

# **Reflections**

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### **“You Are What You Were When”**

Several years ago INCO presented a training program based on the book and film: “You Are What You Were When”. The film explained that your experiences, especially in childhood, shaped your future life. I’ve forgotten how we came to see this, or exactly when after we moved to Copper Cliff, but the film resonated in me and still does to this day. Few people having experienced the effects of the stock market crash of 1929 or the depression of 1930s were left unscathed. Being ‘what you were when’ makes it easy for me to see why saving everything, be it clothes, dishes, paper, string, boxes, ribbons, bows, buttons, just comes naturally to people who lived through the depression. This may be an explanation for the closets full of clothes, books, boxes, and papers in our home.

My birth in 1933, the sixth child of a family of pioneers in the Manitoba village of Laurier, was an at home affair, as were most births in that area at that time. When a woman’s labour started, her young children were sent to the neighbours and stayed with them until after the delivery. The mid-wife was called. In Laurier, this was Mrs. Lavoie, who lived in a log house on the main road into the village. Everyone helped the family until mother could resume activities. Dauphin hospital was the nearest to us, with Ste. Rose du Lac hospital still in the dreaming stage. Being taken to a hospital was very serious.

It was a time of no electricity, no running water, (sometimes in summer, no water period) except for one town well near Trottier/Verley store, where people went to fill up pails and cans to carry home. There were no indoor toilets, even at school; no telephones, no radio, no basement, just a dug-out with a trap door in the kitchen floor. Heating in winter was by wood stove, and in our home we had what was called a “box stove” in the living room. It was connected to the chimney by a long series of stovepipes, hung from the ceiling by an intricate web of “stove pipe wire” and eye hooks in the ceiling. Others had a drum shaped Quebec heater, which took larger pieces of wood and in the railway station coal was used. Large buildings, such as churches, some stores and schools had large furnaces, taking four foot lengths of cord wood, some belching out heat through a floor grill in the centre of the main floor. This required a caretaker to stoke the furnace and empty the ashes.

Wood for the stoves was purchased in the fall and delivered, either as cord wood or in tree length lots. This then had to be sawn into sixteen inch pieces and split with the axe into pieces of a size for the stove. These were

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then piled into neat rows, with adequate space for good drying. Dry wood would produce much better heat than green wood. When needed, the pieces were then carried to the wood-box, either pulled there on a sled, or by arm load, by whoever was available to do the job. Even children five or six years of age were sent out for a few sticks of wood, when needed, and one childhood chore was to fill the wood box.

Our house was very small and unlined, that is, the wood cladding on the outside also formed the inside walls with the wood stud frame showing. The floors were of wood. Since electricity wasn't available, lighting was by coal oil (kerosene) lamps. Two tiny bedrooms had as many beds as could be crammed into them, but these were covered, with many hand-made quilts, and thick comforters made from raw wool, (the pioneers' duvets). The wool was gathered, cleaned, carded combed with special comb/paddles, and used to stuff the comforters, or the wool was spun and knit into warm socks, mitts, and sweaters. Some of the wool was dyed into lovely colours and hand-hooked into rugs, as in those rugs mother produced for the Assailly family in the big brick house across the tracks from our place.

Nothing was ever wasted. Fat was collected and made into lye soap, using wood ash. Clothing was recycled, from adults to children, to quilts, to dishcloths, and to the rag bag to be hooked into mats. This, too, was not an easy task, since the rags had to be dyed in vats on the wood stove, dried, and torn or cut into narrow strips and rolled in preparation for hooking through gunny sacking material rescued from feed bags. This was a task that produced a lot of lint dust, but those mats felt warm when stepping out on the cold floors in winter. They were also long wearing. A couple of mother's hooked rugs are still in our garage many years after their making. Used wool clothing was gathered and when a number of pounds of material had been collected, it was baled and sent to the Fairfield Woollen Mills in Winnipeg, to be used in the making of wool blankets. These were prized as being long wearing, and indeed, I still have one in my possession.

Eaton's and Simpson's, now Sears, catalogues had many uses. First there was the dreaming over illustrated articles, which included furniture, stoves, tools, clothing, yard goods, thread, needles, hats, coats, jewellery, and many, many items. Old catalogues were used to keep youngsters entertained, making paper dolls, finding styles, designing new clothes, etc, before finally being relegated to the outhouse for use there. Brown paper bags were treasured as drawing and figuring material and were used as book covers. It didn't occur to us that we were poor. So many others in the village were in worse circumstances. My older siblings have memories of

