

How the cow jumped over the moon

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For many years my family has been involved in compiling the history of Phelps Township.

As a staunch Women's Institute member, my grandmother began the project of putting together the local branch's Tweedsmuir History of the Township. From an official source unknown to me, she obtained a list of all the people who first settled in the township when it was opened for settlement in 1920, and the number of the lot on which each one resided. She also listed all the post office locations, post masters and post mistresses of the area.

When my mother took over in the 1940's, she was more interested in the settlers themselves than in the bare facts of who lived where. She talked to the pioneer residents for hours, and put their personal stories into the history. The many volumes of the Tweedsmuir History are now on display at Phelps Community Library for public viewing.

The history is a factual thing. However, many of the anecdotes that people had to tell never found their way onto paper.

One has to be careful what is put in writing.

Some years ago, I became involved in updating the volumes and ran into the same thing myself. It is utterly amazing what people will tell you. Usually the remarks begin, "Now, whatever you do, don't put this in, but..."

One lady who resided in the township in the late 1930s was a widow with three children and lived on Mother's Allowance. This didn't provide for any luxuries. When she was offered some moose meat by friends who lived in Quebec, she did not question whether or not it had been shot in season, nor whether or not it was legal to transport it across the border.

Instead, she and her small baby boarded the Deluxe bus which travelled the newly-built Temiskaming highway for the journey to pick up the meat. For the return trip, her friends carried a large wrapped cardboard box containing the meat to the bus, and placed it under the seat ahead of her. During the trip home that seat became occupied by the local game warden.

The lady in question rode with great trepidation until she arrived at her stop. Her son was waiting there with a toboggan to haul the meat home. Imagine her shock when the game warden offered to carry the heavy box out to the toboggan for her. Her son lost no time in removing the box, and the family breathed a sigh of relief when the bus left with the game warden on it.

This is the type of thing which one does not put into print.

Nor does one tell about the pioneer family's arrival in Phelps one spring. The family acquire a lot and built a nice log cabin. When winter came, the family went south again planning to return the following spring.

The only problem was when they returned, there was no trace of the building. It was gone — every log of it. However, the lady of the family always felt rather suspicious of the fact that her cousin, who lived in the township, too, had also acquired a nice new log barn.

Houses aren't the only things which have disappeared under mysterious circumstances. In the early days, residents of the community decided they would like to have a bridge over the North River, and enough logs were cut and hauled to the site in late fall to complete the project the next spring. These went AWOL during the winter when firewood became in short supply.

But of course, you can't write that down.

Nor can you put in the tale about the old bachelor who lived in a one-room cabin. He was rumored to be notoriously lazy; too lazy, in fact, to cut the poles which he was using for fuel into lengths to fit the old box stove he had. He would poke one end of the poles in the stove, and balance the opposite end on a chair, pushing the poles further in as they burned away. He even had it arranged so he could do this without getting out of bed.

Some of the stories stretch into the realm of the unbelievable. Like the one about the old settler who never cleaned out his cow barn. As winter progressed, the pile of manure became larger and larger. As the barn featured air-conditioning through several cracks in the walls, the pile soon became frozen stiff and impossible to remove. So, in an effort to solve the problem, the settler bored a small hole under the pile and placed a stick of dynamite in it. Unfortunately, he forgot to remove the cow from the barn before lighting the fuse.

This is, purportedly, the origin of the story of how the cow jumped over the moon.

I think the person who told me that one might have been pulling my leg.