

CHAPTER FOUR

The election of 1926 was an indication of the popularity of the U.F.A., as their membership in the Legislature increased from thirty-nine to forty-three, while the membership of the Liberal party was reduced from fourteen to seven. The Conservatives increased their membership from one to four while Labor added two to their previous total and now held six seats.

I had come of age in the year 1926, just in time for the election, and acted as the poll clerk at our local poll. My recollection of the Right Honorable Arthur Meighen and his message to the students in Stettler was naturally the factor which determined how I would exercise my franchise for the first time. I voted for the Conservative candidate, Mr. Blair of Stettler, but cannot claim to have helped in any way in the election of the four Conservatives, as Mr. Blair was left at the starting gate, while Mr. Saunders, the U.F.A. incumbent, romped home.

During the years I attended Stettler High School, much discussion took place among the students concerning this strange new government which had been elected in 1921. It was the first time we had heard of a government made up of anything but Liberals or Conservatives, or a combination of both, in our country. Critics spoke of the farmers' government and referred to it as a class government, somewhat similar to the Labor government in Great Britain. Besides, our history teacher assured us that third party governments are always short-lived.

As I had planned, I attended the Normal School in Calgary in the fall of 1925, graduating in the spring of 1926. It was here that I met the girl, Helena Spady of Castor, who was to become my wife five years later. Needless to say, I had little time that year for politics. It was during this year, also, that I became acquainted with Mr. William Aberhart, principal of Crescent Heights High School of Calgary, the man who a few years later was to change the course of my entire life. In neither case have I ever had cause for regret, but, rather, have thanked God for bringing both these people into my life.

I worked as a farm hand during the month of June, and in July attended summer school at the University of Alberta and here again I became acquainted with a young man a few years my senior who also was to have a beneficial influence upon my life. During my years of struggling to secure my teacher's certificate, I had often, when nickels were hard to come by, believed that Fate was treating me less than kindly. Even to attend summer school, I had had to borrow seventy-five dollars from a friendly neighbor. Teachers' salaries at this time were low and most beginners believed themselves to be very lucky if they could secure a school and receive the statutory basic minimum salary of eight hundred and forty dollars per year. I realized that I now had a debt of four hundred and seventy-five dollars staring me in the face because I had taken a government loan of four hundred dollars to finance myself through Normal School. After meeting Jack Marshall, the man I have just mentioned, and learning that he was then in the process of completing his second university degree, though totally blind, I realized just how kind fate had been to me in comparison. I shall refer to Jack later on in my story.

While attending summer school, I daily read advertisements in the newspaper, as did all other young teachers, and made application for several teaching positions. To my surprise and delight, my application was considered favorably by three different schools, one being the Island school close to home, in a neighborhood in which I was well acquainted. This school, incidentally, was built in the year 1921 by the farmer for whom I worked. This man, in addition to being a successful farmer, was a skilled carpenter and on rainy days, when it was impossible to do any field work, I went with him to the school and helped with the sawing of boards and the driving of nails and learned a bit about the carpenter trade. Little did I dream that five years later I would enter the school as a teacher with a first-class certificate, when at that time I had not even completed my grade eight.

I considered myself extremely fortunate in that I was able to live at home with my parents, at least until winter set in, and went to and from school on horseback. In addition to this benefit, the salary was eleven hundred dollars per year, or, rather, one hundred and ten dollars a month for ten months.

My first year of teaching presented a real challenge, as I had thirty-four pupils altogether, making up all the grades from one to ten inclusive. When the results of the final examination were received from Edmonton and I realized that my grade eights, nines and tens had all passed, I decided to apply for a high school position. There were in the Province in those days a few schools known as rural high schools. They were situated, for the most part, in a hamlet and were financed by a number of small rural school districts round about. Grade eight graduates from these rural districts were enabled to secure grades nine, ten and eleven by attending the rural high school. Such a school existed in the little hamlet of Fleet, a few miles east of the Town of Castor. I made application for the position and though I was still twenty-two years of age, was accepted by the school board.

The school itself was a dilapidated old building on the main street, previously used as a butcher shop. The desks were crudely made of common shiplap boards, each pupil using an ordinary hardwood kitchen chair as a seat. In one corner of the room was a large Waterbury heater and immediately behind the teacher's desk a door opened into a lean-to which contained the little equipment they possessed for teaching physics and chemistry.

When I recorded the names and ages of the pupils the first morning the term opened, I realized that I was not so old after all, as I had thought myself to be. Two or three were about my own age and one was older. The establishing of this school had naturally brought back a number of pupils who had graduated from grade eight three or four years before but had not had an opportunity of further education. I was reminded of my own experience time after time as I saw these boys and girls riding or driving horses daily distances up to ten miles in order to secure the education they so truly wanted.

I made it a point of becoming well acquainted with the parents of them all and of finding out the purpose for which each of these young men and young women had come back to school. I recalled the times that some of my teachers had gone out of their way to assist me and I firmly believed that I could pass on the good work, by doing the same thing for the boys and girls of Fleet. Our first year was crowned with success and with the very odd exception, every student in grades nine, ten and eleven received a pass mark on the final examinations from Edmonton. It was a sheer delight to me to see several of the grade eleven graduates going to town or city schools next year to complete their grade twelve.

I cannot think of my first year in Fleet without again recalling the political activity of the district. It seemed that everyone belonged to the U.F.A. organization and their study groups met regularly without fail. Many of the young people I taught were actively engaged in Junior U.F.A. activities and as is usually the case, I could count them among my best students. Despite my evident popularity with these young people and their parents, I could not help but feel that with the support for the U.F.A. government running so high, I would have been considered as some sort of a freak had I dared admit that in the election the year before I had voted Conservative.

For this year's work I was rewarded with a salary of sixteen hundred dollars and another eighty dollars for having been the janitor also. The four hundred and seventy-five dollars' debt I had worried about was no longer a problem.

During the year my school had been inspected by Mr. Fuller, one of the two high school inspectors in the Province. Entirely unknown to me following his inspection, he recommended to the Department of Education that I should be appointed to mark high school examination papers in July. In addition to this honor being financially rewarding, I had an opportunity of associating for four weeks with many older and experienced men and I am sure that as a young teacher, many of my questions must have wearied them. Among those with whom I renewed my acquaintance were Mr. Aberhart and my former high school principal, Mr. H. E. Tanner.

I had been invited to remain on at Fleet for another year, so as soon as marking of papers was over, I returned there, bought some lumber from the local lumber yard and erected for myself during the month of August a little two-room shack in which I could batch. In looking around for a plot of ground to set it on, I spoke to the secretary of the school board, who suggested that he was quite sure I could place it on an unused road allowance which bisected the hamlet. After making appropriate enquiries, I found this to be possible, so in a matter of a couple of weeks, Fleet could boast of having one more

house.

While I taught in the old butcher shop, the school board was busy with the erection of a proper building, so in September of 1928 we started out with up-to-date facilities. The second year turned out to be as successful as the first and again I was invited to mark papers.

While in Edmonton I was approached by Mr. McNally later to become Dr. McNally and Deputy Minister of Education, who asked if I would like to take the principalship of one of the schools then requiring a new principal. In summer school two years before I had taken a course in school administration from Mr. McNally and as a result he indicated he would be most happy to recommend me to a school board. I realized this would mean another step upwards in my teaching career and expressed to Mr. McNally my sincere thanks for his favorable consideration of me. He went immediately to the telephone and phoned to the school board in Trochu and as a result of his recommendation, I was hired on the spot.

During the two years I had taught in Fleet, I had become much attached to the district and its people and actually hated to leave. There was perhaps an additional reason, that being that Miss Spady taught school within easy courting distance. About the middle of August I journeyed to Trochu to meet the school board and to sign my contract with them, which contract, incidentally, resulted in a raise in salary to two thousand dollars per year. On this occasion I chanced to hear that the Curlew school, about eleven miles west of Trochu, was even at that late date without a teacher. Naturally I knew of the very one who would fill the bill admirably, not only for the Curlew district but for me. Consequently, as I took over my duties as principal of the Trochu school, I could continue my courting without interruption. We were married the following July.

During the spring of 1930, however, election fever was in the air once more in the Province and the U.F.A. was making a strong bid for re-election. During their first term of office, the first Premier, Mr. Greenfield, had been succeeded by Mr. John E. Brownlee and under his capable leadership a great deal of publicity was being given to his efforts to secure from the Federal government the ownership and control of the natural resources of Alberta.

Olds constituency, in which Trochu was situated, had a strong U.F.A. candidate, Mr. F. S. Grisdale. He won the election handily and became Minister of Agriculture. On this occasion I forgot my Conservative leanings and voted for Mr. Grisdale, believing that a vote for him was a vote for the return of our natural resources to the Province.

The U.F.A. was returned with a membership of thirty-nine, exactly the same number they had elected in their first victory in 1921. From here on however their popularity started to wane and when the election of 1935 rolled around, they were completely annihilated.

It had not been my intention to teach for a second year in Trochu, as I had intended to return to Halkirk and farm for a couple of years on a quarter section adjoining that of my parents. In 1926 I had signed an agreement to purchase this quarter on the same terms as then applied to people purchasing land from the C.P.R. I had hoped naturally, that my share of the crop would take care of the payments while I was renting it out, and rather looked forward to farming it myself, believing that I would not only thoroughly enjoy the wide open spaces again, but that I could continue university work extramurally.

Returning from a short honeymoon in the first week of August, I discovered a complete crop failure existed on my quarter and realized that I would have to return to the school room.

The Town of Rocky Mountain House was, at the same time, interviewing prospective principals for their six-room school.

An advertisement in one of the Calgary papers indicated that anyone interested should apply to Mr. Jack Smith, the second one of the two high school inspectors for the Province, who was living in Calgary. I went to his home for an interview and as soon as I mentioned my name, he asked me if I were the man who had been principal in Trochu the year before. When I answered in the affirmative, he told me that he had only minutes before been talking to Mr. Fuller on the long distance phone, asking for a recommendation from him, as up to that point he had been unable to find what he considered to be a suitable person for the conditions which existed in Rocky Mountain House at the time. He indicated to me that the school required a good disciplinarian, as Rocky was a lumberjack town and during the previous year the high school boys had succeeded in "putting the run" on two principals in

quick succession.

Apparently Mr. Fuller had told Mr. Smith that he would recommend me very highly but he doubted if I could be contacted, as he understood I had planned on leaving the school room for a couple of years to engage in farming and had no idea where I might be found.

Mr. Smith appeared to be delighted with the coincidence of our meeting and assured me that the position was mine. He advised me to proceed to Rocky at once, to go to the Melton Hotel and enquire for a Mr. Stanley Wilson, who, he said, was the man who had most to say about the operation of the Rocky Mountain House high school. He told me not to be surprised if I were not greeted warmly, as Mr. Wilson was by now a doddering old Englishman with very set views and who lived very much as he had done during the Victorian era.

I found everything to be exactly as Mr. Smith had described it. My knock on Mr. Wilson's door was answered by a gruff "come in." I opened the door and saw, sitting with his back to me, an old white-haired man bending over a desk examining a sheaf of papers. A local farmer was seated on a chair nearby. Without looking up from his work, he bade me find a chair and sit down. This was impossible as the only chair was occupied, so I sat on the edge of his bed. The room was jammed with books and papers and there was scarcely room to move around. Realizing that he was obviously signing documents of one sort or another, for a customer, I suggested that I should wait outside until he was free. Still without looking up, he replied: "Sit down, I said, and wait your turn." As soon as the customer had left, Mr. Wilson turned his chair and for the first time looked in my direction and immediately said: "What can I do for you?" I introduced myself and told him that I had come to take the vacant position on the school staff. "Oh, yes," he said, "we need a primary room teacher, but we prefer a girl." I explained that Mr. Smith, the high school inspector, had sent me to Rocky in response to their advertisement, to become the principal. He informed me at once that the high school inspector didn't run the Rocky Mountain House school and that he would suggest by looking at me that there were boys in high school older than I appeared to be.

I discussed with him the points that Mr. Smith had raised with me, mainly the problem of discipline. The old gentleman agreed that they had had a serious problem the previous year with discipline and reminded me of the old saying that you never send a boy to do a man's job and certainly the principalship of the Rocky Mountain House school was a man's job. I suggested to Mr. Wilson that very often an older person could not accept the point of view of the youth and it might well be that a younger man was what this class of boys required.

I noticed that while he was speaking, he was perusing the Departmental results of the June examinations and before I could ask a question concerning them, he told me that the Departmental results were disgraceful, as only eighteen per cent of the papers sent to Edmonton for marking had received pass marks. The Rocky high school at the time consisted of grades nine, ten and eleven, the principal being obliged to teach all the subjects in the three grades and to supervise the instruction in the other five rooms. The principal's work as a teacher, therefore, was identical with the work I had done in Fleet and Trochu. Having given Mr. Wilson a brief history of my association with high school teaching, I ventured to tell him that I had had an opportunity of speaking on the telephone with the secretary of the Trochu school and had found that of all the papers submitted to Edmonton, ninety-six per cent had received pass marks and that a high percentage of those were seventy-five per cent or over. The old man appeared not to be impressed, as the only thing that seemed to concern him was my youthful appearance.

I suggested that he phone to Mr. Smith and to Mr. Fuller but he would have no part of it and emphasized in no uncertain terms that it was he who ran the Rocky school. I asked him whether or not he did not think that I should speak to the other members of the board and his answer was a definite "no," assuring me that Mr. Ross and Mr. Brockman, the other two members, always relied upon his recommendation when it came to hiring teachers.

One thing I noticed particularly about Mr. Wilson was his flawless English and a cursory look at his books indicated that he must be a lover of the classics. Many pieces of sheet music were also strewn around the room, so I changed the subject and made reference to his library. The old man was

delighted for an opportunity to lean back in his chair, shut his eyes and recite from Shakespeare. I could not help but wonder what had brought him to Rocky Mountain House, a town which then appeared to be the last outpost of civilization.

As he became more friendly, he enquired as to whether or not I was married man and when I told him that I had been married for only two weeks, he jocularly said: "And you're running around alone already? Where's your wife?" I told him that she was waiting in the car for me and that I would like him to meet her. After having done so, he suggested that perhaps I'd like to drive around town, for a good look at the place and though my youth would militate against me, perhaps I'd like to see the school, as well.

The Rocky School had been built in sections; as the population of the town increased, another room was added to the building and at this time the room which was to be occupied by the principal was in the process of being completed. Workmen were still on the job and Mr. Wilson suggested that despite the noise they made, he would like to play for us some of his favorite selections on the old-fashioned pump organ in the principal's office. As I listened to his repertoire, the old man became more and more of a mystery to me. I could fancy myself at an organ recital, if I closed my eyes and listened to his music.

Upon taking him back to the hotel, I discovered that the school board was holding a meeting that evening, with the express purpose of contacting Mr. Smith to find out whether or not he had made a decision for them. By the time he got out of the car I was sure that his attitude must have changed, so suggested to him that I should like to attend the board meeting, if possible. He did not hesitate a moment in letting me know that this just was not possible, because only that day he had turned away another applicant who had come directly to him, not through Mr. Smith.

Before returning to Halkirk, I asked Mr. Wilson if he would be kind enough to telephone the Halkirk operator and leave a message for me, regardless of what the answer of the board would be. This he agreed to do. Strangely enough, about nine that evening I drove up to the telephone office in Halkirk just in time to see the operator coming out of the door waving to me to come in. Mr. Wilson was on the phone. He told me that the board meeting was just then concluding and the board had decided that I could spend a year in Rocky Mountain House.

I thanked him very much and asked if he would mail me the contract, which, incidentally, was in the amount of two thousand dollars, as had been my salary the year before. It was obvious that Mr. Wilson was irked by my suggestion, as he said immediately: "Isn't my word good enough for you? Mr. Brockman, Mr. Ross and our secretary, Mr. Young are all here with me." I again thanked him and told him that I would arrive in Rocky three or four days before school opened.

My wife and I settled down to housekeeping in Rocky Mountain House about the beginning of September, 1930 and it was not long before we had become well acquainted with the people of the town. At the end of the first month, however, I wondered how in the world I could stand to live in Rocky for the year promised me by Mr. Wilson. At the end of the second month, I thought I could tolerate it but before Christmas of that year I had become a confirmed Rocky-ite and believed that I would be happy and content to make it my permanent home.

Truly it was, however, a pioneering town. There was no such thing as power or water or even concrete sidewalks. Though main street had been treated to a course of small boulders which passed for gravel, the streets were, for the most part, a sea of mud when it rained, which turned to layers of very dry dust after the rain had ceased. The economy was based largely upon the lumbering business and the coal mines which were in operation at Alexo, Saunders and Nordegg to the west. The growing of wheat in the immediate area was not known. It was the only town I knew of in Alberta that lacked grain elevators. Coarse grain grew in abundance, however, and the raising of cattle and pigs formed the main occupation of the farmers.

My one year as principal of the school stretched into five and each year my fondness for the district and its people continued to increase. The people in those days certainly made their own fun and a stranger coming into their midst was immediately made welcome.

For years Rocky had been isolated from the more prosperous area to the east, so far as highway

facilities were concerned. In 1931, the sitting member for the Red Deer constituency had passed away. At that time, the Highways Department was building a road from Sylvan Lake to Rocky Mountain House and had reached the Alhambra corner, thirteen miles east of Rocky, when the resultant by-election returned Mr. W. E. Payne of Red Deer, representing the Conservative party. No one will ever convince a Rocky-ite of those days that it was anything other than this fact that brought an abrupt end to the road work, leaving the last thirteen miles as it had always been, almost an impassable muskeg.

I voted for Mr. Payne, little realizing that in the general election of four years later, I would win the seat from him for the Social Credit party.

Since that time I have represented the Social Credit party in eight successive elections and have been successful in retaining the seat with majorities as high as seventy-five per cent of the total vote. On the occasion of each election I have felt extremely humble, realizing that the voters have seen fit to return me to the Legislature time after time to work in their interests.

During these years I have naturally had the opportunity of becoming well acquainted with the district and its people and as I look at the Rocky Mountain House area in particular, as well as at the entire constituency, I realize that a beneficent Creator has smiled upon this entire area.

Having travelled into many parts of the world, and having lived the earlier years of my life on the prairie, I find that I truly regard the area I represent as a veritable Garden of Eden.

The area is richly endowed with water, the beautiful Sylvan Lake and Crimson Lake being two of the outstanding parks which lend their facilities to people from all walks of life from many parts of the Province. The mighty North Saskatchewan river, which supplies the water needs of Edmonton and of the other large towns along its route, is also the waterway that brought the great mapmaker, David Thompson into the awe-inspiring Rocky Mountains and to the vast regions of the Pacific Coast.

The fertile wheat fields to the east have scarcely ever known a total crop failure, while the grey wooded soil of the west is producing fodder in abundance to supply the livestock industry. The Town of Rocky Mountain House, long known for its association with the timber industry, has become the hub of a thriving oil and gas industry as well. Coal deposits to the west will yet become of greater and greater importance and the grandeur of the Rocky Mountains as seen from the highway linking Rocky with Banff and Jasper becomes daily better known and appreciated by an ever-widening circle of humanity.

No district of which I am aware is so cosmopolitan in the make-up of its residents. Starting on the east, while names of Anglo-Saxon origin predominate, an ever-increasing number of those of other ethnic origins develops as we travel toward the mountains and there is no doubt it would be difficult to name a civilized country of the world which does not have a representative in the Rocky Mountain House constituency.

When I first became acquainted with the Town of Rocky Mountain House and its people, two ethnic groups seemed to predominate almost equally, one being British and the other Finnish. The native population, representing several Indian tribes, has always been numerous and the mark these people have made down through history is today well known by the remains of the forts of the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Trading Company. Rocky is steeped in history.

To say that the district is a fisherman's and a big game hunter's paradise is to do the area less than justice, as people come from all over the world to enjoy the many delights this fine district has to offer.

Truly this is a Garden of Eden and a living example of an harmoniously operating United Nations. God has smiled upon Rocky and its environs.