

Childhood Snippets

Three Mini Memoirs of My Childhood

By Nancy Archibald

Mom, Watch Me Swim

After Grandma Nan died in 1958, the family reunion was held at Gull Lake. The aunts and uncles who lived in Edmonton and Calgary could rent a cottage and use it as a base for the picnic activities. Gull Lake was shallow enough that we could play in the water with the water only coming up to our belly buttons. This contrasted with the deep and swift Red Deer River.

“Watch, Mom, I can swim,” I said.

In the shallow water, with my hands clawing at the sand, moving forward in the water, I pretended to swim. I didn’t think it was necessary to put my head under. I was so proud of myself. Mom laughed, not taking me seriously. This moment stayed with me, and I kept my desire to learn to swim.

Gull Lake had sand for a half mile all around. Even the cottages were built in the sand. It really should have been called Sandy Lake, for the soft, fine sand that left ripples after the waves rolled away from the beach. We only attended the reunion for a day because we had to “get the hay up” on the farm.

A picture from the reunion revealed my hair, cut in a bowl cut by my father, had not been combed. I looked like a little ragamuffin in an old coat and a lost look on my face. In the background of the picture, Mom and my sister looked pretty in tidy clothes and neat, curly hair. There were a few pictures from that time in my life, so I cannot compare. Inwardly, I felt like a happy little girl, wanting to do everything my brother and sister did and more, especially learn how to swim.

Feeding Cattle

We had a cold January, the year Mom went back to teaching school. Dad left me in the house when he went out to feed the cattle because he didn't think I should be out in the cold. I sat on the yellow chrome kitchen table, looking for him to come up the path to the house. The frost formed on the window, so I scraped it off with my fingernail to see outside. It was so cold it covered over quickly. This kept my mind off being alone, but I would have rather gone with Dad.

As the cold snap continued, I convinced Dad I was big and tough enough to go out with him to do chores. I ran to the steers' pen, careful not to slip on the snow or trip on the frozen cow pies. I stepped onto the bottom rail of the fence and held on tight so I could see the steers. I wiggled my toes in my boots to keep them warm. Fifteen steers with frost on their backs and steam rising from their nostrils, jostled for their turn to eat the chop. The trough was too small to accommodate all of them at once.

What about that little roan calf? Is he going to get enough to eat?

I turned away from the fence when I heard the tractor sputter. All of a sudden, it made a loud roar when Dad made it come to life. It was time to get the bales from the stack just outside the pen and load them onto the hay rack. I ran over to watch Dad, and he summoned me to join him. I climbed up onto the rack and slid my feet under a bale on the way to the field. The cold air nipped my face.

When Dad turned off the tractor, the cows gathered around the hayrack, looking for their morning meal. I heard the cows bawling as they ran closer. Dad threw some of the bales off the rack, trying to get the cows to move away, then took off the twine and kicked the hay farther in the field

I wish I was bigger, so I could help Dad.

I stayed on the wagon, sitting on a bale. Old Greta's wild eyes scared me. Her crooked horns matched her disposition. She came right for me, but turned when Dad kicked some hay in her direction.

Phew, that was close.

I watched the cows toss the hay up with their noses, ripping open the bales, and chewing vigorously.

Once we were finished with feeding the pigs chop and household scraps, checking for eggs under the warm bellies of the chickens who liked to peck at my hands, and breaking ice in the tanks for steers and pigs, we came into the house for lunch.

“What kind of beans would you like today?” Dad asked.

“Porkin,” I said.

This was our favourite meal.

After lunch, I sat on Dad's lap as he read me a story. The familiar smell of pipe tobacco and the wheezing sound in his chest lulled me off to sleep.

Riding the Big Bike

Every season had its challenges for Dad, looking like a five-year-old. By the end of the school year, I amused myself while Dad planted the barley in the field by the driveway.

The three of us siblings shared an adult-sized girls' bike, and Dad thought it was a good time for me to learn how to ride.

Dad took me and the bike to the hill on the driveway where he could see me from the tractor. I straddled the bike and stood frozen at the top of a small knoll on the dirt road.

“It will be OK,” Dad said.

“What do I do?” I asked.

“Just put your feet on the pedals and coast down the hill to get your balance,” Dad said.

That is just what I did. I coasted down the hill, standing up. Then I pushed the bike back up the hill to start again. I could see Dad looking over at me now and then.

Dad's proud of me; I haven't fallen off.

Over time, I became brave enough to press the pedals forward, propelling the bike to the bottom of the hill and going farther each time. I didn't try to get on the bike to pedal back after I turned it around; that would have to wait. I pushed it back to the top of the hill.

Before long, I learned how to pedal on the flat road, still standing up because I couldn't reach the pedals from the seat.