

Things My Sister Gave Me by Ernie Bies November 1, 2016

As a young boy growing up on a farm near Hearst, I



always looked forward to the Christmas gifts that would come from far off places from my oldest sister Olga. The tooled leather wallet from Mexico, the Davy Crocket hat, the silver cap pistols and holsters made a significant



impression at the time. I got a lot of mileage from the harmonica over the years but the greatest gift she gave



me will stay with me forever. It was the gift of opportunity.

Our parents had come from Czechoslovakia and managed to survive the Depression farming in Bradlo, a small Slovak community 8 miles south of Hearst. The inhospitable Northern Ontario climate soon convinced the settlers that it was unsuitable for long term farming and they began an exodus to more promising southern climates. By 1950 only a few remained. My father made more than one attempt to relocate the family, once in 1939 to Dobie, Ontario and again in 1944 to Geraldton, where I was born. Circumstances beyond his control brought him back to the sanctuary of the farm where we could live off the land until our fortunes improved. Our parents always insisted that we go to school so we too could escape the farm. My sister Olga was tasked with the responsibilities incumbent on the first born in an immigrant family. As soon as she was able she helped with the chores, served as a translator for my parents as they navigated the medical, educational and business bureaucracies and looked after her brothers and sisters when my parents were working the fields or indisposed. She found summer and part time jobs to help with expenses but she always had time for her little brothers and sisters. My first out of town adventure was a train trip to Kapuskasing in about 1948 when she took my sister Martha and me to experience the big city lights.



1950 was a milestone year for us as I started school in grade one while Olga was in her final year



of high school. Always a trailblazer she was a key organizer of school activities, played basketball and was voted as the first Queen of the recently opened Hearst High School. Her dreams of a nursing career and working with children could not be realized because of financial constraints and she was contemplating entering the work force in 1951 when opportunity literally knocked on the farmhouse door. School Board Inspector Kennedy arrived with an offer that changed her life and at the same time changed ours. "How would you like to teach school" he said. After getting over her



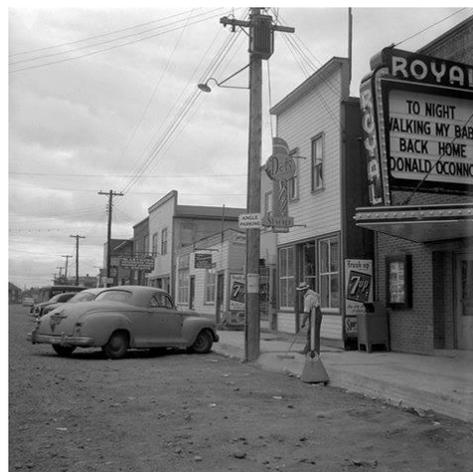
shock he explained that he had asked the High School principal, Bertha Fisher, who would make a good teacher and she recommended Olga. With some summer school training she could take over the one room school at Moose River Crossing. This was a major decision for her but having attended one room schools for 8 years she knew what to expect and accepted the challenge. Family friend Stella Drajanoff became her mentor. Stella had lived in a room in our house in 1933 when she was hired as the first teacher at S.S. Kendall No. 4, the new school in the Slovak community. Then living in Timmins, where she became known as one of the best teachers in Northern Ontario, Stella was able to guide Olga through this initial learning experience although she had to continue with summer school training for years after. Olga was the first to make a break from the farm.

With no relatives or older siblings to give her presents and support when she was little, she made sure the rest of us always had something special under the tree every Christmas. Olga's gift to us from the far north was a Husky pup that we named Nanook. He enjoyed a few years of farm life until he felt the call of the wild and went rogue, never to be seen again.

Through her long career, Olga taught in Moose River Crossing, Cochrane, Nicaragua, Manitouwadge, Hearst, Oakville and finally Caledon. We always looked forward to the phone calls and gifts from these faraway places. The letters with their fascinating stamps helped us realize we too could make the break from the farm and explore new horizons. Many former students kept in touch with her for years after she taught them. One memorable reunion she had occurred in the 1960s in Toronto when she was taking a break in a coffee shop after an evening of shopping. The waitress suddenly went to all the customers and said they didn't have to worry but a motorcycle gang was about to drop in for coffee in a few minutes. Olga was not about to give up her coffee so she sat staring into her cup when she heard the gang of bikers walk in. You could hear a pin drop when suddenly one of the bikers yelled "Miss Bies" and brought his friends over to sit with her. It was a former student from Hearst.

Life on the farm in the early 1950s was a lonely experience for me as a young boy. By then, all of the Slovak families had left and there were no children my own age to play with. We did have neighbours on the next farm, like the Sloans and the Fransons, but they did not stay long as they too moved to greener pastures. The bus and bombardier service to school was cancelled when we were the only family left and they stopped clearing our concession road in winter. Now we had to walk a mile and a half to the main highway every morning to be driven to school in Hearst by our brother Rudy and back at night. We were living off the grid before it became popular. We had no Hydro and the daily routine was to bring in water from the well, wood from the wood shed and spend as little time as possible in the gender neutral bathroom facilities. Ironically I do the same thing today when we go to our cottage in winter but at least now I have a choice. As a boy, when I saw jet planes flying overhead I would often wonder who was in them and where were they going? Someday I would be up there going somewhere; anywhere. When Uncle Mike and Aunt Catherine asked if I wanted to come and live with them in Sudbury for a few months in 1957, I jumped at the chance, much to my mother's chagrin.

By Christmas I was homesick and happy to be going home where I received what I consider to be the greatest Christmas present ever. Olga was now teaching in Hearst and she knew that my mother could not stand many more years on the farm. She helped our parents buy a house in town. Hallelujah! I was now a townie. I could now walk to school with a hockey stick in my hands like every other Canadian boy, play on a hockey team, skate on the outdoor rink, become a rink rat and attend the Lumber Kings games. I joined Sigma C, a boy's club at the United Church. I watched TV at friends' houses which often required that I challenge the 9 P.M. curfew. I soon learned that this was more easily done in foot, as I could hide in the bushes, than on bike. I sampled cigarettes although Olga was instrumental in getting me to quit before I started. I had a paper route and won a trip to Toronto to see my first NHL game. Spending money came from part time jobs at the Hudson Bay Store, Freeman Smiths Confectionery and my favorite job at the Royal Theatre. I hung around the Star Cafe and enjoyed my Pepsi and shoe string potato chips with guys with nick-names like



Brinks, Pickles, Bulldog, Slaughter and Turnip. Roger, the bartender at the Palace Hotel, let us sweep the bar-room floor before it opened for business and we kept any change we found. I am sure he salted it with a few nickels to keep us coming

back. A movie junkie, I went to the Royal and the Cartier Theatres from Monday to Saturday. On Sundays, my friend Marcel and I would cross the tracks to a church basement in the town of St. Pie X to watch old movies dubbed in French where they had to stop the film to rewind and switch reels. An unexpected bonus was that I improved my French. The Rebel Rousers, a local motor cycle gang with members like Lennie, Wibbie, Ronnie and Eddie, let us hang around their club house. We emulated them with our own junior cycle gang that we called Satan's Angels. We proudly rode our bicycles around town, cycled out to Lake Ste Therese to swim or to the sand pit to search unsuccessfully for artefacts from the German POW holding camp. Another feature of town living for young boys were the scuffles that occurred between the English and French "gangs" The annual hockey game between the schools usually ended in a brawl. The French boys had an oversized guy named Ferland who famously scuffled with Clayton Brown, the Public School Principal one day when he was ordered off the school property. I could usually hold my own but was no match for Ferland. One day Ferland and his boys were laying in wait for me at the foot of our driveway and I couldn't get out of the house until my sister Martha solved the problem. She marched out and slapped Ferland's face and told him to leave me alone. He sheepishly backed off and years later he reminded her of the incident. Life as a townie was good.



In the late 1950s, Olga moved to Toronto and her apartment provided a home base for the rest of the family when we ventured south for Grade 13 and higher education.

My turn to move to Toronto came in 1962 when I went from a class of thirteen students in a school of 98 in Hearst to Parkdale Collegiate. I was over-whelmed to be one of 125 students in grade 13 alone, with 800 in the entire school. Olga helped me acclimatize to life in the city. She took me to fancy restaurants, like Ed's Warehouse and Peppio's, where the roving violin player probably expected a tip, something I never had to do at the Husky in Hearst when I had my hot hamburg sandwich. She introduced me to live theater at the Royal Alexandra where I saw

performances by Don Herron, Catherine McKinnon, Billy Van and Christopher Plummer. She also impressed on me the importance of creating a first impression with the fairer sex and suggested I buy a shoe polish kit and a comb. I always thought that I was just ahead of the fashion trends with the grunge and bed-head look but she was probably right. Having learned to knit in grade two, when the family lived in Dobie, Ontario, Olga is never without her knitting needles. At last count she has made 1,659 wool caps for newborn babies in the hospital where she volunteers. I benefitted from a heavy wool Cowichan type sweater she made in 1963. It wasn't quite finished in time for Christmas so she wrapped the pieces individually so I thought I was getting several gifts.



We are forever indebted to her not only for the safe haven that she provided in Toronto but also for the white knuckle drives home for Christmas in her Volkswagen. It is a miracle that we survived those snowy drives so often without mishap.

Recently Olga and I drove to Hearst for a family function. The highway now bypasses most of the small towns. Our favourite stopping places, like the Busy Bee Restaurant in Temagami and the Highway Book Shop in Cobalt, have long since been closed and boarded up.

We also visited the farm. Abandoned for almost sixty years now, it has completely reverted to nature but we did find the dugout for the cellar. All that remained to mark our life there were parts of an old woodstove half buried in the dirt. I pulled up a piece of cast iron that was embossed with the manufacturer's name, A. Belanger, Montmagny Quebec. This stove had been



purchased in Dobie some seventy-seven years ago. It was a suitable memento for her to take back to her cottage as a reminder of the struggles that she and our parents faced and overcame to give us a chance for a better future.



While the toys and clothes she gave me always made a big impression, and some still survive, the intangibles, such as support when it was needed, life skills advice and providing opportunities, were indeed the greatest gifts of all.

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