A Winter's School Day

By Helen Ivanhoe-Smart

We were homesteading pioneers in northern Canada, seven children of Polish immigrants. We grew up in the 1930s in a sparsely settled area with no electricity, no running water, no telephone, no indoor plumbing, and a woodstove for heat. Like all early settlers, we had an outdoor privy; we girls called it an "outhouse," but the boys referred to it as the "toilet."

Our country's seasons were dramatic, and we always looked forward to the changes. When the snows began to melt in the spring, we had contests to see who could spot the first green plant or yellow buttercup.

During the long summer days, we labored to produce food for the winter, but we also had time to swim and picnic along the Pembina River.

When fall approached, we marveled at the dramatic fall colors. And the first snowfall was a joy that covered our world in a clean white blanket and made everything look uncluttered and pristine. And yet we realized that cold weather lay ahead.

Anyone who believes their geography books when they read that Siberia is the coldest place in the world hasn't been to Sangudo, Alberta, Canada, in the winter. During these long cold winters, all our family activities revolved around the thermometer hanging on the back porch.

Father always arose at 6 a.m. to light a fire in the kitchen stove. Sometimes I could hear him muttering in Polish because the wood was green and wet and would not light. By 7 a.m., when the chill was off the frozen air, Father called upstairs to wake us. We dressed rapidly in the dark, often pulling on our heavy woolen underwear and outer clothing under the covers, and then scrambling down the stairs to the warm kitchen to put on socks and shoes.

A heavy curtain always hung at the bottom of the stairs to keep the warm air in the kitchen. But oh, the upstairs was so cold! The two windows in my room were covered with a half inch of hoarfrost; there was no spot where we could look out.

My two older brothers had daily chores to perform before coming back in for breakfast: watering and feeding the pigs, throwing hay to the horses, pumping water to fill the big watering trough, and carrying in firewood for the day's supply.

Poplar School in 1941.

My jobs were to slice the crusty loaves of bread Mother baked and to make our school lunches. Sometimes we had no filling for sandwiches except cold sliced potatoes or cooked beets. My oldest brother, Stan, liked thick slices of yellow onion on his sandwiches. "An apple a day keeps the doctor away, but an onion a day keeps everyone away," he would say. It was sure true!

We saved every scrap of waxed paper, but if we had none, our sandwiches were wrapped in an old *Edmonton Journal.* Lunch papers were always carefully refolded and brought home from school.

Every morning, 8 o'clock was the critical hour when our dad would check the back-porch thermometer. If it read higher than 20 degrees below zero, we were allowed to leave for school. If it was any colder, Father refused to let us leave the farm.

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If it warmed up before noon, he relented and we could go on to school.

We kids really wanted to go to school, and my older brothers and I learned that if we blew on that thermometer, we could force the thin red line above that critical minus-20 mark. Then we would hurriedly call our dad to come and look. "Now can we go to school? It's warmed up from 20 below."

Public school was 3½ miles away by road, but we could shorten that distance by a half-mile by going across our own fields. A poplar forest, two muskegs, a short stretch of muddy trail and a final mile of graded road between dense forests brought us into the welcome clearing of our own Poplar School, Public School 3215.

Our farmhouse in Sangudo, Alberta, Canada, shown here in 1939, was built by our father, John Liss.

In the summer, Dad's horses were needed for work in the fields, so we kids walked the three miles. But in winter, we could hitch the horses to the cozy sleigh our father had made for us. He had outfitted a windproof little boxlike cabin on skids. Two automobile windshields were built in at an angle for the reins to come through and to protect the driver from the cold wind.

The oldest child always drove and had the authority to discipline younger siblings as necessary. I looked forward to the day when my two older brothers would go off to high school and I would be in charge. But I didn't fully realize the responsibilities and duties involved.

As the driver, I had to unhitch the horses and settle them into the school barn while the younger ones rushed into the warm schoolhouse. Sometimes as I unhooked the cold metal traces, I thought my frozen fingers would snap off.

Then, at the noon hour, while everyone sat around the warm potbellied stove, eating their lunches, I had to dress and walk into the cold to feed the two horses their bag of oats. The rule on our farm was "Feed your animals first. Only then can you feed yourself."

Our little Poplar School had eight grades with students ranging in age from 7–16. One of the older students was the school janitor, and that person, boy or girl, was required to arrive one hour early to start a fire in the stove. It was a prestigious job and paid $10 a month.

Among the janitor's after-school duties were pumping water and filling the buckets, chopping wood and making kindling, bringing in a supply of firewood, cleaning the blackboard, going outside to bang the brushes to empty them of chalk dust, and finally sweeping the floors and tidying the cloakrooms for the next school day.

Our school day began at 9 a.m. with the Lord's Prayer and a short reading from the Bible. On really cold days, our teacher marched us around for 15 minutes before we settled at our desks. During the nighttime the bucket of drinking water had frozen, so it was placed atop the stove to thaw, along with the older kids' frozen inkwells. By 10:30, at first recess, we all put our lunches near the stove to warm up.

When it was too cold to play outdoors, we played marbles inside, older and younger kids playing together. We played "knife," flipping the open blades onto the worn wood flooring.

At noon, if it had warmed up, we bundled up and played Fox and Geese in the snow. Sometimes the teacher allowed us to slide down a steep slope off the school grounds. We made snowmen, but we were not allowed to throw snowballs. No child dared to break a teacher's rule! No one ever disobeyed Miss Sides, our teacher.

Our homestead was positioned at about 54 degrees north latitude, so our winter days were short. During those long winter months, it would be dark when we left for school at 8 a.m. and it would be dark again when we came home at 4:30. Mother always had a welcome bowl of hot soup for us before we took off our school clothes and pulled on our work clothes to go back out to do the evening chores.

Hoarfrost in our garden in December 1939.

My older brothers, Stanley and Vlad, had to chop and crush oats for the pigs, throw more hay down from the loft, fill the horses' feed stalls, and again fill that big water trough.

A fire had to be made in the small stove that was inside the water trough to keep it from freezing over. The chickens in the chicken house had to be fed and watered and the doors carefully locked to keep out coyotes, foxes and the occasional weasel.

Cows had to be milked. My job was to milk two cows. Mother milked the rest, faster and better than I did. We carried the full milk pails into the house and emptied them into the cream separator that was bolted to the kitchen floor.

When we finished separating, the cream went into the cream can to sell, and the skim milk went to feed the pigs. And each evening, all parts of the big separator had to be washed and scalded.

My younger brothers had to carry in firewood and the kindling that our dad had split, making sure that the wood box next to the stove was full again. Whenever I had that job, I stacked the wood at uneven angles so that it wouldn't take so many trips from the woodpile to fill the box. Not a very nice example from an older sister!

Finally, with the chores all done, we children and our parents sat down at the long table for supper, Father at one end, and Mother at the opposite end near the stove. All of us seven children sat along the sides in order of our ages.

By 8 p.m. came my final job, washing the dishes—and hoping that I had remembered to fill the kettle and heat enough water.

By 8:30, we all gathered in the living room around a small stove while our mother read to us by the light of an Aladdin lamp. Sometimes it was a timely article our dad wanted us to hear. But the best was when Mother, in her gentle, soothing voice, read from a novel. I relived the experiences of a brother and sister lost in the Sahara in Hendrick Shenkevichi's book *In Desert and Wilderness*. I was always disappointed when 9 o'clock came and it was time to stop reading and go upstairs to bed.

Life was less complicated in the Good Old Days. We knew what was expected of us, we did our job, and we knew that we were appreciated and loved. ❖

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