

REMEMBERING THE 30'S

We grew up believing that books opened the door to every possible vista beyond our farm in Renfrew county. When there was no money to spare for extras, and the bare essentials had to be cut back to the bone, it seems to me now, that my mother found some way to scratch enough pennies together so that we five children would at Christmas and birthdays, have a book tucked in with our otherwise meagre gifts.

To her, reading compensated for all the other shortcomings that came from living on a farm buried deep in Renfrew county away from the advantages found only in the city ... like museums, public libraries and the theatre.

As the depression grew all around us, and each day seemed to be worse than the one before it, the books became less and less, too. It was then that my mother decided that her brood from the country would join the Renfrew library 12 miles away.

And so it was that on a cold fall day she tramped the entire batch of children into Renfrew to negotiate for memberships cards in the Renfrew Public Library. The five of us were excited beyond belief. We had never been to the Library in Renfrew, but we had been taken to the one in Ottawa, and I can remember then being awed by the rows upon rows of books, and the quiet solitude offered to the many readers who sat along the tables buried inside the pages of their books. Of course, we couldn't take the books out...but I can remember my mother taking us up and down the rows after warning us not to talk above a whisper.

So at least before we hit the Renfrew Library, we knew that complete silence was as important there as it was in our Lutheran Church.

I can remember how nervous we all were...at least we five children were. Our mother was her usual composed and assured self, and she walked us all in, as if it was a perfectly natural thing to do. I recall feeling so very conscious of being an outsider amongst the town children who were running their hands along the bookshelves with a familiarity I was sure we would never know. There was no doubt in my mind that this time my mother had attempted the impossible.

She walked right up to the desk where the librarian was sorting library cards into neat piles, and she had in her hand a long pencil with a large clip on the end, and I watched fascinated, as she used the eraser part to flip through the cards. And she never looked...I can remember thinking..."she knows we don't live in Renfrew...she knows we are farm people."

Then mother said she would like membership for her five children and herself in the library. The librarian raised her eyes from her tasks and peered at each one of us for what I thought was hours, and in a whisper I was sure could be heard on Raglan Street, she asked where we lived. "Here it comes" I thought..."We have just lost our chance." We kids shuffled from one foot to the other, my brothers with their tweed caps in their hands, and my sister and I looking with longing eyes to the tables of books.

We heard the librarian explain to my mother in exasperated tones that they had had disastrous results from loaning books beyond the town. Mary came back late...some didn't come back at all ...and because of a continually tight budget, her buying budget was cut drastically, and she could barely meet the needs of the townspeople.



Then we saw our mother draw herself up to her imposing full height, and we heard her talk about democracy...and discrimination...and taxes...and the unfairness imposed on country children ...and finally, she said to the woman who looked as if she was going to burst into tears any second..."Now, you, my dear, can tell these five little country children that they cannot belong to your library." I stole a glance at my three brothers and thought my mother had gone too far this time...there wasn't one of them that didn't tower over the librarian.

Then my mother rhymed off the names of several prominent residents in Renfrew who could supply the library with references as to our integrity if desired. And of course, we were soon putting our names to our first library cards and promising, I'm afraid, too anxiously to meet all the obligations and requirements of being members. As the woman reeled off the instructions we nodded in agreement to everything she said, and by this time a clutch of people was standing around us waiting too for her decision. I was delighted to see that they seemed to be pleased as we were.

When we went back out to the car we were loaded down with books of every description and from then on our mother was determined we would live up to every rule the library imposed on us. She made newspaper protectors for the books and as we read one, it had to be covered...she made small flour bag totes for each of us, so that our books could be kept together and carried to and from the library without harm. And we abided by every rule usually taking the books back long before they were due just to make sure.

Our membership cards opened up a whole new world for us...and I can remember those trips to the library with great happiness. Today my love of books and the sheer joy I still feel when I go into a library and run my hands along the shelves and touch the smooth jackets, I know started back in Renfrew county many years ago.

Mary Cook, In Town and Out, broadcast of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, September 30, 1980.

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