

The Fischbach refugee camp was a former military barracks. Set in the woods, it was a perfect place for a young boy to explore and collect wartime remnants. As the residents renovated their assigned units they often uncovered weapons hidden in the walls. Unexploded munitions were common, and there were some unfortunate accidents. Church, schools and boy scout groups were organized. Very quickly, the new refugees of Fischbach had created a working community providing reasonable living conditions for the residents.



The family at Fischbach refugee camp - Nuremberg 1947

With the war over, many believed they would be returning home in the near future. However, when it became apparent that the Russians were not going to retreat from the Baltics, my family applied to emigrate to Canada. Fortunately for us, my mother's sister Anna had married a neighbor, Tom Peterson, who was a seaman. They had emigrated to Canada years before, and had built a homestead near Edmonton. The Peterson's sponsorship enabled our immigration.

In August 1948 we traveled by train from Nuremberg to the English Channel ferry port at Calais, then by train from Dover to London. England was another world! The railroads in Europe had been devastated by the war, and three years later the bomb damage was still evident. They also had hard wooden seats. But the English trains had upholstered seats, and they served white bread and jam!

Our travel to Canada was by plane. The London to Montreal route was one of the early trans-Atlantic passenger flights operated by Trans Canada Airlines (now Air Canada). The flight was very noisy, and very long with a refueling stop at Reykjavik, Iceland. A nice stewardess with white gloves passed out Chiclets gum on a silver tray. To my surprise, they were free!

We landed at Dorval Airport in Montreal on August 15th 1948,



TCA North Star DC4

We boarded a CNR train in Montreal eventually arriving in Wetaskiwin, the nearest station to the Peterson farm near Pigeon Lake. The last part of the trip was by taxi. It was a very emotional reunion for my mother as she had not seen her sister Anna for over 20 years.



An emotional reunion at the Peterson farm - August 1948

My father and older brother George went to work in a local lumber mill. In short order we managed to acquire a quarter section of land about 2 km north of Pigeon Lake for \$500. The terms were \$200 cash and \$150 in each of the next two years. The 160 acre property was unbroken, covered with bush, and one mile from an improved road. We all pitched in and cleared the home site and a small field. The land was broken using Uncle Tom's steel wheeled Hart Parr tractor and a breaking plow. Subsequent clearing was done by machine when funds were available. It was necessary to work off the land in the winter in order to get the farm started. A house and barn were built. Milk cows, pigs, chickens and grain crops provided food and income.



House construction - 1950



1929 modified Chev - Dad & Ollie 1951

It seems the Latvian people have a fondness for the land. Every summer weekend there was a steady stream of family and friends who wanted to visit and party, particularly for the summer solstice or “Ligo”. The longest day and shortest night have been celebrated by pagan Baltic tribes since pre-history. There were great bonfires, special foods were prepared, and beer flowed. This tradition continues, if a little muted, to this day at Pigeon Lake.



Guests arriving for Ligo - 1952



New house siding and newer car - 1954

Within a month of arriving in Canada I was sent to school. Spring Hill School was a traditional one-room school straight out of “Little House on the Prairie”. It was white, had a belfry, and a church-like appearance. The thirty-some students were seated in rows, grades one to seven. Most of the rows were for the smaller grades, grade seven having only two students. There was a huge map of the world on one wall, and a giant blackboard at the front.

I was nine years old and could not speak a word of English. My teacher, Mrs Mulligan, was experience and wise, but had no idea what to do with me. She placed me somewhere between grades two and three. I was told by my parents to be quiet and pay attention. I have few memories of the first few months. It was like a form of sensory deprivation, a bit like being deaf. I began to identify familiar repeating words and patterns. Gradually, my teacher moved me up grade by grade. It was a solitary experience. Then, I learned to play softball and started to make friends. One day, as if my hearing had miraculously returned, I could understand whole sentences.

In this small community there were a number of WW2 veterans and their kids were my classmates. It was assumed that we, as some other local immigrants were German. There was some tension at first, but any misunderstandings were soon cleared up. Gradually and unconsciously, I began to assimilate.

