hand, you turned the crank, and at the right speed).

The women in the family worked hard. The cooking, baking and ironing were all done on the wood stove. Flour and sugar was purchased in one hundred pound cloth bags, which were later used for dish towels, sheets for children's cots and underwear.

I liked the smell of the green coffee beans being roasted in the black pans. The black pans were always used with wood-stoves, as they baked better. When the coffee beans were nice and brown, they were put into jars, and would be ground fresh every day in the coffee mill. I always begged to do this. In between, I played with my rag doll, and a big red tom-cat who followed me everywhere. In summer I rode on top of the hay loads back and forth from the fields. In winter, if the weather was not too cold, I would be bundled up in what seemed like yards of knitted woolen scarf, knitted mittens and heavy hose, felt boots or rubbers on wet days that laced up the front and had felt insoles in them. Ski-pants or slacks were unheard of for girls or ladies. Then I would ride to the forest, where men called "pulpwood cutters" or "lumberjacks" had cut spruce trees in four foot by four foot by eight foot piles, which was a cord of wood. These were sold to timber companies and then sent by rail or water to pulp mills to be made into paper. Birch cord-wood was cut and piled the same way; people mostly heated their homes with wood. This was how they made a living. It was hard, cold work, but better than the one dollar a day my foster father had earned on the Grand Trunk Railway. The land was rocky and not suitable for farming, but the trees were there; he had the foresight to see this. The "Homestead" and hard work paid off; they were able to buy three hundred and sixty acres of land near the village, which he later sold in ten acre lots and through which the Trans-Canada Highway now runs.

It was indeed a happy day when visitors would come for a visit from a neighbouring homestead or from the village.

Roads were not plowed and in spring break-up the dirt roads were bad. The visitors usually had news for the grown-ups, and the children played happily after the first shyness wore off.

Blueberry time was a happy time, but the preserving was no picnic for the ladies. However the berries made good pies and desserts in winter, as I hardly ever remember having had fresh fruit in winter. It was nearly all dried fruits from which pies and the "Finnish Sweet Soup" was made. Carrots and potatoes were stored in root houses but there were no fresh green vegetables in winter--not even cabbage after the ones from the garden wilted.

The stores in the village were interesting places to go and see. I've been told I turned my first ice-cream cone upside down and lost it.

One of our neighbours got a "victrola" which had a big horn attached to it. After you wound it by a handle and put a cylinder-like thing on it called a record, it played music like I had never heard before. Until then I had only heard some of the "lumberjacks" play on a mouth organ, small accordion, a squeaky violin, and an oboe, and sing their folk songs learned in their homelands. In winter they used the upstairs as a bunk house. The stories they told were always interesting. One poor guy from Finland had never seen pork and beans before.

Because he had come in late one day, they had already cooled off, so he put them in a dessert bowl with sugar, and poured cream on them. He bravely tried to force them down, but finally my foster mother went over, took them away, and kindly explained they would taste better warm, and wouldn't he rather have a piece of her pie? He was quite happy to make the exchange.

The men had enormous appetites and needed the extra food to withstand the hard work felling, cutting the trees into four foot lengths, then piling them in deep snow.

Suddenly my life changed. I was told my father was coming for me, with a new mother. How frightened I was! I still remember lying curled as far in the corner of the couch as I could get, with a sofa cushion over my head. Finally I peeked a bit; to my astonishment, this step-mother looked like a very nice lady. In the three years I lived with her, I grew very fond of her, but she was too frail for the harsh life she was living under now. She was expecting when the 'flu epidemic came and she did not pull through. I remember we had a "doctor" of sorts, who didn't or couldn't do anything to save her. Seeing her die was hard for me. The coffin was sent down by railroad and lay on the kitchen floor until the body was put in. Fortunately the coffin was not opened again. The Anglican minister conducted a short service in English, which very few undertood. A big black wreath was hung on the front door, and I used to come up the back lane while we were still in that house, so I would not see the black wreath or be reminded of it. How I missed her! She had made Christmas morning, for the first time in my memory, a lovely day to wake up to, with lovely presents beside my bed--a little doll, wash tub and board, plus a small clothes line with small pegs for the doll clothes and some candy and fruit. The second Christmas we even had Santa come to the house.

After moving to Nipigon village with my father, I started school in the little United Church, as the one room school was too full and the new school not ready yet. In school I had to learn another language which was called English. The first year in the new school, I was learning to read out of the first Primer--"The little Red Hen found some wheat", who will help me plant the wheat, etc.. (Not long ago, I heard the little "Primer" being ridiculed, but I did learn to read, which I still love to do). As for spelling, a very young teacher taught me a lesson I never forgot. In Grade 3, her class was getting terrible marks in spelling. We were fooling around, so one morning she announced that anyone having more than three mistakes in spelling would get the strap. We were stunned, but we lined up for it. She did not hit hard, but it was the humiliation of having to go home and confess getting the strap. I was back with my foster parents at the time, living next to the present clinic and on Bell St. I knew they would only gently scold me, but I ~~knew~~ knew they would be hurt that I wasn't taking school seriously. They had not had the chance to go to school of any kind and valued education highly. Needless to say, my spelling improved over-night, and never again, the strap. I could not do things I knew they would not approve of, even though I lived sometimes with them or batched with my father or was boarded out with older couples, where I ate, went to school, and mostly cried myself to sleep. But I loved school; weekends I dreaded. I remember learning to print "1921". I do not know why it remains in my memory. I

remember, too, learning to draw the Union Jack, to colour it, and recite "The Union Jack is my flag." How happy I am that my grand-children have the "Maple Leaf", and can call it their very own, and I hope always with pride.

I loved winter and snow, and skating, which I learned on a small back yard rink, and skiing on the hills. The roads were not plowed in winter, and only horse-drawn sleighs were used. The hill on Bell Street on the way home from school was ideal for sliding with a piece of cardboard when it was well packed and icy. There was a hollow in the hill that sort of catapulted you out ---that you couldn't beat for fun. Towards spring, marbles and allies came out. This was a game I enjoyed until it was time to play ball. The C.P.R. field at the back of the station was a favourite spot after school hours. I played right through to the last year in school. We went swimming in the Lagoon. Now due to the carelessness of man, it is such a cesspool that even fish can not live in it.

In summer we would walk down the C.N. tracks to the bridge to see who was fishing or go rowing in the lagoon. Hop-sotch also was a good past-time, and I spent many hours at it. Of course, a picnic was exciting, with races and games. The first one that I can remember was near Lake Helen, about where Bob Matchett has his trailer park. We had sack racing, tug-of-war and egg-on-a-spoon(they weren't boiled either) races. Years later, there were sports booths etc. down at the far end of the lagoon where Thompson's cabins are.

The occasional trip on the train to Port Arthur was enough to keep you awake all night--so many people, lights, and street cars. All those stores! Of course years before that electric lights had come to Nipigon. Just by pushing a button, instant light--no more matches or smelly coal-oil lamps. Then the first cars; my foster parents had one of the first four Model T Fords in Nipigon. I was told the horses were under the hood. Unbelievable! Oh and a nine day wonder was "Gentiles"'s ice cream parlour, with white wire tables and chairs. And how could I forget the Player Piano. It was so pleasant to have some ice cream and listen to "Orient" (Gentile) Winfield pump out the music.

In summer the big circus under a tent, with real live lions in a cage and huge elephants doing the heavy work was exciting too, with all the glitter and side shows. I remember once seeing one of our oldest citizens bring his wife down to see it. She was half blind, but he held her hand and described to her what was going on and how everything looked. Years later he was criticized for being back at his job the day after she died. Perhaps he was right; life does have to go on. Until his time would come, by keeping busy, the day would go faster until he returned to the lonely house with so many memories.

The Black Bay area has a very special place in my memory. My foster parents had by now(I was about ten years old at the time) started leasing rights to cut pulp (spruce trees mostly) on government owned or "crown"lands. The men had been busy all winter in the rough bush camps that had been made out of

logs. Rough lumber was hauled in by horse drawn work sleighs for the roof and floors. Rough bunks too were made, usually with double huge burlap bags stuffed with hay. Coarse grey blankets and your own sweater or mackinaw for a pillow served as bedding. A big camp stove, usually located centrally was the source of heat, with piles of fire-wood beside it. Near it you dried your clothes for the next day's work. Rough wash stands were provided with an aluminum wash bowl, and if you were lucky there would be hot water in a tub on top of the stove. One or two coal oil lamps served as light. It was early to bed and early to rise. Quite often saw blades had to be sharpened and the rope made tight on your wooden buck-saw. Blades often broke or the wooden ends cracked. No modern facilities or motorized saws here. An illustrated book by William Kurelik is the most authentic book I have read on the harsh life of a lumberjack's life. He tells it as I remember it too, except for the dirt. The Finn lumberjacks were nearly all quite fussy about cleanliness. Quite often a steam-bath was built too. However this one at Black Bay did not have one that I can remember. The cook-camp here was built together with the bunk house and had only a partition between it; ~~eiyl yhr nunk houer snf hsf only a petyiyien nryern iy,~~ with a door which was only opened during meal-time. My foster mother was cooking ^{by} herself. One Christmas holiday I went out on the train for a visit. From the lonely section house where the weigh-freight stopped. I had a ride to the camp with the supplies that had come on the same train--hay, oats for the horses, groceries to feed the men. I was batching with my dad again (between step-mothers.) After the joy of seeing my

foster parents again, I told them my own news about school and how many of us had been sent home from school and told to wash our hair with some coal oil in the water. My horrified mother had water boiling on the stove and my hair was washed and washed, after first being cut short as a boy's. I was warned not to tell any of the men why. She wasn't taking any chances on any or all of the men leaving.

Coming in on a small boat during the summer vacation, I again was a problem to her. I was told to walk or run from the boat over the pulp lpgs to get on shore. They were in a shallow cove, held together by giant logs fastened by chains called "boom chains". I was sure I would drown or at least get all wet, but I made it, safe and sound. Of course I did not know then that it was quite shallow underneath and the logs carried my weight easily. This time there was a boy my age at camp for a few days with his father. He had a little canoe, so we paddled around in it all day. Next morning I awoke stiff and sore. It was my job to fill the wood-box in the kitchen, but I could not bend. I finally noticed a large snow shovel, so I would slide this under the wood and managed to always get a few sticks on it. Then I pulled it into the camp and let the wood slide off on to the floor. After a few trips, I was taken seriously. By night I had a fever and was breaking out in a red rash. I had finally come down with the measles. The school had been closed for one week during the winter for lack of pupils, but I had waited till now. Any contagious disease was viewed with alarm by the men in those days and could have meant closing the camp down, so I was covered with a

sheet in bed, while the men ate because the cook and her family as well as any female helpers slept in the cook house.

Later we moved to another camp. My mother and I stayed alone there for several days while the men all went away somewhere. The mornings were beautiful. I would sit quietly and wait for the mother deer to bring her fawn for a drink. It would play and splash like a young child. One day two families came. What fun they had, but the mothers were always on the alert. The porcupines would frighten us at night--was it a bear or just a porcupine? When the men came back the wood that was left on shore had to be pulled into a boom too so that a tug could pull the raft into the water and haul it away. This meant staying in water all day. How hungry I would get. Then we went to the camp for canned tomatoes in an enamel dish and a slice of cold ham. At the end of the week, I too was given a piece of paper that read 'fivedollars' and my name. It was a cheque and with it I could get real money I had earned. I do not remember what I spent it on.

From here we had to walk many miles on a bush road used by horses during the winter, now not much more than a path. Somewhere I had found a kitten. Carrying it in the crook of my arm, I was going up and over logs and rocks quite well until I disturbed a wasps' nest. They attacked my bare legs, and I screamed. A young man ahead of me shouted; "Don't show them the white of your teeth." To this day, I can't know what possible harm that could have been done, but a second time that day, I was stung. No one knew how many times I was stung, but by the time we reached the tracks, my legs were so swollen and sore that I sure didn't feel well. But I still had my kitten when we arrived home.

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My father at this time had very high-spirited horses, and it seemed to me they could run like the wind. We had a sleigh with a canvas cover something similar to a covered wagan. It had a rough floor in it, window in the front, and holes cut so the reins could be pulled inside. He had built small benches on both sides and there was a tiny tin camp stove with a pipe going out to the outside. The heat from it kept you from freezing, plus blankets and the heavy clothing everyone wore. My father would take a load of people up to a neighbouring small community of farmers about ten miles away. They had a one room school where social evenings were held once in a while. It seemed every one that could move was there. Whole families came, and when the children fell asleep they were carried upstairs where the school teachere had her room. There was lunch and coffee served--how good it was after a long cold trip. It was pleasant and exciting with the glow of the lantern (in winter the days are short), and the heat of the stove. I loved to watch the square dancers; they were having such fun. The older people did not get out often and these were rare social events for them so they were making the most of the eventing. People seemed more friendly then or should I say sociable and children were tolerated.

Summers I just roamed around bare-footed. I will always feel the warmth of the hot sand on the beach at Lake Helen and on the hill near the cemetary. The white short lillies grew there in such abundance, but I ^{haven't} ~~haven't~~ even seen one for years. I have told my family I wish to be buried there in the warm sand when my time comes-nowhere else.

One day a friend and I were so busy picking hazel nuts we lost track of time. We found when we ~~found~~ came home with

full bags of nuts that most of the village was out looking for us. We couldn't understand why all the fuss-we were not lost at all. Just too busy.

On this same hill years later, when the hazel trees had been cut down, I had an experience I have not forgotten; Someone's cow had to be butchered, and they needed someone to stir the blood from the cow. Blood sausage was made from this. So I went, not knowing what I was in for, although I knew farm animals were raised for food. There was a fence around the clearing. The poor cow was knocked unconscious, but when the man went near to bleed it, she jumped up and started to run around the field. I headed for the fence and over it. He finally corned the cow and finished the job. He yelled at me to come and stir, but I was too scared to move. The result was lumpy blood, except what he drank warm. Pancakes were made out of it, using whole wheat flour needless to say. To this day, I ^{cannot} ~~cannot~~ eat them.

I remember while living for awhile in Nipigon a fight with a friend ^{and} ~~and~~ crying out, "I am going to tell my mother." My friend retaliated by saying, "You have no mother". Speechless I ran home sobbing, to my foster mother to find the truth. Her answer I do not remember, but whatever it was, she remained dear to me until she died at eight-four years.

The steam-bath was a Saturday night ritual that no Finn missed if she could help it. The hot rocks spit and spattered when water was thrown on them--no wonder, the large rocks had been heated for hours. The remaining coals were carefully

drawn out because it would be very hard on the eyes if any trace of fire remained as in those days there were no chimneys so the smoke went out through vents near the ceiling or through an open window. As a result the walls were blacked by the smoke, but you came out clean and refreshed. Your clean clothes were laid out ready, the bed's clothes changed, and after the sauna, coffee or mild with freshly baked coffee bread made you ready for a relaxed sleep.

Winter was making snow men, building snow forts and snowballs until your mittens were soaked and your mitts and fingers began to freeze. Skiing on home made skis--if you happened to lose one going down-hill, too bad, you had to go down on one somehow, get your ski and try again.