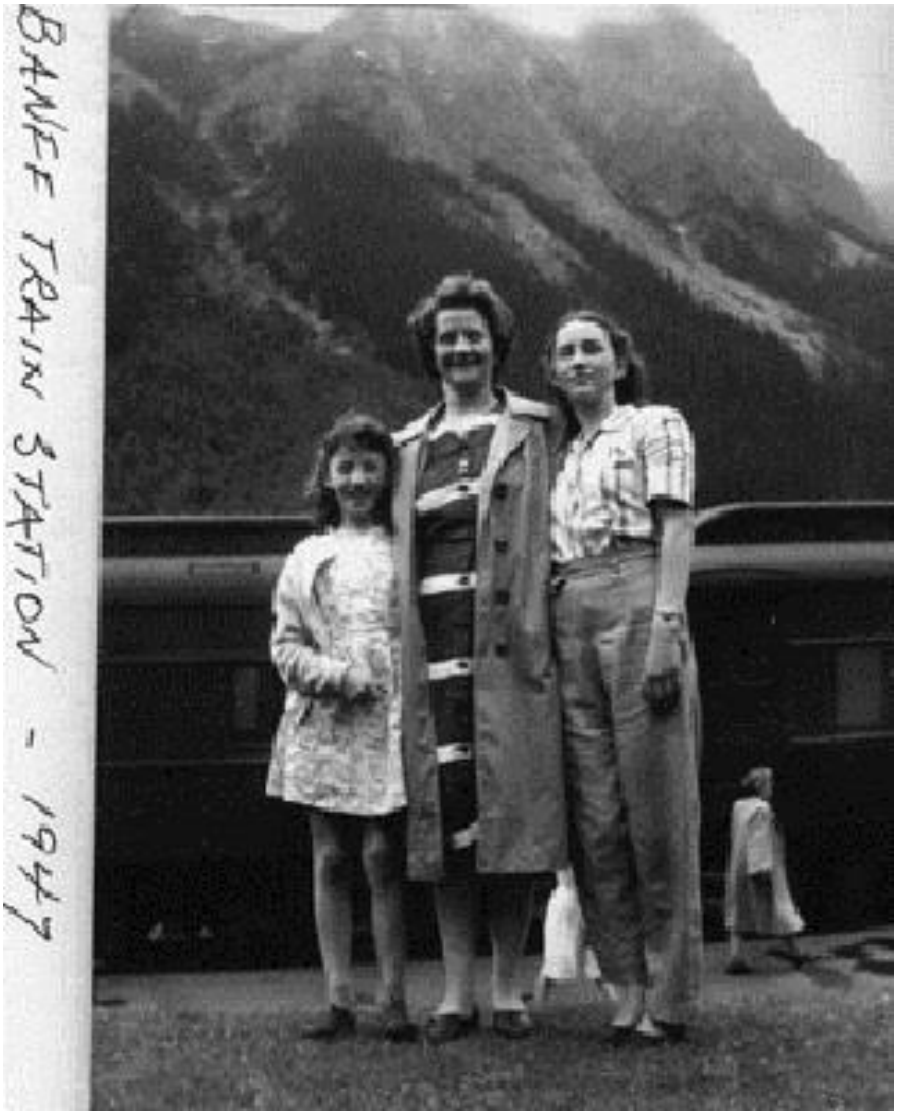

Kathy Hills's story of

Olive

My Mother's Story

My mother, Olive May Smallwood, was born in Nottingham, England, on May 10, 1903. She was the youngest of seven daughters and one of twelve children born to John and Mary Smallwood. She began school at age four at what was called the Infant's School. She stayed in school until she was fourteen, since to advance would have meant travelling to another village, which she could not have done. So she repeated her last grade, rather than leave school altogether, and became the most literate of her family.

My grandmother sewed all her children's clothes and created wonderful hats for her seven daughters. The girls were beautiful, especially my mother with her curly auburn hair and bright blue eyes. The family had little money, toys were handmade and the children entertained themselves. Mum said she was never bored. Christmases were special, even though their stockings, hung at the foot of their beds, contained just an apple and a new penny. Her best Christmas was when a baby brother arrived unannounced!

The family lived in Nottingham until 1918, when Mum's five oldest siblings immigrated to Canada. In 1920, with their help, the rest of the family sailed to Canada as well, eventually all settling in various parts of Ontario and Manitoba. She loved Canada as soon as she arrived. They settled in Winnipeg, which had none of the beauty of her English village, but it did not diminish her excitement of living in Canada. Though the family was separated by distance, they all remained close, exchanging letters regularly.

At eighteen she was happy to find work as an office clerk at the Elmwood Herald, a small, family-owned newspaper in Winnipeg. It was there she met my father, Robert McLean, 26, a linotype operator and brother of the two owners, all recent Scottish immigrants. My father proposed marriage many times, but she always declined, feeling she was too young to get married. Her favourite song was "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," and I wonder if it had to do with the fact that my father smoked, as many did then.

In 1922, while delivering "proofs" for the newspaper advertisers, she was struck by a government vehicle which severely injured her and crushed her knee. Hospitalized for many weeks, she refused surgery, which at that time would have left her with a stiffened leg. Recovering, she coped quietly with this disability.

She joined a United Church that was just being built, and my mother, as well as my father, became a founding member. Through the choir she met many life-long friends. In 1927, on Thanksgiving weekend, my parents became the first couple to be married in the new building. They had no honeymoon, but settled into a tiny rented house near their families and began their life together. Photos of them show a happy young couple with their parents and siblings, picnicking, travelling about in borrowed cars and on the local beach train. They enjoyed life, even though they had very little. Their first child, Hugh, was born in 1930, followed by Janet in 1933. I was their last, Kathleen, born in 1937.

Many Winnipeggers, to escape the summer heat, have cottages along Lake Winnipeg. My mother loved the train trips and the family gatherings at Winnipeg Beach and the other beaches surrounding the Lake. My mother knew a man who had a cottage at Sandy Hook that he seldom used since his wife had died. She asked him about renting it, and he said if she could pay him whatever she could when she could afford it, he would sell it to her. They settled on a price of $600, and my mother paid off the debt in about seven years. This was around 1939; we spent every summer there, my father joining us when he could. It was a basic cottage, furnished but no water or electricity, and we loved it.

In 1941, my father's brothers decided they needed to have jobs ready for their sons returning from war. They asked my Dad to give up his job. This meant Dad had to get on-call shifts at the two major newspapers, going every day at the beginning of the three shifts, hoping to find work. Mum went to her mother-in-law and asked her to lend her $50, which Mum would use as first month's rent on a large house she'd located.

Though she hadn't consulted Dad, he was relieved and proud of Mum for taking this enterprising step to help them through this difficult time. Later he acquired steady work at the Winnipeg Tribune.

Through neighbours and family, she acquired furniture for the five upstairs rooms and quickly secured five tenants, charging them each about $20 a month. Our family of five lived on the main floor, with just the kitchen, living/dining room and a den to house us, and a toilet in the basement. My parents slept in the living room, my sister and I in the little den and my brother on a cot in the dining room. I never thought there was anything odd about this arrangement.

Most of the tenants were women working as teachers or in business. Some were a bit more interesting, with issues my mother would later recall in wonderful stories. One woman had a severe mental collapse, smeared herself and her room in cold cream and screamed at Mum saying, "Look what they've done to me!!" My mother said to her, "No, you've done it to yourself," and called her son to collect his poor mother. Mum took in a young woman, whose husband was overseas, and her child. It was against Mum's rules to rent to someone with a child, but she couldn't turn them away. The little girl contracted diphtheria and our house became quarantined. When Mum explained this to her tenants, who now had to make other housing arrangements, they were outraged. My mother apologized, but left them feeling they had no compassion for the young woman and her child. Mum brought food up to the room, sliding it across the floor to their doorway, sterilizing their dishes on return. My Dad had to stay with his mother, so he would be available for work.

In the summer of 1947, the Winnipeg newspapers went on strike and Dad got little work. Feeling they could not wait for a resolution, they decided to move to Vancouver. Mum rented out our cottage and with the money brought my sister and me to Vancouver with her to look for a house and a job for Dad. We travelled by train, sleeping the three-night journey in our seats and eating from a box of food she had packed. We arrived in Vancouver looking as if we had slept in our clothes, which we had! She made her way to the Vancouver News-Herald and found they had an opening for a linotype operator. The manager said, "Get him here and he has a job!" We stayed in a rooming house in the West End for three weeks, loving English Bay and the surroundings. Returning to Winnipeg, she sold the cottage for $1200 along with most of our furniture, and in November we left again for the coast, travelling in the same style! Dad went straight to work and the cottage money was enough for a down payment on a little house in Kitsilano. We moved into our house just in time for Christmas. She did all this in a city she knew nothing about. From then on Dad worked steadily. Mum took pride in their first home, and they lived there for years, becoming fixtures of the neighbourhood.

In 1951, she and Dad visited my brother in Cambridge, where he had a scholarship. This exciting trip, travelling by train to Montreal and by ship to England, was Mum's first time back since arriving in Canada. As planned, Dad returned home after a couple of weeks to make the money to pay for Mum's return ticket. She did not get home for two months and was relieved when she did! Over the years they went again, each time renewing friendships with childhood friends and family. One exceptional trip included meeting the Queen Mother when my brother was presented to her at a musical event. Mum bought a special hat for the occasion and looked as lovely as the Queen.

Mum was a letter-writer extraordinaire, and her penmanship was equally impressive. She loved getting letters and always replied to them, rarely losing contact with anyone, even former tenants. She would talk to anyone, loved to hear their stories, made friends easily and kept them forever.

In 1963, I left home. I was 26, and my mother was upset: girls did not leave home unless it was to be married, which I was not. She avoided telling anyone I had moved out and would not come to see my new apartment. Eventually she realized that times had changed and was happy when I married a few years later.

From the late 1950s through to 1984, nine grandchildren arrived. She was extremely close to them all, and they to her. Dad died in 1980, which was a great loss. They had been married for 53 years.

In 1982, she and I discussed her knee injury that had bothered her terribly over the years, and as a nurse, I heard again her fears of decreased mobility. This time, however, she mentioned that she had been hit by a government truck. I knew she had been awarded a small sum at the time from the Workmen's Compensation Board, but upon investigation learned that she should have also had a lifetime disability allowance. I arranged for her to see an orthopaedic specialist and her claim of 60 years was reopened. She was amazed when the doctor offered knee replacement surgery, something unimaginable in the past! She recovered quickly from surgery and was awarded her small pension, as well as time-loss benefits during her convalescence. And a note to let the board know when she could return to work! She was 79.

With her new-found agility and resources, she engaged in activities previously denied her. In her 80s she studied Ikebana, joined a flower club through which she won many awards for her displays, and met many new friends. She was a founding member of a seniors group who met weekly, travelled, held luncheons and celebrated one another's birthdays.

My brother discovered a cousin she'd never met, and they flew to England to meet her, creating such a stir in the village that the local newspaper covered the story of new-found cousins. Her last trip was flying to Florida to see my brother at Easter 1996. She went alone, unafraid, and parted from us full of excitement. She was 93.

She had lost all her siblings and was now the last of the twelve children in her family alive. As family matriarch she corresponded and visited with all of their many children and grandchildren. Her memory never failed, and she could recall any event anyone asked about. In August 1996, she fell, breaking her hip, and felt she could not recover. She entertained many people at her bedside, telling each one she loved them. She took my hand and my sister's, calling us her babies, saying for the first time how much she loved us, and asked if there was anything we wanted to know. She told me so many stories, many of which are recorded here. After she died, we found a letter she'd left for the three of us, telling us how much we meant to her. We already knew.