

Things My Grandmother Told Me

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MY GRANDMOTHER lived most of her life within sight of her birthplace on a farm in Simcoe County. Her life was centered in her family, the farm and the creatures on the farm.

Grandmother told me of a dream that she often had: she started out in a buggy drawn by a favorite old grey mare and gradually it all changed until she found that she was driving an automobile and that she was trying hard to keep the old mare in the back seat. It seems to me now that that dream reflected the changes that she had seen in her lifetime.

Grandmother told me of how hard her father and brothers had had to work clearing the land. The forest was an enemy; land had to be cleared for crops and pastures. Sometimes, then as now, fire got out of control and swept through the pine forests, burning out the nearby homesteads and leaving barren miles of charred stumps as monuments to a great forest. But Grandmother lived long enough to hear of young trees being planted and raised by the thousands and waste-lands being made productive again by reforestation.

If there were idle moments when Grandmother was a girl they could be filled by picking up stones from the fields and piling them on stone-boats to be dumped near where a fence was to be built. The children were fascinated by the fence-builder, a man who lived in a caravan-wagon like a gypsy, travelling from farm to farm building beautiful dry stone walls.

Farm houses had to be large, my Grandmother told me, to take care of large families, visiting relatives and those in the community that had no homes. A quiet, little old lady, Mrs. Potter, stayed at Grandmother's for months at a time. In the summer she went about cutting down weeds and thistles with a hoe. As a child I thought that they referred to Mrs. Potter when someone spoke of "just pottering around".

Whether you were an acceptable guest or not, Grandmother told me, depended on how well you could find helpful things to do without upsetting the necessary farm routine. The men usually found the axe and spent some time on the woodpile. Children kept the wood-box full and took cold drinks to the men in the fields. Anyone who didn't watch to see that the waterpails were full didn't belong on a farm. Women took their turns at the washboards and tub, ironing and cooking. The rag carpets (wall to wall) and the Brussels carpet in the parlor were swept with a broom and damp tea-leaves. This was done in good weather when the doors could be opened to let the dust out. The rugs were padded underneath with sweet hay!

"Many hands make light work," Grandmother used to say. But it also took good organization to keep all the farm activities going and get three large-sized meals on the table every day. Bread, pies, cakes, preserves and pickles — everything was made at home from basic materials raised on the farm.

Tea, sugar, spices and molasses were paid for with the butter Grandmother made.

The excuse for most of the social gatherings was some kind of work. There were quilting bees, threshings, barn raisings and sugaring off. There were spelling-bees and singing schools. In the winter there was skating, sleigh-rides and square dances for the young folks. Each one of these was an occasion and didn't happen every week.

Transportation was limited to horse drawn buggies, wagons, sleighs and horseback. In the winter if the road was blocked by snowdrifts, an opening was made in the rail fence and they drove over the fields. Grandmother told me what a great thing the bicycle was for the country, especially for the girls. They no longer had to wait for a rainy day or until the horses could be spared to go to town.

Grandmother told me of the cozy times that they had in the winter evenings sitting around the table with the coal oil lamp in the center. Someone read the news from the Mail and Empire while others knitted, sewed or "whittled". Books were read aloud to the family group. Often they played checkers, dominoes and crokinole. There was a sense of well-being in such a group, especially when a storm was raging outside.

Education was respected and admired in Grandmother's household. It meant sacrifice to send one of the children to college. One son became a doctor and started a hospital in Keewatin; another was a dentist and three daughters trained as nurses. The foundation for this was laid in the daily Bible reading and family prayers and in the reading round the lamp at night. All this from fifty acres and hard work!

Politics were a source of excitement and constant debate. The party newspaper was taken as gospel truth and all the opposing party was composed entirely of villains. It was a great surprise to me when I studied Canadian history to find (after all that I had heard about him from Grandmother!) that Sir Wilfrid Laurier was not born with horns and a tail.

Grandmother told me about pedlars of all kinds: scissor grinders, book salesmen, vendors of pots and pans and above all about the pedlars of laces, braids, dress lengths of materials, fancy buttons and trimmings for hats. Before the days of Eaton's catalogue these salesmen were important to the women of the country.

There was also the travelling dressmaker who came for a week or two, spring and fall, to help with the family sewing. She also helped keep the neighborhood informed as to current events in other households. Perhaps this was the basis of one of Grandmother's favorite sayings, "If you want to find out something, just keep quiet." When the telephone and the party line came to the rural communities, that helped too!

Grandmother told me about the beef-ring. This was a co-operative venture of a group of farmers.