

## An Introduction To Memoirs Of Crescent Lake School

In 1946 our family moved to a new teacherage at Crescent Lake Sask which was 9 miles South of Yorkton Sask. My name is Nancy Leake (nee Hirsch), born March 2<sup>nd</sup> 1938 in Cudworth Sask. My Dad was John Sylvester Hirsch born 1898 in Altona Man. And died in 1995 in Haney BC. My Mother was Elizabeth Mary Hirsch born 1914 in St. Lazlo Sask, and died in 2013 in Kamloops BC. My brother was Ronald John Hirsch born 1932 in Cudworth Sask and died in 1989 in Calgary AB.

### MEMOIRS OF CRESCENT LAKE SCHOOL

I stood silently in this old abandoned school yard, the grass and weeds up to my knees and viewed the old school – paint peeled off, windows gone, caving in at the back and behind three out houses (toilets) standing askew. I looked to my right and there was the teacherage rundown and had at one time been recovered with tacky brick siding coming off, in places and my mind suddenly flashed back fifty six years ago when I was an eight year old little girl arriving to this place with my parents and my thirteen year old brother. The school was a brand new structure, with three new outhouses (there was no running water in rural communities or in many small towns in those days), one for girls, one for boys and the other for the teacher. There was a new two room house with an enclosed porch. Also, a well in the back yard to provide drinking water, a back shed and a barn for horses in case children rode horses to school. This was the beginning of our ten very interesting and wonderful years in what later became the Crescent Lake Community.

After much petitioning by a far sighted woman, Mrs. Allary, the Government, CCF under the premiership of Tommy Douglas, built this expermental school in a Metis Community for the children who had been at a Residential School or no school at all. She wanted a school in their own community. My Dad, John Hirsch, was hired as the teacher. The Government assumed the teacher would be a single person and thus the small teacherage was built. We moved into the little house and settled into our new venture.

The first day of school, the children arrived. Instead of the twenty-five that were expected, over fifty children of all ages came. The school was built for thirty, so fifty plus was impossible. Dad, nonplussed, took their names and ages and decided to divide the classes into morning and afternoon sessions. So for a whole year, we had half a day school which suited the children just fine. The children who had gone to the Residential school could read and write and were in different grades, but there were many who had never been to school and were various ages in grade one. Dad later discovered that there were many parents who couldn't read or write, so he began night classes for the

adults, two or three nights a week. Dad was determined that he would make this school on par with or better than any other school in the area. So, the challenge began. That first year was a year of much learning, not only for the children, but also for our family. The Metis families were wonderful, cooperative and helpful. The children were well behaved, smart and talented. Dad even put on a Christmas Concert.

One of our first really interesting experiences was the New Year's celebration. We heard the children talking about New Years and understood that it was a special time. We were invited to celebrate with the community. The custom was to visit everyone on New Years day. So, off we went and the first house we visited welcomed us and had a beautiful meal to serve us and other visitors. We indulged and thoroughly enjoyed the wonderful fare. Unbeknownst to us, every house in the village had a meal prepared for visitors and would be quite insulted if we did not sit down and eat. There was lots of merry making at each house and we had a great time except we were so stuffed with all that food. Note, we did learn, that day, to nibble at each house!

The following summer, 1947, the teacherage was enlarged – an upstairs with two bedrooms, downstairs had a kitchen/dining area, living room, bedroom and an office. Whoever planned this house forgot about closets, so part of the office was made into a clothes closet. There was a half basement that housed a motor, many large glassed-in batteries which provided electricity for the house and school (lights only). The motor had to be run every so often to keep the batteries charged. There was also a cistern to collect rain water which provided us with washing water. A hand pump, by the sink, in the kitchen brought the water up for us to use.

That fall school was once again in session and Dad had the grades organized into two grade one classes – one for older children who had some learning and another for beginners – eleven children. Ages ranged from seven to eleven. Other grades were ten children in grade 2, five in grade 3, eight in grade 4, two in grade 5 which included me, and two in grade 9 which included my brother. By that time several older children had dropped out to help at home or go to work with their parents. Also some children joined later in the year. We were very cramped in that little school and Dad requested an enlargement to the school.

The next year, the school was enlarged to two rooms with a daylight basement for future classroom use. Mom, then taught the primary grades and Dad taught the rest. The school had a folding wall between the classrooms so a large room could be had for socials and the Christmas Concert.

Dad believed in a well rounded education, so he organized a baseball team, got us in shape for track meets, and formed a gymnastic group. He taught music and formed an orchestra, a choir and taught various country dances. Science was learned first hand by

field trips, studying pond life, bird watching, and bringing in various parents to talk about trapping and the Metis life style. Dad was proud of the Metis people and wanted to impress on the children that they were just as capable as anyone else and could through education and hard work achieve anything they wanted to.

This Metis community was beside a small Indian Reserve. I think there was only two or three families. One family that I remember was the Peepeeche family. There were four girls – Olive, Dorothy, Marie and Rose Alma. The reserve was call Little Bone. Thus, the first name of the school was Little Bone Metis. Two years later it was changed to Meadow View. At some point it became Allary Metis School and I don't know when it became Cresent Lake. I believe, because the district was called Crescent Lake the name shifted to the school.

I made many good friends there. One person I still keep in touch with is Jenny Pelletier who married and is Jenny Fitzpatrick and lives in Calgary. She became a Nurses Aide and worked in a Calgary Hospital until she retired. Another friend was Dorothy Delorme and her brother Delmar. I lost track of them. Dorothy Azure was a bright, pretty little girl and very musical. She played the guitar and sang – I can still hear her sing Patsy Cline's "Seven Lonely Days". I took piano lessons in Yorkton and Dorothy wanted to learn how to play, so when I came home from my lesson, I would teach her. She became very proficient on the piano and played in Dad's orchestra after I left for high school in Yorkton and later Regina. I often think of Willie Dakota. He was one of the "big boys", all of 12 or 13 years old . He was a very good athlete and a star ball player. He was better than anyone else in our school or other neighbouring schools. I think he was a natural athlete, as he was good at all sports. Another young boy I remember was Wilmar Shingoose. He was just a nice all around kid and smart as well.

The school was visited quite often by Government officials like, the minister of Education, the Minister of health and many times by Tommy Douglas, himself. All were interested in the progress of this school and willing to do most things for its success. At Dad's request, a piano was the first thing bought for the school, for Dad said he couldn't teach without a piano! Later instruments were bought for the orchestra - three saxaphones, a drum set, an accordian and a banjo. Various sports equipment were provided and of course all the books and school needs for the children.

At one point, Dad formed a baseball team with the young men in the district and held a ball tournament for surrounding areas. I remember a booth with refreshments that the women ran, and races for the children and some very good ball games.

There were three or four Social Parties held at the school throughout the year. These were planned by the community with Dad. They were usualy dances. It seems that

there was always some in the community who played an instrument, usually an accordian, violin and, or a guitar so the people could dance. Dad would accompany them on the piano. It was a fun evening for everyone. I particularly remember an elderly man, at least to me he was elderly, but, in reality probably 35 or 40 years old. This fella was an accomplished step-dancer (jig) His name was Shorty Pelletier and he had been in Eastern Canada, probably Quebec, where he learned to step-dance. He was always asked to perform at the parties. Everyone would circle around him and he would wow us with his dancing. Step-dancing was much like tap dancing without the taps.

The Christmas Concert was a highlight of the community. Everyone helped. The beginning of December, the magic word was mentioned – Christmas Concert! We were given parts in plays, poems to recite, songs to learn. No child was ever left out or just a part of a group. Dad insisted that each child have his time in the spotlight. For a while practices were held once a week on a Friday afternoon. Then twice a week and finally every afternoon. The 3Rs were done every morning – no holiday from that! The day that the stage was built was most exciting of all. Fathers came to help and we had our first practise on stage. Mothers were busy making costumes and we all, with Dad, made sets and props. Such excitement filled the school on the day of the concert! Parents and visitors came and the show began. Dad always kept behind the stage at concert time.

The concert belonged to the students. It was their time to shine and make their parents proud. A student MC welcomed the crowd and no one really saw Dad until it was over. He and Mom were busy backstage setting sets, helping with costumes, prompting plays and settling nerves. Dad did accompany the musical numbers on the piano. The final scene was the Nativity Story. There was a narrator and the birth of Jesus unfolded before the audience. Children were angels, wisemen, shepherds, Mary, Joseph, animals and choir. Everyone took part in this finale. Then Santa came! Every child received something – a gift, and a bag of candy with a Christmas orange. Everyone went home happy. Note; Eatons Catagogue, at that time provided the school with gifts and candy. Dad had to send in the names and ages of each school child and appropriate gifts were sent to the school. Mom spent hours wrapping gifts and filling bags of goodies for everyone. Our house looked like Santa's Workshop!

One of Dad's proudest moments was the first Metis to graduate with a grade eight diploma from the school. It was a special ceremony and Premier Douglas attended. Two Metis girls were the graduates as well as myself. The girls were Lucy St.Pierre, younger sister of Edwin St. Pierre, author of "REMEMBERING MY METIS PAST" and Merlyn Pelletier. I do not remember if those girls went on to high school. I continued my education in Yorkton and Regina. There were several others during those years who did continue on with their education. Dad had hoped that everyone of those children would become educated enough to be self sufficient and able, through their career choices, to become independent of Government Aide. He always preached "You are just as capable as anyone else. Don't let others put you down. You can become any

thing you work for”.

I remember, shortly after we moved to Crescent Lake, Dad enlisted the Government to help the people build better houses. There was a flurry of activity as everyone got logs and lumber to build new homes. I remember walking around the community with Dad, to see the new homes rising up. The Delorme family even made a small room in their house for a little store.

Dad and Mom taught in that school until the end of June 1956. I don't know who carried on afterwards, and how many more years the school was open. When we went back in 2002, all had been abandoned for years. It saddened me to see that school and buildings in such decrepit condition. There was so many expectations and hopes for the community when they were built. I truly hope that the children who attended there were successful and happy in their lives.

I think back fondly to those times at Crescent Lake and all the people who enriched our lives.

Note: There is a discrepancy in the timing of the addition of the school. I thought that the new addition was added on the summer of 1947, but, according to the school register, the classrooms weren't divided into two rooms until 1948. And Mom started teaching in the fall of 1948, although the class registers for 1948-49 seems to be missing.