



Margaret Birch's story of

Leola



Driving home to the farm one summer day in 1968, Mother spotted a small dog at the edge of the road by her turnoff. She rescued this lost puppy. It became apparent after several phone calls that it had been abandoned, so Pip Squeak (aka Pip) became hers, a loyal companion, shortly after Dad's passing. This event marked the near-midpoint of her life. Widowed at age 54, she lived forty more years.

Leola May was born to James and Minnie (Perry) Wallace at home on September 18, 1913, in Vancouver, a sister for Alfred. Her mother nearly died from the difficult birth, and Leola's stomach settled only after a special formula was found. A photo of her at one year shows a thriving roly-poly child. The next studio photo was taken before the family moved to the prairies in 1917. She is a beautiful, shy four-year-old with long blond ringlets.

Leola's mother, Minnie (born 1889), was the eldest of a Newfoundland family of eight who had moved from one coast to the other. In Vancouver she had met James (born 1881), a Scottish immigrant carpenter. With a partner he built houses in Vancouver for a decade (1907-1917), until World War I caused an economic slowdown. The family then moved to Carbon, Alberta, near Drumheller, to take up farming.

In Alberta they lived in a small house beside Kneehill Creek with the railway line on the other side, near which they planted a vegetable garden. Whenever the train stopped for whatever reason, railway men would help themselves to vegetables. Swimming in the creek and horseback riding filled summer days for Alf and Leola.

When did she learn to play the piano? That remains a question. "The Robin's Return" with lots of trills was a favourite piece she played for Dad. What was her schooling from six to sixteen? Probably at a one-room rural school. The family lived at Carbon until the community's crops were devastated by drought for three successive years. In 1931, the government moved them, along with other farmers, their stock and equipment by rail, north to the Edmonton area. The Wallaces settled on a farm near Pibroch. Leola boarded in Edmonton for grade twelve, and then she attended Alberta Normal School for a one-year teacher training course.

At age eighteen she began teaching in a one-room school, grades one to eight, in rural Poplar Knoll near Pibroch. After stabling her riding horse in the school barn, some of her responsibilities in winter included building a fire in the school stove and thawing snow for hand washing. She was a gifted teacher and loved working with the community, preparing the children for the annual Christmas concert, a social highlight. Even in those days she had a few ESL beginners (German) to teach. Church was also a very important part of the community, and it was here she met her future husband, Alec, who was twenty years older and visiting his Scots-Irish pioneer family.

In 1936, she got a job teaching at a one-room school in the Jumbo Valley, 100 miles south of Calgary, near where Alec was farming. During those depression years, her salary was supposedly \$600 per year, but the school board could only pay her by providing her room and board with different families during the school year.

After Alec bought his first quarter section property, Leola and Alec married in Edmonton on April 20, 1938, during the Easter break from school. Leola was a beautiful bride in a long gown and veil, carrying a cascading bouquet of roses. Her wedding cake sported a floral decoration her mother had used, which her daughters have also used since. (Seventy years later her second daughter modeled her wedding gown at the Granum, Alberta Centennial fashion show.) No honeymoon for Alec and Leola; just a drive back south to start school on Monday morning. At the end of the school year, she resigned from teaching to become a full-time farm wife with a live-in hired girl to help her feed the hired men.

In April, 1939, I was born, followed by a son in June, 1940, and another daughter in May, 1942. One year later there was great sadness: three-year-old Wallace died during surgery for a brain tumour at the University of Alberta hospital. Leola was thirty years old and heart-broken. Decades later a family friend described to me how the wee coffin was carried the 350 miles home from Edmonton on the back seat of the car. The birth of another son, Jamie, one year later, was a gift from God.

By no means luxurious, parts of the big two-storey house were closed off and unheated in winter. Upstairs, hot water bottles were used in the beds. As children we dressed in the morning by the living room coal heater. Standard facilities consisted of chamber pots, an outdoor privy and a weekly bath in a round galvanized tub. Laundry, done by a motorized washer and wringer, froze stiff on the clothesline in winter.

In addition to child care, my mother prepared three meals a day for the two or three hired men. At harvest time there were often many more. Another daily job was dismantling and sterilizing the cream separator. Cream and eggs were shipped weekly by train to the city. Vegetables from the garden, preserved fruit and farm-raised beef and chicken fed us year round. Her motto was "Waste not, want not" and she used everything. Her girls were taught to sew, crochet, knit and do all sorts of chores, inside and out. Her son, too, learned to be self-sufficient.

Leola pushed herself to do everything faster. She gave herself a half hour rest after lunch, while the children napped, but eventually she burned out and had to spend some time recovering in the local hospital. Throughout her life she had eczema on her hands in times of stress.

Gradually Alec acquired additional farmland with houses, so he could accommodate married hired men who could look after themselves, and this lightened my mother's work load. Natural gas, electricity and indoor plumbing also made life easier.

Fond of reading, she stayed up late to finish novels I borrowed from my high school library. By the time I was in grade twelve, she had initiated a women's Bible study (The Joy Club) in her farming community. Held in different homes, this social group sustained her for almost forty years. As long as she was able, she participated in the local church. She took her Christian faith seriously and was glad to share it.

I went off to University of Alberta in 1955. Two years later my sister came to Edmonton for grade twelve and we lived together. When Jamie (now Jim) came to Edmonton for grades eleven and twelve, the family purchased a house there. Our parents visited us and their extended families there for a few weeks every winter.

In 1957, Leola and Alec were one of three couples who started the Crow's Nest Lake Bible Camp. Leola organized crafts and was a member of the camp board for many years. The camp is still running today.

In 1960, Jim continued on to agricultural school and SAIT, then moved back home to rejoin the farm team. In 1963, my sister married and soon gave Mother three cherished grandchildren. In 1967, Alec, my father, died. My parents had been married for 29 years. Grief-stricken, Mother carried on.

Mother and Jim ran the farm and ranch business together for ten years. By this time it was four sections with two more sections of grazing land (a section is 640 acres). Her interest in the community led her to write and proofread some of the comprehensive history of Granum, compiled to mark its 75th anniversary.

In this period of her life, her parents died; first her mother (at age 80 in 1969) and then her dad (at age 93 in 1975). She and her brother Alf were with each of them as they passed, as they had been with her at Dad's death – a close-knit family.

Mother retired when Jim married in 1977. She moved to the town of Claresholm to begin the next phase of her life, in a community she loved and still close to Jim's two dear children. She became a founding member of a new Baptist church there, where she was the bookkeeper and taught a Bible study class for teens. She made a commitment to herself to read through the whole Bible once a year, and to my knowledge she did this about twenty times. Even three hip replacements (one eventually to repair the first) didn't slow her down. Until her brother Alf died in 1994, they spent much time together, visiting Alaska and Hawaii. Her retirement also included travelling to England, Ireland, Scotland, Switzerland, New Zealand, Greece, Egypt and Israel, with extended times volunteering in Ireland and Israel. In 1987, she met Prince Andrew at the opening of Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump, a U.N.E.S.C.O. heritage site Dad had donated to the province 20 years earlier. The world news always interested her and she kept herself well-informed. She came to Vancouver many times for Christmas with her daughters and grandchildren.

Mother had three distinctive traits: her hair, her hands and her heart. Her long, fair, wavy hair was trimmed but never cut short. Finger waves at the front and a roll at the back became a life-long style. She took pleasure in keeping both her clothes and grooming attractive, and she loved to peruse styles in the Eaton's and Sears catalogues. Her handwriting was beautiful – exquisitely so – even into old age, but hard work over a lifetime became evident in her gnarled, arthritic hands, especially her right thumb. Years later, in her nineties, she broke the left one and it healed crooked. She accepted this by saying it would “match the other one!” For certain she had an eye for beauty – in her best fine china, and especially in her roses, grown with limited success in the garden. In retirement she created tiny petit-point scenes and brooches and small watercolour paintings. She also wrote some memoirs, mostly childhood recollections. Each of her (five) grandchildren received a hand-crocheted afghan, “created by Grandma”, as they graduated from high school, as did each of her (six) great-grandkids as babies.

On her 80th birthday (in 1993) the family held an Open House at the farm, and the community turned out in large numbers to honour her. At age 88, always the practical one, she gave up driving of her own volition. She spent her last six years in a seniors care facility in Claresholm, eventually confined to a wheelchair. Towards the end she spoke little. When asked why, her response was, “I only talk when I need to.” The shy, reticent child had reappeared, but I knew by her eyes, she always recognized me when I flew out to visit.

To sum up, Leola walked a remarkable journey. She said, “I have had a good life.” Whenever she looked back on the events of her life, she loved to acknowledge God's guidance and protection. Truly a lady her family can admire and emulate.

In April, 2008, when she was nearly ninety-five years of age, her three children were at her bedside as she quietly slipped into her eternal future with Jesus, her beloved friend. All her extended family and the community again honoured her at her funeral on a blustery spring day. At the burial a six-year-old great-grandson said, “Great-Grandma is free; she is flying with the angels.”