A Country Mouse with One Paw in the Village

Growing up in Prince Edward County

Sandra Marshall Woolfrey
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Preface

I was born October 3rd, 1944 in the old Picton hospital. My parents paid $25 for my delivery. My father had been saving a hundred dollar bill for the occasion, but the woman on duty couldn’t make change and threatened to not admit my mother until my father came up with the right amount of money. This was not at all what my mother needed to hear given that it was the four-thirty in the morning and she was in labour for the first time in her life. I don’t know how this was resolved. I do know that my father put in time by helping Harvard Calnan deliver milk about town in his horse drawn wagon while my mother laboured to bring me howling into the world.

A week later they brought me home to the farm at the west end of Bloomfield where I would grow up. Our house was what had been the hired man’s house. My grandmother lived in the original farmhouse across the lane with my father’s younger brother and his wife. A year and a half later my cousin Douglas was born. As soon as he became old enough to play we became constant playmates. Another couple of years went by before my sister Jean was born. Jean was still not old enough to play when I as the eldest child on the farm started school. Consequently many of my early memories involve activities with Doug though the time came when he and Jean became playmates and I was too old to join in their cowboy and Indian games. I was reading or collecting insects in bottles while they roared around, my sister with blonde curls flying out from beneath her Davy Crocket coonskin hat, guns being pulled from holsters on both their hips.

I left the County for Peterborough Teachers’ College shortly before my eighteenth birthday. What followed were careers in elementary school teaching, archaeology, university administration and teaching and finally publishing. Contrary to early expectations, I fulfilled my childhood dream of becoming an artist. It was while I was a publisher that I initiated a series called Life Writing in which we published diaries, journals, collections of letters and memoirs and I became fascinated by what we could learn from the voices of ordinary people who had written
about their lives without the intention of being literary. It slowly dawned on me that perhaps our greatest gifts are the stories we tell each other. From these stories we can learn not only social history, but how individuals with their unique personalities have navigated the social context in which they lived.

What follows are a series of essays in which I explore what it meant to grow up in a particular physical and cultural landscape in the late 1940’s through the 1950’s. The physical landscape was that of a family farm on the edge of a small village in Prince Edward County. The County landscape was shaped by its semi-insularity, being attached to the mainland by just a few miles of canal and two bridges, one at Belleville and one at Trenton. The rest of the County protruding out into Lake Ontario had hundreds of miles of shoreline, good fishing and some spectacular beaches. The limestone underpinnings that betrayed its seabed origins contributed to its garden county reputation for growing barley, wheat, fruits and vegetables. The historical landscape had been shaped by the high proportion of Loyalist and Quaker settlers who came to the County in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. This immigrant stock living in the County’s relative isolation from larger centres had created a culture that in the 1950’s was politically and socially conservative. The arts were not much admired or practised. It was a culture of hardworking farming families, canning factory workers, shop keepers and clerks. Although the families of the few doctors, lawyers, druggists and business men were financially better off than most, nobody seemed to be terribly rich or terribly poor. Everyone seemed to know everyone else, at least by reputation.

I loved this physical landscape of flat farms, high shorelines and long beaches. Growing up on a farm on the edge of a village of canning factories played an important role in my development. By growing crops for one of the factories and by going to the village school, members of my family played a role in the village and yet we remained a bit apart. School experiences though they are broadly provincial are also particular to a specific time and place and cannot help but play a role in determining who we become. Certainly they send us strong messages about who and how we should be. How all of these physical and social environments shape us is always dependent on the personalities we are given and the families with whom we live and who exert
their own influences upon us. I hope that by telling my stories of how I responded to the physical
and social landscapes of the County I will encourage others to reflect on their own early
experiences and how they were in some measure shaped by a particular sensibility of time and
place.
Sand and Shore

Just surely as baby ducklings become imprinted on the first moving object that they see, I was imprinted on the Sandbanks along the shore of West Lake in Prince Edward County. It was a day of glorious sunshine in the summer of 1945. I would be a year old in October. Not yet able to walk I am sitting on top of a high dune and I am extremely happy. I look down at my sun suit and admire the cream coloured fabric with its printed pattern of red and yellow raspberries. My eyes move to the fine white sand that I am sitting on, the red tin pail on the sand in front of me and the little shovel clutched in my left hand. I make a small, awkward movement with the shovel, but other than the fact that the pail and shovel are brightly coloured and pretty they are quickly forgotten. I raise my eyes and register the spectacular scene before me – a succession of ever lower, sparkling sand dunes; a fringe of bright green grass; the blue of the lake; and the big blue sky above. A landscape of large surfaces in blue, green and white. All I can think about is how absolutely beautiful it all is, starting with the fabric of my sun suit and including all that I can see. I was struck by beauty as if by lightning and the beauty of this place in particular. It is a place I will return to again and again for the rest of my life. A place so important that I will long for it if too much time elapses between visits. There is something restorative about the presence of these dunes, something that brings back that early feeling of pleasure and the wholeness I feel when I am surrounded by beauty. For the remainder of my time growing up, my mother will remark the sand that seeps out of my clothing and my hair summer after summer after summer.

I am a member of that last, fortunate generation that can remember the Sandbanks when the dunes were extraordinarily high and steep at their southern end. It was when I was in high school that the sand from the highest dunes was trucked away to the cement plant. As truckloads of sand ground their way toward the road, I felt I was watching a tragedy. It seemed preposterous that one person was able to own and destroy the County’s greatest natural wonder. But when I was little this was still in the future and thanks to visits from my mother’s nieces and nephews who were older than me, I was taken along with them to marvel at the dunes and to try to walk up the highest one and then come back down without gaining too much momentum and falling. I soon learned that the dunes were not always so high and that they were restlessly on the move.
Relatives of my grandmother’s generation had stories of going to a hotel to dance and having to drive their buggies home through a sandstorm, driving over fence lines that had been buried by drifting sand. The story that the hotel was now buried under the dunes only added to their appeal. In fact, the Sandbanks were commonly known as the Brick Plant as they were also reputed to cover what had once been a brick factory.

The idea that remnants of an earlier time exist beneath the dunes makes them both appealing and mysterious. It is exciting to think that you might be walking over a hotel, a brick plant, old fence lines or a farm. When my father was a boy, he dug up snow from beneath the sand one warm summer day. I always dug in hopes that this would be my luck as well. One summer evening sitting with a friend on top of a dune, my hand sifting through the sand suddenly came up with a glow worm that lit up the darkness. It wasn’t snow, but it was as startling and as special in its own right. One other time when a friend and I had walked quite a long distance north along the dunes we came upon an area that had at one time been forested. Silver tops of sandblasted trees pierced the sand. Years later I tried to find that area again, but with no success. I concluded that the sand had reclaimed the forest and buried it again. My mother and I walking across the dunes from the direction of the Lake Ontario shoreline one warm Easter weekend encountered sculptures of wet sand, the remnants of a dune that had dried and been licked away by wind.

When I was in grade thirteen and a member of student council, I was asked to approach a different photographer than the one who had traditionally taken photos for the school’s year book. Lloyd Thompson was developing a reputation as a photographer who was bringing a new eye to County images. We thought he might bring a fresh look to the year book. It was Lloyd’s idea to photograph a friend and me at the Sandbanks. Hence the yearbook came to have an inside cover photo of a boy and girl sitting with their backs to the camera looking out over the water, contemplating the future before them. We hadn’t discussed it, but he must have known that the Sandbanks played an important role in the psyches of County teenagers. With few public places in which to meet, the Sandbanks became a magical place where classes and groups of friends could meet at night for end of school or informal summer parties. I recall one such evening that contained a magical moment thanks to a stranger. One of the boys had come with a friend from
The friend, who was a member of the reserves in a highland regiment, came wearing a kilt and carrying bagpipes. Eventually we noticed that he had slipped away in the dark. Then at midnight, we heard the sound of bagpipes coming from the top of the highest dune above us. I have never heard bagpipes sound more thrilling.

In the day time, we teenage girls went to the dunes of the Sandbanks or the Outlet beach to swim and talk and deepen our tans. As we got older, we went back in the evening with our boyfriends for the dunes were a romantic place where a couple could have privacy to talk and to explore our awakening physical attraction. However, the real gathering spot in the evening was not at the beach, but at Martin’s snack bar and dance floor along the nearby Outlet River. I can smell the french fries from here. While adventurous boys dove off the high diving board, the rest of us watched and ate our fries, sipped our cokes or licked ice cream cones. The summer I was about to turn fourteen, the dance floor held more attraction than the performance of the divers. You didn’t need a date. You could go with friends and count on boys asking you to dance. The juke box was never silent. The summer of *Mack the Knife* was my awakening to that sweet world of dance and of boys. I remember feeling conflicted as I put a coin in the machine and paused a moment before selecting *Mack the Knife*. How was it I wondered that I loved this song with such terribly violent lyrics. Perhaps, more than any other song, it represented both the attraction and the dangers inherent in our by then more sexually charged lives.

I knew that these same beaches had been important in the young lives of our parents. We were thrilled when a group of us found the silver, sand scrubbed remnants of the Palace of the Moon where our parents had danced away evenings before we were born. Not only did their dance floor have a romantic name, but a moment of reverie came over my parents whenever they mentioned it. As parents of young children, they organized picnics at the beach with family and friends. I remember these picnics when we gathered at picnic tables and the men competed to see who could eat an entire brick of ice cream. My father’s favourite flavour was maple walnut. I liked the appearance of Neapolitan. With its bands of strawberry, vanilla and chocolate ice cream, it was a crowd pleaser. I preferred the taste of plain bricks of chocolate or strawberry.
My parents weren’t people to lounge about a beach. They didn’t have the time or the inclination.
I suspect that this was true for most County people of my parents’ generation. Consequently, the
Brick Plant dunes were a place to take visitors and the less sandy areas of the Outlet were chosen
as picnic sites. There were times when we were taken to the Outlet beach to swim, but they were
rather rare. It was the safer beach for children as we could walk out forever without the water
ever being over our heads. For this reason, it became the site of one of the more embarrassing
moments of my young life. Our Brownie troupe was taken to the Outlet beach for an outing. We
swam and then played games. At the time, there were no change houses or toilets so we changed
into our bathing suits among the poplar trees up on the ridge of dunes and hung our clothes on
poplar branches. It was a windy day and when we came back from our swim and started to get
dressed I discovered that my panties were missing and no where to be found. I dressed in my full,
candy striped skirt and top and all would have gone well if our leaders had not organized a
wheelbarrow race and chosen me to be one of the wheelbarrows. There we were
wheelbarrows
and wheelers lined up with our backs to our leaders as we waited the signal to race away from
them down the beach. At the word “ready” the wheelers raised the legs of the wheelbarrows into
the air. At that moment, the wind filled out my skirt, blew it up around my ears and revealed my
bare bottom. This was immediately followed by the astonished voice of our Brown Owl, Chris
Strawbridge, whose Scottish burr barked out, “Sandra! Where is your underwear!” The event was
delayed while I explained and was removed from the race.

If as small children we weren’t taken to the dunes as often as I would have liked, I was grateful
that each spring the dunes came to us. There was a large maple tree along the edge of our yard
near the lane. My father had done two marvelous things. He had suspended a rope and board
swing on a big branch growing towards our house. This was designated my swing. On a similar
branch growing toward the lane he hung another swing for my cousin Douglas who lived across
the lane. The two swings were oriented in the same direction and in the same positions in relation
to the trunk of the tree. Doug and I loved swinging in those swings, seeing who could pump
higher and trying out different rhythms of pumping and resting, twisting and dizzily unwinding.
When we weren’t swinging we were apt to be playing in my father’s other inspired creation – a
sandbox in the shade straight out from the tree trunk in shared space. Each spring we waited for
the moment when my father returned from the Brick Plant with a bag of fresh sand for the summer season. If there were limits to how much time we could spend swinging, there seemed to be no limit to how much time we could spend giving our imagininations a workout in the sandbox. Archaeologists dig in one, two or five meter squares. When I studied archaeology, I wondered to what extent my destiny had been set in place by the amount of time I had spent pushing sand about in a square sandbox as a child. Being hunkered down in a square methodically moving dirt about was a familiar and comfortable thing to be doing and yielded treasures more surprising than the occasional wire worms and toy cars that Doug and I uncovered.

There were two other events that may have unconsciously led me to be attracted to archaeology and both of them took place on shorelines. The first took place in the County when I was still a pre-schooler. My family considered buying a farm on what people in Bloomfield called McDonald’s Island. The farm made up the far end of the island that was connected to the mainland by a bridge near the outskirts of the village. My father and his brother rented the farm and grew corn there. The soil was sandy, not surprisingly as the Sandbanks were within sight at the other end of West Lake. That fall, our parents loaded up the car with Doug and me and a picnic lunch and spent days picking corn while Doug and I entertained ourselves around the edges of the fields. These days were memorable because of our picnic lunches on a trestle table, the big thermos of water and the tin of cookies that kept Doug and me happy and a couple of extraordinary events. One of these events could have had a tragic ending. Doug and I wandered down the road that skirted the water’s edge. For some reason, Doug decided to walk out into the marshy area that followed the shoreline. I was a year and a half older and sensed that this was dangerous. We had been told not to go near the water. In spite of my remonstrations, Doug waded out and my cries would not bring him back. They did bring help. I don’t remember exactly how the situation was resolved except that it involved frightened adults as well as frightened children and the loss of Doug’s bright red, buckled shoes. The other event was a happier one and it is the one that may have played a role in my decision to study archaeology. There was a house, barn and some smaller out buildings on the point. I remember exploring one of the small outbuildings. I don’t remember if I spotted it first myself or if it was the adult who was with me. What I do remember is holding in my hand a tiny, white glass teacup that no doubt had at one
time belonged to a tea set for some little girl’s doll. As I gazed at the cup in my palm I felt connected to that little girl. The teacup had been found in the dust of the building’s dirt floor. It was not only a treasure for me to keep, but a revelation that lovely old things from the past could be found in places that had been abandoned.

The second and more important event happened along the shore of Kamineskeg Lake in northern Ontario when I was perhaps eleven years old. Every summer my family spent a couple of wonderful weekends vacationing in the deer hunting cabin that my father and uncles and their friends had built on this out of the way shoreline. These were adventure filled weekends from start to finish. To begin with, we packed up all the food, utensils and bedding we would need and drove several hours north through the small mining towns directly north of Belleville. When we came to the Madawaska River, which crossed the lake, my father parked the car and everything was loaded into a waiting boat. We then began the two mile trip by water to the cabin itself. The river was dangerous because it was filled with deadheads – waterlogged logs that were remnants of logging activity and lurked beneath the surface ready to cut off a shear pin and stop the outboard motor. In addition, there were underwater pillars of rocks that had to be negotiated where the river entered the lake. My little sister was frightened of water. This meant that my mother sat holding my sister close to her in the centre of the boat. My father sat at the stern directing the motor. I rode leaning over the bow as we went slowly down the river. It was my job to warn my father of any rock or dead head that might cause trouble and to get us through the pillars without mishap. Once my father and I had us safely out into the lake I could sit down. It is a rather large lake and being surrounded by the remnants of old mountains, sudden squalls born of changing air currents could come up and cause dangerous swells. A small island with a large cross on it commemorating an early shipwreck was a visible reminder of how dangerous the lake could be. We never knew what conditions we might encounter.

When we rounded a long point of land and headed the boat for a sandy beach, the next stage of our adventure would begin. Everything would be carried up a narrow, pine scented path to the one room log cabin that sat on a rise in the forest. The bunk beds and even the table and the crude benches that ran down each side of it were made out of logs. The only relatively modern
thing in the cabin was a huge, black, nickel plated wood stove on which my mother and which ever other female relative or friend who had come with us, would cook all of our meals. It didn’t escape my notice that women worked hard to prepare for cottage weekends and then worked in conditions worse than they had in their own kitchens. I decided not to aspire to own a cottage when I grew up. On the other hand, it was a wonderful place for children. We felt like pioneers. The cooked ham and the other perishable food items were put in tightly closed metal containers and suspended in the icy cold waters of a spring that ran into the lake at the far end of the beach. After supper, we children were sent to the beach to scour pots and pans with sand at the water’s edge. In the evening we had campfires made of driftwood. I recall the summer I used my Girl Guide knowledge to lay fires of different kinds: teepee fires, log cabins, fires with different aesthetic qualities. Every evening at the same hour a whip-poor-will flew above the trees the full length of the beach calling “whip poor will”. It was a beautiful, haunting, liquid sound that told us it was 8:35 and time for children to go to bed. You could set your watch by that bird though I suspect the time changed slightly in relation to the timing of the setting sun. By 8:35 it was twilight and we were tired from a full day of swimming, rowing and riding big driftwood logs which we pretended were our war canoes. We retired to one of the four double bunk beds and waited for the thrill of having little white-footed deer mice skitter across the covers.

Morning would bring another adventure. We might see porcupine quills along the trail to the outhouse. We would check every log on the beach to see it had been rolled out of its resting place by a bear searching for ants and grubs. My father would lead us all on a walk in the forest pointing out deer tracks in wet areas, trees where a bear had clawed or scratched itself and left strands of fur, as well as patches of red mushrooms which we never saw growing any place but there. It was when I was walking the length of the beach with my cousin early one morning that the significant event happened. I was walking with a pointed driftwood walking stick. Suddenly something dark flew up as I poked the sand with my stick. It appeared to be a large rusty coin which I tucked into the pocket of my shorts. When I got home and used a magnifying glass I could see that it was printed with an image of a bank and that it read, “Half Penny Bank of Montreal 1864”. I was thrilled. This was an out of the way place known to few people except a group of hunters and some loggers. Suddenly, I realised that I had been standing where someone
had stood almost a century before me - someone who must have been travelling by foot and by canoe, who may have been working a trap line or prospecting for gold in the stumps of mountains that make up the Canadian Shield. Someone who might have lost his half penny as he shifted the canoe and his belongings from one position to another at the beginning or the end of a portage. I could feel his change in muscle tension. As I scoured the face of the coin for detail, the exploration of this country’s wilderness took root in my imagination. Once again, I was reminded that part of the past is buried beneath our feet just waiting to be recovered.

This northern landscape of lakes surrounded by mountains; gigantic outcrops of granite studded with mullein and huckleberries and backed by fern and pine; cold river water and water lily marshes was not at all like the landscape of my beloved Prince Edward County with its endless shoreline; sluggish streams that emptied into millponds; and long, flat vistas of grain and hay fields punctuated by apple and cherry orchards. Even the fauna and flora were different. At the time there were no deer in the County and it was thrilling to catch a glimpse of one here. Sightings of porcupine and bear were equally exciting. In the north, farmland, woodlots of maple and stands of scrub cedar were replaced by mixed forests of maple, spruce and pine. Red and yellow mushrooms, sword leafed ferns, rose mallow brambles, and the glistening leaves and delicious red and blue berries of wintergreen and huckleberry plants replaced the yellow dandelions, blue chicory, wild phlox and apple blossoms of the County. It was beautiful and exotic, but it was a place to visit. It was not home. The sand was courser and pink with feldspar. It was not the fine, white sand of the Outlet or the Sandbanks and I judged it inferior. In my mind there were only two links between the two landscapes: the maple trees that turned red in autumn and the clams that dug themselves into the sand and hurt our feet if we didn’t manage to avoid stepping on them.

Clams played a significant role in my experience of the West Lake shoreline. Although I didn’t get to the Sandbanks as often as I would have liked, I did get to spend a great deal of time at a cottage on West Lake. My father’s sister and her family spent a month there each summer. My cousin Carol was my age and her younger brother Bill was the same age as my sister Jean. Our cousin Doug, who lived next door to Jean and me, was in between the rest of us in age. The five
of us were best friends and playmates. My aunt often arrived at our farm mid-morning to pick us up and take us to the cottage for the day. Our parents would come for an evening visit and take us home. Sand was such a presence in my life that I wondered exactly what form the Sandman took as my mother would refer to the Sandman’s coming as we drove home at dusk. I associate the Sandman with the curves in the road between West Lake and Bloomfield where the road winds its way through the marsh. I stayed awake to watch for fireflies flickering over the cattails. Then I succumbed to the Sandman and sleep.

Our days at the cottage were largely spent in the water. Here the sand was a bit dirty. The thin beach was a scatter of sand accompanied by a duff of willow leaves and sticks; round, flat shale pebbles that were ideal for skipping over the water; and drifts of empty snail shells that crunched underfoot. The treasure it yielded came in the form of clam shells which we picked up to admire in our search for the prettiest one – the one worth keeping because of its beautiful, iridescent purple interior and its perfect, undamaged form. Clams were abundant on the sandy lake bottom and we were constantly trying to avoid putting our feet down on their sharp ends where they stood upright, gleaning the water for sustenance. The water in West Lake was a bit murky making the clams difficult to see. The water of Kamineskeg Lake was clear and we could not only see the clams but the trails they left in the sandy bottom as they moved about. I don’t think we knew that clams were such travelers until we paid our first visit to Kamineskeg’s shores.

Weeds in West Lake kept us close to shore. It was here that I learned to swim. My cousin Carol had taken swimming lessons in Toronto. That summer she endeavoured to teach me what she had learned. It was a wonderful summer learning to float on my back, do the dead man’s float and the jelly fish, then to dog paddle and do the breast stroke. She went on to try to teach me the butterfly stroke and the crawl, but I was so enamoured with floating on my back I had little interest in learning any other way to navigate in the water. Perhaps like me, many people who grew up in the County developed little interest in swimming distances. What mattered was just being in the water itself. Floating or swimming on my back allowed me to be in the lovely water and to see the sky and shore at the same time. It was this immersion in the natural beauty of the County that mattered. Even better than floating on my back was the ability to float about in inflated inner
tubes which my uncle provided. We spent hours in the lake and nagged my aunt to tell us when the hour was up after meals so we could go back into the water. The Sandbanks were in easy sight at the end of the lake and every once in a while my uncle would load us into the Peterborough boat and take us there for a swim. The water was clearer, but we were more cautious in our swimming because the depth dropped off quickly as the dunes continued their steep trajectory to the bottom of the lake. The fun was in playing in the dunes themselves. Racing up and then down a high dune into the water was the most fun of all.

It was the length of the beaches and the quality of the fine, white sand as much as anything that made me certain that Prince Edward County was a superior place to live. Even the shoreline at the West Lake cottage was superior to the shoreline of Hay Bay on the mainland side of the Bay of Quinte which I also visited frequently as my maternal grandparents, aunts and uncles had cottages on both of its shores. Along Hay Bay, sand was replaced by mud. Water weeds were more in evidence and in the case of my grandparents’ cottage large water snakes kept us out of the water. We could see their dark heads swimming towards the dock. Each time we visited, it seemed there was another story about the size of a snake that someone had recently shot and killed. Seven feet was not unusual. It is surprising that my sister and I are not afraid of snakes. Perhaps we are not afraid because we survived a harrowing encounter. Near my grandparents’ cottage there was an old cement foundation surrounded by high weeds. One morning we went there bare foot, wearing shorts and T-shirts to play hopscotch. As the sun warmed the cement, we suddenly saw large, black snakes slithering towards us from all sides of the foundation. I remember grabbing a long stick to beat our way out as our bare legs jumped over and our bare feet managed to land without touching any of the long, black bodies that continued to crawl toward us. We were terrified, but we reached short grass unscathed. We didn’t become more frightened of snakes, but we stayed away from that cement foundation and all similar, potential snake sunning spots in future.

The pleasure in visiting my grandparents’ cottage, in addition to seeing them, which we always enjoyed, was in fishing for perch and sunfish off the dock. My father equipped us with long bamboo poles and fishing lines with bright red and white floats that bobbed up and down
tentatively if we had a nibble and began to go under when a fish struggled to free itself of a hook.

Normally our parents spent the time visiting with my grandparents, but I recall one day when our
grandparents weren’t there and my father encouraged us to catch a lot of fish which he cleaned
and my mother fried to golden perfection for our dinner that noon. The sweet taste of perch and
sunfish was a revelation not to be experienced again until my uncle cleaned the large number of
perch caught by my young step-daughter off the Lake Ontario shoreline of Prince Edward
County.

The shoreline of Hay Bay in front of the cottages owned by my mother’s siblings as well as the
shoreline that bordered my grandparent’s farm was low and wet. We swam in a tiny cove, but the
bottom was unappealing to feet accustomed to sand. If one eats something one doesn’t like with
long teeth, I suppose I could say that we waded with long feet. I remember that my sister and I
spent a week at one of these cottages with my mother, who was recovering from an
appendectomy. It must have been a rainy summer for the grass in front of the cottages was
flooded and we made our way to and from the cove on a series of old boards that had been put
down to make a walkway. We inevitably ended up with feet full of slivers that began to hurt. One
morning when we came to the breakfast table my mother told us that she had spent ages the night
before with a needle and a flashlight extracting slivers from our feet while we slept. She did not
want to catch us walking barefoot on that boardwalk again. I was so impressed by the compassion
and the ingenuity of her gesture that I was mindful not to put her to such trouble again.

It seemed to me that wherever we went in Prince Edward County, the shoreline was superior.
Where it wasn’t sandy, it seemed to be composed of big, clean slabs of rocks or of shale cobbled
beaches where fossils could be found. In other places, the shoreline was a steep cliff rising
straight out of the water. This was what made Picton harbour Canada’s deepest and best natural
inland harbour. In the nineteenth century it must have been one of the busiest with shiploads of
barley and hops leaving the harbour for the other side of Lake Ontario. Our family spent a
wonderful summer of evenings gathering limestone rocks from the Lake Ontario shore. We
brought the rocks home in the back of our pickup truck and my father cemented them together to
make a barbecue in our backyard. The rocks left over were used to create a rock garden next to
the barbecue. My mother took an interest in flower gardening for the first time. In addition to the low growing, drought tolerant plants in the rock garden, she grew sensational roses along the front steps. Her secret was in throwing pans full of dishwater on the roses after every meal. Not only did the soapy water keep away insects, but the constant addition of water was welcome in summers of low rainfall. Water was always a precious commodity in the County. I was impressed when we learned in a high school geography class that Prince Edward County was classified as a semi-arid environment. And yet, people in the County somehow managed to grow such marvelous fruits and vegetables. That was another reason I was convinced of the County’s superiority.

The shoreline in one part of the County or another was the place to retreat to on hot summer evenings. After a day of haying in sweltering heat, my father was happy to take us to McDonald’s island where my mother and sister and I would paddle about in the water while he relaxed in the shade. My father almost never swam. His skinny body simply could not support the coldness of the water. My mother enjoyed cooling off in the water. In her light orange, textured bathing suit she reminded me of goldfish and of merwomen. I thought she was quite glamorous. When the summer sun was busy baking County residents and putting flavour in the corn and tomato crops, the park next to the lake in Wellington was one of the coolest places to be. I remember being introduced to the swings and the slide there one summer evening when I was very young. When I was an adolescent my family took to fishing off the piers in Wellington on summer evenings. By then I was old enough to be sickened by the idea of killing fish for a past time. I asserted my independence and refused to participate.

By the time I finished elementary school I owned a bicycle which gave me a great deal more independence. As the weather warmed and school was drawing to a close, I organized a bicycle excursion to the Sandbanks. Four of us rode out the West Lake road one Saturday morning. We stopped at the cottage and built a bonfire in the fire pit on the beach. We had brought a black iron frying pan in which we cooked up bacon and a can of Baxter’s pork and beans. The result was delicious. After making sure our fire was extinguished, we rode to the Sandbanks where we spent a wonderful afternoon before returning home exhilarated but dog tired. My best friend Helen and
I rode straight to the Sandbanks several times that summer. The last time we did it, we were caught in a severe thunderstorm as we approached the marsh on our way home. We knew the fork lightening was dangerous. The thunder that followed each fork came quickly and crashed in our ears. I reasoned that our rubber bicycle tires would protect us if we just kept riding. The marsh offered no protection that I could think of. Needless to say we were severely drenched and relieved when we arrived home. We felt doubly lucky when we learned that a man had been struck by lightning and killed at the Sandbanks as we were riding home.

The next summer we were more adventurous. Helen’s mother had a taxi business and she often agreed to take us to the Outlet beach where the swimming was better. If she was unable to give us a ride to the Outlet we obtained permission to bike there and arranged for my father to meet us in the evening and bring us home in the truck with our bikes in the back. This had the added advantage of allowing us to eat a supper of french fries at Martin’s snack bar while listening to the jukebox before my father made his appearance. It was that summer that I learned about another County custom. Shops in Picton and Bloomfield closed every Wednesday afternoon. Since there were always many more cars and people at the Outlet every Wednesday afternoon, I developed a picture of store clerks as a class of people who appreciated afternoons at the beach as much as Helen and I did, perhaps more. I thought of them as kindred spirits.

Helen and I were regulars at Cook’s movie theatre on Saturday afternoons. We must have seen an Esther Williams’ movie for we shared with my cousin Carol an interest in water ballet. Hip deep water at the Outlet beach seemed the ideal place for three or four girls to join hands and float in a star formation. It seems to me we spent ages working on our improvised routines before retreating to our beach towels to dry off and develop a perfect copper toned tan without the aid of tanning lotion. One summer, one of Carol’s ordinarily pale aunts showed up in the County with a deep coppery tan. She claimed her success was the result of a mixture of iodine and baby oil. Naturally, we had to try it, but her success eluded us. We all three were the sort of blondes whose skin stubbornly refused to turn that perfect copper colour sported by the girls in Seventeen magazine. Seventeen was my bible. I read it at the Bloomfield public library. I internalised the California myth of Betty Grable legs, large breasts, wasp waist, clear complexion and a perfect
tan. My mirror made it painfully clear that the only one of these I had was the tiny waistline and since it went with a skinny body it didn’t count. In an age of full-bodied movie stars I was embarrassed by my hollow legs – the kind of legs that are de rigueur on today’s fashion runways. The tan seemed like the one part of this equation that I should be able to achieve with enough perseverance. I went so far as to slather myself in oil and lie nude on a white surface that reflected the sunlight. In spite of my effort, I never attained a shade deeper than honey and this didn’t count in the fifties when tans were associated with Hawaii, grass skirts, pineapples and coconuts. I did attain some first class burns during my time spent at the beach where the reflective surfaces of the sand and the water together with the deceptive sense of time one develops in such an environment conspired to turn my skin red rather than the brown I so desired. What I did get for my efforts at nude sunbathing was an appreciation for being au nature in the great outdoors. Somehow one feels more completely imbedded in the landscape when no articles of clothing separate us from nature and we are no different from the plants and the other animals. The only time I camped at the Outlet beach I got up at dawn, made my way to the beach, undressed and entered the water. It was a glorious moment of solitude in which I felt completely connected to the universe. A new day was beginning and I was conscious that in a very short time I would be leaving the County. In future I would return to the County as a visitor – a visitor who in returning to the County’s beaches was always coming home.

Years went by when I missed the Sandbanks and Outlet beaches so sorely that they were like an ache that I carried within me. Then, once again, I returned to my parents’ house bearing small gifts of sand. I rented cottages that smelled of mildew and slept in cottage beds with springs that sagged half way to the floor. I rented trailers that were small but snug. I introduced friends and members of my new family to the wonders of County beaches. To my great joy, they too appreciated the County’s treasures. Together we flew kites, read books, tanned or burned in zebra stripes in the shade of poplar trees, walked forever along the crests of dunes and collected blue glass pebbles and the tiny, bleached bones of birds. Once when we were walking from the West Lake shore towards Lake Ontario we encountered an older man pulling his sailboat across the sand towards West Lake. He was alone. It was a warm day and he refused our offer of help. He had been sailing Lake Ontario and had decided to explore West Lake as well. This image of a
Hemingway figure pulling his boat alone through the sand remains with me. Although I know he eventually gave up and sought help, the scale and romance of the idea are in keeping with the story of buried gold which may be apocryphal, the story of the buried hotel which apparently is apocryphal, as well as the stories of the buried brick factory, snow, trees, cedar rail fences and Amerindian campsites all of which are true. The stories told add romance as do the stories untold of countless lovers drawn together there. But their magic is secondary, for these crystalline dunes stretching as they do between sky and water are, first and foremost, a place of great beauty, a place of sparkling sands and sparkling waters. A restorative place for body and soul to return to again and again.
I have just shelled the first green peas of the season. I have a green line beneath each thumbnail to prove it. Shelling peas always brings back childhood memories. A memory of peapod sailboats sailing across a washtub of water comes floating back with pod hulls, toothpick masts and paper sails. We were children making use of what came to hand just as we made dolls out of hollyhock blossoms. A perfect hollyhock flower, perhaps in a deep shade of wine, was chosen and turned upside down to make a full skirt. Then the tubular spent blossom of a hollyhock in a lighter shade of pink was threaded through the sepal end of the skirt to make the slender upper torso. Its own darker swollen base and sepals became a head atop which sat a pretty, green hat. A line of hollyhock dolls became southern belles ready to waltz across the verandah.

On a sunny afternoon playing along the lane way we couldn’t resist picking a buttercup and holding it over a bare arm or leg to see if it reflected yellow. If it did, and it always did, it meant we liked butter. As we got older, we would pick daisy petals one by one: he loves me, he loves me not; or twist the stem of an apple reciting a letter of the alphabet with each turn until the stem twisted off. Our future husband’s name would begin with the last letter. Fortunately most of the boys had names beginning with letters early in the alphabet. Presumably none of us was going to marry a Michael, a Ted or a Winston.

But the fresh taste and crunch of green peas between my teeth and the sound of new peas plopping down into a basin bring back more memories than those of summer games. They bring back memories of canning factories and the roles they played in all of our lives. Our farm was just on the western edge of the village of Bloomfield where there were several canning factories when I was a child. The farmers in the area grew the produce and many of the men and women of the village worked in the factories. Much of it was seasonable employment. The gas stations, the grocery store, the butcher shop, the hardware store, the barber shop all owed their existence to the commerce of everyone else whose livelihood was somehow implicated in the factory/farm business.
The factory that was most important to our family was the Baxter canning factory for it was with this factory that my father and his brother contracted to grow peas, tomatoes and pumpkins. It was also the largest factory in the village and the one that remained in operation the longest, holding out while others closed during the 1950’s. Baxter’s, which was the largest physical structure in the entire village, was next door to the second largest structure – our elementary school, an imposing red brick building with a large playground and a baseball diamond. The large windows at the sides and ends of the intermediate and senior classrooms ensured that we were all well aware of the factory activity. The end windows looked out on the factory, its small office building, a lane that led down along the deep end of the factory, as well as the low building across the street that functioned as a cafeteria. The front windows looked out on the street and the farmers who arrived with their loads of produce.

The office building was intriguing to me for this is where the owner Ed Baxter and his son Don and their office manager Sylvia Stark worked. These were the people, perhaps the only people, who came and went to and from the factory wearing good clothes. To my mind Sylvia Stark was a glamorous figure. First of all, she was a single woman who had a career. The only other women I knew who had careers were her sisters. Miss Ival Stark taught us in the intermediate grades. Her older sister, Keitha, was the Mrs. Gough who taught us in grades one and two. All three together with their younger sister, Ruth, who stayed home and kept house, and their other married sister Leta, were the best dressed women in the village. They wore beautiful hats that gladdened my heart whenever I saw them in church. Perhaps because she didn’t have the moral responsibility that went with being a teacher, Sylvia seemed to be the gayest and prettiest of the four.

Every noon when school was dismissed, Mrs. Gough’s husband, Jim, who was a farmer, would be waiting in his truck to take them all to the house in the village where Ruth had prepared their dinner. It all seemed so evocative of another way of being in a village where families lived more traditional lives and most women stayed at home except when the peas or the beans or the tomatoes were running at the factory.

The spot in front of the school where Jim Gough parked his truck twice a day so that the sisters
would never have to walk home, pretty much marked the end of the line of wagons and trucks waiting their turn to have their load weighed, inspected and unloaded for processing into cans of Baxter’s Silver Ribbon peas, tomatoes or pumpkins. In June we were thrilled to see the lumber wagons stacked high with pea vines. A farmer might nod his assent and let us have some vines clinging to the outside of his wagon racks. A few vines would be snagged by the limbs of the maple trees along the edge of the schoolyard and fall to the ground where we happily snatched them up. In either case, we carried them off to a swing or teeter totter where we would sit with friends snapping the pods open and tumbling the sugary sweet peas into our greedy mouths. Such a treat! And so thrilling to know that the peas from our very own farm became part of the procession and ended up in the silver and blue cans marked Baxter’s to be sold on store shelves.

June is an exciting month for any child, a month of warm days, end of school activities and the promise of the long, hot days that made up our summer holidays. On the farm it meant that the cows were out to pasture and had to be brought back to the barn for milking. My cousin and I took weekly turns riding our bikes back the lane to bring the cows down to the gate by the house where my father would fetch them to the barn. If time permitted we could stop off at the hickory nut field where the peas were growing and spend a few moments indulging in an after school snack of fresh peas. Sometimes when it wasn’t my turn to fetch the cows, I made the trip expressly for this.

There were early summer mornings after school ended when I helped my mother pick six quart baskets full of peas. I loved being in the pea field, the white blossoms, the green vines spreading across acres in the fresh, clear air of an early July morning. My mother and I with knees bent, hunched over, choosing the perfect peas, checking that the pods were full enough, but not too hard or too dry. Some mornings my father would simply drop a bundle of vines off at the house. I would then sit cross-legged on the verandah with the pea vines, a newspaper to catch the empty pods and my mother’s aluminum cooking pot in which to spill the peas as I slit a pod open with my thumbnail and then pulled the line of peas forward plop, plop into the pot. My mother would then cook them in a bit of water, adding milk, butter and sugar, salt and pepper to the juice before bringing them to the table. If I were lucky they would be served with new, creamed potatoes. My
mouth waters just thinking about it.

When we went back to school in September, the wagons lined up in front of the school were piled high with crates of bright red tomatoes. Overripe tomatoes made splashes of red here and there on the pavement. The procession of red tomatoes and the sweet smell of stewed tomatoes coming from the factory were part of the signature of our September school days. It was a new season with a new crop, new textbooks, new pencils and perhaps a new teacher. It was as if the procession got bolder evolving from the more discreet green of the pea vines to the bright red of tomatoes, partially concealed by the crate slats, to the full out glory of wagons piled with big orange pumpkins in October.

The farm work too became harder. Whereas pea vines were cut and loaded onto the wagons by machines, the tomatoes were picked by hand by my parents and my aunt and uncle. It was back breaking work of bending and putting tomatoes into round wire baskets and carefully emptying the baskets into wooden, bushel crates on the sides of which my father had stenciled our name, Marshall, in black paint one April morning. The empty crates he or my uncle had dropped off at intervals along the rows of tomato plants early in the morning. After supper while our mothers swept the floors, did the dishes, ironed or peeled and froze tomatoes, the men went back to the field with the tractor or wagon and loaded the full crates of tomatoes. My cousin or I might drive the tractor. We had learned how to steer the truck or tractor as soon as our legs could reach the pedals. Driving while our fathers loaded on hay was one of our specialties. I didn’t realise how good we were until I was an adult and my then husband, helping out one weekend, took a corner too short and overturned a load of hay.

The pumpkins were another back breaking harvest. I remember an autumn long before I was old enough to go to school when I had been brought to the pumpkin patch one afternoon. It was perhaps our biggest pumpkin crop ever. Some of the pumpkins were bigger than I was. Each one had to be lifted and carried by hand or with the tines of a pitch fork and then tossed onto the wagon.
As the line of loads of pumpkins became shorter and Hallowe’en was over we knew that snow would soon fall. The factory and the farm would be quieter for a while. Groups of men would go deer hunting in early November. When the factory would start up again it would be canning pork and beans which wouldn’t involve the farm families at all. The dried beans came from elsewhere. I don’t know where.

The unpleasant odour of beans cooking filled our winter classrooms. We looked out the windows toward the factory, wrinkled our noses and quietly chanted, “Beans, beans, the magical fruit, the more you eat, the more you toot!” Then we laughed at how daring and wicked we had been. My father teased our friend, Mary Hicks, who worked on the pork and bean line, saying that her job was to pick the farts out of the beans. Since the beans in cans of pork and beans often seemed to have a spot where the skin was broken, I thought maybe she really did this. How did she pick the farts out of the beans”, I asked. “Why with a pin,” he replied.

The pea season began without much odour, but the longer the pea vines remained in a stack and the hotter the days became, the odour of rotting vegetation became quite revolting. We would be driving home from the Outlet or the Sandbanks on a hot July evening and as we approached Bloomfield we would be hit by the stench and someone would say, “Smell Baxter’s pea stack!” We were grateful we lived at the west end of the village and unlike many villagers didn’t have to live with that smell day after day, night after night. There was a rather pleasant aroma that accompanied the stewing of tomatoes. I can’t recall any odour produced by the cooking of pumpkins. Then there was the flatulent odour of cooking beans that we objected to in our classrooms in winter.

The factories affected the livelihoods of almost everyone in and around the village. Prince Edward County, I was proud to learn, had at one time been considered the garden county of Ontario. Canning factories abounded. But in the 1950’s all but one of the factories in Bloomfield closed and Baxter’s was in difficulty. Most of the smaller factories in the surrounding countryside had already gone out of business. I remember worried conversations about Del Monte, an American company I associated with pineapple, buying up canning factories and closing them
down so that Canadians would be forced to buy their products. It must have been a terrible blow to the factory workers and the farmers who grew for those factories. I remember the worry in my father’s voice when Baxter’s faced the prospect of closure. My father and other farmers attended a meeting one evening to discuss Baxter’s future. The farmers agreed to make a financial contribution to keep the factory running. It was the best they could do. No one wanted to see the factory close. Too much of our livelihoods depended on it.

My father was already enraged by what he perceived as the unfairness that the factory owners built into the system. It was not that he disliked the Baxters. They were even distant relatives. Ed Baxter was his father’s cousin. But my father was a proud farmer who tried to grow the best crop he could weather permitting. Weather was a big factor and the chances were very good that if one farmer had a particularly good crop, many others did too. Crops were sold by weight calculated at the factory weigh scales and by grade. This meant that local people were employed to work in a grading station and determine the quality or grade of each load. My father couldn’t help but notice that in a year when everyone had a big crop, the grade was lower than he thought just for high quality tomatoes. Similarly, on years when the crop was less abundant, perhaps, and many farmers had tomatoes infected with black rot, the grade was higher than he thought just. Rather than welcoming this evening out of our finances, he railed against it, sputtering at dinner over the grade that had been assigned that day. Fearing he would lose his temper, he did not take our tomatoes to the factory himself. That job belonged to my uncle who unlike my father muttered often, but knew how to contain himself when it mattered.

Canning factories provided my introduction to the broader world of politics. In between the pea and tomato crops we had several acres of blue Columbian raspberries that ripened. Each evening in berry season my father drove the truck full of berry boxes to Greer’s canning factory in Wellington, a village about five miles away along the lake shore. Greer’s had one of two factories in the County that still canned raspberries and one of the owner’s sons, Bill, was a close friend of my father’s. I remember a couple of tense conversations around our kitchen table when one summer the price fell out of the berry market. Greer’s had contracted berries at $.40 a quart. The owner of the other factory was importing berries into the County at $.33 a quart. I learned
that by selling at lower prices into the Canadian market, American farmers were doing what was called dumping. In order to remain competitive, Greer’s were going to break their contract. Bill Greer and I believe some other men were going to talk to politicians to try to prevent the dumping of berries into Canada in future. They were unsuccessful. There was a sad sense of resignation and betrayal. The County farmers who had created the garden county of Ontario and during the glory days of the nineteenth century had shipped barley, hops and fresh produce to the United states before protective tariffs had been imposed by the Americans, now were suffering from American buyouts and factory closures and American dumping facilitated by one of their own factory owners. The next year my father surprised Bill Greer by refusing to sign a contract, saying what was the use. He had signed the year before and it hadn’t meant a thing. We began to go out of the berry business, which had been good for us because we controlled more of its income than we did for the other factory crops.

Blue Columbian raspberries grow well in the soil and climate of Prince Edward County, but don’t grow well in many areas outside of it. They are rare in comparison to the more common red varieties which are a very different type of raspberry and seem to grow all over southern Ontario. Consequently blue raspberries are less well known, but there are people who prefer them. People from quite some distance telephoned each year to order a number of quarts to purchase on a certain day when they could visit our farm. Late afternoon after the picking ended, cars rolled up our lane to pick up their orders of this perishable fruit and presumably hurried home to freeze or can them or turn them into delicious jam. Since berries sold on the market at a better price than we received from the canning factory they were a good additional source of income. We took pride in this demand for our berries and the fact that they were travelling as far away as Kingston or Perth.

Berry season was exciting. Each morning up to thirty-one pickers arrived to begin picking at eight o’clock. Each person wore a leather belt, which they threaded through one side of a quart berry box made of extremely thin wood. They picked up a wooden carrier which held eight quart baskets and had a carrying handle across the centre. An empty quart box was chosen from the eight in the carrier and inserted inside the supporting box on the belt. Berries were put into the
inner box. Once the carrier was almost full, the picker yelled “Carrier” and my father came with an empty one and took away the full one to put under a tarpaulin on the truck. We could hear the word “carrier” being called out in succession as some pickers were faster than others and some rows yielded more berries. My father knew who picked clean – didn’t miss any ripe berries and who did not. Evelyn Thompson of Bloomfield was the champion. She picked clean and she picked faster than anyone else. She was absolutely amazing. It was not unusual for her to pick well over one hundred quarts a day at the peak of the season when I might do well to pick eighty.

Pickers were paid $.08 a quart and I spent a lot of time calculating how much I was going to make and how I was going to spend it. This was a complicated process as it involved spending spare time memorizing the photos of fabrics in the Eaton’s and Simpson’s catalogues so that while I was picking I could imagine which fabric could be used to make what item of clothing, calculate how much fabric I would need and how much it would cost. Every night my mother prepared long, stiff cards with each picker’s name on one of them. A hole was punched in the top of the card and a string was pulled through it so that it could be worn attached to a picker’s shirt button or belt loop. Each time my father picked up a full carrier from someone, he punched their card with a heart or diamond shaped paper punch. Every Thursday night my mother calculated and prepared the payroll of cash in individual envelopes. This was cold cash as it had been kept in the freezer in case anyone decided to rob us the night before. The envelopes were handed out at the end of the day on Friday. The last payroll of the season was celebrated with ice cream bars as we all gathered together under the big maple tree in our yard, enjoying the ice cream and each other’s company and dreaming about what we would buy with our earnings.

There was an easy camaraderie between the pickers who paired up generally with someone compatible to their speed and temperament to make for slow, easy conversations if one felt like talking across the bushes. Often kibitzing took place across rows in voices loud enough that a number of pickers could hear and share in the joke. The joking punctuated long periods of heat and silence as one worked almost mesmerized by the berries at hand, searching under limbs where the berries hid and taking special pleasure in coming across a section of plants with low limbs weighted down to the ground with an exceptional number of very large, ripe berries. We
ate what we wanted to quell our hunger and thirst. We told ourselves and each other that berry bugs tasted like berries anyway though that wasn’t actually true. No pesticides were used and every once in a while a flat, gray, bitter tasting berry bug appeared deep inside a berry.

Some of the women had young children whom they brought with them. The children might hang about with their mothers helping them pick for a while before wandering off to play with each other and my younger sister. At noon the children and the pickers went back to the maple tree in our yard where they ate their lunches, washing their hands in a big washtub of water and stretching out their backs on the cool grass.

My grandmother would cross the lane from her house with bowls of new potatoes and yellow beans that she had cooked to help my mother out. I always associated blue raspberries with meals of new potatoes, yellow beans cut in small sections and smothered in butter, a bit of sugar and salt and pepper as well as fried pork chops. For dessert we would have ice cream and more berries if we wanted them. If we were lucky, in the evening my mother might find the energy to make her famous (to us) berry pudding served with hot caramel sauce. When the Women’s Auxiliary of the Bloomfield United Church decided to make a recipe book as a fundraiser, my mother contributed her recipe for berry pudding. I teased her about this being a great piece of marketing which embarrassed her as she hadn’t thought of the connection. She had just wanted to contribute her best recipe and she had. It is one of the best desserts I have ever tasted. I believe my sister has my mother’s knack for making it.

My father like many of his generation took pride in the appearance of his fields. Rows of grain and corn and berries had to be perfectly straight and well turned at the ends. I came to think of this as my father’s art. An artist myself, when he retired I shot rolls of film inside the barn and implement shed capturing the artful placement of objects in what otherwise might appear to be a tangle of junk. Blue raspberries appealed to his aesthetic sense of farming. When I asked why we didn’t grow some red raspberries he replied with disdain saying they were dirty things that spread all over the place. It is true that red raspberries have to be contained as new suckers shoot up from the spreading roots. Red raspberries are always on the move. Blue Columbian raspberries
Each of our berry plants had its own cedar stake to which it could be tied. Every fall my father walked up and down the rows of berry plants. With a shovel he would plant the ends of those new canes that had a spear of leaves at their tips into the ground. This was called putting down sets as in spring a new plant (set) would appear where each tip had been buried. The sets were dug up and sold at ten cents each to people who called and placed their orders hopeful that blue raspberries would grow in their area. Putting down dimes we called it. As he put down sets, he walked with a bundle of precut pieces of binder twine which he used to tie the remaining canes to the stake to prevent them from breaking under the weight of winter snow. This was scratchy business and often his retired uncle would come from Oshawa to help. Uncle Elmer came back in the spring when they cut the twine, cut out any dead canes to be piled and burned, and snipped the canes that had been used to produce sets.

When all this had been done and the sets had been dug up and sold one order at a time, the berry rows, which had been spaced six feet apart, were ready to be cultivated. This was done by my father using a horse and scuffler (one horse cultivator). The rows were then “clean” of weeds. New leaves had appeared and the entire patch was a work of art waiting for the small white blossoms to be pollinated and the berries to form and ripen. We would plan on berries being ripe for my uncle’s birthday on July 18th. Before then there would be a late afternoon when my mother would hand me a bowl and say, “Go see if you can find some berries for supper.” It was always thrilling to pop the first berry of the season into your mouth.

I had the sense that the camaraderie amongst the pickers in the berry patch existed as well on the lines in the canning factories. My mother seemed to recall her own time as a teenager working in canning factories as a time when the “girls” worked hard, but enjoyed each others’ company. Hot and sweaty and dangerous as the work might be the routine tasks didn’t prevent them from talking and laughing. The factory was an assembly line kitchen with many women working together to can the same product. It was not so removed from what had taken place when mothers and daughters and sisters helped each other in summer kitchens, working with fruit, clear glass
sealers and copper boilers steaming on woodstoves.

When the pea and tomato lines were running at Baxter’s, I used to see the mothers of my classmates dressed in printed cotton dresses, leaving the factory together, chatting as they walked toward their homes in the centre of the village. Thinking of the supper they were about to prepare, they might stop at Moore’s grocery store or Demille’s (formerly Stacey’s) butcher shop. I felt a bit wistful on behalf of my mother isolated on the farm. The movement of the mothers toward the centre of the village paralleled the movement of their children and reinforced the fact that those very few children who lived at the west end of the village were somehow shut off from a village life that existed in its heart.

I was less certain about what the men who worked in the factory did. Loading and unloading trucks I assumed, stoking boilers, putting the cans into the cookers, driving trucks, running machines. As far as I could tell they didn’t work on the lines where the cans were filled except perhaps when it came to pumpkins. There my imagination was captured by a story of Johnny Rabbie. Mr. Rabbie seemed to be a very nice man whom children knew as the man who kept the stove burning in the change room of the ice rink. He sat by the stove and sold us bottles of Orange Crush, but often we had to wake him up in order to buy it. He may have suffered from a thyroid condition. At any rate he was famous in the village for his ability to fall asleep. It was said he could fall asleep with his cleaver in mid-air while chopping up pumpkins. I always visualised him this way, one arm wielding a large cleaver suspended in time over big, orange pieces of pumpkin.

It is unfortunate that our teachers didn’t think to take us on a tour of the factory so that we could see for ourselves what really went on in this mysterious place that played such an important role in our lives. My father did take me with him once to Greer’s factory where I saw women working on the berry line. I was fascinated when as a young child he took me to the creamery in Picton where I was shown how butter was made. In those days cheese factories, which had been everywhere in the County, were also disappearing. One day my friend Helen Buder and I rode our bikes to the Bloomfield cheese factory where her father Jake showed us how cheese was
made. I still remember the smell of rennet and the squeak of fresh cheese curd. I have wanted to try my hand at cheese making ever since. For awhile we sold our cream to an ice-cream factory on the road between Bloomfield and Wellington. Although I often went with my father in the evening to pick up cans of whey to feed our pigs I never got to go inside the place, something I very much wanted to do.

Having been introduced to good quality tartans, tweeds and sweaters at Baird’s textile shop in Picton, my favourite shop in town, I subsequently visited the factory in Scotland where Baird’s Peter Scott sweaters were made. When I discovered that the woolen mill in Donegal was closed, someone who spotted me looking through a window, invited me in for a tour, saying that the factory was closed but that designers were at work creating new designs for the coming season. I could have a tour of the silent machines and see the designers at their looms. On the same trip I visited a small cottage industry of weavers in Wales and saw how traditional Welsh designs differed from those of Scotland and Ireland. These men were still weaving on handlooms. I had been taught something about this technology by Mrs. Cahoon in her cottage in Wellington when I was an adolescent. She and her daughter Margaret wove items which I believe they sold from the cottage. I recall that they were kind enough to encourage my own artistic impulses by attempting to sell my shell jewelry. I would love to be able to transport myself back to a moment in time when on Saturday evenings I explored a bank of narrow wooden drawers full of brightly coloured shells in Inrig’s drugstore in Picton. Inspired by their exotic shapes and lovely colours I made my purchases and glued the shells onto plastic backings to create brooches and earrings.

The farm and factory experiences of my childhood have enriched my life in ways I never could have anticipated. I love seeing how raw materials are turned into something new. Factories are magical places that I continue to visit whenever I can.
“Starting school,” the very words had a magical ring to them. I was going to be starting school. The summer that I was five, various members of my family took it upon themselves to prepare me for this big event. My mother, ever the practical one, told me that there were two things that I must learn before I started school. One was to tie my own shoelaces. I remember looking down at my lace-ups as she said this. I was pleased to learn this skill. The other thing she said I must learn was how to tell time. She taught me this using the clock on the kitchen wall. For a time she would look up from ironing or cooking and ask me what time it was. I would check the clock and tell her. I rather enjoyed this game. Then the day came in late August when she showed me how to walk to school. We lived a mile from the Bloomfield school. The last streetlight to the west of the village was between our lane and the neighbour’s driveway. Our house and the house where my grandmother lived with my aunt and uncle and cousin Doug were well back from the highway. Once I walked the quarter of a mile down the lane I would have to walk along the Belleville highway for almost another half mile before I would reach the hill with the White Rose garage on it and the beginning of the sidewalk. For most of that distance there were no houses, only fields, deep ditches and the pond that the firefighters used to fill the fire truck with water. My mother taught me that I must walk along the shoulder of the road facing oncoming traffic. The right side of the road was for cars; the left was for pedestrians.

My grandmother, ever the worrier, told me more than once that I must never accept rides from men I didn’t know. I took this so to heart that I offended two of our more elderly neighbours by refusing to get in when they stopped their trucks and offered me a ride. I shook my head and looked down at the ground in front of me. Even after my father remonstrated with me, saying that these men were neighbours, not strangers, I stubbornly refused their offers and they stopped asking. The fact was that I recognized each of them, but I didn’t feel that I knew them.

My father, who took it upon himself to teach my sister and me the importance of honesty, consideration of others and good behaviour in general, warned me that children must not talk in
school. This led to a problem the first day of school when Mrs. Gough asked me a question. Confused by this unexpected turn of events, I hung my head and didn’t answer. When she came and stood beside my desk and asked me why I wasn’t answering her question, I whispered that my father had said that children must not talk in school. She wisely replied that this was true, but that I could talk to her because she was the teacher. I liked her immediately for this intimacy. That night at supper I informed my father that children could talk to the teacher. He agreed that this was possible.

Actually, I had been certain that I would like her because I knew that my father was very fond of her. He had conveyed to me the sense that I was very lucky because I was going to be taught by Mrs. Gough who had taught him as well as my uncle Harry. I liked the idea of this family continuity. She was an attractive woman of middle age who had a matronly figure and pleasant demeanor. She never lost her temper though she was sometimes cross. There were times when the strap came out of the desk drawer and laid across the desk for all to see. That was enough to silence the children whose fathers hadn’t taught them that they must not talk in school. Wanting me to feel comfortable at school, my father had also told me that the intermediate grades were taught by Mrs. Gough’s sister who had taken a summer course after normal school with my aunt Freda. I also knew that my father’s snowshoes had been given to him by the woman who had been principal of the school when he attended. She had worn them to get to school on days of deep snow. I would later wear them to get to the school bus that took me to high school. They are a particularly gay looking pair of snowshoes with red wool knots feathering their edges. I expect that they were made by a Mohawk, perhaps one of the Maracles living west of the village. I have a rocking chair with what I believe is the last elm bark seat woven by Mr. Maracle in the 1960’s.

The school itself was the largest building I had ever entered. A high, red brick building with a central bell tower, it had originally been built as a two-story school with a classroom on each level to the left of the hall. At the top of the stairs, the hall continued back to the bell tower at the front of the building so that a senior boy could reach the bell rope and signal that school was about to begin. It was in this upper hall space that the visiting health nurse inspected us for lice, tested our eyes and gave us our vaccinations. By the time I started school the primary grades
were accommodated in a classroom to the right of the hall on the main floor. There were two doors at the end of the lower hall. One led to the girls’ washroom. The other led to the boys’ washroom and a larger space where senior boys learned woodworking skills. It was in this space where I and a group of other girls, who stayed for lunch, taught each other gymnastic skills when we were seniors ourselves. There was a water fountain at the end of the lower hall. This was a small, congested area at recess as children rushed to get a drink of water or to get to the washroom. More than one child chipped a tooth when someone pushed too hard in the line behind them as they took a drink. Hooks for older children to hang their coats lined the right side of the upper and lower halls. In winter, the halls became narrow passages as they filled up with winter coats and boots. The newer, primary classroom had its own cloakroom at the left of its entrance. Young children who misbehaved in class were sent there as punishment.

The classroom ceilings were high and covered with patterned tin painted a cream colour. The two original classrooms had tall windows on three sides. The primary classroom had windows on the side facing the street. That and a lower ceiling made it a more intimate space. The schoolyard was enormous by today’s standards. A broad cement walk led up to the school from the street. This is where we scrambled to enter morning and afternoon and after each recess. A set of wide cement steps with iron railings led up to a covered porch where we could take shelter on cold mornings. Nothing else distinguished the area of grass in front of the school proper. However, there was a set of four large swings parallel the street where the yard extended over to the canning factory to the east. Past the swings, there were two wooden teeter totters. These and an old merry-go-round behind the school were our playground equipment. Well back behind the school there was a set of graying bleachers and a well-used ball diamond. Maple trees lined the street and a mix of trees blocked the view to the west and to the south behind the ball diamond. The school grounds formed a large unsupervised space where children gathered and played four times a day. Children wanting privacy could sneak through the fence and under a factory warehouse to the east.

I don’t remember how we were greeted that first day of school or how those of us in grade one found ourselves in our classroom. About that first day I only remember learning that teachers asked questions and children were expected to answer. I do remember learning the alphabet in
days to come. Mrs. Gough then began teaching us how to sound out one letter at a time and how words could be made from letters. I remember being absolutely thrilled when she printed this list on the blackboard and I realised how easily words could be read:

\begin{itemize}
  \item a
  \item at
  \item bat
  \item cat
  \item fat
  \item hat
\end{itemize}

We then progressed to reading in our Alice and Jerry reader. I loved the Alice and Jerry stories and was very disappointed when in grade two we switched to a Dick and Jane reader. I didn’t like Dick and Jane and their dog Spot. They were boring and it troubled me that this was so. It is only recently that I have realised that the fault probably did not lie with the author, but with the fact that my reading skills were well beyond Dick and Jane. My mother bought me a library card that September and I chose *Cherry Ames, Army Nurse* as my first book. No wonder I was bored with Dick and Jane and their cries of “See Spot run”.

Of course, we also learned about numbers. Numbers were interesting, but not as interesting as letters since they didn’t promise to unlock a whole new world for me. If reading was the most important skill that I learned, the complexity of human nature was the most important subject. Living isolated on the farm, I had not encountered many people. I played with my younger cousin Doug and from time to time our cousins came to visit. My knowledge of people was restricted to family and brief encounters with the neighbours who were my parents’ friends. I quickly realised that the children in grades one and two were more varied than I had suspected possible. The very first day it was apparent that there were two very unusual children in the classroom. One of them named Jimmy was a freckled faced, skinny boy with big ears who was taller than the rest of us. What was immediately striking about Jimmy was his surprising and rather disruptive habit of clapping his inner wrists together while chortling with glee. I never knew what it was that he found so amusing, but it was pleasant to see him being so demonstrably happy. Mrs. Gough generally said his name to quiet him down. The most amazing child was fourteen years old and
sat with the grade two children in a desk bigger than the rest of us had. She was a pretty child who only seemed different because of her size, her rather large protruding eyes and her speech which was not quite normal. I remember that Mrs. Gough explained that Margie was in our class because she found it difficult to learn. I don’t remember if she also mentioned Jimmy, but it was soon apparent that he too had learning difficulties.

I went home with questions about why these two children were different from the rest of us. My mother and I had a serious conversation. Jimmy’s father she said was also his grandfather. Women weren’t supposed to have children by their own fathers. If they did their children were not normal. This was why people could not marry close cousins. Since genetics was well understood on the farm, I was impressed with this rather dramatic example of inappropriate breeding. Margie, on the other hand, was quite a different story. She was Mrs. Gough’s step-daughter. My mother told me that Margie’s brain had been damaged while her mother was giving birth to her. She lived with her aunt who was her father’s sister, a single woman who thought the world of her. Their house was just across the street from where her father and Mrs. Gough lived. I formed very different pictures of the home lives of Margie and of Jimmy.

I soon encountered behavior that I simply could not understand. My mother dressed me in a tam as soon as the days became cooler. When I arrived at school, I took shelter in the enclosed porch where several big kids who also arrived early waited each morning for the door to open. I am inherently shy and life as the oldest child on the farm had not taught me many social skills. I was frightened, mortified and very puzzled by the fact that the older children teased me. I was frightened that I would never get my tam back as the teasing involved one of the big boys taking it off my head and putting it up out of my reach just under the roof of the porch. Not knowing what response they expected from me, I simply stood tongue tied, hoping he would give me my tam back before the door opened. I couldn’t for the life of me understand why I attracted this unwanted attention. It wasn’t until I was in my forties and my mother and I met a woman who had been one of the “big kids” that I learned the reason. Realising who I was, she said, “Oh we thought you were so cute when you were little that we used to tease you all the time, but we never could get a response out of you.” So that was it. And all these years I had thought that for some
reason they didn’t like me.

If life could be cruel to children when they were born, I learned that it could also be cruel to the elderly. I had already seen my elderly great-grandparents become hard of hearing, frail, sick and die. I accepted this as a natural process just as plants grew, became mature, flowered, bore fruit, withered and eventually died or were killed by frost. I was not prepared for the most surprising and for me frightening event that took place early that fall in our classroom. It was a warm, sunny fall day. Our classroom door was open and we were startled to look up and see a little, old lady enter the classroom. She walked straight to the teacher’s desk; placed a brown paper shopping bag on the corner of the desk; and took out a large mechanical alarm clock which she set on the desk. Mrs. Gough talked to her in a low, soft voice; put the clock back in the bag; and taking her by the elbow walked her out of the classroom. When she returned she explained to us that the woman was Mrs. Gunn who used to teach in this very room and who now that she was elderly had become confused and thought that she was coming here to spend the night. In addition to the alarm clock she was carrying her nightgown. The idea that adults could become so confused and lose sight of reality was the most frightening idea that I had yet encountered. I had thought that all adults were in control of themselves. Apparently this was not the case.

Naturally I talked to my parents about this. It prepared me for the sad state of affairs when not long afterwards our elderly neighbour across the highway took a similar turn. Mrs. Stafford was a lovely woman whom I had enjoyed visiting with my mother. She was a gentle woman who always served us delicious cookies which she had baked and who most amazingly of all had a sun porch window sill covered with red and purple gloxinia in bloom. I loved their velvety trumpets and rich colours. The first time that I saw them, I decided that some day I too would have a sun porch with beautiful flowers. I too would grow gloxinia. I was saddened to learn that like Mrs. Gunn, Mrs. Stafford had suddenly become senile. The sweet tempered woman we had known now swore and spit. I never saw her again.

There was one more shock in store for us the year that I was in grade one. At that time the village still had a sheriff. There was great consternation in the school yard the morning that the sheriff’s
car was sitting outside the school at recess and we watched the sheriff lead away one of the grade eight girls. I was alarmed by the event and Mrs Gough made no attempt to explain it to us. It was only when I got home that I learned that she had been taken away because she was pregnant. The idea that unmarried school girls could get pregnant was as disturbing as the fact that the sheriff could come and take somebody out of school. The world was a great deal more complex than I had ever suspected. It was all quite sobering and I think I became a more serious child because of it.

Sexual activity was another of the surprising aspects of human behavior that I encountered in grade one. Someone nodded toward the swings and told me that the big kids were “doing it”. I knew that this meant sex. I was aware of sex in some vague way from observing animals on the farm I suppose. I wasn’t sure how exactly it was done by humans and puzzled over it. The position adopted by four legged animals simply did not seem dignified enough for my mother and yet I couldn’t figure out how else it could be done. In this case, I was presented with an image of tall boys swinging high with girls in skirts, their legs spread, sitting on their laps facing them. I wasn’t convinced that it was the real thing either, but I was convinced that it was at the very least some sort of sexual play. Although they continued to do this for the rest of the fall, I wasn’t aware of it happening again after those particular children graduated from grade eight. My sister tells me that it was practised by children when she was in the senior grades a dozen years later. When I was in the senior grades some of the older children retreated to the area beneath the factory warehouse for sexual experimentation. A brother and sister made no secret of the fact that they “did it” at home.

I have often thought back in gratitude for a school system that allowed children like Jimmy and Margie to be in our classroom. Mrs. Gough was gentle and patient with both of them. Their easy laughter was a sunny presence in an otherwise rather serious environment. Because Mrs. Gough treated them with respect we did too and I think we were the richer for it. When our first report cards were given out at Christmas, I realised that in fact we were all in some continuum of learning abilities. When I left the classroom at the end of grade two, I lost sight of what became of Jimmy. Margie continued to be a positive presence in our lives. Years later I continued to see
her with her aunt in the library on Saturday afternoons, choosing picture books, She was as sunny as she had been in our classroom and it was a blessing to see how happy the two of them seemed to be together.

I was happy to be in grade one and went to school cheerfully with one exception – silo filling day. I loved silo filling day when the neighbour men came with their tractors and wagons and I got to watch load after load of corn come down our lane, past the house, to the barn where the corn was loaded into a machine that chopped it up and forced it up a chute until it spewed out into our silo where it would become winter silage to feed the cows. Equally exciting was the fact that these men stayed for dinner. My grandmother, my aunt and my mother had been cooking and baking and it was marvelous just to see all of these men sitting around my grandmother’s large dining room table in high spirits eating enormous amounts of pie. The three of us children were fed at the smaller kitchen table at the other end of the large room. From our vantage point we got to see the platters and bowls carried to the men’s table and witness their camaraderie. I recall very well the morning of silo filling day when I was in grade one. I announced that I was not going to school because I wanted to see the silo fillers. My mother was of another opinion. This resulted in her trying to force me to walk to school. She ended up walking behind me. She had a small switch in her hand which she threatened to use on my bare legs. I knew that her mother had had her cut a switch from their lilac bush when she discovered that my mother had been spending her days playing in a lilac bush rather than going to school at the beginning of grade one. With this story in both our minds, we made very slow progress down the lane with my refusing to take a step forward until my mother threatened me. Finally we approached the neighbour’s house at the end of our lane. There my mother lost her nerve. She was too embarrassed to continue one step further. We compromised. She told me that I could stay home for the morning, but that as soon as my father had finished his dinner he would take me to school and there would be no more argument about it. This seemed fair to me. I had a glorious morning – the last time I would ever see the silo being filled – and I went cheerfully back to school for the afternoon.

Excitement entered our grade one classroom in December when we began to prepare for the Christmas concert which would be held in the United Church. Nancy Thompson and I were
chosen to be a duet of teapots. Standing beside each other we sang,

I’m a little teapot short and stout.
Here is my handle (right hand on hip).
Here is my spout (left arm bent with elbow on hip)
When I get all steamed up
Hear me shout.
Just tip me over (bend to left and hold)
And pour me out.

I don’t know how well we performed, but I remember feeling some relief that we had at least not made a gaff like Bill had. Bill, who was my age, was the son of my parents’ friends who lived two farms away. I remember two things about a visit we paid them one evening in December. Their older son who was studying at Royal Roads Military College in British Columbia had sent them a box full of holly. I thought it was beautiful. This together with stories of my great-uncle who lived there just confirmed for me that British Columbia was an exotic place. How I wished that holly grew in Ontario. But the story that had us in gales of laughter was not that of the hardships Jack was enduring in military training. It was Bill’s performance at the Christmas concert in his one-room school house the night before. Bill, who was a cute kid with freckles and dark blond hair, had been the grade one student who had been chosen to play the role of master of ceremony. At the beginning of the evening, he had told the audience to sit back and exlax. Having been the victim of an aunt who had given me more Exlax than a small child needed, I knew why his audience had roared with laughter. “Sit back and exlax,” became one of our family’s expressions.

In grade two we prepared a rhythm band performance for the Christmas concert. What I remember is that some or all of us in grade two were given simple musical instruments which we played as an ensemble. Many children played the sticks. I and some others played some sort of clapper thing which had jangling bits of metal on it and which we played as a percussion instrument by slapping it on an open palm. Two of the more musical children played tambourines
and one or two children had the delicate task of playing a triangle. I wished that I was one of them.

This period marked a brief interest in music on my part. It was when I was in grade two that I decided that I would like to play the piano. As I walked up our lane after school one day, I developed a plan for how I would learn to play. My grandmother who lived next door had a piano on which she sometimes played hymns. I decided that I would go straight to her house. I told her that Mrs. Gough had taught us how to play *Ba Ba Black Sheep* on the piano that day and that I wanted her to teach me more. “Oh did she?” she archly replied. I was unprepared for her to ask me to show her what I had learned, but I went to the piano and banged on a few keys. She then told me that she could not teach me to play the piano. Why not I remonstrated. She said that she wouldn’t know how to teach anybody to play. This was the most disappointing turn of events that I had encountered in my young life. I put the piano out of my mind forever and I never quite forgave my grandmother who until that time had been so supportive. It had been my grandmother who had given me a kindergarten table and chair when I was four so that I could play at being a young scholar. She was convinced that I would become a teacher.

I paid rather dearly for this boldfaced lie. Not only had it prompted my grandmother to disappoint me, but the lie itself weighed heavily on my conscience. My father was very firm about the importance of not lying, cheating or stealing. By the end of grade two I found myself lying awake in bed worrying about the lies I had told. I had told two clear lies, this being one of them, and I had told what may or may not have been a third one. I couldn’t be sure. In grade two I had a new, brown leather book bag, the kind with a strap that went over the shoulder. One day as I was crossing the school yard one end of the strap gave way and my book bag fell to the ground. I looked behind me and there just a couple of feet behind me were two boys, one of whom held an open jackknife. I told my parents that he had cut the strap. Of course I hadn’t actually seen him do it so I tortured myself about whether or not this was a third lie or if he really had done it. I wasn’t sure whether it was two or three lies that were now on my record and this seemingly dreadful number upset me so much that I resolved not to lie again.
The grade one and two classroom had old fashioned bench seats fastened to iron runners on the floor. The desk part consisted of a writing surface under which was an open storage area for our books. The polished wood surfaces and curling, iron leg work that attached the desks to the runners gave the classroom an attractive appearance. In grade two, I sat in the row next to the window. The front of that row terminated in a bench with no desk portion in front of it. This empty bench was cause of my embarrassment. That fall, my dog Sport took to following me to school. Sport was a big, white hound with black spots. One warm day when the front door of the school had been left open to let in some air, Sport entered the classroom, walked down one row and up along my row. When he reached the front of the row he jumped up on the empty bench where he sat up on his haunches, alert and ready to learn. Everyone laughed. I had remained still hoping that my dog would disappear as easily as he had appeared without any one knowing he belonged to me. To my mortification Mrs. Gough said, “Sandra, would you please take your dog out of the classroom.” How did she know it was my dog? After that Sport was locked in the barn while I walked to school and I didn’t have to endure another incident like that one.

I think grade two represented for me some artistic awakening for I can’t think of those desks without thinking of sliding my hand under the seat to remove a gray, Lipson’s clothing box. I lived for Friday afternoon when the grade ones were sent home at recess. After recess, Mrs. Gough gave every child a piece of construction paper. I loved construction paper. It came in such pretty colours. I was happy the entire time that we followed Mrs. Gough’s directions and folded the paper to make an origami object. I remember that a purple, three dimensional chair was my favourite. We had each brought a box to school the first week so that throughout the year we could store the objects we made. I was so excited to take it home and show my mother the last day of school. I think these Friday afternoons of origami were the highlight of my public school experience.

In addition to music for the Christmas concert and origami which was no doubt intended to develop small motor and listening skills, our primary classroom offered one other artistically stimulating event. At the back of the class room we had a sand table. It was a table about four feet by three with sides so it could hold the fine white sand that we all recognized as coming from
either the Outlet or Sandbanks beaches. Although the sand table itself didn’t allow us any artistic expression, it was an art gallery of sort for after Christmas each year a diorama suddenly appeared thanks to Mrs. Gough’s effort. One year it contained Eskimo figures, sugar cube igloos, sled dogs and sleighs. It was magical and we spent recesses crowding around it amazed by this very different world which we were seeing. The next year it was a scene of Indians. During class time Mrs. Gough taught us about these cultures. It was fascinating to think that people in Canada had lived such different lives from ours and that in the case of the Eskimos (The word Inuit wasn’t used then.) they were still living in snow houses. As impressed as I was by these cultural differences, I was equally impressed that someone could make scenes like this out of such things as plasticine, sugar cubes and paper.

I remained shy and really didn’t learn how to make friends. Most of the children seemed to already know each other. By chance there was only one other elementary school child living between our house and the school when I entered grade one. She was much older than me and seemed to be as shy as I was. My mother had arranged that for the first day of school I would knock on her door and she would walk the last third of the way with me. A girl my age lived on the Wellington road near the cemetery. We visited each other’s houses once in grade two, but it didn’t seem worth our while to continue to bridge the distance. I am not sure how I spent my recess time. I mainly remember standing on the school steps with other shy children from the village outskirts watching the girls from the center of the village skipping together as they chanted a series of skipping rhymes. I do remember having short conversations with them from time to time. One of them told me the amazing news that a princess from England was visiting Canada. Her name was Elizabeth and she and her mother were going to Trenton to see her train passing, hoping to catch a glimpse of the princess herself. At the time of her coronation, I took note of the fact that a young woman had become Queen of England and the Commonwealth. I believe this was my first awareness of events happening some where else in the world.

The years in Mrs. Gough’s classroom were in some way the golden years of elementary school. Starting in grade three, school would become a drudgery. This was in part due to the fact that Mrs. Gough’s sister didn’t bring the same enthusiasm and imagination to her task and in part
because the subjects themselves seemed to involve a great deal of drudge work. The classroom was dull without a single addition of anything on display to make it appear interesting. Being short and up so high, we were relatively cut off from the view in spite of the windows. Fire drill was feared for it meant going down narrow iron stairs with steps and sides we could see through.

Fortunately, I only spent two of the three required years in that classroom. Three of would be accelerated by taking grades three and four together. This meant that we would do all of the work required of the students in both classes, including the homework which we began to have for the first time. We had new subjects. One of them was spelling. Every night we had to memorise a set of words for a test the next day. My father elected himself to help me with my homework during this important year. This meant that he drilled me in spelling and math while my mother washed dishes and put my younger sister to bed. Both he and the teacher became exasperated when I spelled the grade four words better than I did the grade three words. I had no explanation for this. I supposed that I simply thought the grade four words were more important and therefore learned them better.

In arithmetic we learned the times tables. My father drilled me in these as well. I enjoyed learning them because our teacher taught us in small groups by using bundles of different coloured sticks. I loved these sticks because they were so pretty and was sorry when those lessons ended. I realise looking back on my schooling what a visual learner I was and how much aesthetics mattered to me. Whether or not I enjoyed learning depended almost entirely on whether or not the learning involved a visually interesting or pleasing experience. We progressed naturally from multiplication tables to multiplication and division. I don’t remember what might have been the problem other than fatigue from having so much to do, but I do remember my father being unhappy with my performance during one of our nightly sessions and telling me that I had unfortunately inherited his weakness in math and my mother’s weakness in spelling. When I mentioned this to my mother recently she expressed surprise saying she had always thought that my father was very good with numbers. Since she was the one who kept the farm accounts I had always assumed that perhaps he was not. What was clear to me was that my father was a farmer with a firm belief in genetics. I felt let down. Instead of inheriting their strengths, I had inherited
their weaknesses. After that if I didn’t do particularly well in math or in spelling, I simply told myself it wasn’t my fault. I had inherited both of my parents’ weaknesses. It made me feel a bit sad.

I didn’t really mind having to do grade three and grade four exercises in arithmetic, but I hated doing the exercises for both grades in another new subject – grammar. Grammar was the most boring subject in the world and I really resented the fact that our textbooks had exercises that always went from the letters a to j. I thought that “e” would be quite sufficient and I resented every example that came after it. I was convinced that the use of letters rather than numbers was simply a disingenuous way of trying to trick us into not realising that we had to do ten examples every time. I learned to dislike the letter “j” for its duplicity. When I went to Teachers’ College and we had an exhaustive grammar test, I was surprised to learn that in spite of hating grammar I had learned it rather well.

The most painful subject of all was reading. I was good at reading and it was sheer torture to have to listen to the children who had difficulty reading, stand and mangle the text as they read out loud. It must have been excruciating for them. Day after day we all went through this exercise of reading along in our readers, waiting to be called upon to stand and read. It was no longer the text that I disliked, but the process itself. The worse part about being accelerated was having to participate in this activity twice a day.

It is true that the intermediate grades did put a new emphasis on knowledge in addition to skills. Social studies was a new subject which I enjoyed. We learned about maps and children in far away countries. I was quite taken with Maria of Mexico. For one thing she was a girl which made her stand out in a book full of stories about boys. Even though many of us had ancestors who had spoken Gaelic, German or French, we were unaware of this at the time and our first names were all within a narrow range of Anglo Saxon options. I thought Maria was a particularly beautiful name and immediately changed my doll’s name from Marie to Maria. Perhaps I remember Mexico when the other countries are forgotten because it engaged my visual imagination. We learned about a lake of floating islands and dugout canoes full of flowers as well as two towering
volcanoes with names that sounded like Papa and Momma Kettle. It all sounded very beautiful to me.

I began to soak up what little information came my way about people in other cultures. I was given a set of cards about three inches by eight. Each card was divided by a line down the centre. On the left was a black and white drawing of a woman in the traditional costume of a particular country; on the right was a man in traditional costume. I was fascinated by the names of the countries, the variety of the costumes, all of which with their lace, embroidery and many layers seemed much more attractive than the machine made clothing worn by people in Canada. The first time that I went to Europe I was thrilled to see women in villages who still wore dirndls. I bought an embroidered blouse in Switzerland with images of these cards firmly in mind.

In grade five, social studies provided the second highlight of my schooling. Along one side of our classroom, there was a long stretch of tables on which senior girls learned to cook. By some stroke of great luck we were given materials printed in colour which we would cut and mount to collectively make a diorama of a coffee plantation. I was so happy when we spent time working around this table. I loved the images of white coffee flowers and red coffee beans and the plantation buildings which were so architecturally different from anything any of us had ever seen. This was farming in a warmer part of the world. I would love to be able to see these materials one more time. I retain strong images of red, brown, white and green. Coffee has seemed both beautiful and magical to me ever since.

Before we would be senior enough to learn to cook on hotplates at these tables we had to first learn to knit and sew. Intermediate students were allowed to go home at recess one Friday a month so that the intermediate teacher could teach home economics. I don’t recall if girls began to take home economics in grade five or grade six. I do remember that I did not particularly enjoy it. Since I was spending my play time designing dresses, it is surprising that I did not enjoy home economics. For years as an adult, I sewed almost everything I wore. However, I couldn’t forgive the teacher for forcing us to work with ugly materials on projects which seemed very unappealing to me. We began by learning to knit. We knit a dishcloth using butcher twine from Stacey’s
butcher shop. My mother now knits me pretty cotton dish cloths, but at the time I didn’t believe that any woman knit dish cloths. And they were so ugly. Plain knit, pearl stitches making a cloth that became grubby as we worked on it month after month to completion. When I took it home, my mother seemed about as enthusiastic as I was. She knit beautiful diamond socks and mittens, not dish cloths.

Next we learned to sew by hand. Our project was a drawstring bag to hold our materials. This was not a bad idea, but the cloth provided to us was such an unattractive pattern of brown on white that I disliked looking at it as I sewed. Since our teacher was a very well dressed woman I don’t really understand why we were given such unappealing fabrics to use. Cost can’t be the explanation. The next year we had two sewing projects. The first seemed like a great waste of time to me. Sewing by hand we made a three inch band of white cotton which was doubled in thickness and which formed a circle when we attached two pieces of elastic to the ends. This we were expected to wear when we cooked to keep our hair out of our food. It made us look a bit like the women working next door at the factory. They wore hairnets with white visors. I didn’t believe that any woman alive wore an ugly band like this in her own kitchen. Next we made an apron taking turns using the one treadle sewing machine at the back of the classroom. Once again, neither the fabric nor the pattern was very attractive. Finally, we were old enough for cooking lessons. I only remember our first lesson. We made tomato soup. In spite of having acres of tomatoes, my mother never made tomato soup. She was too busy picking them. I remember thinking how ridiculous it was that we were making tomato soup when we could smell tomatoes being canned at the factory next door. Now I make tomato soup every fall and freeze it. Of course, I add onion, roasted garlic, and herbs like basil or spices like cloves, none of which were added to the plain tomato soup we made in school.

I realise now that Friday afternoons after recess often provided a break in routine. Once a month at that time the intermediate students crowded into the senior class room where we sat on folding canvas stools between the rows of desks and watched black and white films made by the NFB. I only remember two of these films. They both made a big impression on me because they offered a window onto people of cultures very different from ours. One of them was about French
Canadian loggers. It may have been the first time that I understood that there were people living in Canada who spoke French instead of English. The loggers were a jolly bunch with woven wool sashes tied about their waists. They participated in log rolling contests and danced to fiddle tunes on logs floating in the water. I knew that there were logging camps not so far north of us in Ontario, but this was not how I imagined that the loggers looked or behaved. I imagined that they looked and dressed very much like my father and other farmers I knew. These French Canadian people were clearly different.

The second film, which I remember, is one that I would like to see again. At the time I found it very frightening. An elderly Indian man lay on a narrow bed of some sort along the wall of a small, gloomy room. He seemed to be dying. Into the room danced a member of an Iroquoian False Face Society. He was wearing a carved wooden mask with a contorted face. The face scowled and had a large nose twisted off centre. The film seemed to consist of this healer dancing around in the gloom, singing and shaking his turtle shell rattle in an effort to cure the sick man. I didn’t think the man was going to live and I wanted these images to come to an end. They were too disturbing. I didn’t want to see the man die and I felt uncomfortable witnessing the invocation of unknown spirits.

During our senior years, one late Friday afternoon a month was reserved for art lessons. When I was younger, one of my aunts sometimes entertained me by sketching people while my mother prepared dinner. I thought this was the most wonderful talent in the world and solemnly declared that I was going to be an artist when I grew up. For some reason, my father found this idea dangerous enough that he gave me my first lesson in genetics. I could not be an artist he said. There had never been an artist in our family. It followed that I could not be an artist either. (Similarly, when I wanted to take dance lessons, he told me that this was out of the question. I would never be a good dancer as both he and my mother had two left feet.) I silently chafed at all these genetic restrictions placed upon me. I wasn’t convinced that he was right, but he held to his conviction and ended conversations on genetics by saying you can’t get rats from mice. During my forties, when he once shook his head at something I had done successfully and said he didn’t know where I got that from (whatever talent he was acknowledging), I laughed and said, “You
can’t get rats from mice.” He grinned back in surprise and dawning recognition. My father hadn’t cast his genetic net deep enough when he assessed our capabilities.

You would think, then, that I would love art lessons. It was not the case. Art as it was taught to us, simply reinforced my father’s assessment of my ability. I only recall one art lesson that I really enjoyed. We covered a piece of cardboard with different colours of wax crayon, over which we painted black ink. We then used a pin to scratch a scene into the ink. I scratched an under water scene and enjoyed this technique so much that I sometimes think of incorporating crayon resist into my work today. Otherwise, our art lessons seemed to consist mainly of following directions. I recall one exercise in frustration in which we followed very explicit directions that consisted of measurements to draw a cenotaph for Remembrance Day. It was supposed to be a lesson in three-dimensional perspective. The teacher stood at the front of the class, calling out measurements such as seven-eighths of an inch or forty-five degrees, so that we could draw a cenotaph exactly like the one on the paper he held in his hands. It was a lesson in math dressed up as art. I hated it.

There was a time when we created some kind of abstract pattern of coloured lines. To my great delight I was chosen to make a bulletin board display of our work. I remember how perfectly happy I was that afternoon after school when I held each piece of art in my hands, turning it to see how it would look best when put with the other pieces that I already had on the board. Colours and direction of lines were my criteria. To my horror, this delightful event came back to haunt me on my last day of school at the end of grade eight. That day our teacher said that he was going to tell three things about each of us that he would never forget. I only remember one of the things that he told about me. He said he would never forget that the one time he had asked me to display the class’s art, I had displayed it up upside down and backwards. It seemed that I hadn’t realised that everyone signed their piece in the lower right corner and that this was the criterion that I should have used. Whether or not the overall effect was pleasing was not the point. This event together with my disappointing marks in art (I don’t think I ever had a mark higher than a C or C+), the only subject in which I wanted to do well, made it clear that my father was right after all.
When we entered grade six, we moved to the senior classroom on the main floor. The big change was that we would be taught for the first time by a man. The previous school principal was a man whom we younger children regarded with some fear. The year that I started grade six, the school had a new male principal – an unknown entity to the entire community. It soon became apparent that this young, attractive man was an excellent teacher. Spelling actually became interesting. We had the same series of spelling texts as usual with their list of the week’s new words set in bold type in columns at the top of the left hand page. However, his approach to teaching spelling was entirely different. Instead of having us memorise one column of words each night for the next day’s test, he introduced all the words on Monday, analysed and reviewed them throughout the week and tested us on Friday. Suddenly I found that I could spell well. Not only that, but we were rewarded with beautiful stickers each time we had a perfect score. This proved to be an important lesson in pedagogy and in human nature. I was so impressed with this superior way of teaching spelling that I rushed to tell our intermediate teacher about it. Consequently, I found myself standing beside her desk one recess enthusiastically telling her about the new method that the senior teacher was using to teach spelling. I thought she would be thrilled. To my surprise, she was curt and dismissive. I was quite crushed. Clearly not everyone wanted to learn how to do something better. This was the real lesson though the more pedagogic one of analyzing words stayed with me when I began to teach spelling myself.

The senior class room introduced me and no doubt most of the other children to violence. The year that I was in grade six there were a number of very tall and aggressive boys in grade seven and eight. I don’t know how old some of them were, but their ringleader seemed more like a man than a boy. I don’t remember how exactly they misbehaved, but they were definitely rowdy. I do remember that that fall a number of them were strapped and strapped hard in front of the rest of us. Our female teachers had never used the strap. The former principal had, but the new principal was using it much more liberally. It became a topic of concern within the community. Parents of the boys being strapped came to the school as a group and complained. Strapping pretty much came to a halt to the relief of all of us. The violence, though it became infrequent, was worse for it was unpredictable both in its cause and in its outcome. Children weren’t strapped. They were
shaken and pushed about. I recall one event involving a tall boy in grade eight who was very cheeky. When the teacher attacked him, he fought back and the two of them red in the face struggled the full width of the back of the classroom. When they reached the far side, the altercation suddenly stopped. The boy returned to his seat and the teacher returned to the front of the classroom. It was unclear who had won the struggle; it seemed at best to have been a draw.

After this, things turned for the worse. On three different occasions, the teacher suddenly attacked quiet children who had done nothing particularly wrong and would neither fight back nor (I guessed) tell their parents what had happened to them. They were the most vulnerable children in the class. Two of them happened to be sitting near me so I was well aware that they had done nothing wrong. In the one case, the child had simply left his dictionary on his desk after we had been told to put our books away. He seemed genuinely surprised to realise that his dictionary was still there. In another case, a girl who never said a word to anyone seemed to have simply annoyed him with her facial expression when she was unable to answer a question. These explosions of violence were terrifying because they were so unpredictable and because the level of violence was so horrible. I remember a screw flying out of the girl’s upturned desk and her glasses flying off and breaking. I feared that this could happen to me as easily as it had happened to them. I hoped that he would know intuitively that I would tell my parents and that my father would come to my defence and that this intuition alone would offer me some protection. Looking back on my elementary school education, I regret that I did not have the social skills to reach out to these children, to tell them that I was sorry and that I knew they hadn’t deserved what happened to them. How did they live with this I wonder. It was clear to me that these attacks were caused by something in his psychological makeup and not their behavior. I suspected that he saw something in them that reflected something he didn’t like in himself, but how we could protect ourselves from behavior as irrational as that I didn’t know. Since he seemed to otherwise be a very nice man and was a superb teacher it was difficult to reconcile these conflicting aspects of his behaviour.

The same boys who had provoked the principal to strap them were the source of another sort of violence – sexual violence. If a girl passed an older boy in the school hall, the chances were very
good that he would try to grab her crotch. One boy in particular seemed to lie in wait for me. I finally lashed back with violence myself, kicking out as I saw his arm streak towards me. The next day his sister came to tell me that her parents wanted me to know that girls must not kick boys in the crotch. I was humiliated. The message seemed clear about who could do what. I remember one horrible noon hour when the senior girls were collectively molested. As I cleaned out my desk drawer and the other girls chatted, the big boys entered the room in a line. Led by the biggest, they methodically made their way about the room grabbing the crotch of every girl in turn. Since I was squatted down only one boy made an attempt to touch me, but I was unnerved by this event nevertheless. Their mission accomplished they left as suddenly as they had arrived. In unspeakable silence, we resumed whatever we had been doing. I was mortified. I expect the other girls were as well.

Fortunately, the material we learned in the senior grades was often quite interesting. I enjoyed learning about the exploration of Canada. The year that our history classes were devoted to the history of the kings and queens of England I was enchanted. Here was the lengthy history of one particular country as told by the actions and personalities of its sovereigns. I was thrilled that there had been several queens as rulers and that Elizabeth the first had been a very powerful queen during a time of great exploration and Spanish gold stolen from the Americas. I was disappointed that Ann had not been a great queen. I wanted very much to have as many models as possible of women who could do great things when given the opportunity.

Science was my favourite subject, but oddly enough I don’t remember what we studied other than a project involving weed identification which I particularly enjoyed. We each had to dry, mount and label a weed. The weeds were then suspended along a wire suspended the length of the classroom so that we could learn to identify them all. We must have learned about the refraction and colours of light. I remember seeing the spectrum refracted by the glass of an aquarium and I think we may have had a glass prism to play with in the back corner of the classroom where we had a small set of three shelves of books. I remember wishing that we had many more books. I was allowed to spend time there when I finished my assignments, but there was nothing new for me to read. At the time I was learning as much science as I could from *Hammond’s Nature Atlas*. 
which I borrowed more than once from the Bloomfield Public Library. With its illustrations and informative texts, it was a treasure trove of knowledge. How I wished our school had books like that.

To this day I can’t fully understand why other girls in my class didn’t do well in science. My first sense that there was some gendered difference happened in grade seven when the teacher announced that everyone who had achieved a certain grade on a science test could go out to the playground while the others took up the test. To my surprise I was the only girl who left the room. I remember sitting on the end of the teeter-totter sifting quartz pebbles and wondering why I was the only girl.

Mornings in elementary school began with the singing of *God Save the Queen* followed by the repetition of the *Lord’s Prayer* and the *Pledge of Allegiance*, which we made with our right hands upheld and our eyes on the portrait of the Queen at the front of the room, plus a short scripture reading poorly managed by one student or another. This was followed by a health inspection to make sure that we had clean nails and hands. Health was an interesting subject. I enjoyed learning about the parts of the eye and the ear and how they functioned. We learned helpful tips such as how to remove foreign objects from our eyes. All of this stuck with me in vivid detail, perhaps because lessons were often accompanied by colourful diagrams which made it easier to learn for visual learners like myself.

Music became the surprise addition to our curriculum. I say surprise because if there was a regular schedule for when the music teacher would appear I never figured out what it was. It was certainly no more often than once a month, but it was not on a Friday afternoon. He simply walked in and began to teach us how to read music or to sing a particular song. I never really made a firm connection between the musical notes on the music that he drew on the board and the actual sounds that we were asked to sing. They seemed to be two separate topics for different days and different lessons. We learned to sing English and French folk songs. I remember *By the Light of the Moon* and *A Froggy Would a Wooing Go*. “A Froggy would a wooing go. Uhhunh. Whether his mother would let him or no. Uhhunh. He rode up to Miss Mousie’s den. Uhhunh.
Said he Miss Mousie are you within?” I felt a bit sorry for our music teacher. It seemed to me that we were a disappointment to him. What a job he had, travelling about trying to teach music to children who had little formal or, for that matter, informal experience with it and whom he only saw at one month intervals. I recall a Christmas concert when I sat with other girls on the pew nearest the piano where our music teacher banged out carols. He had arrived a bit late and the girl sitting just behind him claimed she could smell liquor on his breath. This made him seem all the more an outsider to me. Whereas everyone else I knew, including our other teachers, was anchored in the community, I had no idea where this man belonged when he was not drifting from one classroom or concert to another. For me he represented the separateness and the disappointment of someone with a more artistic sensibility.

Our Christmas concerts were the highlight of the school year for the entire community. For most people they were the only live performances that they ever saw outside of Sunday church services. When I asked my mother recently what she remembered about them she said that she remembered that she enjoyed them, that she loved seeing the little ones perform. I remember senior boys dressed in striped bathrobes playing the roles of shepherds or wise men in the nativity play each year (There were fewer roles for girls - the angels had to be pretty and didn’t speak). Sometimes the senior students performed Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* (another play involving male characters). I think that we girls mainly raised our voices in song. Smaller children entertained the crowd with the kinds of performances I participated in when I was in grades one and two. They were the real stars of the evening.

The concert which was held in a packed United Church ended with the appearance of Santa Claus up in the balcony. Each child received a gift that their mother had wrapped and their father had secretly handed over to someone at the beginning of the evening. I remember being very pleased with gifts of colouring books which kept me happily employed in the days to come before Christmas day itself. Santa also gave each child a bag containing a selection of hard candy which must have come from Moore’s grocery store across the street. What I remember most is the good feeling in the air. These were moments of collective happiness that were never replicated during the rest of the year. Peace on earth and good will rested in our hearts as the concert drew to its
conclusion and we wished each other merry Christmas on our way out of the church and headed toward homes where red or green cellophane wreaths hung in the windows.

The year that I was in grade seven or eight our teacher had the inspired idea of teaching us how to make three-dimensional snowflakes. We folded and cut red, green or white squares of tissue paper which we then threaded together and fluffed out to make beautiful spheres with snowflake like edges. The ceiling of our classroom was festooned with brightly coloured snowflakes hung in suspension. My cousin Douglas and I spent a wonderful Saturday morning cutting and sewing snowflakes to decorate our respective kitchens. It was a marvelous Christmas. This same teacher gave each us a Christmas present the last day of school. One year he gave each girl a beautiful model of the type of clock that turns around within a high glass dome. The clock was gold and I loved it so much that I kept it for years. Other years we each received what were known as Life Saver books. These were silver coloured boxes that opened like books to reveal a row of different flavoured Life Savers down each of the inside covers. If it hadn’t been for these books I might not have known that one could buy clove or cinnamon flavoured Life Savers. I came to associate these flavours with Christmas holidays.

Valentine’s day was a day for a minor celebration in the intermediate and senior grades. In early February our mothers purchased booklets of Valentine cards. Each page contained several attractive figures holding hearts and Valentine wishes. We cut these out and decided which card would be appropriate for which student and wrote their names and ours in the To and From spaces provided on the back. We stuffed the cards through the mail slot in our class room’s Valentine box. On Valentine’s day, the box was opened and the cards were distributed as they were drawn from the box. I enjoyed this until the year I was in grade six which was my first year in the senior class room. That year I only received a few Valentines. I was crushed and embarrassed to show them to my parents. I realised that having been accelerated I had not become well integrated with the other students in my grade who were one and often two years older than me. What’s more, the students in grade seven and eight hardly knew me. I was less than ten years old when I entered grade six and I was in a room with children as old as fifteen. There was a world of difference between us.
The following year I began to become better acquainted with the other children as I had more access to the village core where most of them lived. I received a second hand bike. Suddenly I could not only ride to school, but I could ride to the library where a few other children also gathered. In winter I began to skate at the rink next to the United Church. That year we celebrated Valentine’s day with a box lunch sale. Each girl brought a lunch. The unidentified lunches were auctioned off to the boys in class. My mother had the brilliant idea of putting fried chicken in my lunch box. As luck would have it, my box was bought by the most attractive boy in grade eight. The chicken was delicious, he thought he was the luckiest boy in the room and we had a good time sitting together eating it. Years later in grade eleven, he became my first serious boyfriend and showed great enthusiasm for my mother’s roast beef.

Our teacher gave me a leg up socially when he decided that I would be the score keeper for the baseball games that senior students played every noon in good weather. He showed me how to keep score. The graphic nature of it appealed to me as did watching the game for which I had absolutely no talent. Being score keeper guaranteed that I had some prestige and social interaction with the other kids. My braininess also began to pay off when it became clear that I was a good person to have on your team for a geography or spelling bee which we seemed to have fairly often in grades seven and eight. I was so enthusiastic about geography bees that I spent my spare time studying the atlas to locate place names that began with A or E. The rule was that the person on the opposite team had to name a place that began with the last letter of the place just named. The best way to win was to have an arsenal of names beginning with these letters. The best strategy of all was to be prepared to name a place that began and ended with one of these letters.

To my surprise, I discovered that I wasn’t as athletically challenged as I had thought. It was true that my eye/hand co-ordination was so poor that I would never play sports, but I had a talent for the gymnastics which we taught ourselves during winter noon hours. My body was supple and I could do things like backbends and splits particularly well which earned me the respect of the
other girls as well as myself. By the end of grade eight when a new irrigation pond had been dug on our farm, I was sufficiently well integrated socially that I had a good friend and we, together with many of the other grade eight students, gathered to swim and generally enjoy ourselves at the pond after school. My skinny body was still less developed than those of the other girls who were all older than me, but I now wore a bra which made me one of them. And at least one boy had begun to notice me. The two of us had long talks about morality and what we expected of life.

With summer holidays, my elementary school days came to an end. My best friend and I rode our bikes, drank cokes, read movie magazines, watched boys and swam at the Outlet beach as often as we could get there. We earned money by picking strawberries and raspberries. We planned our high school wardrobes and generally prepared ourselves for a new existence as socially active teenagers. High school brought its own challenges, but that is another story. We had completed one more stage in our journey and were prepared to enter the final stretch on our way toward adulthood.
Social Space

A country mouse with one paw in the village is perhaps the best way to describe my formative years. As a country mouse I came to know almost every inch of our farm and all of its buildings. But the village was as close as what we called “the front field” so as I grew older the social and cultural space of the village became part of my known world. Our farm was at the west end of Bloomfield along the Belleville highway. The last street light was between our lane and the driveway of the Fox family who owned the farm to the west of us. The house was well back from the highway so my initial sense of where we lived was that of our farm with its barn, outbuildings and two houses and its lane almost a mile long running from the Belleville highway and ending in our rear field which fronted on the Scoharie road. I knew that the farm to the west of us belonged to the Foxs and the farm to the east of us belonged to the Baxters. There was a pond just over the fence on the Baxter farm which they didn’t seem to use, but which we did. In the heart of winter my father or my uncle drove our cows from the barn twice a day to Baxter’s pond where they chopped holes in the ice so the cattle could drink. I remember the cows’ steamy breath, my father swinging the axe and the water droplets that froze when they landed.

Mrs. Stafford and her son Mac, who was a carpenter, lived on a smaller, but still substantial, property across the highway from us. There was a pond on their property too. It was on Stafford’s pond that I learned to skate one Christmas day. My cousin Douglas and I had both received skates for Christmas and that afternoon our mothers took us to Stafford’s pond for our first skating lesson. Being close to the highway it was the easier pond to reach. I recall holding onto a chair seat for balance as I learned to stay upright on silver blades. These three farms and the Stafford property formed much of the world that I could see. Looking towards Stafford’s from our front porch I could just make out the backs of houses along the ridge where the Wellington road ran. Turning my head and following the highway east towards the village centre I could see a few houses and the barn where Clayt Greetings made horseradish. To the west was farmland as far as I could see.
Bloomfield is a long drawn out affair that includes the front properties of several farms. As I neared school age I knew that I would go to the Bloomfield school because our front field was in the village whereas the children of my parents’ friends on farms to the west of us, would go to a one-room school further up the highway. I soon learned that we paid village taxes on that field and Hallowell township taxes on the rest of the farm. It was my first understanding of how the landscape was legally divided other than by farm. We had a foot in both worlds it seemed to me. Country and village both became part of my identity. Still, as a small child the village proper was a place I visited only occasionally. I know that my parents took me to visit my great-grandparents who lived across from the library, but I only have a few memories of those early visits. I expect we also visited my aunt Vera and my uncle Tony who lived in the east end of the village, but my memory only reaches back to visits made during my first year of school. Before I started school my memories of the village mainly consist of visits to shops and garages with my father. The shopping heart of the village was a mile and a half from our house and my mother, like most other wives, did not have a driver’s license so she prepared a grocery list for my father. Some items on the list were coded. When I was old enough to read I learned that cornflakes, which we did not eat, was code for Kotex in order to not embarrass my father should anyone see the list. To this day I use her code t.p. for toilet paper. On Saturday nights, my father made the trip to the village to buy the week’s groceries. I don’t recall the going or the coming when I was very small and accompanied him except for one winter evening. I was riding on my father’s shoulders and he was carrying the groceries. As we reached our mailbox my father stopped and put me and the box of groceries on my hand sleigh and pulled us up the lane to the house. This was the same sleigh that our dog Spot pulled me about on for shorter sorties near the house.

I loved going to Moore’s grocery store. It had a good smell. I particularly liked to see the box of oranges which I thought very beautiful. Mr. Moore always seemed to take time to chat. Mrs. Moore with long black hair and a bright gash of red lipstick was a friendly presence at the till. In fact, the village was a friendly place for a small child. Mr. Moore was generous with children. My introduction to pomegranates came one December when Art Moore sent home pomegranates for my cousin Douglas, my sister Jean and me. That year for the first and only time my uncle
Harry decided that he would cut down their Christmas tree. So one Saturday morning when snow was on the ground Uncle Harry bundled us three kids with our newly acquired pomegranates into the truck and set out to find the perfect tree. The task was not so simple. I, at perhaps the age of ten, was aware that as we went from place to place looking for perfect trees we at one point entered government property and at another time private property whose ownership I knew. I began to feel a bit uneasy about this project. It didn’t ruin the morning for as we tagged along going from tree to tree in one wood lot after another, we marveled about pomegranates - the red skin and the amazing little red jellied seed pouches separated into sections by a honeycomb affair of white skin. There was something very special about eating these crystalline, ruby drops of fruit, holding them on our tongues for the others to see and spitting out the red stained seeds on pristine white snow as my uncle looked for the perfect, dark green spruce. I was glad we hadn’t found it in the first place we stopped. The excursion and the pomegranates lasted the better part of the morning.

Next door to Moore’s grocery was Stacey’s butcher shop. Butch Stacey was a jolly seeming man who was very fond of children. He had several of his own. Unfortunately, it was on the sidewalk in the relatively short space between the door of Moore’s grocery and the door of Stacey’s butcher shop that I let my father down. My mother recalls that my father loved to take me with him to show me off to his friends. I didn’t make him proud when it came to Stacey’s butcher shop. Twice I remember screaming and crying in terror on the sidewalk when I heard the sound of Mr. Stacey’s saw coming from the shop. I had no idea why that sound terrified me, but it did and I had to be coaxed to go into the shop with my father. Mr. Stacey loved to give little children a raw wiener to eat. I took a bite the first time and found it disgusting. To this day I don’t eat raw or even rare meat. I simply could not be polite and eat the rest of it. The second time Mr. Stacey offered me a wiener I hung my head and shook it in humiliation. I would have liked to please him and my father by accepting it, but I simply could not. This is my first memory of social inadequacy. I was told that my cousin Doug loved Mr. Stacey’s raw wiener. Although I enjoyed being weighed like a pig on Mr. Stacey’s big platform scales that stood in the corner, the butcher shop with its display and smell of raw meat would never be my favourite place to be. I was happier in Otto’s drugstore. Mr. Otto also seemed very nice. He didn’t offer free samples of any
kind, but his eyes sparkled and he smiled warmly. As I grew older I discovered the delicious ice-
cream sodas which he served at the soda fountain at the far end of the store.

What was obvious to me was that these stores were not just a place to shop, but a place to talk. This could also happen on the sidewalk in front of shops and in places like McCoy’s barber shop where I expect people had lots of time to chat while Mr. McCoy cut their hair and clipped their necks with his clippers. Mr. McCoy gave me my first professional hair cut when my father took me there and I went from long hair in ringlets, which required a lot of effort on my mother’s part, to a short bob. I sat on a board that stretched across the arms of the chair while Mr. McCoy cut and he and my father chatted. I remember the tingle and pinch of the hand clippers on my neck and the tickle as Mr. McCoy flourished his big, talcum powdered brush and whisked away any fallen hair.

While I was in elementary school, his daughter Margaret opened up a beauty salon across the street from the barber shop. I expect it offered women the same opportunity to chat that her father’s shop offered men. I only went there once. It was an event that transformed me. I imagine I was ready to be transformed. I had only been enduring the first two years of high school. Younger than most of the other kids, I was skinny and shy and totally lacking in confidence. My breasts were small; my complexion was pimpled. I didn’t help my appearance at all by wearing my hair parted on one side and pulled back in a rather greasy, dark blonde ponytail. The hair that swept across my forehead in a sort of bang was held in place on the other side by nineteen bobby pins. I really must have looked a sight, particularly in left profile. Add to this picture cat’s eye glasses. Towards the end of grade ten it was somehow decided by my mother that I would have my hair cut and styled at Margaret’s beauty salon. In the years since my hair had been cut by Mr. McCoy, it had been cut by my aunt Leta or by my mother who alternated my bob with an occasional Toni home permanent. This involved sitting on the edge of our kitchen table wearing as little as decently possible with my mother eventually sounding cross and saying “Sit still!” while she pulled and twisted my hair into narrow, pink plastic rollers and then squeezed a foul smelling liquid onto them while I protected my eyes with a towel.
My mother made an early Thursday evening appointment. I would spend the night at my friend Helen’s place in the village. It was hard to believe that the girl with short curly hair who walked out of the shop was actually the same girl who had walked in with a ponytail and excessive hardware. I could hardly sleep for fear I would crush the curls that had been so artfully swept into what I thought of as a kind of turkey tail arrangement at the back of my head. The extent of the transformation hit me when people, including a couple of the teachers, didn’t recognize me when I got to high school the next morning. I never looked back. The ugly duckling had hatched, not into a swan, but into someone who now had the confidence to look life in the eye and enjoy it.

Margaret’s beauty parlour was the one place in the village that was exclusively the space of women. Since my earliest forays into the village were in the company of my father I thought of the places that we visited on his errands as the places of men who could be accompanied by small children. I later realised that women in the village shopped at Moore’s and Stacey’s, but my earliest memories are of my father talking to other men in these stores as well as at Cleave’s hardware store and Tripp’s shoemaker shop. It is quite possible that Saturday evening was a time for farmers like himself to come into town for the week’s groceries and miscellaneous errands, the village housewives having done their shopping earlier that day or on Friday so they would be free for Saturday’s baking. The women in my extended family all held to the same routine. Monday was washing day. Tuesday ironing. Saturday for baking and cleaning. Sunday church and company. I think all the women in the village and surrounding countryside followed this routine with the possible exception of church attendance. Monday is still the day when clothes snap on lines in my neighbourhood which is far from Prince Edward County.

If shops were a mixed social space, the garages I visited with my father were clearly the place of men. I never saw a woman in one of them. There were definite signals that these were places where men’s work was done and where men gathered. Cars and trucks were the domain of men. The black grease on the tools and on the hoist and the grease stained hands of the men who worked there and whose hands remained grease stained after they wiped them with a rag before handling money at the till, were a clear signal that this was not a place for a clean woman in a print dress. This was a place for men who didn’t mind getting dirty and who could do heavy
lifting. They made it very clear that the garage was a place for men only by hanging erotic calendars. We looked forward to receiving calendars with pretty scenes given out by garages and shops every December. But garages hung calendars with provocative pictures of women wearing very few clothes. Neither the women nor their clothes looked the least bit real. It was clear from the way the men behaved that these calendars were for their eyes only, that there was something taboo about them and that my father was uncomfortable with his small daughter taking notice of them. It was equally clear from the way the women looked up and smiled with puckered lips that men were the intended viewers. My mother explained that these were girlie calendars that men hung in garages. I knew that the men made joking remarks about them, remarks for men’s ears only which they found amusing as they stood about smoking and drinking cokes from the cooler. I hadn’t visited a garage since I was a tot accompanying my father until one August when I happened to be in the office part of a garage with him during a sweltering heat wave. I would have been eleven or twelve years old. That time I caught the tenor of their remarks when someone commented that it was an awfully hot time for young Jack to be having his honeymoon and everyone but me laughed heartily. Clearly they all enjoyed the moment of reverie and revelry that this invoked. I was painfully aware that I was a female who was too old to be in their presence in what was really their space.

The garage wasn’t just a place for car repairs, it was a place where a man could joke with other men while filling up the gas tank or picking up a mended inner tube or tire or simply stopping for a soft drink or a pack of smokes. Here men could safely engage in sexual banter or gossip. Part of their entertainment was provided by more marginal men who drifted in on a regular basis: Johnny Baverstock, a tall, lean man who chewed on a cigarette butt and was one of the County’s first recyclers as he walked County roads picking up pop bottles and putting them in the child’s wagon he pulled behind him; Pepsi Cola Pete, who drank his first Pepsi of the day when Art Moore opened the grocery store each morning and who stopped at the White Rose garage for another one mid-afternoon, was known for the number of Pepsis he consumed – up to seventeen a day the White Rose owner said; the large and not terribly bright man who developed a hernia they said was the size of a watermelon and who was charged by a dairy owner after he was found in a compromising position standing on a crate behind one of their cows. He was known to
children as the one (and rather scary) adult who regularly attended Saturday afternoon shows at the Regent cinema. At the beginning of each film he could be seen standing framed in the light of the doorway licking an ice cream cone.

Women found their own private space largely in their homes where they received each other for monthly meetings of the Women’s Auxiliary or the Women’s Missionary Society of the United Church where most of them were members. I can only guess at the tenor of their conversations. I benefited from my mother telling me about the books she read for at each meeting each woman reported the number of serious books she had read that month. It was through this reading that my mother developed a sympathy for the lives of people in Africa and in the Arctic as well as a disgust for racism, sensibilities that she imparted to me. She disliked discussions about improving the parsonage and she wished that other members would take their reading more seriously for she was a voracious reader and had always read more than anyone else. When I was old enough to attend church she instructed me to put my donation in the mission side of the envelope. People in Africa needed help and she reckoned that the parsonage could do without a new rug as well as she could.

I couldn’t accept what she relayed to me from a fervently anti-Catholic book that she read. The book which was supposedly written as an exposé by a former nun claimed that priests forced nuns to submit to their sexual desires and that pregnancies were dealt with by the other nuns putting a mattress over the pregnant nun and stomping on her belly. My mother was scandalized. I suspect it was a popular book that had been exposed as fraudulent long before my mother read it; but she didn’t know that. It was, after all, a book classified as non-fiction in the Bloomfield library. I simply could not believe that this was true. It was too preposterous for my idealistic teenage mind to accept.

The Sunday school rooms attached to the back of the United Church provided social space for a number of affiliated groups. It was there that the Women’s Auxiliary held their Christmas and Easter teas for which the women contributed food and served afternoon tea to the older ladies in the community, many of whom were members of the Women’s Missionary Society for an age
line demarcated membership in the two groups. I recall coming home from school and finding my mother making ribbon sandwiches using white, pink and green bread. Checkerboard sandwiches were made using white and brown bread. She cut the crusts off the bread so that the tea sandwiches were little geometric masterpieces. Best of all she made pinwheel sandwiches by rolling bananas in long slices of white bread spread with peanut butter and then sliced crosswise. I was always allowed to eat one of these. My mother recalls that for years the Christmas tea’s pièce de résistance was a dessert of white angel food cake, cut and layered with red and green jello. I don’t know if they always had an entertainment program for these teas. I do know that Dorothy Stenning organized us teenage girls one spring to provide a fashion show of old clothes. I felt very proud strutting across the runaway at the front of the room wearing a mauve chiffon flapper dress from the twenties, knowing that my grandmother was sitting at a table with her friends in the audience and that my mother would be watching from the back of the room with the other servers. These teas, as well as church suppers such as the chicken pie supper held each autumn, were church fundraisers to which younger women donated time and food and older women and couples paid for the privilege of attending a large social event and eating in the fellowship of friends and neighbours.

When my father died I found myself back in these rooms for the first time in thirty-five years. Although his funeral was held in the morning at a funeral home in Picton, my mother had arranged for a lunch to be served by the Women’s Auxiliary in Bloomfield. I found myself for the first time sitting at a table and being served by one of my mother’s friends and neighbours from the time of my childhood. It was the most comforting thing to be in the presence of these women who for their entire adult lives had been providing food and a quiet comfort to the bereaved. It brought back and gave new meaning to all those times I had heard the phone ring and my mother say that yes she would be willing to make a pie and those times when I had been the one who brought home her pie plate or scalloped potato dish with her initials E.L.M. taped to the bottom. So much in my own world had changed that it was a consolation to see that the women of Bloomfield had carried on a tradition and were carrying it on still and to feel for myself the value of it.
The Sunday school rooms of the United Church may well have been the most actively used social space in the village. In addition to the organized activities of church affiliated groups such as meetings of the Young People’s Association and the dinners of the AOTS men’s group, both of which took place one evening a month, this was where the Bloomfield troupes of Brownies, Girl Guides, Cubs and Boy Scouts met. I was a Brownie and a Girl Guide so I well remember us swinging around in a pixie circle in our little brown uniforms with little gold pixie pins on our chests. Girl Guides for me was a wonderful experience. I learned so much. My mother was our leader and she was very good which made me very proud of her. I remember groups of us retreating to different corners of the rooms to practise skills such as knot tying or semaphore.

One winter our troupe went to Picton one evening a week to learn first aid from members of the Saint John’s Ambulance. Another winter we learned life saving skills. My mother and I talked about our new found knowledge and practised tying bandages on each other at home. One Saturday morning in spring my mother led us on a hike towards McDonald’s Island so we could practise our trail laying skills along the way. A couple of times she arranged for my father to take us over the same route on a hayride using our hay wagon and team of horses. For me this was a magical time as we rode on the wagon together looking out over the fields and marshes bathed in the light of the evening, our voices ringing out sweetly in White Coral Bells and more raucously in Johnny Trebek (We’ll all be ground in sausage meat in Johnny Trebek’s machine) or I Wish I Was… (a little mosquito. I would nippy and I’d bitey under everybody’s nightie. Oh I wish I was a little mosquito).

Girl Guide and Boy Scout activities opened us up to a broader world. Once every winter Girl Guide troupes from all over the County would gather at the Picton United Church and troupe in behind the more senior members of our individual troupes who carried flags which were deposited at the front of the church. I don’t remember what exactly happened after we all took our seats. I know that there were speeches and songs. What I remember was that this event made us feel that we were part of a much broader movement. This was particularly brought home to us the year that we boarded a bus and went to Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto where we and other Girl Guides from across Canada filled the stands and watched Girl Guides from all over the world troupe their colours as they marched into the arena behind their flags. It was a colourful
and moving experience to realise that girls all over the world, girls with brown, black or white skin, were learning the same skills as we were and sharing in the same kind of camaraderie as we had when we came together.

It wasn’t until late in my elementary school days that I realised that the town hall was another place where women met. One day when friends and I were walking past it after school, some of their mothers were just coming down the town hall steps. They had been at a meeting of the Women’s Institute, a non-denominational organization, that seems to have been more project oriented than the church affiliated groups. The doors were wide open and I had the impression that it had been a more interesting and gayer meeting than what I imagined Women’s Auxiliary meetings to be. They had been quilting. We had a collection of quilts that had been made by my grandmothers and aunts before my parents were married. I knew, however, that quilting could be an enjoyable activity as I had twice seen my grandmother Marshall and her friends quilting in her living room. This experience helped me imagine my grandmother Fitchett, my mother and her sisters and my great-grandmother Baldwin who had carded the wool for the batting, working together to stitch four quilts each for my mother and her sisters before they married. I wished I had more occasions to be with women who were quilting. Quilting looked interesting and it seemed to be fun.

By the time that I learned about the Women’s Institute I owned a bicycle and this had made the village more accessible to me. When I was seven my mother bought me a library card. From then on the library became the most important place in the village, other than the school, and it was the place that I loved the best. I loved books and I liked the people who came into the library for clearly, like my mother and me, they liked books too. Miss Smith, the librarian, was a very nice person and I thought she had a very interesting job. I read every Nancy Drew, Cherry Ames and Bobbsey Twins book that she had on the shelves and then moved on to books about car racing and animals before discovering romance in books like *Forever Amber* in the adult section.

The library collection included two books of non-fiction that played very important roles in my education. The one was *Hammond’s Nature Atlas* which I borrowed again and again and wished
there were more books like it. It was this book that taught me how to identify the grains of white quartz and pink feldspar in coarse sand as well as the types of rocks that built up the bridgeway leading to the second story of our barn. I have never lost my interest in rocks and minerals that began with the reading of this book. When I was twelve and suddenly religious, I reasoned that if Jesus was a Jew I must be one too, that all Christians were in some sense Jews and that therefore I should learn something about what it meant to be a Jew. Fortunately the library had acquired a big new book, I believe it was a Time Life book, on world religions. I read it cover to cover several times comparing the world’s great religions. It seemed to me that their common thread was the golden rule and that this was what mattered as the basis for how we treated each other. Whether we did that as Christians, Jews, Muslims or Hindus didn’t matter. I was envious of the more colourful aspects of the oriental religions. The United Church was anything but colourful and my aesthetic needs would never be satisfied there. In spite of the plainness of Protestantism, I realised that although each of these great religions seemed legitimate, it was the social gospel in which I was growing up that I found the most appealing. Although I left organized religion as a young adult, the ideas and knowledge that I gained reading that book stayed with me and later sustained my study of religion and archaeology at university. The social gospel became the bedrock of my politics.

By the time I discovered these big books, I was no longer dependent on my father for a ride to the library except in winter. By riding my bike I could stay as long as I wanted and make use of the big table where members of the library board sat for their meetings and where the magazines were spread out to be read. For a while Seventeen magazine became my most cherished guide as I tried to make sense of life as a teenager. I and other book loving young people could sit around this table and read and talk quietly to each other. The library was a social place and not just a repository of books.

In our early teens, finding social space where we could be together outside of our homes took on more importance. Where that social space would be was seasonal. In winter it was on ice. I don’t know how many years the United Church drive shed, which had been built to shelter horses and buggies, functioned as a skating rink. I only frequented it towards the end of elementary school.
The single most important book of my childhood was *Bells on Finland Street* about a young girl in Sudbury who wants very much to learn to figure skate. Her family can’t afford figure skates or lessons. Then her grandfather comes from Finland to live with them. It turns out that grandfather knows how to do fancy figures. Ellen’s dream comes true when grandfather gives her a pair of figure skates for Christmas and teaches her how to figure skate. I loved this book and read it several times. The book had black and white line drawings of Ellen practising the sparrow and other figures. My cousin in Toronto had figure skates and took lessons, but for a while reading this book was the best I could do. Once I too had figure skates I would put on my skates as soon as I got home from school and head across the field east of the house where water had frozen in reasonably long patches. There I did my best to emulate Ellen. I wanted to soar like a bird across that ice. I did it for relatively short stretches.

The ice rink was not a place to practise figure skating. It was a more social place where children could talk as they skated round and round to music. There was even a small room attached to the front of the shed where we could put on our skates, buy a soft drink and warm up by the stove. Then someone in the village, it might have been Henry D. Williams, got the magnificent idea of turning the millpond into a skating rink. The men of the village seemed to throw their hearts into it. Lights were installed on poles to light up the end of the pond closest to the street. A shack smelling wonderfully of fresh wood was built on the shore. Our fathers took turns as supervisors during evenings and weekends. I expect they also assumed responsibility for cleaning the ice. There was music and a loudspeaker and a stove to warm up by. Boys played hockey in the brightly lit area in front of the shack. The rest of us skated as far as we wanted to venture, generally not going too far away from the warmth of the shack and the pool of light adjacent to the designated hockey area. It seems to me that I skated there every weekend afternoon and several evenings every week all winter. I was in heaven. There is no skating like that on a long outdoor surface of ice. Add the music of *The Skaters’ Waltz*, a sky full of stars above and a friend’s hand in yours as you skate together down a long stretch of ice, your breath steaming out in front of you and you approach northern nirvana. When our fun was brought too soon to an end by a group of boys who smashed the lights and vandalised the shack, the soft artificial ice that stuck to our skate blades in the newly constructed Picton arena just didn’t hold the same
In summer we found companionship at the beach, on long bike rides through the countryside, on our front porches and in the indoor social spaces provided by snack bars. The soda fountain in Otto’s drugstore was another place where my best friend and I could enjoy ourselves, but it didn’t seem to be a place where we could linger. There were snack bars throughout the village where men stopped for coffee or for a hamburger or hotdog lunch in the case of tourists and men whose work had them travelling about the County. In summer they became places that teenagers could enjoy. My friend and I discovered one, which we particularly liked, where we could take as much time as we wanted to sip our cokes and eat a bag of chips or a Crispy Crunch chocolate bar. Mac’s Lunch was appealing in part because it was long and low with a north light slanting in the windows that ran the length of it. We warmed two of the about fourteen counter stools every afternoon we could for a couple of summers. The main attraction for me was Audrey. I was always on the lookout for women as role models for how women could live their lives other than as housewives as was the case for almost every woman I knew. Audrey was one such example. She seemed to run her own show as the owner, chief cook and bottle washer and often the only server. Although Audrey had a son, she didn’t look like any other mother that we knew. She wore her hair in a ponytail, a style only worn by teenagers like ourselves as far as we knew. She flipped burgers while she drawled a conversation out of one corner of her mouth and maintained a cigarette with a long stump of ash out of the other corner. Audrey brooked no nonsense and it was clear that men respected her. I was impressed.

It may not be surprising, then, that Audrey played an important role in my life. One afternoon when business was slow, Audrey came over to the counter to talk to us. She asked if we had received our report cards. We said we had. She asked my friend what her average was. She responded with something like 68 per cent. This surprised me as I had always had higher grades than she did. I had been an excellent student in elementary school, but in grades nine and ten I had stayed up late, did little homework and was too tired to pay much attention in class. I hadn’t given it any thought before, but I suppose at some unconscious level I had just assumed that my friend had slipped down with me. Audrey then asked what average I had and I sheepishly replied
something like 63. Audrey looked a bit surprised and asked me how long each class was at high school. I said fifty minutes. Audrey looked at me hard and said, “Do you mean to tell me that you can’t remember what you hear in forty minutes out of fifty?” I could follow her math. She was telling me that I should be able to have an average of 80 per cent. It all seemed so simple. Surely I could remember what I heard in forty minutes out of fifty. Needless to say my grades showed a marked improvement that fall. But Audrey’s message wasn’t about getting high marks. It was about paying attention to what is going on around you and doing your best. It changed my life.

Before we were old enough to seek out snack bars as places where we could socialize there was one place in the village that was known and loved by all children. Philomena DeGroff had a small variety store on main street very close to the school. Going to Fleeney’s was a favourite past time. Our allowance money was dribbled out in pennies, nickels or dimes on noon hour excursions. A bell rang as we opened the door and Fleeney would appear from the further recesses of the store where she may have been sitting and chatting for Fleeney had arranged two chairs facing each other near a stove and along a window. At slow times she could be found sitting there visiting with an man of her age. Immediately on the right as one entered there was a wide glass showcase full of penny candy and chocolate bars. There we would crowd around trying to decide between red wax lips, black licorice bars, black licorice pipes with red beaded ashes, red licorice twizzlers, black balls which we could suck and verify the changing colour from time to time, brown pastilles which were said to taste like anaesthetic, Smith Brothers’ black coughdrops or the more expensive chocolate bars or bottles of pop from the cooler. It was not an easy decision and required discussion on the way there as well as on the way back to school as we evaluated our purchases and discussed the relative merits of Orange Crush and pink Cream Soda. There was always a heightened awareness when we were in Fleeney’s. Not only was there this almost overwhelming selection and the possibility of something new appearing (wax lips made a brief appearance only in spring), but Fleeney herself was considered something of a character. She was an elderly woman running her own business which made her extraordinary. She had men as friends. Although the shelves were crowded with all kinds of dry goods, as far as we were concerned she was in the business of selling candy. She was said to wear a wig and a story was told that once when she was up on a ladder reaching something for a customer, her wig
had become caught and had been lifted off. We went there in an edgy state of anticipation always
wondering if her wig would come off while we were there. We hoped it would. Then we would
have a real story to tell.

As we entered our teens our social space expanded to include hockey games at the arena in
Wellington and Saturday afternoon matinees at the Regent Theatre in Picton. As high school
students we could go to dances held in the school gymnasium or at Teen Town, where organised
dances were held for teenagers every Saturday night at the army base at camp Picton. Boys who
were more electronically minded were our disc jockeys. If we were lucky we would eventually
date boys who had drivers’ licenses and access to a car on Saturday night in which case our social
horizons expanded to include movie theatres in Belleville. Since we came together at high school
from all parts of the County, our friendships became far flung and involved riding on a friend’s
school bus for an overnight visit at their house on a farm in some distant corner of the County.
Whether visiting friends, going to the beach or dating, we spent a lot of time travelling County
roads together. Whether we lived on a farm, in a village or in the town of Picton, our lives didn’t
seem to be that dissimilar. The friendships we made with teenagers whose fathers were in the
military offered a rare glimpse into lives lived outside of one environment where everyone knew
everyone else at least by reputation not to mention the reputation of their ancestors.

By my last year in high school I had begun to find the County a bit too confining. I wanted access
to bookstores and bigger libraries. Since I had cousins who lived in Toronto I had visited the city
fairly regularly. I had been to the Toronto zoo and I had been visiting the Royal Ontario Museum
since I was six or seven. Each time I went to visit, my aunt asked me what I would like to do.
Despite the sighs I came to expect from my cousins I always replied that I wanted to visit the
museum. I was increasingly attracted to the resources offered by the city. I had eaten in Toronto’s
Chinatown and I liked the fact that there were new immigrants in Toronto and shops and
restaurants that catered to them. When my cousin from Toronto came to visit me we explored our
interest in ethnic foods by making late night feasts of spaghetti, each time striving to make the
sauce hotter with the addition of more and more chili powder. I don’t know where we got the
impression that Italians ate hot spicy food, but the food served by our mothers and the mothers of
our friends was not spicy and we craved the sophistication of trying something different. We went to Picton and asked a Chinese waiter to show us how to use chopsticks to eat the chicken chow mein we had ordered. Part of growing older involved differentiating ourselves from the way our parents and our grandparents had lived. For many of us this meant leaving the County to seek more education or employment after high school graduation. In many ways we had no choice. The County could not provide either the education or the career paths that our high school education prepared us to take. For the rest of my life I have struggled to find a balance between the city and the country for the appeal of County landscapes and the love of nature that I developed there has never left me.

All I had ever really wanted to be when I grew up was an artist. In these days of television it is not hard to imagine how a child gets ideas about what she would like to be when she grows up. But how did I growing up on a farm on the edge of a village in the Forties and Fifties get the notion I wanted to be an artist? An aunt who drew profiles of people seemed inspiration enough. I was taught to love reading, but never having seen anyone write anything other than a letter, it didn’t occur to me to want to be a writer.

Words and visual images were what fired my imagination and satisfied me. The beauty of the County’s landscapes, its water and its beaches became part of my visual repertoire. I looked to the village for other means of visual and cultural stimulation. Today potters, glassblowers, woodcrafters and painters make their homes in Bloomfield and contribute to its charm. This wasn’t the case when I was young. The school perhaps should have been a cultural centre, but it wasn’t. Other than the box under my desk full of folded paper wonders that we added one more piece to every Friday afternoon in grade two, art was either non-existent or a dull matter of following directions. The word “creativity” had not yet entered the school curriculum. Nor was there much in our pageantry – the annual Nativity scene aside – that was sustaining or memorable. Our readers were dull and made even duller by the voices of one child or another mangling the language as they struggled to read out loud. A few books at the back of the senior room didn’t add much to the cultural scene.
No, culture was found in other places… like the town hall, the drugstore and the library. In the Forties I remember being taken to two plays in the town hall. They were thrilling. One was a minstrel show. The novelty of the blackened faces and the banjo music was exciting. The other play featured a romantic looking young woman to whom a young man sang, “Daisy, Daisy give me your answer true.” I was captivated. My aunt took part in both productions. They were the only plays my family saw; whether none was performed in the Fifties or whether we didn’t go because my aunt wasn’t involved, I don’t know.

The town hall was the venue of a wonderful Hallowe’en party. Children in costumes paraded around the room to piano music while judges decided which costumes should be awarded prizes. I was awestruck by the magnitude of the fact that Dick Sutton’s mother had actually knit him a suit of chain mail so he could be a knight. That certainly sparked my artistic imagination. The next year I was old enough to assume responsibility for my own costume. I went as a bat all dressed in black with my mother’s old black pillbox hat sprouting little black ears atop my head and magnificent black wings taking flight on my back.

Although I could only imagine the fiddle music, the plaid shirts and the full skirts swinging, I knew that couples square danced in the town hall. Before I was born my parents, despite their claims of each having two left feet, had sometimes danced the foxtrot at deer hunters’ dances organized by Art Moore on Saturday nights throughout the winter. The town hall was a cultural centre that embraced more than town council meetings.

For me the cultural centre of the village was the library, which was open on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. It was a stroke of genius that led my mother to get me a library card at the beginning of grade two. I still remember the thrill of reading my first library book, Cherry Ames, Army Nurse. I read it sitting outdoors, on a great roll of fencing wire surrounded by sunflowers in bloom while my mother and aunt pulled carrots and other root vegetables from the garden. I remember pausing to look up at them and to ponder how amazing it was that I was reading without my mother’s help.
My art gallery was Otto’s drugstore. For one thing, Mr. Otto had a collection of green glass demi-john bottles that lined a high shelf along both sides of the store. I loved their shapes and shades of green, green blue. This was installation art. One of Otto’s other features was a cozy corner just inside the door where Mr. Otto kept rows of comic books. Cartoon art was there for the browsing and the ultimate ten cent purchase. The one and only time we had to do a research assignment in public school, it was a *Life* magazine from Otto’s that furnished the illustrations. I loved its glossy colour images. Even the pink and chocolate sodas served at Otto’s soda fountain were art to me.

Finally, there was one more source of the arts in Bloomfield. The stained glass windows of the Bloomfield United Church, the elegant hats of the Stark sisters, Mrs. Thompson playing the organ and the poetry of the twenty-third psalm.

The country itself was just coming of age and experiencing a cultural awakening. The social, cultural and physical landscapes of the County formed the bedrock on which we could build a life whether we chose to stay or to leave to follow our dreams and make the most of our innate capacities. That is the genius of our place and our times.
"Country Mouse"

“Come quickly,” my mother said in a tone of both awe and excitement. Scooping me up in her arms so that I could see out of the kitchen window, my mother pointed to a bluebird perched atop the rusty stem of a dockweed, the world around it white with snow. I will never forget that late March or early April sight of vivid blue and the deep rusty brown of the bird’s breast, the dockweed darker still against a background of pure white snow. With this one gesture, my mother signaled to me that nature was a thing of beauty to be appreciated and, perhaps of equal importance, she signaled that nature was something that members of our family would share. To this day, when we talk or write to each other we always share stories of what wildlife we have seen recently, what birds have visited our feeders, what flowers are in bloom in our gardens, the weather and everything related to it. Now that my mother is living in an apartment and has less opportunity to see birds, my sister and I act as eyes for her, writing to her each week about the birds we have seen. She says she loves to read these letters. She is still the one with the best memory for identifying their songs and calls, but then my mother has always been a whistler, a talent neither my sister nor I seem to have inherited. Perhaps being a whistler herself she is better tuned to the whistled songs of others. If I were to liken my mother to a bird, it would be a brown thrasher. Only the thrasher approaches the exuberance of my mother whistling *Surrey With the Fringe on Top*, tanned and barefoot, going about her chores, as I knew her to be when she was young.

It may have been later that same spring that I wandered alone toward the dockweed through long grass that seemed to be as tall as I was. Suddenly the grass parted and there in front of me were brown puppies rolling and tumbling over and under each other. Scarcely able to believe my eyes I went running back to the house to tell my mother. Not puppies, baby groundhogs she said. Their mother must have a hole where they live under ground. I went back to find them, but the groundhogs had disappeared. I never saw them again. I was fortunate to have seen them during the one or two days that baby groundhogs are given to play. That summer my father showed me how groundhogs made homes with more than one hole so that they would always have an escape route and how one of these holes might be quite hidden behind an old pile of stones or some other
obstacle whereas the main hole provided the groundhog with a good view in a sunny location. I loved to see where groundhogs would pop up each spring. Generally they lived along the fence lines, but every once in awhile one would foolishly create a hole far enough out in a field to be a hazard for the horses. This was an invitation for my father to get out his shotgun.

Although my mother helped in the fields planting and picking tomatoes, picking berries, working in the garden and loading pumpkins, she spent most of her time in the house. Consequently it was my father, who had an equally sharp eye for nature and perhaps a greater interest, who was the one to introduce us children to the plant and animal wildlife around us. They may have both taught me to recognize the common birds that I could see about the house. I remember April mornings when my attention was drawn to robins extracting worms from the lawn. It was my father who taught my cousin Doug and me how to recognize grassy bird nests as well as killdeer nests, both of which nest on the ground, and the way the mother killdeer would try to lead us away from her nest with her bent wing behaviour and pleading call. If we wanted to find her nest we must search in the direction she came from and not in the direction she was trying to lead us. Once we had learned to recognize these nests, my father could then tell me at the dinner table that there was a grassy bird nest in the hayfield below the berry patch. This was enough to send my cousin Doug and me out on a search. Having seen the nest for ourselves we could then report back on our success. We received similar assignments to look for killdeer in the berry patch. There was something magical about finding a nest full of eggs. We knew that we must not touch them or stay too long and upset the mother bird. When we were old enough to venture further from the house I received such messages as a cowbird has laid eggs in another bird’s nest in a fence post this side of the pear tree. That would send us off to discover which fence post and what kind of bird was sitting on cowbird eggs. I don’t think for one moment that my father was thinking up activities to entertain us. He was simply sharing his own observations and enthusiasm for nature. By then, we were old enough to be familiar with the barn and the barn swallows that built their muddy nests along the rafters of the cow stable. It was always entertaining to watch the baby swallows sticking their scrawny necks out over the lip of the nest demanding food from their parents. Their open beaks seemed to be the biggest part of them. On our own we discovered that downy woodpeckers favoured the line of silver maple trees close to the back of Doug’s
house. Every once in awhile we would decide to go and watch the woodpeckers. No one else seemed to pay them much attention. It was a private place for woodpeckers and children. The woodpeckers paid no attention whatsoever to us.

Gradually we learned the names of plants. The names of plants in the flower beds I learned at planting time. I always helped my father plant the pansies and the marigolds and my grandmother taught me the names of the plants that she planted in the beds in front of her house. In addition to the annuals like sweet alyssum which edged the beds and the zinnias and asters which provided colour in August, her lawn was bordered by a line of bridlewreath spirea bushes as well as big, blowsy peonies. She had created a shady spot at the south end of the verandah where a Persian lilac grew near a Persian yellow shrub rose that was appreciated in June for its single gold flowers and spicy scent. These two plants were her pride and joy and I could understand why. Although I was struck by the fact that they were both Persian, it was only later that they put me in mind of very different gardens - gardens with the symmetry of Persian carpets in an altogether different landscape.

I wanted very much to have a garden of my own. I created one with Doug’s help one morning in early May. The ground ivy was in bloom in the raspberry patch. I thought its mottled leaves, purple flowers and pungent aroma quite attractive. We dug the plants up with our hands. The soil was soft and the lawn was damp when we artfully arranged the plants sitting in some sort of geometric pattern all over the front lawn. We added some small boards to improve the geometric effect. I thought we had done a splendid job and was very surprised when my father came in for dinner and chastised me for having made a mess of the lawn. A mess! I was crushed. It was beautiful! I had to wait until I was nine years old to have my own garden. Mrs. Cahoon was dividing perennials and my grandmother who understood my love for plants arranged for me to have some which I planted near the phlox that grew around our front porch. None of these perennials survived for long except the yellow iris which really are indestructible and can survive a lack of water and a poorly dug bed

We developed quite a repertoire of weeds which we knew by name: butter and eggs, buttercups,
nettles, pigweed, burdock, chicory, plantain. We learned their names in such a casual way that I have no memory of it ever happening, with one exception. I expect it was probably the first summer that I was allowed to play outside unsupervised that my father took me to a spot along the lane where deadly nightshade grew. Beside it was a wild current bush. My father, who must have been watching the fruit develop so that his lesson would be well timed, taught me how to recognize the deadly nightshade with its purple flowers and red berries. He explained that the berries were poisonous. The currents, on the other hand were edible, but they were apt to contain worms. He opened one up to show me a tiny worm inside. Doug and I would sometimes pick a few black currents to eat, but we were discouraged by the worms and the currents never tasted as good as we would have liked. I am not sure how we figured out that the best part of the current bush was the sweet nectar that we could suck from the narrow ends of the tubular yellow flowers. It was delicious. When I was old enough to venture farther afield, a lesson in poison ivy recognition was equally important though it never stopped me from breaking out in the familiar itchy blisters each spring.

I don’t remember how exactly we learned the names of wild flowers. What I remember is that my mother who grew up along the shore of Hay Bay didn’t always use the same names for things as my father who grew up in the County. What were adders’ tongues to my father were rooster fights to my mother. Similarly the birds which my father called flickers were highholders to my mother. Eventually I learned that the delicate pink flowers that my parents called mayflowers were known as spring beauties in wild flower books. It may have been because Doug and I went to the fields with our parents when they planted tomatoes that we discovered the joy of picking violets and trilliums and adders’ tongues in the woods which were near the rear of the farm far from the house. Our bouquets were so pretty and we had so much fun picking them that it was a great disappointment to watch them become so bedraggled before we could get them to the house and put them in a jar of cold water.

As young school children we would venture back the lane on our own to pick wild flowers always after having ascertained from my father that the trilliums had come into bloom. We would hunt through the damp area near the creek that ran through the woods in springtime to see who
could spot the biggest jack-in-the-pulpit, lifting up the green and maroon striped hood to reveal the purple jack inside. I remember my surprise and delight the first time that I realised that over the summer jack had become a cluster of red berries. When I think about it, my father must have taken us to the woods to teach us the names of flowers for I do remember him teaching me how to recognize the jack-in-the-pulpit and to not pick it as there were few of them.

It would be early summer when my father would announce that the wild phlox were in bloom. I lived for this moment. The phlox were my favourite wild flowers and they only grew in one spot. They formed a patch in our rear field that was used only for pasture. To get to them we had to walk the full length of the lane which ended on a bit of a rise at the entrance to the field. I reached the top of the rise in anticipation for I knew that soon we would see the patch of blue flowers surrounded by white clover and timothy. We each picked an armload of the sweet scented blue flowers until one year my father told me that there were none. I went looking for them for several years, but wild phlox were never seen again growing on our farm. Perhaps Doug and I in our enthusiasm had unwittingly contributed to their demise. It breaks my heart to think about it, for the bouquets, which were beautiful in our arms, were never at their best after the long walk back to the house. If only we had known to simply admire them as we did with the jack-in-the-pulpits.

We showed the same combination of enthusiasm and disappointment when the tadpoles and polywogs we collected each spring died before they turned into frogs and toads. Fortunately, the amphibian population survived our depredations better than the wild phlox did. We seemed to be eternally optimistic. We would come home from school to find some of them floating belly up, empty the jars and head back to the creek hoping to have better luck next time. What we gained besides the occasional wet foot, was a better understanding of amphibian development and we had a lot of fun doing it. Red-winged blackbirds fusses and okacheed in the low willow bushes that outlined the creek’s edge. Purple violets and bright yellow marsh marigolds saturated the banks with colour. We often returned with a bouquet in addition to the requisite jar of tadpoles.

I quickly understood that different plants not only bloomed at different times but preferred different environments. These differences were more subtle than the obvious differences between
woodlots, wet lands or open sunny spots in a pasture field. There were differences between one woodlot and another though I couldn’t yet grasp what caused those differences other than the amount of light that penetrated the trees. Our woodlot was quite thick and had the spring creek running through it. The woodlot that I visited with my friend Diane just three farms west of us was drier and its canopy was far more open. Mayflowers and trilliums were more abundant in it. More mysterious was the fact that hepaticas and pink wild orchids grew in the area where my mother grew up. Hepaticas actually grew on both farms owned by my maternal grandparents though these farms were on opposite shores of Hay Bay. I was not aware of any place in the County where they grew and I didn’t know about differences in soil alkalinity and acidity. I only wished that they grew on our farm for they were very pretty. Like the wild phlox some plants seemed to only grow in small very localized patches. Orange hawkweed only grew beside one large boulder along the lane. Blue flag iris only grew in one area along the creek. Their specificity made them all the more admirable as well as mysterious.

Spring first entered our lives each year from McDonald’s Island. Or more properly speaking from the marshes that surrounded it. My father and my uncle had licenses to trap muskrats and permission to run trap lines in the marsh. Consequently, each spring in tandem with the flocks of migratory geese that flew low overhead and the taste of fresh maple syrup from Foster’s sugar bush, dead muskrats appeared lined up on the verandah to dry. Bouquets of pussy willows were brought home from the marsh as were the occasional mink or a blue winged teal that had been caught in a trap. One year my father brought home a painted turtle that was suffering from a large bloodsucker that was wound around its neck. My father held a lighted match to the bloodsucker and it quickly dropped off. I thought of the turtle as a pet and was quite disappointed when it disappeared. We assumed it had found the pond. Years later its dried carapace was found under the side step. We surmised it had gotten under there and become stuck, unable to get back out.

McDonald’s Island played such an important role in offering us the richness of another habitat, that to this day a drive to the island is something that members of my immediate family do whenever we get together in the County. We are always hopeful that we will sight ducks and geese, perhaps a doe and a fawn along the edge of a hayfield in the last of the evening’s sunlight.
or if we are very lucky a red fox. The latter never happens and the deer are more common some
years than others, but the hope remains the same. Even if we come away not having seen much
more than a robin, we have enjoyed the journey and the memories it has evoked of other times -
the sweet scent of sap boiling in Blackman’s sugar shanty one fine spring Saturday, the buck
spotted several times along the edge of Blackman’s woods, old glass bottles found in an
abandoned dump between the marsh and the road, the Canada geese nesting in a quiet area of
water, the red-winged-blackbirds that sang from the dried stems of last year’s cattails, the good
feeling of just being together one more time driving slowly along this familiar road hoping for a
glimpse of wildlife to share.

Death wasn’t my preferred way to learn about nature, but it was part of farm life. I disliked
seeing the remains of winter butchering when Doug and I went to the barn to ride our sleighs
down the bridgeway. My father and my uncle were hunters which meant that every November
deer were skinned and hung from the same maple tree that held our swings in summer. The
skinned bodies of deer, rabbits and muskrats were familiar sights. A number of men including
some who lived in the village trapped muskrats. The area around Bloomfield was divided up into
trapping territories where each man worked. In trapping season my father and my uncle spent
their evenings in the woodhouse with sharp skinning knives and a pile of muskrats to be skinned.
Although I found what they were doing repugnant, I had to admire their ability to skin a muskrat
without damaging the pelt and reducing its value, turning the pelt inside out as they skinned along
the membrane that held together the inner organs and musculature. My mother and my aunt spent
these evenings in our kitchen with newspapers spread on the floor and a pile of newly skinned
pelts. Their job was to use sharp knives to remove the fat that clung to the skins. I knew that my
mother hated this job. She was as finicky about raw meat as I was. I can still hear the sound of
globs of pink fat falling on newspapers as they worked and chatted, a look of displeasure on both
of their faces. It was then the men’s turn to stretch the pelts skin side out on wire stretchers and
hang them on a line to dry stiff. As they dried they became the beautiful pelts that would be used
to make fur coats. It was an interesting process and I did learn something about anatomy as well
as about nature in a broader sense. By the time I came home from school and saw the bodies of
the rats drying, the pink lice that had been living on them had come out onto the tips of the fur

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and died from lack of a living host. I learned that the rat population fluctuated and that their pelts were thicker following particularly harsh winters. Of course, we had been shown muskrat houses in the marsh and we knew what muskrats ate. Scanning marshy areas to determine the number of houses and the size of the population was just something that was done whenever we drove past a marshy area.

My father wasn’t much of a bird hunter, though he did seem to take pride in shooting one Canada goose each fall. I think what he enjoyed most was getting close enough for a good shot despite the vigilance of the lead gander on duty at the moment. He respected these birds and taught us to do so as well. I did admire the beauty of a dead cock pheasant before it was plucked. To my mind, pheasant was delicious whereas I did not appreciate the taste of the occasional wild ducks that my mother cooked. Nor did I appreciate the gamy taste of venison, moose or the black bear that another hunter had given us to try. I really would have preferred to have seen all of these animals alive.

Fortunately, my father also liked to hunt animals without killing them. When he hunted to kill it was in the company of other men. Otherwise he hunted for the pleasure of sharing his love of wildlife with his family. He once came to the front door with a snowy owl he had caught with his hands. He said he wanted us to see it before he let it go. It is the only snowy owl I have ever seen and I am grateful to him. We were all sad when he came home the next day with the news that someone in the village had shot it after he had let it go. It was so beautiful and so rare its death seemed a real travesty. Once he simulated hunting in hopes of scaring up game for us to see. Hunting was illegal on Sunday, but one Sunday, no doubt with a desire to be out enjoying nature, he took my sister and me as well as a hunting friend of his, to the Sandbanks where he had my sister and I run yipping like dogs ahead of the hunters to scare up game. We thoroughly enjoyed that game though we didn’t scare up a single fox or rabbit that we saw. It was enough just to be there on a spring day when the trees were leafing out and the sun was warm.

One other Sunday morning he introduced my sister and me to a family of foxes. Each spring we rented a pasture farm where the young cattle would be put to graze and fatten over the summer.
Every Sunday morning my father went to check on them to ensure they were all accounted for and that none of them were sick or injured. One year a farm was rented along the Glenora road where the land rises up high above the Bay of Quinte. This particular Sunday he took my sister and me with him. He had discovered a den of foxes the week before and wanted to share it with us. Consequently, we found ourselves walking ever so quietly downwind of the den until we came in sight of it just a bit further down the hillside. We waited hidden by some bushes and it wasn’t long before three little foxes appeared and began to frolic in front of the den. A jumble of red fur, black noses and dainty black feet, they tumbled about like kittens. We had managed to get quite close and it was thrilling to see such beautiful animals playing in the sunshine on the grassy knoll. We loved having a father who would share such scenes with us.

The few weekends each summer that we spent at the deer hunting cabin he and his friends used each autumn, I looked forward to Sunday mornings when my father would take us on a walk to discover deer tracks and evidence of black bears or porcupines. Once when he came across a porcupine swimming in the lake he put a noose around its neck and slowly brought it back to shore to show us children. A few years ago I told that story to a stranger when we came across a porcupine along a trail in the Gaspé. He took great exception to it, saying that my father must have been an awful showoff. I hadn’t thought of it that way. Since then I have given it some thought. I don’t think he was. I do think he enjoyed the challenge of being able to approach and even catch animals, that was the boy in him, but mainly he wanted to share them with his children. I never heard him tell anyone else about what he had done. Neither the snowy owl nor the porcupine were any the worse for wear physically and he had let them go the minute we had been able to examine them. As a matter of fact they both seemed remarkably complacent.

I expect his motivation with regard to the baby rabbits was more complicated. We had a tractor and a team of draft horses. As a general rule my uncle worked with the tractor and my father worked with the horses. He loved horses and was very good with them, eventually raising purebred Belgians. It was my father who mowed hay with the team pulling the mower. Every once in a while, the mower blade would destroy a cottontail rabbit’s nest in the midst of a field of alfalfa or sweet clover. Rabbits were injured and my father felt bad about this. When I was young
he would bring a baby rabbit that he had managed to rescue to the house for me to nurse. I did this by feeding them milk from a doll’s bottle and wheeling them about in my doll’s buggy. None of them survived. It was sad, but we had tried. Eventually my father accepted the futility of these rescue missions and stopped bringing rabbits to the house. The baby bunnies were sweet little creatures and this contact with them made me feel closer to the larger but still quite small rabbits that we would see eating clover along the laneway on a summer evening.

As far back as I can remember I have felt close to nature. When we were very small Doug and I played under the bowers of grapevines stretched over and between the honeysuckle bushes that grew along the lane while our parents planted or picked tomatoes. I still have fond memories of these bower houses. We were small and making a temporary home so close to the earth and the plants that nature provided made it rather easy to imagine the scale of the world inhabited by a fox or a rabbit. As we became a bit older we occupied ourselves making houses under trees at the edge of the woods while our parents worked. My house was a big old oak tree. Sticks and stones outlined our rooms. The point of the activity seemed to be nothing more than this. We were creating homes in nature and for the space of a morning or an afternoon they were as homey as our actual houses and had the benefit of novelty and of being en plein air.

My mother increased my ability to imagine and appreciate the lives of wild animals when she began to buy us copies of the Burgess bedtime series. I have wonderfully warm memories of my mother seated on the wine coloured chesterfield with its cut leaf design and a little girl snuggled on either side of her while she read us stories of Sammy Jay, Bobby Coon, Jimmy Skunk and all of the other animals of the woods. The stories were very real to me and sometimes sad in the way that I already knew life could be sad and cruel. The bunnies had taught me that. I knew that some animals preyed on other animals. That was just how life was in nature. We ourselves ate meat. Animals would always be individuals to me. As an adult I have read disparaging remarks about those of us whom they claim anthropomorphize animals. However, now that I have time to observe animals and read scientific studies about them, I have no apologies for having considered animals as individuals worthy of my respect. I have been trained by a blue jay that I call Old Faithful and he is a very different individual than his mate Scaredy Cat or his son the Scientist.
And anyone who claims animals don’t experience emotions has simply not spent enough time with one. Any cat or dog can teach them that.

Thanks to my mother and Mr. Burgess I understood the significance of the crow that flew the length of the woods cawing every time we entered. I could now imagine how this communication would be received by other animals that would remain hidden while we were there. Sammy Jay had done the same for the animals in his woods. I now know that the chickadees in my garden add a couple of extra dees to their chickadee dee dee whenever a neighbour’s cat appears. Now that I understand rudimentary dee dee it has become a signal for me to go shoo the cat. One extra dee means a blue jay is near and I better check my pockets for peanuts in case it is Old Faithful or one of his clan. Nor do I have any doubt that the squirrels and the various kinds of birds in the garden understand the meaning of each other’s alarm behaviour. They are all multilingual.

Having heard the Burgess stories, now any animal we saw could be imagined by the name assigned by Mr. Burgess. The woods became an even more magical place alive with hidden possibility. Our most memorable time together in the woods took place one beautiful Thanksgiving day. Our cousins always came from Toronto to spend Thanksgiving on the farm with us. It may have been my idea that the five of us children celebrate Thanksgiving in the woods. My aunt Freda went along with the idea and packed us a lunch of sandwiches and grapes. I still think of this as the perfect Thanksgiving. At least it started out that way. The creek that ran through the woods always dried up in summer and by Thanksgiving the creek bottom was a bed of dried leaves. Marvelous thick grape vines hung down and we were having a great time swinging across the stream bed. I kept thinking how perfectly beautiful and idyllic it was. The canopy of coloured leaves above, the sunshine filtering through, grapevines sturdier than we had ever seen them. I felt truly thankful for this beauty and for the enjoyment that we took in each other’s company. Our idyll was interrupted when my uncle Errol’s voice called angrily from the lane. He had driven back to make us come back to the house and join the adults for dinner. I was furious. None of us wanted to go. We remonstrated. We had food we said. We had permission to be there. Still he commanded us in his voice full of authority and anger. I think we all knew that he would never cross the field to actually force us to come with him and yet somehow we
reluctantly gave in and went to join him. I still wonder at the power of adult authority. I had the impression that he was the only one of the grownups who couldn’t appreciate the idea of children celebrating Thanksgiving in the woods. Our fun had been sacrificed to his needs. It ruined the day and I doubt if our unhappy faces added much joy to the Thanksgiving table. To this day, I think that if at all possible, at least part of every Thanksgiving weekend should be spent in the woods.

If the story of Sammy Jay had alerted me to the possibility of inter-species communication among wild things, my parents had already alerted me to the idea that we could learn from the robin’s calls. There may be nothing more important to the success of any farmer than the role that weather plays. My father was always scanning the sky for signs of changes in the weather. The first axiom I ever learned was “Red sky at night, sailor’s delight. Red sky in the morning, sailor take warning.” It seems to work every time. Clouds in general were read for the information they contained. Summers were dry and we children would become aware that the adults were hoping for rain. The signal that preceded the clouds and told us that rain was coming came from the robin. We learned to recognize not just its cheery song and its alarm call, but more importantly its rain call. We would hear it and say, “The robin is calling for rain.” Adults and children would remark it and wait to see if the robin was right in its prediction. We hoped it would be.

Rain was a tricky business. The County was dry and we needed rain to make the crops grow. However nobody wanted so much rain in fall or spring that plants would be late being planted or tractors would become stuck in mud during fall ploughing. Once the hay was cut everyone on the farm held their collective breath that it not rain again until the hay was dry enough that it had been brought into the mow. Wet hay would warm up as it dried in a mow and cause spontaneous combustion. Every summer a barn burned either because of overheated hay or electrical storms. Nor did anyone want to feed moldy hay to their cows in winter. For us children, haying was a wonderful time. Doug and I would take well-timed turns driving the truck or tractor. My father seemed to be the expert who knew exactly how to load the hay onto the wagon so he could unload it efficiently. When the wagon load of hay reached the barn, the wagon was backed up the bridgeway and into the barn where it sat in the open area between the high mows on either side.
The tractor was then fastened to the rope of the block and tackle system that would deliver the hay to the mow. My uncle would climb up into the mow, fork in hand. My father stood on the load of hay and created a big mound of hay into which he pushed a giant two-tined fork. The fork locked onto the hay and my father then drove the tractor down the bridgeway. As he drove away, the fork holding an enormous amount of hay began to rise until it reached a track that ran across the barn. It quickly sped along the track. When it was directly above the spot where my uncle wanted the hay dropped he yelled, “Trip her!” This was the signal for Doug or Jean or I (We took strict turns.) to pull on the trip rope. The instant we pulled, the fork opened up and the hay fell into the mow. We would hear my uncle, up so high and so far into the mow that we couldn’t see him, forking the hay about to make it level. There was a wonderful smell of fresh mown hay and a dust of dried green leaves and blue alfalfa petals that settled through the air. This was repeated until the wagon was empty and back to the field we would go for another load. In winter we would play in the mow, climbing up and walking along cross beams and jumping down into the hay. I never had as much nerve as Doug who climbed all the way up to the platform just below the barn’s peak and jumped from that distance.

As soon as summer was over, the barn became a favourite place to play. We sought out nests of kittens in the hay. We got permission to feed a handful of oats to the horses. I loved the feel of their soft muzzles as they nuzzled our hands. Sometimes we were allowed to climb into the silo when one of our fathers was forking the corn silage down to be fed to the cows. Or we helped parcel out this sour smelling mixture of chopped corn for the cows to eat. We played hide and seek hiding behind hay bales or the old binder machine or in the granary bins of wheat and oats. By late winter there would be calves to feed from pails. Sometimes we “helped” clean the stable, pushing the wide stable brush ahead of us. For a time when we were quite young, Doug and I visited the barn when no one else was there with the express purpose of riding the cows. I suppose it was the beginning of our cowboy consciousness. Doug had received a brown and tan cowboy suit for Christmas and he wore it for these occasions. There was a low solid wood partition at the end of one stable. We took turns climbing up on it and maneuvering ourselves onto the back of the nearest cow. We had had several of these clandestine riding adventures before disaster struck. Doug who had left the house in his clean cowboy suit was thrown off the
cow’s back and landed in the gutter behind her. He was not a pretty sight. It was with heavy hearts that we returned to our respective houses. The jig was up. Our cow riding days were over.

My horse riding days had started when I was less than two years old. I shared my father’s love of horses and was never happier than when I sat legs almost straight out across a mare’s back while he cultivated or led the horse to drink. I would have given a lot to have learned how to ride properly. Our mutual love of horses formed an unspoken bond between my father, my great-uncle Elmer and me.

When I think back on my days growing up on the farm, my most powerful memories are tactile and sensual. The warm soft muzzles of horses, their sweet breath and welcoming nicker. The distinctive and strangely attractive smell of baby pigs that my father brought to the house because the sow had too many to feed and which he let me cuddle. The scent of freshly cut hay carried on the breeze of a warm summer evening. The smell of tractor grease and warm steel. My face buried in the soft brown fur of a baby rabbit. My small hands cupping the pale yellow feathers and tiny bones of a newly hatched and dried baby chick. The warmth of the hens’ eggs that we gathered. Waking up to the sound of my little banty rooster crowing and the taste of the tiny banty hen’s eggs that my mother fried in butter for my breakfast. The sweet smell of freshly picked raspberries in my hand and on their way to my mouth. The song of the robin calling for rain from the top of an old maple tree. The smell of dust in the lane on a still summer day after a truck has driven by on its way to the field. Cow tails swishing against pink and white flowered honeysuckle bushes as I drive the cows ahead of me down the lane to be milked. The patter of the first rain drops on dry earth.

They are good memories of a world that I found hard to leave. Living in my first Toronto apartment I fantasized that I had a raspberry bush growing in a tub in a corner of the kitchen. If only I had one raspberry bush to connect me to the farm that I missed so much, I reasoned I would feel more whole as I made my career in the city. It has not been easy to reconcile the country mouse and the city mouse that live within me. I have tried various combinations of city and country experience, never being content to have too much of one without the other.
Inevitably I return to the County for a visit and reconnect with the landscape, both physical and mental, that has played such a strong role in the shaping of my psyche. It feels good to touch the earth that I come from.