

## ALWAYS AN ADVENTURE: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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## *Beginnings*

Truckloads of men were coming to our farm with guns. They looked big, sombre, and threatening as they turned off the main trail from Edgerton and followed the road past our flowing well. I grabbed The Old Cat (that was her name), ran upstairs, and hid under the bed. My mother tried to explain that these were simply a few neighbours and friends who had come to our place for a turkey shoot. That didn't help, for I could envision dozens of turkeys being slaughtered by a bunch of gun-happy farmers. Only later did I learn that in a turkey shoot, one used ordinary targets and won turkeys as prizes.

The year was 1933, and I was four years old. My father Otto had been a World War I veteran and now he was trying to make a go of it in the midst of the Depression. Not only was he running a farm, but he was secretary-treasurer of the municipal district and had a small shack that he used for an office.

When World War I broke out in 1914, my father enlisted the day after war was declared. He was posted to the 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion and spent most of the war in England and France as an armourer in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Railway Regiment. There he met my mother, Lily Louise Sharp, in Folkestone, Kent, where she was a servant for a wealthy family, and they were married in 1916.

At the end of the war, my mother was repatriated first and it proved to be an excruciating experience. She was a lively twenty-two-year-old girl from a close-knit seafaring family and was sent to the bleak Canadian prairies just before the onset of the winter of 1918–19. Her mother-in-law, Mary Jane, had married a farmer named Nelson McBride, so my mother went to their farm near Edgerton, 200 kilometres east of Edmonton. Just one look at old photographs of Mary Jane and one can sense what a cold, humourless person she was. “Black Irish,” somebody called her. Mother says that anytime during that winter, if someone had given her the fare home, the marriage would have been over.

My father was demobilized in the spring of 1919, and as soon as he arrived at his mother's place, he announced that he had been given land under the Soldiers Resettlement Act. It was only a few miles away, close to Wainwright Buffalo Park. When they got there, Mother cried. It was a sandy, godforsaken place where someone had tried to farm and had given up. The "nice house" which the government people had said they could have was a log shack with newspapers plastering the walls, a dirt floor with straw spread over it, and a sod roof infested with weeds. To make matters worse, they arrived there on her birthday.

"How can we live here?" she cried to her husband.

"I'll put on a new roof and fix up the place," he promised.<sup>1</sup>

And he was true to his word. As soon as the first promised \$100 a month came from Soldiers Resettlement, he replaced the roof, papered the walls, put linoleum on the floor, and bought a new stove. But the soil was marginal at best, and the promised help from the government was cut off at the end of the year. There was no way they could make a living on that miserable piece of land, so they rented a place a few miles closer to town, and in 1927 they moved again to a farm in the McCafferty district, ten miles south of Edgerton, where I was born on November 7, 1929.

I was the fourth boy in the family. There were no girls, a fact my mother always regretted. The oldest was Harry (actually Henry Varner), born in 1918 while mother was still in England. The second was Bill (William Samuel), born in 1920, followed by Glen Allen in 1924. Glen and I were close but because of age differences I didn't get to know my two older brothers until they were grown up.

In later years, my mother told me more about the turkey shoot that had struck such fear into my heart. "We used to hold them on Remembrance Day, November 11th," she said. "We had a big copper boiler that we filled with sandwiches, and had cakes and pots of coffee for the men. People came from Edgerton, Wainwright, and even as far away as Edmonton, and were charged so much a shot. This was your father's own doing. We raised the turkeys and they were given alive to the winners."<sup>2</sup>

This was the middle of the Depression, when my father was doing everything he could to feed and clothe our family of four boys. He organized a beef ring in which each farmer in turn slaughtered a cow a week and distributed equal parts to other members. Thus they could have fresh meat all year round and in the fall he pooled his money with a couple of friends so they could go moose hunting near Edson. They shared their kills so that there was a good

supply of wild meat for the winter. But the crops were poor, grasshoppers plentiful, and prices low as he struggled to make a living from the land. As mother said, “We were hailed out, dried out, and frozen out for three years.”<sup>3</sup> Then in 1934 further disaster struck when my father’s little office for the municipality burned down and he was out of a job.

That’s when he decided to move to the Peace River district. Father had heard that homestead land was still available and that the crops had been a lot better than in the arid south. We were renting our farm, so all he had to do was to hold an auction sale in the fall of 1934 and prepare for the trip. He got a pittance for his machinery as everybody else was broke, but there was enough money for him to hire a trucker to take our furniture and personal things to Edmonton. We brought along The Old Cat and three mink that my father wanted to use for breeding stock once we got to our new farm. His idea was to let the family stay in the city over the winter while he went north with his former hired man, Murdo Fraser, to scout out a piece of land for us.

Once in Edmonton, my father and Murdo left immediately for the north, but they ran into an early fall blizzard and had to turn back. Meanwhile, the rest of us stayed at the Hub Hotel and when father got back he rented a small house on 91st Street. We must have looked like a bunch of hillbillies when we arrived. I usually went barefoot and in winter I wore moccasins with rubbers pulled over them and sealer rings to keep them from falling off. My clothes were clean but ragged and I didn’t have more than one or two changes of clothing. I’m told that even the patches on my trousers had patches on them.

Within the first week, our rustic behaviour was demonstrated to all our neighbours when the three mink escaped from their cage. We had them in an old barn at the end of our lot and almost tore the place apart before we could capture them. Once they were back in the cages, we got rid of them.

The only cash we had was from the paltry proceeds of the auction sale, so we had no recourse but to go on relief. My father was a very proud man and I think it was only the thought of moving north in the spring that kept him going. We got \$40 a month relief money, with \$15 of that going for rent. We also got food coupons, clothes, and shoes. However, the clothes were all the same, so as soon as we put them on, everybody knew we were on relief.

We survived the winter of 1934–35 as poor but proud country folk thrust into the alien world of the big city. Of course, my mother loved it. She had electricity, running water, and, most of all, close neighbours and St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church. She loved being with people and had suffered enormously because of the isolated life on the farm. We boys went to Sunday

School regularly, and during the church services, my brother Glen pumped the organ that provided the music.

In the spring, father's dream of moving to the Peace River area was shattered when he broke his ankle. He had been able to get a temporary job at Hayward Lumber Company but on his first day a pile of lumber fell on him. He was in the hospital for a while and then on crutches for several months. This meant we were taken off relief and placed on workmen's compensation; this immediately proved to be a greater hardship, for they provided the same amount of monthly aid but did not give food coupons or clothes. So instead of our traditional Sunday roast, Mother had to buy ends and scraps of meat for a stew. It also meant a strict rationing of money for milk and groceries. Even then, we had no new clothes for the rest of the year. But my only recollection of any food shortage occurred one day when Mother served a dessert made from leftover breakfast porridge with a few raisins added. I turned up my nose in disgust, but as I think back, Mother must have been desperate to serve something like that.

When my father was back on his feet again, our situation began to improve. When we went back on relief it was almost a bonanza to get a clothing allowance and food coupons. I started in Grade I at Parkdale School in 1935, and once a day all those on relief were given a glass of milk to drink at recess time. But the money was still scarce and my father had no luck in finding a permanent job. He did some bookkeeping, helped build houses and garages at 20 cents an hour, dug gardens, and even made some ironing boards which he sold from door to door. Each time he came home with a bit of money, it went right into groceries.

We moved in 1935 to a bigger house on 89th Street, two blocks away. It cost \$5 more a month but it had both a dirt cellar and a front porch, which the other place had lacked. On the south side was a vacant lot and next to it were the tracks of the 114th Avenue streetcar line. Beyond them was a tiny flat-roofed shack on the back half of the corner lot. I never knew who lived there, but they had a windup phonograph player and only one record, "You Are My Sunshine." In the summer, with the windows wide open, the song blared out endlessly until I knew it by heart.

There were quite a few vacant lots in the neighbourhood. Over on 90th Street between 114th and 115th Avenues there was only one house on the west side about halfway down the block. From there to the streetcar tracks was an open field where we played such games as "Duck on the Rock," "Run Sheep Run," and "Guns." For the latter game, we had L-shaped pieces of wood with

nails serving as pretend triggers. We were all impressed when a kid from the other side of the tracks (literally) showed up with a real toy gun. However, we found him to be a very strange fellow, for we all shouted “bang! bang!” during the game, while he yelled “pow! pow!” My fascination with the game ended when somebody got mad and threw their gun at me. It struck me in the face and I received my first black eye.

The north end of 90th Street at 116th Avenue consisted of a dense growth of willows which, to our active imaginations, was a deep forest. We made trails, built little shelters, and played all sorts of games far away from the prying eyes of our parents. The area was only half a block long and a block wide but it seemed as though it went on forever, and we felt we were indeed in the wilderness as we played hide-and-seek and other games.

If times were tough, I wasn’t aware of it. Years later when I spoke to my mother about it, she agreed with me. “We lived a hand to mouth existence and were run down at the heels,” she said, “but we didn’t think anything of it at the time. Just about everyone else we knew seemed to be in the same situation.”<sup>24</sup> Two of our best treats were fresh homemade bread with brown sugar on top and – especially as a birthday treat – wieners. One year when Mother apparently couldn’t afford wieners for my birthday, she got bologna instead. She tried to tell me that the only difference between bologna and wieners was that one was rolled up tight and the other was flat. I wasn’t convinced.

I enjoyed school and passed with honours the first few years. I had some good friends and was never at a loss for something to do. My parents were not strict about staying near the house or accounting for our time, so we wandered far and wide in our freedom. This gave me a sense of independence that never left me. Our favourite haunts were a deserted brick factory near the railroad tracks and the city dump alongside the North Saskatchewan River. At the first place, we could explore the deserted rooms, climb over abandoned machinery, and play games like “Cops and Robbers.” At the city dump, we looked for things to sell, like rags and beer bottles. But we had to be careful, for two or three hoboes lived in tar paper shacks on the edge of the dump and they resented anyone encroaching on their territory.

Among my best friends were the Slobidnyk kids, who lived half a block away. Their father was a carpenter who had built them a fine two-storey house. Behind it was a small shack where the old grandfather lived. He could speak no English. He had a rickety old wagon with wobbly wheels which he dragged down alleys, looking in garbage cans for rags, bottles, or other saleable scraps. Sometimes we used to follow him, yelling out phrases in Ukrainian that we

didn't understand, but were sure to make him furious. He would throw rocks at us and we would run away laughing. It's sad, when I think about it now, that sometimes the instigator of this "fun" was his own grandson.

In 1936 we moved again, this time to a house just off 118th Avenue (which was still being called Alberta Avenue by the local residents). This was another two-storey house where my brother and I shared an unheated upstairs room. It wasn't entirely unheated; there was an open hole in the floor originally made for a stovepipe and enough heat drifted through it to keep us warm. I had no complaints.



The following summer was a memorable one for me. The government had organized a Better Health Camp at Lac Ste. Anne for children on relief. My father applied for both my brother and me; I was a year too young, but as my brother was along, they let me go. It lasted a month and was the most joyous, agonizing, and unhappy time of my life. I cried when my mother left me at the bus, and in later years she told me she had cried all the way home. At the camp, my brother Glen, being four years older (I was seven and he was eleven), didn't have much time for me, as there were plenty of boys his own age to play with. I was painfully homesick for several days, crying myself to sleep every night.

We lived in dormitories in a rustic camp along the side of the lake. There wasn't much of a beach, if any, as the bulrushes choked the shores, and a rickety wharf extended out into the lake to a point where it was possible to swim. I had a few friends at the camp, but as the youngest I was often ignored and left alone. That was all right with me. I wandered along the shore, catching frogs and looking for birds' nests; sometimes I went to the ice house, where huge blocks of ice were buried in sawdust and sparrows fluttered around the rafters. Sometimes I went into the treed area near the camp (we weren't allowed to leave the compound) and pretended I was in the forest.

I always had a great imagination, even before that time, so it was easy for me to slip into my own dream world and see myself in a primeval forest, hunting one of the deer or ruffed grouse that sometimes ventured into our camp. Reality returned as soon as I went for lunch. We ate in a screened veranda and then we had an hour's rest period when we all lay quietly on cots. On reflection, I suspect that some of the boys may have been tubercular, so fresh air, rest, and sunshine were priority items. Then, at the end of the rest period, each of us had to drink a glass of warm water; supposedly it was good for our digestion.

Like the others, I hated the stuff, but the counsellors stood over us and saw that we drank every drop.

One day after the warm water dietetic, our supervisor announced that we were going to have a poster contest. The subject was good health. There was a groan from the boys, who wanted to be out on the lake, but they all dutifully took their paper, pencils, and crayons, and began their works of art. I had an idea, but when I tried to put it down on paper I was so unhappy with the result that I folded it and tucked it under my chair. When the counsellor came to collect the papers, she saw mine, made me sign it, and put it with the others.

That evening, at supper, I was astounded when I won first prize. The supervisor said my poster showed the most originality of all those submitted. As far as I can recall, I had carrots and other vegetables with arms, legs, and faces, saying that “We’re good to eat.” If I was surprised by my win, my brother wasn’t. Two years earlier, he had heard me announce that I was going to be an artist when I grew up. I was fond of scribbling and even in the junior grades art was my best subject.

One day, the dining room program became an excruciating experience for me. Somehow, the supervisor discovered that I had memorized “Who Killed Cock Robin” – all umpteen verses – so on this particular evening I was called upon to perform the recitation. I was painfully shy, and although I stumbled through the verse, I was just about ready to run away to hide with embarrassment after my first public performance. However, the experience was soon forgotten when my father showed up for a visit. He was doing some carpentry work at one of the beaches and had walked several miles to our camp. Afterwards, as I saw him going down the road and out of sight among the trees, my homesickness welled up in me again and I cried as only a seven-year-old can cry when they’re lonely.

The month at the Better Health Camp seemed like an eternity. When we finally got off the bus in Edmonton and I saw my mother waiting for us, my joy knew no bounds. Later that day I looked up my school friends, particularly a pal named Art, and pretty soon it was as though I had never left.



One of our favourite events of the summer was the Edmonton Exhibition. We had no money for the gate fee so it was necessary for us to sneak inside. Our best place was a stretch of fence on the east side of the grounds, close to where an old railway locomotive was eroding into dust. It had been the first train into Edmonton in 1905, but by the time I saw the relic, it was a piece of rusty junk.



Once over the fence, Art and I would go to see my mother, who was working at the St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church booth just north of the Administration Building. If we visited her at the back of the booth, she could slip us a corn on the cob or hot dog. Sometimes we even earned some food by peeling potatoes or doing other odd jobs.

Our afternoon at the fairgrounds was a study in enjoying one's self without spending a dime. We saw all the free exhibits in the Manufacturers Building and Women's Building, taking any samples that were being offered. We then wandered down past the original log *Edmonton Bulletin* building, which had a bust of its founder, Frank Oliver, in front. The only trouble was that Frank's marble nose was broken so it was hard to take him seriously. Then it was down the midway, checking the sawdust around the rides to see if anyone had lost any money. Surprisingly, we did find a few coins from time to time. After that, it was over to the sideshows to enjoy the free previews on the stages in front. On one occasion, a magician called me up to be his "victim." He filled a large metal cup with water, then asked me to pour it out. When I had done so, he asked me if I had poured all of it. I said yes. Then he tipped it and poured out another stream of water, and laughingly bawled me out for not doing it right. "Are you sure it's all out now?" he asked me in front of the crowd. "Yes," I said. So he handed it to me and said, "Try it again." I did, and more water came out. This time, I could see that the cup had false sides and small holes where the water was seeping in. By this time the show was over and I was given a free ticket to go inside.

If we really got hungry, we could always wander behind the booths, either looking for a free handout or finding food that was being thrown out. One time we came across a bunch of overripe bananas which were like manna from heaven; another time we found a couple of wieners which had been inadvertently left in a box that was being discarded. By the time we left the grounds and headed home along Alberta Avenue, we were as contented as anyone who had spent a week's earnings at the fair.



Although I have a faint recollection of Christmases soon after we arrived in Edmonton, my detailed memories begin during the four years we lived near 118th Avenue. My brother and I were told that Santa Claus wouldn't come if we stayed awake, but who could sleep at a time like this? Our parents had been skilful in hiding our few presents, so to our knowledge everything depended upon Santa's visit. Finally, by some miracle, Christmas morning arrived and

about five o'clock my brother and I crept downstairs and into the living room. There, under the tree, were what seemed to be piles and piles of presents. We excitedly shook a few, tried to read the name tags, and finally slipped back to our bedroom with our Christmas stockings. As soon as we heard our parents or older brothers stirring, we hurried downstairs and impatiently waited for permission to open our gifts.

On reflection, the presents themselves were less important than actually getting them. We were not a demonstrative family as far as hugging and kissing were concerned – something I always regretted – perhaps because I had no sister. In their own way, the presents, the stockings, and the tree were symbols of love and family. If I try to think back about the toys I had before I was ten years old, I'm more likely to recall the little trucks I made from wood ends or the lead soldiers I stole from Kresge's department store.

Christmas was a big day for us; mother said that the first year in Edmonton was the only time we went without turkey. Usually, she managed to save enough money for a bird and once she even won one at a bingo game. Quite a few other farmers had been dried out in the Edgerton district and, like us, they had come to Edmonton. My father used to meet people like Ernie Trotter, Knutt Tangen, and Jack Cram in the downtown Hudson's Bay store where they would stand around and talk. They all were on relief and they had nothing else to do. But often they came around at Christmas, particularly the bachelors like Murdo Fraser, who lived at the Salvation Army. As well, my Uncle Stuart and his family sometimes joined us. They still lived on their farm and Christmas holidays were a perfect time to get together.

When she could afford it, my mother made a fruitcake in the fall and stored it in the cellar where it could age until Christmas. Then, as the holiday approached, she made Old English plum pudding and always managed to get some small silver nickels which were scattered through the batter. The holiday took some careful planning on my mother's part, for she had to depend upon the little money she had been able to save in the fall to buy the important little extras. Some of the food was bought, but a lot came from home canning and from our cold room in the basement where we had the potatoes, onions, beets, and other vegetables from the garden.

Our guests usually arrived in the afternoon and we kids went out to play with our cousins or friends. Meanwhile, the women congregated around the coal stove in the kitchen while the men sat in the front room, smoking and talking about the farm, politics, and their army days. There was a lot of laughter and storytelling.

We did not have skates or toboggans, but we did have some rough sleds that my father had made, and if the weather was mild we took them to the hills of the North Saskatchewan River where we had a lot of fun. Otherwise, we played around the house, sharing the excitement of the holiday, smelling the aroma of food cooking in the kitchen, and looking over our presents again and again.

One special gift always arrived for me just before Christmas and was opened immediately. It was from my Grandma Sharp in Folkestone, England, and contained a bundle of English children's magazines all rolled up tight and wrapped with brown paper. I had heard of American comic books, but these were entirely different. Tabloid in size, they were a fascinating mixture of comics, stories, and puzzles. Hours were spent poring over the adventure tales and the continuing sagas of English actors like Harold Lloyd and George Formby in comic book form. And, just as important, they were exclusive to me; no other kid on the block had ever seen them. I never met my grandmother, but I loved her for thinking of me at Christmas.

Sometimes we would haul down the copies of Harmsworth's Encyclopaedia for a guessing game. At the beginning of each new letter of the alphabet was a third of a page containing a scene filled with objects beginning with that letter. If it was "C," one was sure to find a cat, clock, church, or chimpanzee, but might have more trouble identifying a clarinet or a condor. Even with our familiarity with the Encyclopaedia, I don't think any of us ever identified every item at a single sitting.

Finally, mother and her visitors set the dining room table, digging out her best dishes and silver. We could not afford soft drinks, so in the fall we went to the city dump to find wine bottles that still had the corks in them. Then my parents made a mild ginger beer out of wheat that friends brought from the farm, and the bottles were placed upside down to ferment until Christmas day. One of these was placed beside every plate.

What great fun we had opening the bottles! They were wired down to keep them from exploding and whenever anyone took the wire off, they never knew when the cork might suddenly go bang! and spray the wheat beer all over the place. An empty glass was kept handy so the bottle could be upended into it as soon as the liquid began to bubble out.

Soon, what seemed to my youthful eyes to be piles and piles of steaming food was brought in from the kitchen. This was the time when the potatoes were put through the ricer to produce a fluffy white mound that seemed to collapse under the weight of the gravy. Also, a mixture of peas and carrots was

always present – something we called “Presbyterian mix” for some reason or other. And with the turkey came sage dressing and giblet gravy, all done with the professional touch which my mother had learned while working in the kitchens of people in England.

The dessert at the best of times was plum pudding, fruitcake, and perhaps hot mince pie. In lean years, it was plum pudding alone, and somehow my mother always managed the servings so that there was at least one nickel inside every serving, to be rescued before the sauce was poured over it.

The measure of the meal’s success was the degree of immobility it produced afterwards. Usually I stretched out on the floor to groan happily in my overstuffed and satiated condition. Others were equally relaxed, except for the women, who seemed anxious to clear the tables and wash the dishes. Unless they were staying overnight, our guests left soon after the dishes were done, and we all settled down in the happiness and security of family life.



In the summer of 1938, when I was eight years old, I got my first job as a delivery boy on a milk wagon. It may not have been much, but from that time on, there was never a year when I was not working for wages, even if only part-time. In later years, when I asked my mother about my working, she said, “You were always a go-getter. Glen and Bill weren’t. Glen was the quiet one and Bill talked to himself and to his imaginary friend. Harry knew what he was doing, but he wasn’t aggressive. You were highly aggressive and a leader, like me.”

The deliveryman, Charles Hickey, and I had a routine. He got up at 5 a.m. and walked about two miles to the Edmonton City Dairy, on 109th Street across from the CPR station. He harnessed his horse, hitched her to a wagon, and waited in line for his milk. Once loaded, he set out for home, arriving in time for breakfast. I got up about seven and walked five blocks to his house, arriving just as he was getting ready to leave.

His route was in the Woodland and Delton districts, which included our house and was the reason I got the job. Our routine was simple. The milk wagon had covered storage bins on each side and an aisle down the middle. By opening the lids, we could take out the bottles we needed, put them into a wire basket, and make the delivery. Mr. Hickey would do one side of the street and I would do the other. I went up to the door (usually the back door), where I found empty bottles and tickets. I left the required milk, took away the empties, and put them into a special compartment. Almost invariably, the bottles were as clean as a whistle; seldom did we ever encounter one encrusted with dried milk.

One of the interesting features of the work was the delivery horse. She knew the route better than we did. When a delivery had been made and Mr. Hickey said “Giddyap” she plodded along and stopped at the next customer’s house without being told. There was one place on the route where we had to shift over to the next street. After I had made my delivery, I crossed the road and followed Mr. Hickey, who delivered his milk, went through a backyard, across the alley to his next customer, and when he emerged on the other street, the horse and wagon were waiting for us. The only time Mr. Hickey had to take over was when a customer quit or a new one was added. After a few days, however, the horse adjusted to the change in the routine.

We finished deliveries at the northeast corner of the Delton district about noon. Mr. Hickey then swung over to 118th Avenue and we clip-clopped down that main thoroughfare, the empty bottles rattling in the bins, until we got to my street. There I was given my daily pay – five cents – and if I was lucky, a bottle of milk. I never understood how Mr. Hickey was able to give me milk one day and not another. Perhaps it had something to do with breakage or a miscount. However, I’d prefer to think that as a wage earner, he felt some sympathy for the skinny kid on welfare and every once in a while he would take a dime out of his pocket to make sure we had milk in the house.

That job lasted only for the summer but I felt as though I was rich. I had never received an allowance, and the money I had earned selling rags and bottles could be counted in pennies. A favourite use for my nickel was to buy something called a brazil nut slab. It was a chocolate bar containing whole brazil nuts and came in a cellophane bag. It was a feast in itself.



During the Depression, people on relief could apply to the City to take over a vacant lot as a vegetable garden. My father got one about a block away which he planted in addition to the one beside our house. Potatoes took up a lot of space but there also were carrots, peas, beets, cucumbers, onions, and other vegetables that could be dried, canned, or pickled. We boys pitched in (we had to) to weed, hill potatoes, thin the rows, and do the other chores necessary in a big garden. In early summer, we went down to the river to cut willows to use as pea sticks. These were shoved into the ground to provide supports for the pea vines. In the fall, we followed behind my father as he dug into the earthen hills and exposed stacks of white potatoes. We picked them up and put them into gunny sacks which, when filled, were tied with binder twine and carried home in a wheelbarrow. We had a cold room in the cellar next to the coal bin where the potatoes were kept.

The fall was the time when my mother did so much canning that there always seemed to be steam in the kitchen. She had a huge boiler for the jars, a table littered with sealer rings and metal caps, and pots for cooking. I'm sure she canned vegetables but all I remember were the peaches and pears which became standard fare throughout the winter. Pickled beets and cucumbers were other favourites of mine. Those, added to the bread she made every week and the moose meat my father got from hunting, made us pretty self-sufficient. On \$40 a month for relief, with half going for rent, we had to be.

Besides the milk wagon, a few other horse-drawn vehicles passed our house every day. We had an ice box, a forerunner of the refrigerator, so once a week in summer the ice wagon stopped in front of our place. A few of us watched in fascination as the iceman chipped a block to the exact size needed, grabbed it with his metal tongs, and carried it on his back, which was protected by a rubber sheet. While he was inside the house, especially on hot days, we took the opportunity to grab some of the larger chips of ice and suck on them as though they were candy. They were a real treat.

We never could afford store-bought bread, so the McGavin's Bakery wagon just kept on going past our house. Another vehicle that passed us by was the honey wagon. Quite a few homes still had outside toilets, so periodically the honey wagon came down the alley, where the men opened the trap door at the back of the outhouse and shovelled out the mess. The honey wagons were solid vehicles with trap doors on the bottom so the load could be dumped without any further shovelling. When not in use, these wagons were stored on an open lot just west of Clarke Stadium. Needless to say, no one ever played on them.

After the summer season, it was back to school and no more milk deliveries. But that didn't mean I gave up earning money. In the winter there were sidewalks to be shovelled and in the spring I sometimes asked people for sprigs of blue or white lilacs, then made them into bouquets to sell to householders who had no flowers. Another way of making money was an adventure in itself. On a Saturday, I would get up at six o'clock and go to my friend Art's place two blocks away. From there we walked a mile and a half to a point called Lover's Leap at the end of Viewpoint Road. This is where couples liked to park, drink beer, and make love. Art and I tried to be the first ones there in the morning. We searched the parking area and along the slopes into the trees, looking for beer bottles. We wanted at least three each, but got more if we were lucky.

With our treasures, we walked along Jasper Avenue about three miles to the Alberta Liquor Vendors on 103rd Street. There we sold the empties for three for a nickel. If we had made more than a dime between us, we went to

Eaton's to buy broken cookies. Any broken or damaged ones went into a special bin, and for a nickel one could get a paper bag full. Sometimes, if we were lucky, we got specialty treats which were chocolate covered or had marshmallow centres. Usually, however, the bag contained a mixture of plain varieties, like oatmeal and ginger snaps.

Armed with these we walked a half mile to the Gem Theatre on Jasper Avenue, just east of 97th Street. Every Saturday it had a special five-cent program consisting of two full-length movies, cartoons, previews, and a thrilling serial which continued from week to week. All this lasted until late afternoon. When we came out into the bright sunshine, we were rested, happy, and ready for the three-mile walk home. I usually arrived just in time for supper.

"What did you do today?" my mother would ask.

"Aw, nothin'."



I got my second job during the winter of 1938–39 as a result of cleaning sidewalks. A regular customer was Mrs. Elgie Latta, who lived half a block north of us. From shovelling snow, I graduated to carrying out the ashes from her coal stove and furnace and dumping them in the alley. One thing led to another and pretty soon I was doing so many odd jobs that she hired me for 35 cents a week to be her nine-year-old handyman. And what started off as a simple task of keeping her sidewalk clear and carrying out her ashes soon turned into a year-round after-school occupation.

There wasn't much to do in winter except clean the sidewalk, bring in wood and coal, shake down the stoves, and clean out the ashes. As soon as spring arrived, I had the task of keeping her dugout cellar dry. She had a hand pump which consisted of a vertical pipe which extended from the floor to an outside drain. My task was to grasp a pump handle, and work it up and down until the water which had collected from the spring runoff was siphoned off. Later, when the snow had melted, I dug her vegetable garden and helped her plant. Fortunately it wasn't a large garden, as she also had flowers and raspberry bushes. During the summer I did the weeding and thinning, then cleaned up the yard in the fall.

If I worked well outside and in the cellar, Mrs. Latta assumed I could be of help around the house as well. So once a week I washed, waxed and polished her floors and did the dusting. This didn't take all my time, but as I was a skinny kid, I sometimes had trouble with heavy snows in winter, and the interminable pumping. Finally, Mrs. Latta suggested that I get some help, so

my brother Glen joined me and our salary was set at 50 cents a week between the two of us.

Mrs. Latta was a nice lady. Being young and uninquisitive, I never knew if she was a widow, why she was alone, or where she worked. All I knew was that she treated me very kindly. I stayed with her for over a year, in fact until we moved away in the summer of 1940.



Our lives slowly improved during the latter part of the Depression. On the farm, my father had been an active Conservative and had been asked to run for the Alberta legislature. On arriving in Edmonton, he had switched to the Social Credit party, which was just being organized by William Aberhart. He threw his support behind our local candidate, David B. Mullen, and worked hard on his behalf. Even Glen and I were pressed into service, delivering leaflets from door to door. When Mullen was elected, my father continued to be one of his active campaigners in the Alberta Avenue Constituency Association. I recall on one occasion, Premier Aberhart came to speak at the community hall and my father took me along. After the program, I was taken up to the stage to meet the premier. As we walked forward, I felt as though I was being ushered into the presence of God himself, and when I shook the Great Man's pudgy hand, people acted as though this was the greatest honour that could ever be bestowed upon a mere mortal.

In the fall of 1938, my father's work with the party paid off when he was given the position of elevator operator at the downtown Provincial Building. This was pure patronage, but it was the first time my father had held a regular job since we came to Edmonton. It made a world of difference, not only in his standard of income, but in the fact that he could now provide for the family without welfare handouts. As my mother said, "He hated charity, but what could he do?" His life insurance policy had been cancelled during the Depression and he was constantly worried about what would happen to the family in the event of his death.

As soon as he got the job, he was determined to be the best elevator operator the building had ever seen. Many times I visited him at work and saw how people respected him. Not only did he do his job well but he was constantly going out of his way to help others. He was very solicitous of his clients, sometimes checking on a person who was staying late to see if they were all right, or helping with deliveries. There wasn't much a person could do wrong as an elevator operator, but my father brought a pride and efficiency to the work that reflected his feeling about at last finding employment.



The work convinced my father that the only security in the world lay in the civil service. He emphasized to the rest of us how important it was to have a secure job; after his Depression experience, his attitude was not surprising.

When my oldest brother, Harry, came back from a two-year stint with a northern fur trading company, my father used his political influence with Mullen, who was now Minister of Agriculture, to get him a job with the Department of Fish and Game. Harry was born in 1918 so I hardly knew him as a child. During the war he enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force and served overseas. I greatly admired him and looked up to him as my hero. He was a handsome, dashing man with a lot of flair, and both of us seemed to have similar aggressive personalities.

After the war, Harry joined the federal Fisheries Department in Winnipeg and I stayed with him during one hitchhiking adventure. Then he was promoted to Ottawa and became Director of Consumer Services for the department. That's when I really got to know him, for I used to make frequent business trips to Ottawa and Harry often visited Calgary. It was funny, but we seemed to run along parallel lines. He had been a stamp collector, so I became a stamp collector. I started building a library of Canadian books, and he started a similar library. It was almost like a competition, but it wasn't. Rather, I think we were both so fond of each other that each naturally pursued the other's interests. He was the oldest so it seemed so unfair that he should be the first of the brothers to die. He was a heavy smoker, contracted lung cancer, and died in 1969 at the age of fifty-one.

Getting back to my dad, soon after the war broke out in 1939, he tried to enlist, but he was too old at forty-seven, and his eardrums had been damaged while testing guns in the earlier war. Then one day in the summer of 1940, my mother sat on my bed and told me we were going to move. It was a nice place, she said, closer to downtown so my father could walk to work. We didn't need a big house. The place turned out to be the upstairs of a box-like old house on 105A Avenue. There was no garden, no lawn, and for the first time, we had neighbours with only a floor separating us. But I didn't mind. I moved from Parkdale to Alex Taylor School, found new friends, and soon was comfortable in our new surroundings.

I was out of work again, but it took only a few weeks to find a new job. As in my previous employment, I became a gardener and handyman, this time for the lady who lived across the street. Her name was Miss Emma Holmes, and she was general secretary for the Alberta Wool Growers Association. She was a very businesslike person, not warm and friendly like Mrs. Latta but still a

good and fair boss. And my work was very similar to what I had done before. She had natural gas or electricity so I didn't have any ashes to dump, but I did clean her house, tended the garden, and undertook any other odd jobs. My pay was 50 cents a week.



Alex Taylor was quite a different school from Parkdale. I was now in Grade VI and perhaps I was becoming more observant about things around me. There seemed to be a lot of “tough” kids at the school, and fights were not uncommon. During a football game, I was deliberately kicked in the kneecap by one of these punks, and my knee was never the same after that.

My best pals were a small group of four boys and three girls who liked to hang out on 105th Avenue, along a tree-lined street where a couple of them lived. At eleven, I was one of the oldest, the youngest being a girl of nine. We used to call ourselves the Fifth Street Gang, inspired no doubt by the movies. However, we were anything but a gang in the real sense of the word. We played skipping, marbles, hide and seek, and a couple of the bunch even had roller skates. We made a soapbox racing car using old wagon wheels and had scooters from apple boxes and roller skate wheels. When we weren't on 105th Avenue, we were two blocks away at Bissell Park, playing softball or soccer.

By the time the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour in 1941 and the Americans joined the war, I had graduated from Alex Taylor and was now a Grade VII student at McCauley Intermediate. In that same year, my father finally settled into his lifetime career. All during the 1930s, he had listed his occupation as bookkeeper, but in Edmonton he had had few opportunities to practise it. Then, when the war broke out and men were enlisting by the hundreds, new jobs began to open up. With his military experience giving him preference, he was able to win a competition as Customs Officer for the federal government. It was a job he loved. He memorized its “Blue Book” by heart and soon became the resident expert on customs and excise duties.

Edmonton underwent a massive change in 1942 when we were invaded by the Americans. The Alaska Highway, Canol Project, and Northwest Staging Route brought thousands of military and civilian workers to the city. New buildings popped up overnight on Jasper Avenue and near the airport, and American troops became a common sight on the streets. This soon had an impact upon many of my fellow students as a whole new social hierarchy was created. American comic books, forbidden since the war, began to appear; boys sported USAF shoulder flashes on their jackets; and rationed items

such as chocolate bars found their way into the classrooms. I was denied all these luxuries, for I lacked the essential ingredient for success: an older sister. Boys my own age regaled us with stories of rich American soldiers who dated their sisters and always came bearing gifts. While the girls traipsed off to the Trocadero Ballroom or Lover's Leap, the boys reaped the spoils of war. Sometimes they were willing to trade their treasures, but I had little or nothing of value to them. Money wasn't as important as prestige.

Like others, I was captivated by the romantic image of American soldiers, and the few I met were open, friendly, and generous. Even the civilians working for such construction outfits as Bechtel Price Callaghan of California left a good impression. Black soldiers were something of a curiosity on Edmonton streets, as was a black zoot suiter I saw one day near the post office. He had the whole outfit – yellow shoes, drapes, purple jacket with no lapels, wide brimmed hat, and a long keychain. As he stood on the street corner, people avoided him like the plague, myself included. Also during the war, I could never get used to seeing airplanes flying overhead bearing Russian markings. They were mostly Air Cobras, part of the lend-lease program to Russia. The planes flew to Alaska, where they were turned over to Russian pilots who ferried them across Siberia to the battlefields of Europe.

Aircraft identification became a fetish with some students. Cards slightly smaller than playing cards bearing silhouettes of aircraft were available, and we used them as flash cards. A boy would hold up a card and instantly someone would shout the name. Similarly, if we were out in the playground and aircraft flew over (as they often did) we accurately picked out the Air Cobras, Mustangs, Dakotas, Lightnings, and such Canadian training planes as Fairey Battles, Avro Ansons, and Harvards. Even though I had two brothers (later three) in the Air Force, to me the war was far away. The real excitement was right in Edmonton where we had American soldiers, Russian planes, food rationing, British Commonwealth Air Training Plan activities, and our own recruiting depots and armouries.

Life at McCauley Intermediate proved very difficult for me. I had managed to slide through all the elementary grades without studying and still passed with honours. As a result, I never picked up the habit of studying and tried to coast along on what I picked up in the classroom. By Grade VII I had slipped to a B grade and for the rest of my school years I was an indifferent student. This was partly due to boredom with the school system. Much of my time in classes was spent doodling and daydreaming. Only in English, art, and social studies did I maintain any level of interest. The rest I found tiresome.

Added to this was the fact that I was always working so that I seldom, if ever, participated in intramural activities. I was too skinny to be active in sports and too shy for the theatre. I always had lots of friends like Howie Carey and Cam MacLean but I also enjoyed my own company.

One of my best friends was a collie named Rex. I never had a dog of my own and half a block from us was a family with no children. I started playing with their dog and they had no objection to my taking him out for a run. Our favourite activity occurred in the winter. A half block from our house was the beginning of the Chinese market gardens. This was an area more than two blocks square which had once been the Edmonton Penitentiary grounds. In winter it was entirely barren and covered with snow. Rex and I would dash across the open fields, he barking and me laughing as we enjoyed each other's company. Quite often Rex would raise a rabbit and take off like a shot while I struggled to follow. "Here Rex! Here Rex!" I would shout into the darkness but the dog would return only when he was good and ready, tired and happy. At other times I looked into the night sky and searched for the North Star, the Big Dipper, and the few other constellations that I could recognize. It was a thoroughly joyful experience for me, and I suspect for Rex too.

My job with Miss Holmes lasted for about a year, but came to a crashing halt in the spring of 1942. Although there was no set routine, the usual procedure was to put in an hour or so after school, taking out the garbage, and doing odd chores. On Saturday I usually worked half a day in the garden, cleaning house, dusting, etc. One Saturday, Miss Holmes told me without warning that I would have to work all day. She had some guests coming that evening and had extra duties for me. I explained that I already had a date to meet some friends downtown and there was no way I could contact them. She told me in no uncertain terms that I had to decide which was more important, my job or my friends. I chose my friends and joined the ranks of the unemployed.

But not for long. Within a couple of weeks, I had presented myself to the circulation manager at the *Edmonton Bulletin* and became a paper boy. I had the two necessary prerequisites: a bike with a strap-iron carrier and a willingness to work. I was given a route flanking each side of 96th Street in one of the crummiest parts of town – although I didn't realize it at the time. Actually, I knew the area well as it was directly on my way to and from downtown. I delivered to homes, stores, and a couple of apartment buildings. In later years, I learned that one place on my route was a brothel, but I never saw anything or heard anything to make me suspicious. I simply went down the hall and slipped the newspaper under all the doors of the subscribers. And when I think

back, they must have been a pretty literate bunch, as most of them took the paper.

Like other boys, I went to the *Bulletin* every day after school and waited at the back door until my turn came to get my list of new subscribers, cancellations, and complaints. The manager then counted off my papers, I stuck them in my bag, mounted my bike, and headed off for my route. At least it happened that way if I was lucky. Sometimes, if the papers were late on a Saturday afternoon, a few bullies in the crowd might decide to have some fun by terrorizing some of the younger lads. I was one of the youngest – a skinny shy kid who was a perfect target for their harassment. I was never actually beaten up, but I was threatened, chased, and ridiculed. One time, I was forced to flee down the steep slope behind the *Bulletin* to get away from the bullies, and then I got in trouble with the boss because I was late picking up my papers.

Once in a while, I crept through the doors into the pressroom to avoid trouble, and was awestruck by the roaring presses, the newspapers cascading down the racks in orderly rows, and the huge rolls of paper waiting to be fed into the hungry machines. The presses seemed to go all the way to the ceiling – which they did – and the smell of printers' ink and newsprint permeated the air and captured my imagination.

I had no wish to deliver papers during an Edmonton winter so I quit the *Bulletin* in the fall. And it did get cold in Edmonton. One morning, the air was perfectly still when I left the house for school. As I walked along, my breath left a vapour trail and the snow under my feet was as granular as sand. When a train whistle sounded in the distance, it echoed through the hollow air as though it was just across the street. It was less than half a mile to school but during the walk I saw no one. At first I thought I was early but even then I should have met others heading in the same direction. When I finally entered McCauley, a teacher waiting in the hall said that classes had been cancelled as it was  $-62^{\circ}\text{F}$ . Together with a few other hardy souls who had wandered into the building, I was kept inside until we had warmed up, and then we were sent home.

I always bundled up warm for Edmonton winters – long underwear, thick flannel trousers, heavy socks, boots (or if it was *really* cold, moccasins), flannel shirt, sweater, windbreaker, scarf, toque, and mittens. One of my early acquisitions from the military was a Canadian khaki-coloured balaclava which I could wear rolled up as a toque but pull it down so only my eyes were showing when the weather turned cold.



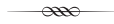
McCauley was a typical city school, but one event sticks out in my mind, probably because it was so unique at the time. It concerned our drama teacher. He was a young man in his twenties who made me appreciate Shakespeare. Until that time, I had enjoyed poetry and had memorized such verses as “The Shooting of Dan McGrew” and “Frankie and Johnnie” – real classical stuff. I had appreciated poems like “The Song My Paddle Sings” and “The Highwayman,” but The Bard had left me cold. Then came our drama teacher. He didn’t teach Shakespeare, he acted it. He actually stood on top of his desk one day when he recited Hamlet’s soliloquy, after which he explained it to us in terms we could understand.

Then one day in mid-term he was gone. No explanation, just replacement with another of those humdrum teachers whose monotonous drones were guaranteed to bring on utter boredom, if not sleep. Then the whispering began. Our drama teacher had been fired. Why? He was one of those, a faggot! (We didn’t have such neutral terms as “gay” or “homosexual”; in fact, “faggot” was perhaps one of the kinder words bandied about.) I was as shocked as the rest of the class, but even then I wondered how such a wonderful teacher could have been such an “evil” man. There had never been a hint of scandal involving any of the students and, in fact, rumour had it that he was living with a man a few blocks west of the school. Perhaps someone with his sexual proclivities shouldn’t have been teaching young boys, but I know he was the finest drama teacher I ever had.

My first brush with sex during this time scared the wits out of me. One Saturday afternoon when I was fourteen, I had pedalled down into the river valley and across the Dawson Bridge to the Riverside Golf Course. During World War I, part of this area had been a shooting range, and there was a cut-bank where one could dig out rifle bullets. After a successful foray, I was on my way home, pushing my bike up the hill below Alex Taylor School when a boy I knew slightly called to me from some bushes. When I went over, I found two boys and three girls settling down to the serious business of necking. They obviously were a boy short, so I was elected. A rather nice-looking girl of my own age nestled up beside me while the others paired off, one going into passionate kissing and the other talking in low murmurs.

I was at a loss as to what to do. My experience with girls was absolutely nil and, coupled with my natural shyness and my unfamiliarity with girls my age, I didn’t know what to do next. The girl, sweetheart that she was, set me at ease by saying she didn’t care what the others did, all she wanted to do was

chat. It seemed doubtful but I never found out if she really meant it, for after a few minutes the caretaker from the school came down the hill and told us to get out. As we scampered away, the girl told me that they were going directly to a little place in Rat Creek ravine where they could *really* be alone. I had my bike to contend with, so I promised to meet them later. But I never did. I went home, grateful that I had escaped a situation that seemed to be beyond my emotional capabilities, yet cursing myself for not going. It was tough being a teenager.



In the fall of 1942, after I had made up my mind that I was not going to deliver newspapers, I had to decide what to do next. Up to this time, most of my winter work experience had been indoors, except for shovelling sidewalks. I had never received an allowance from my parents and I wasn't about ready to start; neither was I prepared to be unemployed. So when I learned that Graydon's Drug Store needed a "boy" with a "wheel" I hurried down and got the job. At first I was puzzled about the required "wheel," as all I had was a bicycle, but I soon learned that this was its English term.

Graydon's was located on Jasper Avenue, just east of 99th Street, and in later years was demolished for the extension of the Macdonald Hotel. It prided itself on being the oldest drug store in Edmonton, having been established by George Graydon in 1890. He was dead by the time I was hired, and his two assistants had taken over the business. They were as opposite as night and day. One was Nels Ferris, a small owlish man who was a good druggist and businessman but was somewhat cold and aloof. He was a family man and lived in the West End. The other was Charles Miller, an older man with flowing white hair, a florid face from too much drinking, and with a warm and friendly personality. He was a bachelor who lived at the Queen's Hotel but spent most of his free time at the Elks Club farther east on Jasper Avenue.

I got along with both men, but Mr. Miller was my favourite. He used to chat about the early years of his pharmacy work when he was with George Graydon. One day he described how opium had been shipped direct from China when the drug was still legal. It arrived, he said, looking like "a big elephant turd" and they had to refine it themselves, using the drug in their own elixirs and medicines. He also told me that during the prohibition era the only way a person could get liquor was with a doctor's prescription and the drug store did a roaring business.

My job stretched into a five-year association with Graydon's during which time I was clerk, handyman, and delivery boy. I worked for two hours every day after school, all day Saturdays, and part time for the summer. I got 30 cents an hour, which was the minimum wage, and I loved it. My routine during the week was to make any needed deliveries, then go to the National Drug Company warehouse to pick up anything the store needed. When I got back, I took out the garbage, filled the shelves, and helped with the clerking if they got too busy. On Saturdays I swept out the store and usually spent the morning dusting.

Being an old store, Graydon's was very traditional. In the windows were two huge glass jars, one filled with red liquid and one with green; these were pharmaceutical symbols. When you entered the door, you came into a huge room with rows and rows of bottles down both walls. These contained strange liquids and powders with Latin names, and a few recognizable things like cinnamon sticks and powdered liquorice. The floor was wood and the display cases ancient. Halfway down each side was a counter for serving customers, and at the back of the room was a massive beaded curtain that extended from the ceiling to the tops of display cases and down to the floor. It had a peacock design and I was told it had come from China with one of the opium shipments.

My weekend chore was to start at one end of the room and begin dusting the bottles. This meant that all the bottles on a length of shelf had to be removed, wiped with a damp cloth, and then returned to a shelf that had been dusted clean. Between clerking, delivering, and other tasks, I could do about a quarter of one side of the room in a day, but by the time I had done the entire room, the first ones were dusty again. It was a job that I hated.

During the summer, I did everything except fill prescriptions, and even there I sometimes helped by assembling the necessary medicines on the table, or scraping the brand names off bottles so the prescription labels could be glued on. Graydon's was one of the few drug stores at the time that commonly mixed its own prescriptions rather than just taking something from a bottle. Many times I saw Mr. Miller or Mr. Ferris carefully weighing powders or herbs on a delicate scale, dumping them into a mortar, and grinding them with a pestle, or measuring a mixture of several liquids into a beaker.

Although I didn't handle prescription drugs, I did mix herbal remedies. The store had a tattered old book which contained the formulas for making such items as Chinese Herbal Tea, Graydon's Balsam Mix, and Graydon's Blood Tonic. The herbs came to the store in small bales. I dumped these into well-marked barrels, and when we ran short of an item I took the recipe book,



a bunch of small boxes, a weigh scale, and set to work. With a scoop I shovelled the required amounts of several herbs into a container which I stirred thoroughly. Then, using a smaller scoop, I filled each box with the mixture, sealed it, and stuck on the label.

The drugstore also had its own brand name items which, like cough medicine, were mixed by the druggists while I bottled and labelled them. Some, such as Graydon's Zinc Ointment, were simply taken from large containers and bottled in small jars.

While they did handle the usual patent medicines, shaving cream, toothpaste, candy, and other items found in "modern" drugstores, they still emphasized the medical side of pharmacy. Besides the prescriptions, they did a good business in trusses, body belts, and other medical appliances.

When I joined Graydon's, we were in the middle of a war and rationing was a visible part of the business. For example, anyone wishing to buy a tube of toothpaste had to return their old tube so that the lead could be salvaged. The allotment of chocolate bars was so limited that they were kept behind the counter and sold only to regular customers, and the sale of some of the store's herbal mixtures was suspended because it was impossible to import the necessary ingredients.

My work as a clerk was fairly routine, although when I started I was pretty green. For example, a man came in one day and placed three fingers on the counter in front of me. I asked him what he wanted, but he didn't say a word. He just looked angry and repeated the three-finger motion. Then Mr. Miller stepped in. He reached under the counter and produced a package of three condoms and handed them to the customer. That sign language was standard during the five years I worked there. Many men were either embarrassed or shy about asking for condoms, especially if there were other customers in the store, so they used this signal. We usually gave them Sheiks unless they asked for one of the other brands. And I can still remember Mr. Miller's embarrassment one day when a woman asked for "safes" (condoms). He hesitated, fearing he hadn't heard right, but when she repeated her request, he sold her the goods. When he came back into the dispensary, his face was beet red; it was the first time this had ever happened to him in his long years at the store. But I guess it was a sign of the changing times.

Graydon's had a basement that extended the length of the entire store, and it was a wonderful place to explore. At one time, a loading ramp had extended from the alley to the lower area but this had since been filled in. Yet the double doors were still in place and I always wondered what was behind them. They

were hard to get to, as the space in front of them was used to pile empty cardboard boxes. One day, I took matters into my own hands, cleaned away the boxes, and pried the door open slightly. Imagine my disgust when all I found was a solid wall of clay and gravel.

In another corner of the basement were some rusty old German relics from World War I. There was a belt buckle inscribed “Gott Mit Uns,” a potato-masher-type hand grenade, a cloth wedgie hat, and a few other items. The only British object was a helmet. I was captivated by these relics and wondered why they were abandoned in the basement to rust away. I asked Mr. Ferris (hoping he might say, “Take them”) and he explained that they belonged to a former employee. A war veteran, the man had spent a few years at Graydon’s and one day he simply didn’t show up for work. This was in the 1920s. As far as Mr. Ferris was concerned, they still belonged to that man and until he came to reclaim them, they would stay where they were. I suspect they went under the bulldozer when the building was destroyed, as in later years neither Mr. Ferris nor Mr. Miller knew what became of them.

Considering that we were just on the fringes of the depressed areas near 97th Street, the drug store was remarkably free of trouble. There was never a robbery during my five years there and we seldom had beggars or derelicts in the store. A few denizens of St. Elmo’s Hotel, a block away, sometimes came to get prescriptions filled, but they were usually sad, elderly men who were down on their luck. Most customers were businessmen or women who passed the store when walking to work, or people who lived in the various rooming houses and apartments in the district. Others who had once lived in the area still patronized Graydon’s but did so by phone. These were the people to whom I delivered orders, including the widow of George Graydon, who lived at the far west end of Jasper Avenue.



At school, I managed to squeak through Intermediate (later called Junior High) with passing grades but I found myself slipping farther and farther behind in classes. I still hadn’t adopted a discipline of study and my feeble attempts to memorize math tables and scientific formulas were dismal failures. Only in English, social studies and art did I continue to excel.

In 1944 I graduated into high school. Like my fellow classmates from McCauley, I lined up to register at Victoria High School and found the hallways packed with students. A bunch of us who had chummed together at McCauley gravitated to each other in this plethora of strangers and found ourselves assigned to the same room. After the second day, we were notified that

the school was overcrowded and arrangements had been made for us to transfer to McDougall Commercial High School, five blocks away.

McDougall! That was a girls' school where they taught bookkeeping and stenography! But rules were rules, so forty-four boys and sixteen girls trooped off to the sedate world of female education. We were divided into two classes, all the girls going into one room with fourteen boys, and all the rest of the boys – including me – in another room. That was a mistake; even a couple of girls would have made our room less rowdy, but as it was, we became the terror of the school. The poor women teachers, unaccustomed to handling a roomful of recalcitrant youths, were unable to cope during the first few weeks. On at least two occasions a teacher fled from the room in tears.

The school had a distinguished history. Its principal was J. Percy Page, who had coached the world famous Grads basketball team and later became lieutenant-governor of Alberta. He was absent for part of the year and his duties were taken over by Clare Hollingsworth, who I believe was his son-in-law, and also coached the Grads. As the weeks passed, we gradually slipped into the school routine, but as the only academic classes in a school dominated by commercial courses, we were the outsiders. A few boys excelled both in classroom and sports activities, but we were really in the wrong place.

My closest friends during that year were Eddie Andruko, Howie Carey, Ken Riddle, and Julian Buchanan. Some of us had nicknames: I was “Cuke,” Ken was “Maggots,” and Julian was “Judd.”<sup>5</sup> Actually, the latter may have been a family name, for in later years when he became Minister of Indian Affairs & Northern Development, he was the Hon. Judd Buchanan. During his tenure in office he remembered our earlier association when he appointed me Alberta member of the Historic Sites & Monuments Board of Canada.

Patriotism ran high during my time at McDougall. The Allies were finally on the offensive and the end of the conflict was near. The school had competitions between classrooms as to which could sell the most number of War Savings Stamps, money was collected to buy chocolate bars for veterans in local hospitals, and lists were published of former students killed in action. In music class we sang patriotic songs such as “Rule Britannia,” “White Cliffs of Dover,” and “The Maple Leaf Forever.” If someone suggested “O Canada” or “God Save the King,” we had to rise and stand by our desks. That was all right, but I could never understand why we had to stand while singing “I am an American,” or why we didn’t sing the revised version, “I am a Canadian.” Maybe it was the strong American military presence in Edmonton that caused the teachers to defer to the Stars and Stripes.

I graduated from Grade X a few days after the war ended in Europe in June 1945. My three brothers were in the RCAF, one overseas, and I bitterly resented the fact that at fifteen I was too young to join up. Now I'd never be a war veteran.



There had been some big changes in my life over the winter of 1944–45. Most importantly, we moved to a house on 76th Avenue, on the South Side. It was a nice two-bedroom bungalow with a big yard and a garage, even though we had no car. It was nine blocks from the streetcar line, but as I had a bicycle the distance never bothered me. Even when I had to use the streetcar, I simply rode my bike to Whyte Avenue, parked it beside a shoe repair shop, and picked it up on the way home.

When we moved, the big questions were my school and my job. I was registered at McDougall and had been there for several weeks but now the school was about four miles away, with the Saskatchewan River valley separating us. Similarly, I was now a couple of miles from Graydon's. I guess there never was a question, for even with the river valley, the distance was not great for a cyclist. There were many people who walked that distance every day. So for the rest of the winter and into spring, I rode my bike down Scona Road to the Low Level Bridge, then carried it up the long steps below the Macdonald Hotel. I then rode to Graydon's, cleaned the sidewalk, and got to school in time for classes. The return route was similar, although sometimes if I was lucky, I grabbed the end of a slow-moving vehicle and was pulled up Scona Hill instead of pedalling.

I had managed to pass from Grade X into Grade XI after dropping trigonometry. In the Christmas exams I had the dubious honour of having the lowest mark in the school, some 16 per cent, a clear indication that the sciences weren't my field. I wasn't much better in algebra, chemistry, or physics but I continued to be an honours student in English, art, and social studies. My one passion continued to be art. I was now into water colours, wood carving, and oils. During my senior high school years, I earned extra money by making hand-painted ties featuring pinup girls, and making school crests and other adornments out of felt. I became quite proficient with my mother's sewing machine and found a ready market for my products, particularly crests featuring Walt Disney characters like the Big Bad Wolf.

During the summer of 1945, when I was fifteen, I left Edmonton on my own for the first time. This was the first of three expeditions that I made over

the next three summers. It took me to the interior of British Columbia where I had planned to spend the summer picking apples. However, one look at the hovel that was supposed to be my living quarters made me so homesick that in just two days I was back in Edmonton. I don't know what my parents must have thought when their adventuresome son came home with his tail between his legs, but I still admire the fact that they recognized my independent spirit and made no attempt to limit my actions, no matter how foolish or unrealistic.

A year later I decided to hitchhike to Winnipeg, stay with my brother Harry, and get a job for a month or so. The trip was a memorable one. I caught a number of rides that took me through Calgary and on to Lethbridge. Next day I made it to Maple Creek for the night. When walking out of town early next morning, I met a young boy named Jackie who was also hitchhiking. I thought I was rather adventuresome, travelling all the way to Winnipeg, but he was younger than me and his destination was Toronto. We stayed together all day and by the time we were dumped off at Whitewood, Saskatchewan, the town looked like it was closed down for the night. When we went to the hotel – the only one in town – the owner had gone to bed, but we woke him up and asked for rooms. He told us there was only one left, with a double bed, and a bathroom down the hall. It would cost us a dollar each. That was fine by me, and if Jackie hesitated, I didn't notice it.

We crept up to our room through a darkened hallway and once we were inside, I started to get ready for bed, as I was dog tired. Jackie, however, just stood in the middle of the room, his packsack on the floor in front of him.

“I've got something to tell you,” he said.

I paused as I rifled through my duffle bag, looking for my pyjamas.

“What is it?”

“I'm not a boy, I'm a girl.”

“What?!”

Yes, she told me. Her name wasn't Jackie Jackson, it was Judy Dwyer. She was eighteen years old and on the way to Toronto to meet her boyfriend. She had cut her hair short and disguised herself as a boy so she wouldn't be hassled by truck drivers.

I was speechless. Here I was, sixteen years old, no experience with girls, and thrust into a bedroom in the middle of nowhere with someone who was presumably a nubile young woman. Before I could say a word, she picked up a towel, said, “I'm going to the bathroom,” and was gone. When she got back, she said, “It's your turn,” so off I went. When I got back, the room was in darkness and she was already in bed. I undressed, joined her, and after a few

exploratory probes, I found that all she was wearing was a shirt and panties. But although I had a general idea, I really didn't know what I was looking for, where to find it, or what to do next. All I knew was that I was sixteen with lots of hormones. But that didn't help, for as soon as I crawled into bed she rolled over on her stomach and started snoring. Even for a neophyte like me, the message was clear.

Next morning when we went for breakfast, it was as though nothing had happened. She even took my little diary and in a crisp clear hand, recorded our journey of the previous day. She was still dressed in blue jeans, shirt, and cloth cap, and could quite easily pass for a boy. But now that I knew what she was, she was quite willing to talk about herself. However, the more she talked, the more I realized that she was just spinning me a wild story, either because I appeared to be so gullible or because she had a screw loose somewhere. She claimed she was a courier, carrying heroin from a dude ranch on the Ghost River in Alberta to her boyfriend in Toronto. She told me that the drugs had been delivered by another courier from Vancouver and she was taking them the rest of the way. As immature as I was, I knew it didn't make any sense. If she was a courier, why didn't she take a bus instead of facing the uncertainty of life on the road? What would her contacts think when she was out of touch for days at a time? And, most important, why would she be telling me all this, when all I had to do was to stop the closest Mountie and have her arrested? She was a nice girl and a good travelling companion but it was obvious she had mental problems of her own.

Then our luck seemed to change. We sat at the side of the road from 7:30 a.m. until noon without a ride. Plenty of passenger cars roared past us, but it was July 1st, Dominion Day, and the usual truckers were nowhere to be seen. It was as though Jackie's transformation to Judy had cast a spell over our previous good fortune. So we sat and talked, as the girl went on and on about her fictional life. I rather enjoyed it, as it sounded almost like a dime novel, and it certainly passed the time.

At noon, a trucker came down the road and when he saw us with our thumbs out, he stopped in a cloud of dust. He called out from his window, "I'll take the little lady, but that's all." It took Judy half a second to make up her mind. In spite of the fact that he had seen through her disguise, and in spite of the fact that he was a truck driver, she was fed up with sitting by the road. She waved me a hasty goodbye and, with a spin of the tires and a shower of gravel, the truck headed down the highway.

I sat there until evening without a ride and when I saw a Greyhound bus looming into view, I decided I had had enough. I waved it down, paid my fare to Winnipeg from my meagre holdings, and spent that night comfortably ensconced in my brother's house in West Kildonan.

I never saw the girl again, but there was a footnote to the story. Four years later, when I was with the *Edmonton Bulletin*, I went with police reporter Brud Delaney to see two Mounties from Regina who were staying at the Macdonald Hotel. They were involved in a drug education program, and when they invited Brud up for drinks, I went along. While we sat around swapping tales, I couldn't resist telling about my little incident with the so-called courier. Instantly, one of the Mounties became serious.

"What did she call herself?" he asked.

"Jackie Jackson."

He looked at his fellow officer. "That was the alias used by Judy Dwyer," he said.

"That's right," I said. "She told me that was her real name."

"You travelled with Judy Dwyer?"

"Sure."

"When she told you about the drugs, why didn't you tell the police?"

"Look," I said, "if a perfect stranger comes along and starts telling you about carrying heroin, are you going to believe them? I thought she was just stringing me a line."

The Mountie asked me to tell him everything I could remember. When I mentioned the dude ranch as a contact point, he said they had never heard of it. I said all this had happened four years ago and couldn't possibly be of any use, but he took notes anyway. He explained that the woman had been part of a major drug network and was well known to the authorities. So it turned out that everything she had told me had been absolutely true.

Wow!

During my short stay in Winnipeg, I couldn't find a job and ended up trying to sell encyclopaedias. I quit after a week with no sales and when I couldn't find anything else, I decided I'd better get back to my 30 cents an hour at Graydon's. This time I didn't try to hitchhike; my brother loaned me the money for bus fare.

My third foray into the unknown occurred just a year later when I was seventeen. This time I decided to hitchhike to Vancouver where my brother Bill lived. The trip west was relatively easy and my stay was quite pleasant. The return, however, had its share of adventures, including spending the night in a

deserted wartime internment camp, and then meeting a mountain lion on the highway at 6 a.m. He looked at me and I looked at him. Not knowing what to do, I decided to do nothing. I propped up my duffle bag to use as a chair, and sat on it, and just watched. The mountain lion stood at the side of the road, looking at me while its tail moved in slow rhythm. At last it walked across the highway, went up a slope, and disappeared into the trees. Strangely enough, I wasn't the least bit scared. I was curious and cautious, but I really didn't see the animal as a threat. I remained where I was for another fifteen minutes, and then continued on my way.

I was dropped off at a mosquito-infested area at Kinbasket Lake on the top end of the Big Bend road, where I curled up against the wall of a shed, pulled a coat over my head, and tried to sleep. But it was hopeless. It was a warm night, and if I covered my head I suffocated, but if I left it uncovered, the mosquitoes tried to eat me alive. Over the next several hours, I must have moved a dozen times, walked around, futilely swatted at the attacking insects, and barely slept a wink. I was on the road about 4 a.m. and walked for three hours before I got a ride. I finally made it back to Edmonton and that ended my hitchhiking adventures.

By this time, from 1945 to 1947, I was a student at Strathcona High School. Living on the South Side, it was impractical for me to stay at McDougall High, so at the beginning of the next school term I had switched schools. I kept working for Graydon's, but now I left my bike at the store and went to and from work on the bus. In both years, I managed to have my last class of the day as a spare so I could slip away early. It was against the rules but I was never caught.



In general, my high school years were more memorable for what I didn't do than what I did. I didn't study; I didn't get good marks in the sciences; I didn't join any clubs; I didn't go to any dances or graduation exercises; and I didn't enjoy school. It has been said that our high school days can be the happiest of our lives. It didn't happen to me, or perhaps I should say I didn't let it happen to me. I seemed to have been driven by some unfathomable work ethic that grew out of my experiences in the Depression. Now that times were more prosperous, my father was working steady and all my brothers were gainfully employed as civil servants, yet there seemed to be an almost desperate need on my part to be sharing in these times. And it certainly wasn't for the money alone, for I spent most of it on junk food, stamps for my collection, art supplies,



and other nonessentials. The little bit I saved was for Christmas presents and summer holidays.

The result was that I was a poor student. It would be easy to blame my parents for not being tougher on me, not forcing me to study and develop a positive attitude towards school, but I had only myself to blame. I had made up my mind that school was simply preventing me from getting on with my life, and I wanted it out of the way as soon as possible. After one year of Grade XII I was still far away from matriculating, but I announced to my family that I was going to quit and get a full-time job. I had always wanted to be an artist and now I would do so.