

Emma Miller writing to Dr. Edwin Wright in [1961]

In Tacoma, Washington, my father and mother, Mr. and Mrs. Mose Blair, read about the boom at Athabasca and homesteads to be had for ten dollars. It sounded so enticing Mr. Blair went up to see how true it was in April of 1911. In July he sent for mother and us four children to go by train to Edmonton.

On arriving, my father had Mr. David Grandbois, with his team and a covered wagon, to transport us north over the Athabasca Trail. We had bought six hens and a nine week old pig so we all set off, sometimes having to stop to cut trees from across our path.

A Mr. Billy Smith had one stopping place, and that was where our pig got loose, and all the men freighters volunteered to catch it. The poor thing was exhausted and ready to drop when finally caught, and on the seventh day we reached the "Landing".

My father obtained work at Mr. Ike Gagnon's mill, west end of town, and mother got the job of cooking for the help, and we all moved into a house on the premises. In his spare time, father had filed on his homestead, NE of town, and erected a big house. For want of money he had made a roof of poles, hay and dirt, and chinked the walls with moss and mud.

It was a severe winter, so we had to keep good fires constantly. Prices of food were high so we only could have the essentials. With flour at fifteen dollars a hundred, there was no money for meat so we caught rabbits in a wired enclosure around a haystack when they came to feed, and with the addition of beans, we survived.

In the spring of 1912, we moved back to town, where father was employed to construct scows for hauling freight down north. They were in addition to steamboats also running. The town was a bustling place by this time, as the railroad was approaching and lots of settlers were arriving to get in on the boom.

The next year, 1913, my father was foreman at Pelican Rapids for portaging the freight around the rapids, the water being so fast, the scows were poled over them empty and reloaded at the other end. Father went downriver for several summers on this job.

We stayed on the homestead, and when he was home, we'd clear land and prepare to farm. By this time we were getting surrounded by other homesteaders, a lot of bachelors. Girls were very scarce, but Parkhurst was growing and a school was decided on.

Father built the Parkhurst School, and I helped shingle, as I was the oldest child, my brother being too young yet. There was not enough taxes collected to pay a teacher for more than five months for the first three or four years, so the school closed for the winter months.

The first wedding was mine, in the new schoolhouse, and Peter Miller, who homesteaded next to us. He had gone from Denmark to North Dakota and Nebraska, then headed north for the big deal in free homesteads.

At the birth of our first child there was no doctor nearer than Edmonton, Dr's Olivier and Mac Donald having left, as the homesteaders had very little money which to pay them for their services, and they had to live too.

Mother had officiated over two hundred births as midwife, so was at my bedside. It wasn't very long before mother decided a doctor was needed, as things were not going as nature intended. So my husband drove to town to see about getting a doctor from Edmonton, but they wanted a guarantee of two hundred dollars which we did not have. Everyone was very kind and sympathetic and the manager of the Imperial Bank and other merchants raised the money. Mr. Mackie of the H.B.Co. knew there was a government doctor who travelled near and far, so they wired him to come the hundred miles but by the time he arrived the baby was born after an arduous ordeal.

That was very evident that a doctor was sorely needed in the district and a meeting in the town was called and folks attended for miles around.

It was decided each family would pay twelve dollars a year to a fee for the doctor, so the man in question was Doctor Meyer who practiced for quite a few years before his retirement in B.C. where he died a few years ago.

In 1918 mother and Dad moved into town and took over a restaurant and small rooming house where they lived for about fourteen years. They were both buried in the cemetery along with their son who was drowned in the Tawatinaw Creek back in 1924.

In 1919 my family had increased to three. Then in the fall of 1920 the eldest contracted croup which developed into pneumonia and caused his death. We were so heartbroken we felt we just couldn't stay on in our surroundings and sold out and left for Tacoma. After three months we were so homesick for Athabasca and my folks, we arrived back into the town where my husband worked for Mr. Daigneau's livery stable for four years.

We felt the urge to farm again and moved out on the old Lachapelle place in Parkhurst and farmed there a number of years until Pete had the chance of a job with the town office and water works department, and we stayed on the farm for awhile until he got established. He moved us back in where we lived on the east hill until 1949 when Pete's health failed and doctors advised living at sea level, so we moved to the coast where he expired in 1957 leaving six daughters and a son, two sons having died in the interim.

I am near my four daughters, another still is at Athabasca, one in Germany, and my son is here close to me in Duncan. But Athabasca is still my home town.