

My Grandmother

By Lillian Parent © 2005

Third Place: Wondrous Western Women Story Contest to Celebrate Alberta's Centennial
Famous 5 Foundation (www.famous5.org) and Light Hearted Concepts (www.lightheartedconcepts.com)

My grandmother, Mary Love was a remarkable woman. She was born in the USA to immigrant parents. She and my grandfather were pen-pals and wrote to each other for a couple of years. Following her heart she traveled across the country to marry him, against the wishes of her family. Grandma immigrated to Ontario, Canada in 1939 when my Grandfather joined the Canadian army. They moved to northern Alberta in 1942 with their two young daughters after my grandfather was injured in the war and returned home to Canada.

My grandfather was a telegraph operator, who brought his family to Alberta where he was able to find work. They drove to Alberta from Ontario in an old Model-T ford. Grandma learned to cook over a campfire when they stopped by the side of the road each evening and to sleep under the stars as the children were tucked into a padded bed made up in the back of the car.

The Model-T was sold in Athabaska to buy materials to build a raft to take them upriver. My grandmother always said that Grandpa kept that old Model-T running with chewing gum, string and prayers. She was terrified of the raft but still braved the trip on the Athabasca River; sure that someone would fall off.

They were going to Pelican Portage. All Grandpa and Grandma knew about Pelican Portage was that it was a spot on the map, more than a hundred miles from the closest town. The only way to get to there was to travel from Athabasca by boat or raft. The river could only be traveled in the summer, as it froze solid in the winter preventing passage.

It is my belief that it takes a strong woman to follow her husband into the unknown, leaving all her family and friends behind. Life was hard and lonely in the bush, for a woman who was raised in the city and had always had her family close by. She had many things to learn to be able to make sure her family could survive in the wilderness.

Out of necessity, Grandma learned to drive a dog sled and went out to fix the telegraph line on a few occasions, when grandpa was ill and the line was down. She quickly learned to care for the team of dogs that pulled the sled. She became skilled at tending a large garden, hunted if she had to, chopped down trees, cutting them into

logs for firewood to heat her home, bought enough groceries to last a year and became a teacher for her children.

Grandma became the postmistress at Pelican Portage from 1942 to 1946, during the time they lived at Pelican Portage. The only company they had were the trappers who came to pick up their mail at irregular intervals. The trappers were always welcomed into her home for as long as they wanted to stay. She wrote and read letters for any who were unable to read and write and learned to doctor any injuries and illnesses, such as frostbite, wounds and sicknesses as needed for her family and guests.

The first Christmas they were there, two little girls were expecting Santa. Even if money had not been tight, there was still no way to shop for gifts. Grandma recycled and scrubbed up two old rubber dolls, made clothes and bedding for the beds grandpa made, to make sure that her children would have gifts under the tree.

Grandpa was transferred to Fort Vermillion in 1946. He went on ahead and Grandma packed up all their belongings. She arranged to have everything shipped by boat and traveled with her children by steamer and train to Fort Vermillion. She was overjoyed to be moving as she was so eager to have women to talk to once again. Even though she knew that the population of Fort Vermillion was small, she was sure that she would love it and she did.

I have never heard anyone talk about my grandparents except for family members as Grandpa died before I was born and I was five years old when my grandmother died. I had the opportunity to take my mother to Fort Vermillion, Pelican Portage and Athabasca twice before she died. The first lady we met in Fort Vermillion that knew my grandmother, said she has always hoped she would come back.

It was amazing for me to hear people talk about what a wonderful person my grandmother was. I heard many stories of how my grandmother was willing to help anyone in need. She brought meals to sick friends and cared for them, donated her best things to a family when a fire destroyed their home. She took home children to care for many times when someone had a new baby so they could get some rest, and many other acts of kindness when someone needed help. My grandmother was a truly extraordinary woman and still remained in the hearts of the friends she made in Fort Vermillion fifty years after she left.