



Florence Nicholson's story of

Pauline



Pauline Olivia Verigin was born on Dec. 11, 1904 on a homestead in south eastern Saskatchewan, near Tisdale and Star City. She was the first child of newly immigrated Russian peasants Anna and Peter Verigan. Her father was truly disappointed she was not a boy to help with the harsh farm existence they were facing. So five years later when her brother John arrived on the scene, followed in 2 more years by brother Peter, she was virtually relegated to the dictates of the three men in her world. Pauline was the maid, chief kitchen and household servant for the family from an extremely young age. She also worked in the garden and looked after the animals, including cleaning out barns and coops and milking cows. Life was harsh with little affection displayed from parents who had little education and had worked hard all their lives. Girls were expected to look after the men and never complain about the work. If she did complain her father was ready with a swat to the head without hesitation. (this might have been the cause of the life long headaches she suffered) It was common for Russian peasants to marry off girls young to lessen the burden of costs. At 13 years of age a suitable 20 year old son of immigrant Russians, Paul Popoff was found, and it was arranged that he would marry my mother Pauline. She left her parents home without regret but didn't find much relief in marriage, not because of abuse, but because of poverty. Homesteading was a hard life and Paul had only grade 3 education before being pulled out of school to work on the farm. When he and Pauline married he decided to try out for other jobs. He was a quick learner and soon became "a jack of all trades", learning a little about many trades from electricity, (line-man work) welding, heavy duty machine operating, mechanics, carpentry, salesmanship (selling household products door to door) He was a good man and a dedicated worker but he had little time for family or money for luxuries. One Christmas he presented Pauline with a wooden toy soldier. As a child I loved it but I could see the disappointment on my mother's face.

Pauline gave birth to 5 children, Nellie, Kathleen, Florence, Anna, and finally the cherished son Larry. By the time she turned 36 she was grandmother to her eldest daughter Nellie's twin sons.

My earliest memories of my mother were of her ability to keep us amused with her talent of drawing anything we asked her to draw for us. She would make "dolly-dingle" cuts out for us and even cut out a fashionable wardrobe for them. There was no television, only a short wave radio (with plenty of static!) no indoor plumbing or even running water. By today's standards, it was camping! Entertainment for her five children was story telling and drawing by Pauline and board games day after day.

I remember the hours she spent canning and preserving food supplies for the winter. A special treat in the middle winter was her bottled chicken and always a rice pudding (casha) for dessert. We existed on the fruits of her labour putting root vegetables in the cellar, canning whatever else needed preserving and buying sacks of rice and flour. There was no running to the corner store. Chicken farming provided eggs and meat, and a cow provided milk. Rice and flour and raisins were the only staples they bought.

One of my earliest recollections of my mother is her strong contralto singing voice. The family would drive to a predominately Russian community, to socialize and to reminisce their Russian heritage by singing their folk songs, which were mostly very mournful. They would gather at someone's home and sing. My mother's voice was powerful and beautiful and carried above everyone else's voice. I loved to hear her deep contralto voice, however, listening to it made me realize, that my mother was basically very unhappy. Her deep sadness was very evident to me even as young as I was. These gatherings were held every Sunday and may have been their version for church. All the immigrants and their children gathered with friends to sing the old Russian heritage songs each Sunday. It always brought many of those singing, to tears. The children would play on the dirt road streets outside while the singing went on inside for hours and hours it seemed to the children. In between songs the adults were reminiscing the heritage of their ancestors

difficult, labour filled past and realizing that the new country, although free from oppression, was still going to be a difficult road without education and money. They came to Canada with nothing and were sent to the worst parts of the Prairies to homestead an inhospitable land.

Pauline was the life of social gatherings, she had a great sense of humour and was very popular in the social circle she and Paul joined with. She had a way about her to make others happy while she kept her sadness inside. The old proverb “Keep your troubles to yourself or be judged by them” was part of her upbringing. She never talked about her unhappiness ~Yet, I knew my mother was unhappy. I don’t think she ever felt ‘cherished’ and even though my dad, Paul, was a good and kind man, there didn’t seem to be much affection between them. An arranged marriage and an unhappy childhood left my mother always searching for that something missing in her life. She kept all her emotions to herself while portraying herself as being happy go-lucky!

By the time I was ten years old I realized that my mother was seriously depressed. She tried to commit suicide on two different occasions before I turned 15 and when I was 16 she had a nervous breakdown. On doctors advise, after hospitalization, she found a job as cook in a café in greater Vancouver and lived in an apartment block, coming home to her family on weekends only. She was happy with this new found independence. She was cheerful and showered us with many small surprises on her return visits.

My mother also found love and had a secret relationship with Ted, who lived in the same apartment block. I discovered the secret when I stayed with my mother at her suite one summer vacation. I had a close relationship with my mother but we didn’t talk about ‘feelings’ in our family so I never mentioned that I knew about the relationship she had with Ted. He was just a friend and so we didn’t talk about the real love between them. It is something I will always regret as it might have made a difference if she knew I accepted her ‘affair’ and was happy to see her finding pleasure in life. I know that she and Ted did some traveling on this continent together and had some good friends they socialized with. She was leading a double life that couldn’t be brought to light by the standards of that era. I am happy she had those few years with Ted in her life. He brought out a joy I had never seen in my mother before.

Sadly, it didn’t last too long because at the age of 53, December 8, 1957, she unexpectedly died in her sleep. The life long headaches she’d experienced, resulted in a hemorrhage on the brain.

I still have the autograph book she signed for me with “Never let it be said, and said with shame, that the place was more beautiful here, before you came”

Pauline, Olivia fulfilled those few words by living them . She left the world a more beautiful place because she lived!!