

COPY

MY RECOLLECTIONS OF BIG COULEE SCHOOL 1931-34.

It was late in August (about the 29th, 1931, as I remember) that Mrs. A. Gorman telephoned me at my home in Bremner, Alberta that I had been chosen by the Big Coulee School Board to teach in their school. Mrs. Gorman explained Mr. McCulloch was the Chairman of the Big Coulee School Board and Mr. Tann, the Secretary-Treasurer, and I should get in touch with the Chairman if I was accepting the position offered.

My father, the late John Reynolds, being a local school board member himself, knew I had only a few days in which to decide. He decided we should go and see the school.

On Saturday morning the 30th of August, we left home at dawn in an Essex Car (quite modern in that day) for Athabaska. My two older sisters, older brother, Dad and I. It was considered "quite a journey" in those days as I recall very uneventful until we had to cross the ferry at Athabaska. I can remember now (as I was quite a tender age at the time) that I had never seen logs floating down a stream as was happening on the Athabaska River that day, let alone see paveys being used to bring the logs to shore.

We soon reached the Gorman farm, and anyone from that area knows the hospitality extended by Mr. and Mrs. Gorman to anyone who stopped at their place.

We were directed to Mr. McCulloch's, Paul Kavulok's (another trustee) on the farms north on the same road, as well as to the "new Big Coulee" school three and a half miles north of Gorman's.

On reaching the school I remember ~~that~~ being very surprised at a road (trail) branching off to go past the school rather than keeping to the main road.

The school was "brand" new made of logs, shingled roof, and surrounded by huge ant hills. On opening the door I still remember seeing the pile of shavings by the big round barrel heater (with shelf on top that was to be used later for heating lunches) as I looked in.

These things stand out in my mind, the older Sister (Ethel) remarked "Well, at least it has a good safe chimney". But the other sister (Hester) cried and said to my dad, "You're not going to let her stay here, are you?"

As for me, after having written answers to every teacher's ad in the Edmonton Journal for over two months and many of my school friends had accepted schools in the "far north" of Alberta, I was not going to be without a school. "Now, one had to get experience some where, didn't one?" was what I was thinking. I was determined to get "that experience."

With this assertion my sister looked at Dad to give his answer that "surely I couldn't accept the school." (Parents did have that power of veto in those days. Evidently, they knew more then, than parents of to-day do!!). However, no such answer came forth but the reply was "Let her stay if she is determined to do so, but I sure wouldn't without making the board move those Indian graves in the yard, (reference to the ants hills). *But I wasn't telling that story...* Without more ado we returned to the McCulloch farm to find Mr. McCulloch had not returned from Athabaska. However, I handed my letter of acceptance to the housekeeper (later Mrs. Norman Williamson) and was informed that the "Grand Opening" of the school was to be a dance the following Sat. night. It had been arranged thus (I was told) so the new teacher could meet the parents. School was to start the following Monday.

I arrived back to board with the Gorman's (until a room was built onto the home of Mr. and Mrs. George Tomlinson's house whol lived in Big Coulee district where I was supposed to board), on the following Saturday. I will never forget the pleasant atmosphere in the Gorman home. Meal times in their home were so enjoyable. All members of the family had such fine senses of humor. They were such a "self-sufficent" family as well as fine community workers. I have many happy memories of my stay in their home. Mrs. Gorman, having been a teacher, was always interested in schools. How she could guide without interference!!

It rained the night before school started. However, Monday morning the sun was shining brightly when Mr. Paul Kavulok (chairman of the board) arrived by wagon to take me to school. We picked up his two daughters on the way back (north from Gormans') Annie and Amelia. (~~I might add he called them by their Polish names and I interpreted Amelia's name incorrectly as evidently it should have been Mildred.~~) The McCulloch boys Donald and Tom were also taken along.

When we arrived at school there was a small cardboard box on the teacher's desk containing what proved to be my year's supply of materials. In it were a box of chalk, two blackboard brushes, a little box of colored chalk, two boxes of letters, two boxes of numbers. (What use the letters and numbers were put to later!), a dozen paper mats and strips for weaving two boxes of colored sticks one long the other short.

The desks were home-made by respective parents of the children, some single and some double. There were three shelves beside the windows on the east wall. ~~The stove was a big barrel shape fitted with a shelf.~~

The pupils began to arrive long before 9 a.m. Some were brought by the parents walking with them. I believe there were about twenty and only the Stinsman boys, (Elwood, Roscoe and Frank), and Frasers (Lloyd, and ^{Clair}) had ever been in school before. Others besides the Kavulok and McCulloch children who attended during my time in Big Coulee were Joe Hnatyshen, Peter Rojowski, Mary and Slovka Borodizi, Andrew (Jiggs) McCulloch, ^{Matilda} ~~Matilda~~ ^{Deren} ~~Deren~~, as well as other Stinsman and Fraser children. Many of these, about twelve, had to be taught English.

I remember I never seemed to have a minute to myself the first few weeks, they were all so eager. The New Canadians all wanting to learn the English words. I marvelled at the way they could pick up our English, I'm sure ^{now} it was because of proper attitudes both at home and school.

Mr. Paul Kavulok, Chairman of the board was always so helpful in school matters and wished to do the right things in all matters. I felt he knew the "School Act" and tried to enforce it.

During my three years teaching in this school I had many happy times, many decisions to make, and how I had to adjust to a new way of life. Public opinion was such an influence in those days. (I wish it was as great an influence today).

All families were kind to me, inviting me to their homes for meals, trips to Athabaska, and dances in other communities. Many pleasant week-ends were spent at Gorman's (after I moved to board at Mr. and Mrs. Mike Kavulok's) as well as at the Weldon home in the Youngeville (Sawdy) District.

Christmas concerts were big events. Each Christmas candy bags, presents for school age children, less costlier ones for pre-schoolers paid^{for} from proceeds of socials were given to all. Eaton's catalogues were sure used extensively in ordering.

In school studies pupils achieved well and most seem to have done well in their chosen vocations. Mr. Swift who for many years has been Deputy Minister of Education was our inspector. I can still remember watching for his Model T coupe arriving at the school.

A few things stand out in my mind as I recall early days teaching in Big Coulee, like the morning I arrived along the trail and saw from the distance two white objects at the front of the school. On approaching I saw two ladies with white kerchiefs on their heads (babushkas), this I had never seen before. Each lady held a child by the hand. They tried to talk to me but I didn't understand either of them. However, I had presence of mind to know that they were enrolling their children in Big Coulee School. Before leaving they burst into tears, each thrust a child's hand in mine and in their language said - "bud dobborah" "bud dobbarah". This was the initiation for Slovka Barodizi and Peter Rajowski into our school.

Another hot June day we finished our Sunday school year with a picnic which everyone in the area was to attend. After ball games and lunch our class presented a play "Children Around the World". Costumes for all had been arranged. But to my surprise as I peeped from behind the curtain and saw when the Eskimo appeared on the platform (Donald McCulloch) he was in furs from head to knees - but behold was barelegged and barefooted.

Mr. A. Tann a sincere elderly man did his duties faithfully, as the Secretary of the school. He always used "Yours Fraternally" in the closing part of any note or letter. A form not often seen then "or now".

I'm sure none of the early residents have forgotten Mr. Day, (Buffalo Bill) from Calling Lake. The very colorful picture he presented as he rode on his fine horse, dressed in chaps and buckskin outfit. "By the Lord Harry!" would begin his greeting as he rode by the school door or in anyone's yard. He was a fine looking man with his well-groomed beard. He often exchanged books, materials, letters etc., between his daughter-in-law, Mrs. Cloe Day who was teaching at Deep Creek school and myself.

In closing I would like to let you know how it was that I was first offered the job in this school where I spent three happy years getting "that experience" in teaching school. Five hundred and seventy-five applications had been received in answer to the ad in the Edmonton Journal. These were sorted and re-sorted until the members of the board had picked two good writers. Out of the two I was chosen because they were certain "Violet" was a girl's name and they were not sure the other one was. The people who were to board the teacher had stipulated they would only take a lady boarder. I'm not mentioning this in a boastful manner but merely to point out "such is fate." (Later I was questioned by a member of the board what I meant in my application when I had ~~stated~~ I had attended the Edmonton "Normal" School. I know he was relieved when I told him it was a "Teacher's Training College".

Violet Reynolds Carr

Please return this to
Copy-Vi Mrs. Mike Rypien
Box 570, Athabasca