

Born Thirty Years Too Soon?

By Mrs. JOHN HUBBARD, Grenfell, Sask.

There is a cartoon in the papers entitled "Born Thirty Years Too Soon", and it presents such a thing of regret. Looking back I think there is compensation for having been born in the early years of the Province. Though my children enjoy many luxuries I never knew as a child there are many things I saw, did, and felt that they will never know. Our district was just being homesteaded when I was born and as I grew up there were still whole sections of unbroken prairie around us. Not only this, but also there was no school until I was nine and my brother ten — three years stolen from the classroom to become better acquainted with the prairie.

Over the open prairie, little cluttered by fences, we rode our ponies to gather cattle or walked with gopher trap and snare. The latter was an occupation whose main gain was the avoidance of household chores, tho there was a bounty of three cents a tail on gophers caught in April and May before the first batch of young arrived. There was a low stony ridge that wound through many sections of land in our district (our school was called "Longridge" from it) and this ridge, often left uncultivated because of its stoniness and infertility grew an enormous crop of gophers, and sprouted many badger holes. What a wonderful spot to set your traps and then lie down on the warm earth with a snare at a likely hole. Lying such in the warm sun, watching the drifting clouds above or a big black beetle at its labours below, the snare was often forgotten and many a perky gopher wore one away as memento of a daydreaming trapper. The big buzzard hawks soaring — what wonderful days for them with such an abundance of gophers, before gopher poison took the place of child labour! These big hawks sometimes nested on old straw stacks; the stacks, fascinating play spots for children, now too almost a thing of the past.

When we rode across the prairie to collect our small herd of cattle in the evening usually our faithful dog, a Collie-Airdale cross, came with us. He was a big dog and even after

he lost one foot in a coyote trap was not averse to challenging a coyote or two. Sometimes they circled round trying to get close to the dog and even from the vantage point of a pony's back the rider felt a bit nervous. Two or three of our neighbors kept packs of hounds, big bad-tempered brutes, for chasing coyotes. On a hunt they kept the hounds in a box on a sled till near a coyote when they were released and the chase began. We watched one such chase from the windmill and barn roof until the participants were out of sight.

Our ponies were all broncos, or part bronco, and rides anywhere at anytime could suddenly become interesting. Top place for awakening a dreamer must always go to the Prairie Chicken (pinnated grouse). A flock of these birds exploding from the prairie wool beneath your pony's feet would send the startled animal hurtling sideways or backwards so rapidly that only the most wary rider remained seated (and our ponies never remained on ceremony — if you came off they went home and you walked).

Besides gophers, coyotes and badgers, weasels were numerous and occasionally made serious raids on the henhouse. Several times to my disgust I caught them in my traps — there was no bounty on weasels! Porcupines seemed to be quite common judging from their victims, and this was strange on the open treeless brushless prairie — however they probably came from the Saskatchewan River coulees not many miles away. One day my father pointed out a herd of antelope. Whether I was looking for something larger or whether I didn't look in the right direction quickly enough I don't know for I can't remember seeing them. Jackrabbits were plentiful — too plentiful for they killed all the big cottonwoods in our shelterbelt.

The buffalo were long gone, and hardly a buffalo bone remained, but in a few places there were enormous stones with wide rings worn down in the soil that the buffalo had

evidently used as scratching posts. If you "accidentally" fell off your pony and had sense enough not to let go the reins you could use such a stone as a mounting post if you could climb on to it to begin with.

Flowers were not overly plentiful but I can remember a few varieties that did grow in abundance. Summer-fallowing was done by horse power and it was often late in the season before it was completed. Maybe this was not good but frequently before the plough destroyed them the fields were blue with beard-tongue (blue-bells to us). We brought them in by the armful, this bounty of nature which to my father were weeds, and filled every vase and tin in the house.

In some places the ditches and fields beside the road were yellow with waisthigh sunflowers. And the bare roads themselves sometimes were carpeted with scarlet mallow with its beautiful red flowers and soft grey foliage. There were some shallow sloughs which after the water had gone turned yellow with a velvety gold-and-brown flower that blossomed on bare stems. Picked they made poor bouquets without added foliage. In small sloughs the silky red top grass waving back and forth in a fresh wind was breathtakingly beautiful.

The individual flowers that grew around our farm were personal friends. There was the spot with southern exposure where the first crocus bloomed in spring, and almost at the same time could be seen the bright yellow flower and artistic foliage of the hairy-fruited parsley. And just as bright and just as admired the leafy musineon. In the shade and moist atmosphere of the pumphouse there was a beautiful clump of goldenrod, and in the rich soil of the old barn blue vetch grew lush like bunches of grapes.

In the overgrazed pasture there was cactus (bane of bare feet), pussytoes, sage, and clumps of moss phlox, stiff bristly plants with dainty white flowers. Once I rode three miles to get a specimen of sneeze-weed to make item No. 12 in an entry for the Eston Fair — if my wisdom had been greater I probably would not have had to go so far for a twelfth known specimen! Trailing

home behind the cattle, low in the stubble I found a small vetch with grey leaves, red buds that opened into pale pink flowers. Beside the stonepile there was a fleabane that grew in a circle like a small fairy ring (maybe there was a stone in the middle) — it had pink petals and had to be enjoyed in solitude for picked the fragile petals quickly withered.

Best of all memories though were those of our infrequent picnics beside the Saskatchewan River about twelve miles from our farm by devious route and many a ranch barbed-wire gate. The smell of roses, the tier on tier of coulees blue in the distance, and as we neared the river the dangerous descents over primitive trails, then the smell of willow and finally the swift and treacherous river itself flowing in its wide bed by stony shore and sandbanks. Many's the time we wished we could corral some of that water rushing uselessly to the Bay to water our parched crops. The giant clumps of cactus with their bright waxy flowers, the profusion of trees and shrubs, new flowers, flowing water from a spring, and wet sand beneath the feet — these were indeed rare sensations for the prairie child.

When I first moved to the Grenfell district I missed the rich colour of the earth in the Snipe Lake district, the distant blue hills of the Saskatchewan River, the unlimited sunsets and the wide unfenced untreed spaces, but time and I have changed, and now I doubt if I would give up my bluffs and jewel-like sloughs for the open prairie again even if it remained to go back to. Be that as it may the memories are good.

A SHORT, SHORT STORY

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Moral: If you really want a picture of a Red Breasted Nuthatch don't try to get it with an R. B. Graphlex and an expensive fishing line. You will suffer from frustration and you will weep when next you try to throw a fly with a frayed line.

Note — "T.F.N.C." means "Toronto Field Naturalists' Club". Nearly all members have cameras.

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