

Bill & Elsie - a “snapshot” in time

In 1972, I gathered a number of Mom and Dad’s belongings from Ethel Derrick’s basement where she had kindly stored them for so many months. Even though I had no intentions of becoming a family historian, I just couldn’t throw away scrapbooks, photo albums, much less boxes of negatives and letters. I have always wondered why these possessions included so many letters from the Fall of 1931 and the Spring of 1932, and so few from other years. On reading them, it appears that this was the only period in which she and Dad were separated for any length of time. As a regular candidate for the ministry, Bill More was sent by the United Church to North Bend, B.C. for those 8 months. It seems that this was a break between his undergraduate studies at U.B.C and divinity studies at Union College. In Vancouver, Mom continued her teaching job at Bridgeport School, commuting by tram from the family’s home at 2415 Dunbar St. She describes the intense cold walking on the bridges, or waiting for the “cars” in the dead of winter. In these months, they wrote over 50 letters to each other, which I have now read. They yield fascinating tidbits of their lives at the time and glimpses of their world and their family’s world during the early years of the depression.

The early weeks of Dad’s time in the lower Fraser Canyon seem to have been fraught with some sort of crisis which involved his mother’s “needs”. A distinctly unimpressive October 5 letter from a Union College administrator sheds little light on the subject (below). Dad’s “mission” seems to have been North Bend (where he resided), Yale and Hope, travelling weekly between these communities. His duties included holding Saturday and Sunday services, organizing Young People’s groups, Trail Rangers (boys 12-14) and Tuxis (boys 15 and up). On one camping trip with a boys group, one of the boys forgot about a can of beans which he left in the campfire to warm up. An amusing description follows of wiping beans and sauce off themselves after the can had “really” warmed. In addition to organizing and preaching, he visited sick and needy people, and of particular note he travelled to the unemployment relief camps at Yale and Hope. These camps provided employment in exchange for room and board, clothing allowance, medical care and 20 cents per day. There was also a discussion of the exodus from dried out areas of Saskatchewan, another feature of the depression in Canada. At Yale and Hope, he also had to arrange the “worship” venues and see that the spaces were fit and the fires were lit. It is obvious from his letters that Dad was enthusiastic about his work, clearly gaining a great deal of experience and confidence for his future studies and career. Of course, Dad was “Baching it”, cooking and cleaning for himself, although he certainly seems to have been invited to dine with members of the congregation on a regular basis. A five week grocery bill came to \$10.69. He was in a relatively remote area. However, the railway does run through these communities (in fact is these communities). Accordingly Dad met many people on their way through, including a visit from his brother Ted, during his Spring Break. At 20 years of age, it’s not clear what he was on break from.

Mom’s teaching job at Bridgeport School brought in needed financial support in such difficult years, since at that time she held the only full time job in the family. In this year, the School Board cut teacher’s salaries, but agreed to a “scaled” cut so the the lower earning teachers had a smaller percentage cut. Mom remarks that “Hard times are all you hear these about these days”. She declines to attend the Teacher’s Convention in that year because the registration is \$2? Her “boss” Mrs. McNeely (a legend in the history of Richmond Schools) was apparently quite patriotic and at one point required the entire school to stand outside saluting the flagpole and sing the national anthem every morning. Grampa and the older brothers seem to have found an increasing amount of contract work in the mid 30s including construction of the Burrard Bridge and the new Vancouver City Hall. An interesting convention of the time, however, mandated that as soon as Mom married Dad, she would have to give up her teaching job.

Her letters describe interactions with her parents and siblings in their Dunbar home, where they had moved only 2 years before. The “new” house must have provided an important “base” for the nodal family years of teen-age growth (Ken and Ruth), higher education (Edna & Harold), career beginnings (Mom, Phil, Fred and Jack) and “departure from nest” (Jack married Margaret in 1928). One evening, Mom went to Jack and Margaret’s for dinner, but Jack was late getting home due to a particularly large “job”. Whatever his work was, Mom seemed surprised since, as she said: “It’s seldom they have much to do.” “Uncle” is mentioned on several occasions. I assume this to be Grampa’s brother Heber, since he lived nearby. A letter from another of Grampa’s brothers: Uncle Fred invites the family to visit his farm in Coghlan (Langley) and see his new fruit orchard. There is no mention of brother Asher or his wife Mary, who at that time also lived in Langley (Panorama Ridge). Grampa is mentioned, fixing a burst pipe or putting a new felt on a sticking piano key. He also seems to have been an current affairs resource for Mom. Mom asked him about the “fuss in Manchuria”, referring to the Japanese invasion of September, 1931. Gramma seems to have been in and out of poor health during this year. Mom describes the pressures Gramma is under “in these difficult (depression) years”. There is also an amusing description of Harold singing (“or whatever you call it”) while his Mom plays the piano. It seems that sibling “cheap shots” happened 90 years ago also. Along with Edna, Harold seems to be in Mom’s large social circle at the time, although there are occasional games of Bridge with Ken and Fred and visits with now-married Jack and Margaret. Harold partakes in a mock trial put on by the Young People’s group and is found guilty of “robbery with violence”. One afternoon, Margaret takes 11 year old Ruth to see Will Rogers in “Business and Pleasure” at the Orpheum. Mrs. Baker (a close neighbour dating back to Edmonton days) seems to be active in the family’s social life also. She and Edna threw a surprise birthday party for Mom on Feb. 12. Not surprisingly, we hear about Mom’s best friend frequently. Eva Fleming is now married to Bob and has their first born Margaret. The “yuppy” couple (Bob is a well-employed fireman) tells of their “fancy new radio” that has with 10 tubes!

There is much description of youth activities including hiking & tennis. Dad’s groups play “tennis quoits” (google it), and a large variety

of social events centering on Young People's groups. It seems that some of the hikes were quite extensive. On Good Friday of '32, they walked from Dunbar to the North Van ferry in Downtown Vancouver and on the other side hiked up Lynn Canyon as far as the 2nd (?) suspension bridge. On the return, they "pooped out" and took a tram from the Vancouver side back to Dunbar. In April, the brothers are out golfing, beginning their lifelong "addiction" to the sport. There is a description of attendance at the Easter Sunrise Service in English Bay, apparently "minus the sunrise". Mom sings in the St. James Church choir and (simultaneously with Dad) and struggles to learn to play the piano. There are frequent mentions of Harold's studies including Dad passing on logic notes to him. Harold is also involved with canvassing for support of the severely failing U.B.C. budget.

On Dad's side of the family, Mom mentions attending a performance involving his cousin Frank Wilcox, who left Salmon Arm to study voice at the Toronto Conservatory and then settled in Vancouver, becoming an important soloist in the Vancouver "scene". For New Years, Dad and Mom were invited to Dad's home in Salmon Arm. Initially, Mom was reluctant to spend the needed travel money: "As you know, I'm the only one working at present and nine is a big family to keep..." Nevertheless, Gramma Emma encouraged Mom to go as long as she could be in Vancouver for Christmas dinner. The saga continued when Gramma Effie wrote Mom, basically "uninviting" her because Dad's sister Annie, Morley and two infant girls were planning to come from Alberta. The next letter I have is January 3 in which Mom is on cloud nine describing their visit to Salmon Arm, so clearly they worked something out. In subsequent letters, Mom mentions Dad's siblings: Annie, Frances and Ted. She clearly made a big impression on Dad's family, particularly in view of the fact that she spent part of the next summer at Glen Echo, the More family summer cabin near Salmon Arm.

Mom and Dad both seemed to suffer from a series of colds during this winter. Dad describes days of having to stay in bed and Mom describes keeping her mother and Harold awake by her coughing. Dad observes progress in medicine: "We used to think as youngsters that all cures consisted of nasty medicine but nowadays when even pills are chocolate coated and castor oil has been made tasteless I'm beginning to believe the the more pleasant a cure is, the more effective."

The letters are full of description of the beauties of nature, both in Vancouver and in the Fraser Valley, including an enthusiastic description by Mom of downtown Vancouver Christmas lights. Like lovers since the beginning of time, Mom and Dad shared star-gazing, albeit remotely.

Even though it was only a few hours from North Bend to Vancouver by train, Dad never was able to get to see Mom during the entire Fall, and only for a short business trip in March during which he negotiated with BC Electric to renew his meter reading job. He had less than a week's notice of permission to leave North Bend in April to renew that job. It seems clear that "the powers" wanted him to stay on, but the combination of a good summer job with BC Electric and being able to see Mom on a regular basis was clearly too much of an attraction. I sense that whereas the experience at North Bend was his best move career wise, that the possibility of saving anything for the future lay in a regular job like reading meters. I believe he continued at this job while he continued his studies at Union College. The only downside (for me) is that I have no more letters to read to continue their story.

The United Church of Canada
Affiliated with the University of British Columbia

Union College of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

OFFICE OF THE PRINCIPAL

October 15th, 1931.

Rev. D. W. More,
North Bend,
B. C.

Dear Mr. More,

I have heard from Mr. MacKenzie in a long letter received today. I also heard from Mr. Braden that he had received a letter from one of the members on the field, and that they were requesting that they might see the Committee. This will likely be arranged; next Monday, I think.

Now in the meantime, stand steady. Be kindly and thoughtful, but do your work as you ought to do it. You have been sent there by the authorities of the Church and you are a regular candidate for the Ministry. When it comes down to a fine thing, your need and the need of your mother demands as fair consideration as that of any other man. In my judgment it is very wrong to have a sympathy plea worked up to the injury of one in a place such as you are in, but you will not be without backing and the problem is not for you to fight. You can leave it to those who are responsible. I hope you will carry on Sunday patiently and quietly. Keep your thought on the good news of the Gospel and have no misgivings.

I sincerely hope you will have a good time. Be sure we will be thinking about you, and you can leave it to the Committee to clear the air of any difficulties.

Yours sincerely,
J. G. Brown