Patrick Ready's story of

Bess

My Mother's Story

Bess Ready was a wonderful mother. God knows, without her and the way she dealt with others in this life, who knows how we would have turned out. That's particularly referring to the seven of us—the six kids she raised, and dad. Ultimately we all became what we became because of her, at least the good parts of us.

Bess was born just after the first World War, in 1917, in Minnedosa, Manitoba, to John Dyer and Gertrude Dyer, formerly Gertrude Harrison. Bess had three brothers—Philip, Hugh and David. I have been told that both Philip and Hugh did very well in school, and were acknowledged as having some of the highest marks in Manitoba during their school years. At the beginning of WWII Philip shipped himself off to England on a cattle ship taking care of seasick cows at sea, then joined the RAF, and soon after died over the English Channel during the Battle of Briton. I was given Philip as my middle name when I was born just after that war. Hugh Dyer was wounded during the war and eventually took over taking care of the family farm in Minnedosa. David became an entomologist, and a very well known and successful entomologist. Hugh and David both passed away within the past few years here in Victoria.

Some stories Bess told us about the farm in the old days stick in my mind.

There was the time Grand Dad shot at a moose a couple of times that was poking its head around the side of the barn, only to discover he'd shot two moose, or maybe it was three, which kept the family in meat and leather for quite a while.

Bess said they were lucky during the depression, because her dad would go out and get swarms of bees off trees using smoke and bring them on branches back to the farm for his own hives to make honey, which they could sell for cash — a very rare commodity in Minnedosa during the 30s. Both cash and honey were rare commodities.

Hugh and Philip used to set out snare traps for animals in the winter. And then put the animals in the larder. One time they found a wolf frozen stiff in one of their snares and decided to put it in the larder. Mom went down to the larder and found herself being snarled at by a very alive wolf.

Sometime during the 30s the local doctor in Minnedosa thought that Bess was a bit too nervous and prescribed she take up smoking cigarettes to calm her down. She smoked after that until the late 60s when she quit.

Bess became a nurse in 1939 and during the war went overseas where she met dad, William Ready. Though he called himself Ready (pronounced "Reedy") at the time to avoid confusion, he said, with military expressions such as "Ready, Aim, Fire!," or "Is Everybody Ready?"

They actually met in a military hospital in Assisi, Italy. Dad had gone from Oxford to the army and found himself as an officer in North Africa loading mortar shells which were fired against Rommel's troops. The thing about loading mortar shells is that you let the previous one fire and then you hand load in the next one. Dad was not mechanically inclined and loaded in a mortar before the previous one had fired and the explosion seriously damaged his hand. And Bess, as his nurse, nursed him back to health and they fell in love and got married in Cardiff after the war.

I was the eldest of the children, and was never a good example for the others to follow which wasn't much help to mom. I remember refusing to do dishes, being horrible as a baby sitter, keeping a very messy bedroom and fighting a lot with my brother Vincent. And I was just one of the six kids.

But we weren't the only difficult people in her life. I remember one time, in a house we had in Stanford, California, mom had a large and lovely vegetable garden. One morning we looked out the windows to see an escaped herd of cows grazing in that vegetable garden. Dad, who'd been raised in Cardiff, Wales, had never personally experienced the largess of an actual cow before, much less a herd of them – he was terrified. Bess on the other hand was used to cattle and just wanted to go out and shoo them away from the garden, but dad refused to let her, or any of us, out of the house. So that was it for the broccoli, cauliflower and spinach that year.

At Christmas you would sew us little sleds out of birch bark at that house. I've never heard of anyone else, anywhere, ever sewing little birch bark sleds.

After a few years we moved on to Milwaukee where Dad had got a job as the Head Librarian at Marquette University.

We took up golf in Milwaukee. The day before we'd go golfing we'd go to the Saint Vincent de Paul Thrift Shop and buy some clubs and golf balls, and then go to the golf course at 5 am the next morning so we wouldn't have to pay the Green's Fee.

The problem was we were very disorganized. We'd always skip the holes with water hazards as we only had one ball each. Some of us would be teeing off while others were a few yards in front swinging at their second shot. Once when Bess was swinging, one of us got her in the back of her hand with a golf ball so hard that she had to wear her arm in a sling for a long time after that. A far distant cry from the golf we see now on TV.

Dad bought a Willis Jeep in Milwaukee, which we would travel in up to the farm in Minnedosa, Manitoba, in the summers. I've just looked up the journey on the internet—924 miles, which will take 14 ½ hours, it says.

Dad would only drive the jeep at 35 miles an hour, as that was the speed he'd learned to drive at in the desert in North Africa. When we complained he would rebut us with, "You couldn't run this fast!" I remember him coming home one night complaining about Pat MacDonald, one of the neighbor kids, who was waiting at a bus stop and he'd offered a lift to school. "No thank you Mr. Ready, I'm in a rush, so I'd better take the bus," he'd said.

So you can understand why it would take us 4 days to travel the 924 miles from Milwaukee to Minnedosa. Usually we would camp out en route, and Bess would cook these amazing meals that included, somehow, bread. Loaves of bread on a camp stove or an open barbecue with this tin folding oven from the Saint Vincent de Paul Thrift Shop. And she would somehow cook everything else that would comprise a very large meal in these minimal situations.

My strongest memory of one of these meals was something Bess prepared at a motel one night. It's something I don't think you would find in a prison cookbook. And I've looked in a couple of them to see. She propped up an electric iron between some books, and plugged it in. And then put a pot of water on it full of eggs and left it like that over night. The next day, though the water hadn't actually been able to boil due to the low heat put out by an iron, we ate the eggs and they were cooked, but not hard boiled, nor soft boiled. But like, what I imagine, translucent duck eggs might be like.

I remember having a dream around this period where I'm standing in a field lazily flapping my arms. I look over and see you Bess, leaning against a fence post. "What are you doing Park?" you asked. And I told you I was trying to fly. "Well you are not trying very hard. No wonder you can't fly. Flap your arms harder!" So I flapped them a bit harder. "Work at it! Don't be so lazy. Flap harder!" you commanded. "Flap harder!"

And I flapped my arms harder and faster and began to fly. And ever since then whenever I fly in my dreams, I'm standing straight up and down flapping my arms like a humming bird.

But this was typical of mom. She would only advise rarely, but firmly insisted on good advice when it was really needed. Another example I remember occurred a long time before this, in the early 50s, when dad had written a story that he'd kept sending out to literary magazines until he'd accumulated a thick wad of rejection slips. Mom told him that the story was very good and that he should send it to the Atlantic Monthly, the most prestigious literary magazine of those days. He was reluctant, so she did it, and they took it. The Atlantic Monthly took it right away, and awarded him "The Best First Short Story of The Year Award." As a result that same year he got another short story published in the Saturday Evening Post, and we ended up being financially secure that year as a result of his writing and her direction.

Dad passed away in 1981. Mom then got more involved in her painting and artwork and she made many new friends here in Victoria. One day in Vancouver, where I live, I got a phone call telling me to turn on CBC TV, and there was mom with two other women in a canoe singing protest songs and wearing bizarre clothes in front of the enormous hull of an American warship with Canadian helicopters swooping down and yelling through megaphones at Bess and the others in the canoe that what they were doing was highly illegal and to leave the area immediately. The Canadian ladies were protesting the presence of US nuclear warships in Canadian waters. This was the beginning of the Raging Grannies.

When I went over to Victoria shortly after that I met the "The Raging Grannies." They had actually started up in Bess' living room in 1987 it says in Wikipedea on the internet—though I have been told by people with better memories than me that it may have been 1985. There are now very active groups of Raging Grannies all over North America, from New York to California.

Another time during one of these Raging Granny antiwar protests mom got asked, on TV, by a young, well dressed, whipper-snapper what she was singing these ridiculous songs for. I loved the power of her answer. She simply said, "Because I was a nurse during the second world war."

Anyway, mom has passed away this week, at 12:30 Monday morning. And though I know she has gone to a far far better place, she will be sorely missed by all her children, grandchildren, relatives and friends.