

CHAPTER TWO

The close of World War One, followed immediately by the world-wide epidemic of Spanish influenza seemed to mark the end of an era in history and what became known as the Roaring Twenties were ushered in. While the war had taken many Canadian lives, the influenza took even more. Nearly every family throughout the Halkirk district had been affected one way or the other, either by the war or the influenza.

The month of October, 1918, seemed to be an especially sad one for the Halkirk area, as several young people were taken by the flu and word had reached the district that several families had lost a boy in the war.

It seemed to me that these tragedies created in the minds of so many people the attitude of "What's the use?"

Ever since 1905 when Alberta became a Province, we had been ruled by a Liberal government and at the close of the war the membership of the Legislature was thirty-four Liberals, nineteen Conservatives, two Independents, one Labor, while two members had been elected to represent the armed forces.

As is always the case following a war, there are more problems to solve than there were before. Feelings of bitterness had been engendered between people of different nationalities. It was not unusual to hear people with an English name speak almost contemptuously of a neighbor whose ancestors had belonged to a nationality against whom we had fought during the war, even though they had neighbored with them for years on a very friendly basis before the war. Canada's people, naturally, had come from all parts of Europe and while politicians talked in glowing terms about our great Canadianism, their statements seemed to have such a hollow ring to many people and there is no doubt that the building up of a true Canadianism had been greatly aggravated and delayed.

Many soldiers returning from the war had been led to believe that the government was their "great white father" and that it was only necessary, if they had a problem at all, to contact the local representative or, more especially, the armed forces representatives and their every problem would be solved. It did not take long for them to discover that the promise was one thing but the fulfilling of it was something else. These men had been removed from their homes and their regular employment for a number of years, had offered their lives in the service of their country and had returned to a country which had changed during their absence. Many who had stayed home and away from the Hell of war, had benefited greatly from the false prosperity which the same conflict had engendered.

Governments were discussed more than ever before, as more and more people looked about for someone to blame for the conditions they so detested. The returned men soon realized that the prices for their products were falling; that many pre-war markets were now non-existent and yet the prices of everything they had to buy were increasing daily. Not only had they fought the war but upon their return they had also been asked to pay, through higher taxes and higher prices, the cost of the carnage.

Bitterness towards anything German, no matter how remotely connected, continued to grow, even though the war was over and Germany had been defeated.

I recall one instance of a young Englishman returning home from war after having been seriously wounded and shellshocked. Any mention of anything German to him was sufficient to arouse his anger and it was evident that the shock he had suffered was still close to the surface. Through the Soldier Settlement Board, he had purchased a farm, together with equipment, a number of cows and four work horses. I was with him when he went to buy a team from a neighbor he had not met but who had been recommended to him very highly as a man who raised good Belgian stock. After choosing the team to his liking, he enquired of the owner as to what names he had given them. When he was told that the names were Fritz and Hans, he promptly took a second and third look at the other teams offered for sale, stating in no uncertain terms that he would have nothing around him, not even a horse, which would remind him of anything German. Despite this, however, this team constituted his number one choice, so after some discussion with the owner and with me, because I would be driving the team, it was decided that we would re-christen them and we took them home as Prince and Dan.

I worked for this man all one summer and more than once when the horses stepped over their traces or refused to stop when he shouted "whoa," he entertained them with a tirade about their early association with the Germans. Nellie and Silver escaped similar scoldings.

As a boy of thirteen, I actually had much sympathy for the feelings of these men, not because I disliked Germans, but rather because of my early schooling in England, where the matter of patriotism was daily drilled into our young minds. We had been steeped in British history and such names as Drake, Raleigh and Nelson were well known to every school boy. The singing of "Rule Britannia" was almost a daily routine and there was no doubt in any of our young minds that God had ever created a human being with all the glorious attributes with which He had endowed the Englishman.

Having been steeped in these traditions during the first eight years of my life, I could not understand the meaning of the signs we saw on buildings and billboards as we travelled across Canada on the immigrant train, signs which so often read: "Men wanted but no Englishmen need apply." Those British history lessons being foremost in my memory, I knew that General Wolfe had defeated General Montcalm on the Plains of Abraham and that Canada had in this way become an English country.

I had not heard English spoken with an accent, other than our own, nor had I heard of hyphenated Canadians. It was in Halkirk that I learned what a cosmopolitan population made up the nine millions of people we called Canadians, that being the total population of Canada at that time.

Political meetings, as I had known them, were non-existent so far as I was concerned, although my interest in the subject never waned. The nearest thing to a political meeting was the annual meeting of the school board and of the municipal council and I well recall attending the local school board meeting on many occasions. Incidentally, the problems were the same as now—the cost of education was too high—sometimes reaching twenty dollars per quarter section and the school board was urged by the ratepayers to make it known to the government that taxes on land would soon be unbearable if other sources of revenue were not found. Teachers' salaries were also getting out of control, some reaching five or even six hundred dollars per year. There was, however, one added feature in those days and that concerned the teacher's lodgings. In some cases no one wished to board the teacher and on other occasions two or three families would fight for the honor. I can recall mention being made of what would be an ideal situation: that of having the teacher board with people who had no children of school age. It was so often true in the minds of some people that a youngster was bound to be the teacher's pet, if the teacher boarded at that youngster's home. There was no doubt in the minds of other youngsters, either, that the teacher helped such pupil with his homework.

The question of a school barn was always a lively topic. Youngsters who lived within two miles of the school usually walked, but there were always a number who came by horse-drawn vehicle or who rode a saddle horse. If a barn were built to accommodate eight horses, but ten horses were driven to school, it was always a question as to whose team would be left out. Keeping the barn clean was always a good topic for some lively discussion. Was it something for the caretaker to do or should the people who used the barn take their turn? The caretaker was often one of the pupils who came in the morning a little earlier than the rest to make the fire and stayed a little later after three-thirty to sweep the floor.

Our district was made up of people who had come from several parts of the world and I learned then the differences that exist between the attitudes of these people to the same problem. It always amused me to realize how much time could be wasted by adults arguing, sometimes very heatedly, over whose turn it was to clean the barn, while they could have done the job in far less time than they spent arguing about it. I remember one particular meeting when many trivialities had been discussed very seriously, and to the amusement of an Englishman, a comparative newcomer to the district. His sense of humor seemed to be running in high gear that day and as the chairman dismissed the meeting, this man rose to his feet and asked if he could make an announcement. When the chairman agreed, he said: "Ladies and gentlemen, I would just like to announce that two weeks from today there will be an open-air meeting held here in this very room to decide upon what color we shall whitewash the barn."

Our school library was well stocked with at least twenty books and I well recall at one of the annual meetings a mother presenting a resolution for discussion, asking the school board to try to find at least twenty-five dollars for the purchase of more books, as one of her children had already read the entire

contents of the library twice. Someone countered by saying that if this youngster had done that much reading already, it is time he got out in the world and made his living, as certainly he must have a good education by this time. The resolution was defeated.

My first recollection of seeing a real live Canadian politician concerned the local M.L.A. coming to Halkirk to inform the people that the government was going to instal telephones throughout the district. His announcement was greeted with much enthusiasm until the question period came up and apparently many farmers who were becoming greatly concerned about the extent to which the Liberal government of that day was going into debt, declared they were getting along well as far as telephone lines were concerned by using the barbed wire fences which were by this time becoming numerous throughout the country. While they by no means covered a large area, the people who were making use of them saw no reason for the sophisticated telephone services the local member was recommending. However, the telephone lines soon became a reality.

Two facts concerning the local line stick in my memory: one was that prairie chickens and ducks would often fly into the wire and fall dead or seriously injured; another concerned the target practice all the boys in the neighborhood had in seeing who would throw a rock straight enough to smash the glass insulators. Telephone service was really delightful, in that ten or twelve of the local families found it very convenient to gossip all at the same time.

In the hope of bettering their conditions, the farmers were becoming organized throughout Alberta and were threatening to establish themselves as a political party and challenge the Liberal government of that day. I attended as many of the local meetings as I could, so as a young teenager, heard the farmers' woes and I could not help but wonder why so many people with so many problems which seemed to defy solution would not change their occupations for any other on earth.

The farmer had to pay prices for his machinery which were far too high and he had no voice whatever in setting the price for any product he had to sell. Freight rates in Alberta were such that he could not possibly compete with grain farmers even in Saskatchewan. The same terrible situations existed whether he shipped cream, sold cattle or pigs—and certainly when he bought meat from the butcher shop he knew for sure that the butcher was making a fantastic profit at his expense. The farmer's wife, who took her home-made dairy butter and her fresh eggs to the local grocery store had no say whatever over the price at which she sold them and as they were perishable products, had to take whatever the storekeeper offered.

Though farming conditions have, over the intervening years, undergone tremendous changes, the complaints of the farmer have remained remarkably unchanged.

Especially after the close of the war, did the farm organization known as the United Farmers of Alberta step up its activities, laying much emphasis upon the need for strengthening the women's organization, together with that of the youth. There was no doubt whatever that the farmer meant business. He laid most of his troubles at the door of the government which had been in existence ever since 1905, declared it was time for a change and insisted that the farmers were the only people sufficiently concerned to solve the farmers' problems. Mortgage rates in those days often carried eight per cent interest, compounded. This they could see would ruin the agricultural industry and bring about a total collapse of the economy. They decided to field candidates in the next election.

The election took place in 1921 and, as they predicted, the Liberal government was defeated and after the ballots were counted, the United Farmers of Alberta had elected thirty-nine members. The number of Liberals had been reduced from thirty-four to fourteen; the Conservatives from nineteen to one; the Independents remained at two, while Labour rose from one to four. The representation of the armed forces was discontinued. Mr. Herbert Greenfield from Westlock became the first Premier of the U.F.A. government.

The farmers were now jubilant because with such an overwhelming majority in the legislature, they saw no reason whatever why all their problems could not be solved quickly.

I attended regularly many meetings in our own district where all the shortcomings of the Liberal administration were hashed over time after time. It was obvious that the waste and extravagance of the previous government would never be repeated; that taxes would be reduced and that the seventy-eight millions of dollars of bonded indebtedness which the Liberal government had placed upon the backs of our people in sixteen short years would have to be paid off at the earliest possible moment.

The farmers' wheat marketing problems were to be solved by the establishment of a wheat pool, a program "sold" to the farmers by an American promoter named Sapiro. It was predicted that other grain companies with elevators located in all our towns and villages, would soon be a thing of the past and that wheat pool elevators, then being erected or purchased, would take over. I was as optimistic as the rest.

For the next fourteen years Alberta was governed by the U.F.A. party. During this time, we elected U.F.A. members to Ottawa and these men became well known in the House of Commons as a "ginger" group who on every possible occasion placed before the Federal government of that day the problems of the Western Canadian farmer.

Between 1921 and 1926 the Province appeared to be prosperous and the government popular. Nevertheless, Provincial debt continued to mount, as the U.F.A. government found itself unable to carry out its election promises without also borrowing large sums of money in exactly the same way as the Liberal party had done.

During the month of January, 1922, the weather was extremely mild and work in the coal mines was almost nonexistent. I had also been able to save up a few dollars and decided that I might be well advised to attend the rural school, now in the hands of a well-qualified teacher, Miss Edna Beatty, and see whether or not I could secure my grade eight diploma by the end of June.

In due course I received a diploma from the Department of Education, indicating that I could now call myself a grade eight graduate and again I hired out to a farmer for the remainder of the summer and fall.

Still believing that it would be impossible for me to ever become a teacher, I toyed with the idea of going to either Calgary or Edmonton for the winter and of learning the barber trade, or perhaps taking a course in bookkeeping. In addition to talking this over with my parents, I discussed it with Miss Beatty, who by now had become Mrs. John Farnalls, as well as with several members of the Farnalls family, who, by the way, had always been looked upon as leaders in the community. Mr. Paul Farnalls was a municipal councillor and two of his sisters were teachers.

During a short time in Spruce Creek school Miss Margaret Farnalls had been one of our teachers and actually it was she who had given me much encouragement about seeking a higher education and had recommended to me that I read in the school library all the books of Horatio Alger. By January of 1923, Miss Upham, a sister of Mrs. Paul Farnalls, had become the teacher at the Rosebank school. While Spruce Creek school was closed because of lack of pupils, the few who remained enrolled in Rosebank.

When the following January rolled around, I decided to go and have a talk with Miss Upham. She suggested to me that if I should like to come to school for the winter, she would assist me with grade nine. Father and Mother, of course, were delighted and insisted that I should forget about coal mining and go back to school. Not only was I able to take grade nine, but as I was the only pupil in the school above grade eight, and could go as fast as I wished, I secured the grade ten textbooks and took half of grade ten, as well. Miss Upham gave me every assistance she could and certainly every encouragement. In the six months that followed I burned much midnight oil but by the end of June was rewarded with good pass marks.

At the age of seventeen, however, I felt that I had come of age, so to speak and a grade twelve diploma and a teaching certificate still looked a long way off. It was impossible, however, to proceed any further in school without leaving home and the closest place I could expect to obtain further education was Stettler. This presented a real problem. Mother had, in the meantime, undergone major surgery and my brother had become the victim of a shooting accident, both incidents costing an amount of money far beyond what father was able to raise. My small savings, therefore, were dissipated in order to help the family budget and any vain hope I had entertained of ever becoming a teacher had gone completely. However, there was always the possibility that someone in the Town of Stettler might be able to use my part-time services and I might be able to further my education in that way.

About the middle of August, 1923, I discussed this idea with my Mother and Father and it was agreed that Father and I would take the train on Saturday morning to Stettler and together make enquiries around town regarding the possibility of securing part-time employment.

Upon arriving in the Town of Stettler, we made our way to the hardware store to try to find a Mr. Harry Cullis, a man whom Father had known years before in Coleford, England. We had heard that he and his brother, George, were residing in the Stettler area and that Harry was engaged in the hardware business.

Though both were well known, neither was in town at the time. We explained to a store employee our mission and he suggested that a general store would perhaps offer opportunities for part-time employment, as they were importing large quantities of British Columbia fruit and usually needed extra help.

We spent the day tramping around town, making our wishes known to store managers, but all to no avail. We returned home on the afternoon train, believing that what I was searching for was impossible.

On the next Saturday, however, we tried again and by this time I was prepared to take any sort of work, no matter what it was. We spoke to the managers of all the hotels in town, as I was quite prepared to work at any menial task, so long as it gave me the opportunity of attending school. Having no success at the hotels, I tried the livery barn and I was hoping against hope that I could find employment there, as I was well acquainted with horses and farming generally. Again, no luck. It now appeared to me that the only places in town I had not contacted were the bakery, the second-hand store and the undertaking parlor.

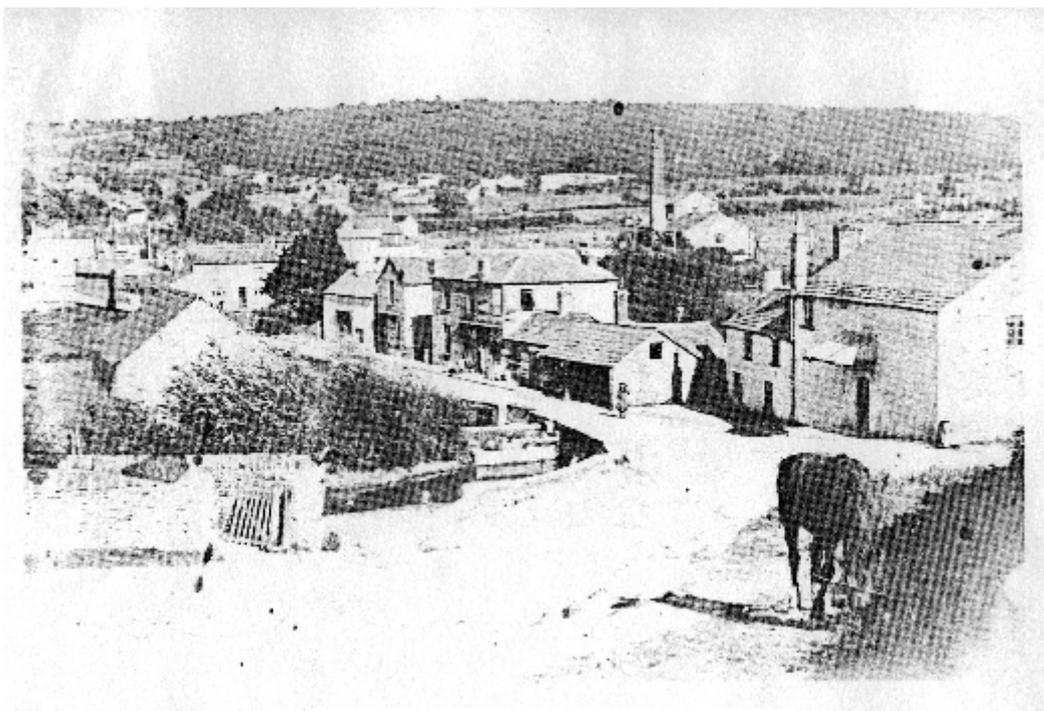
During our conversations with businessmen, many remarked that it was too bad I was not a girl because many families in town gave board and lodging to out-of-town girls, in exchange for light domestic duties, baby sitting, etc. I hated to admit that I was even prepared to take employment of this sort, effeminate though it seemed, because both my brother and I, during the lengthy illness of my Mother, had learned to do all those things a Mother is called upon to do, including the baking of bread.

By train time, three in the afternoon, we had found nothing, so we again took the train for Halkirk.

The following Saturday was the last before school began and I made up my mind on the Friday night that as I still had about \$2.00 and as the return train fare was \$1.20, I would try once more. This time I went alone.

When I arrived in Stettler, I wondered where in the world to start, so for the first hour I walked up one side of the street and down the other, wondering whether or not I should try again in places where I had already been on the two previous occasions.

I had in my possession this time a note from Miss Upham, the teacher who had instructed me the year before and who had worked so hard to assist me in grade nine and grade ten. It was addressed "To whom it may concern" and amongst other compliments she had stated in her note that she would recommend to any teacher that I be given the opportunity of trying more than one grade in a year.



Birthplace

On my previous visits, I had found that the principal of the high school, Mr. Harold E. Tanner, was holidaying at Buffalo Lake, but on this occasion I found him at home. He read the note with interest and listened to my story with sympathy. I told him that I would like to attempt the remaining half of grade ten and all of grade eleven and explained that in addition to this, I was trying to find a place where I could work for my board. He said to me: "You sound like a young man who is desperate for an education. You are undertaking a heavy task, but I have never yet stood in any boy's way and I'll not stand in yours. School opens on Monday morning and I hope to see you there. I'll give you all the help I can." I felt elated with his assurance and it seemed to boost my morale to the place where I felt I could again approach a prospective employer.

About ten minutes to three I was standing on the sidewalk in front of what was then known as the Staack Block, now the Gabriel Block. The ground floor was taken up by a secondhand store operated by Mr. Staack himself, while next door was a grocery store with the name "Seth Witton" over the door. They were the only two places in town my Father and I had not visited. The second-hand store had seemed deserted and the grocery store was the smallest in town. While I stood gazing in the window wondering whether I should or shouldn't try once more, I heard the train whistle nine miles away, as it pulled into the little village of Erskine. This meant that in less than fifteen minutes the train would be in Stettler and I had to be on it.

It seemed to me at the moment that I was being pushed through the door of the Seth Witton store to make one last desperate attempt at securing employment before running to catch the train. The manager, Mr. Wright, was a very kindly man and to him I owe a debt of gratitude I can never repay. I told him of my problem in one sentence and even before I could finish, he said to me: "Are you the young man from Halkirk who has been trying for several weeks to find work so that you can attend school?" When I answered in the affirmative, he said to me: "You have the type of ambition I like. Be prepared to go to school Monday morning. I don't know for sure what I can do but I do know that between my son and me we'll work out something." I could not believe my ears. I thanked him and ran every step to the depot, catching the train as it started to move.

I arrived back in Stettler on Monday morning with a cardboard suitcase containing a few belongings, twenty cents in my pocket and a sickly feeling in the pit of my stomach. The words of Mr. Tanner and Mr. Wright were ringing in my ears. I made my way to the Seth Witton store, knowing at this early hour in the morning it was not yet open. As I waited, a young man with a shock of blond, wavy hair came up the sidewalk and turned the key in the door. He said to me: "Are you the young man from Halkirk?" When I told him I was, he shook hands and introduced himself as the son of Mr. Wright. In just a few minutes Mr. Wright Sr. arrived and his first question was: "What's your name? I want to introduce you to the man next door who owns this block and operates the second-hand store. He is a little Jewish gentleman by the name of Pete Staack. I have arranged with Pete for you to occupy a little two-room suite upstairs for ten dollars a month. I hope you can do your own cooking." By this time I was beginning to feel at home with Mr. Wright and assured him that I could do my own cooking as long as I had something to cook.

Mr. Staack showed me to the little suite he suggested I occupy and assured me that I could make myself at home and that if he could help me in any way, he would be most pleased to do so. To him, also, I owe a debt of gratitude.

It was now getting close to nine o'clock and time to be in school, so I went downstairs and spoke again to Mr. Wright and thanked him for what he had done. He told me to drop in to the store as soon as I came home from school at four o'clock and he would put me to work. Looking back, I am sure that he needed my help in the same way he needed an artificial limb. True, he found work for me to do, in carrying boxes of groceries out to customers' democrats and buggies and in carrying boxes of fruit and bags of flour and sugar from the storage area into the store.

Upon arriving at school and before seeing Mr. Tanner, I spied a young fellow whose face I thought I'd seen before; simultaneously, he did likewise. He came up to me and said: "My name is Bus Rohrer. Are you from Halkirk?" When I said "yes," he said: "Did you work on a farm north of Halkirk about a year ago?" I said, "Yes I did." He said: "I think you are the kid who got up about five o'clock one morning when I knocked on your door, harnessed a team of horses, came down the road about a mile, hooked on to my Dad's model T and pulled us through the mud up to your farm where the roads were dry." I said: "Yes, I remember it well." He said: "My dad remembers it, too, because he wanted to pay you and you refused to take a cent. Dad has told the story many times. How about coming home at noon and meeting him again?" This I gladly did and here and then a friendship commenced between me and Colonel Rohrer, a well-known auctioneer and a highly respected man. Needless to say, when I arrived at Mr. Wright's store about five minutes after four, my two dimes were still intact, as Mrs. Rohrer had supplied a very welcome lunch.

I have often believed that Stettler is a town in which a person is a stranger only once.