

**Distant Sleigh Bells, Peppermints and Red Jell-O** by Ernie Bies Nov. 2013, Ottawa Ontario

Growing up on a small farm eight miles south of Hearst Ontario provided many memories of a less complex life and simple pleasures coupled with severe hardships. Being the youngest of seven children I did not always realize the significance of many of these events and marvel at how we survived.

The first snow in the fall was the signal for my father to hitch his horses to the sleigh and drive off down the speeder track which separated our farm from Uncle Mike's. Along with many of the other farmers along Concession 2 and 3 he worked as a teamster

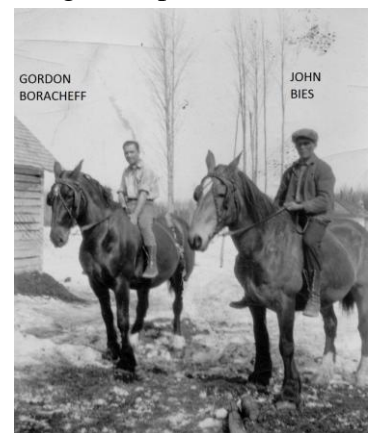


hauling pulpwood every winter at the Driftwood Lands and Timber Company bush camp a few miles to the south. They returned a few days before Christmas and then it was back to the camps in January until spring. After a hard day hauling, the horses needed to be cared for and rested up for the next day so there was no time for even a short visit home.



These huge horses, with names like Tom, Prince, and Mike, were extremely patient with little children who wanted to be cowboys. Their stalls in the barn offered very cramped quarters as they stood side by side, with less than a foot of space between them and the walls. They stood under a low ceiling with the hayloft above and their heads extending into the internal walkway that was used to put hay in their troughs and bring them pails of water

or treats of oats. The clearance above their shoulders was barely a foot but that did not deter my sister and me from playing cowboy. We would give them some oats in a pail and while they were chowing down we would clamber up their necks, pulling ourselves up by the hair on their manes till we could sit on their backs. We could not sit up-right so had to lay forward but we were now cowboys riding these magnificent beasts. Fortunately these gentle animals tolerated our games till my father found us and laid down the law ending our pseudo-riding days. He said if the horses got startled and bucked or if we fell off under their hooves we'd be crushed instantly. There had been instances of horses kicking and killing their masters so he was fearful for our safety although, in the past, he and his friend Gordon Boracheff did ride the horses on occasion.



Like the other farm wives, my mother was left to tend to her children, manage the few head of livestock and chickens that we kept and survive the harsh winters of Northern Ontario. With the horses gone she was without any means of transportation to town so Dad had to stock up with the store bought provisions before he left. Bags of flour and sugar, pails of lard and plum jam were hauled in. Flour bags became clothing, table cloths and pillow cases so they all had to be different. Empty lard pails were put to good use for storage in the shed, feeding the chickens or catching drops from a leaky ceiling. Nothing went to waste. Milk from the cows also provided butter which the younger ones spent countless hours churning. Sour milk was converted to cottage cheese. In addition to supplying eggs daily, the chickens were also guests of honour at the Sunday dinner and provided endless chicken soup that cured all ailments. The dugout under the house served as our root cellar and was stocked with potatoes, carrots and turnips from the summer's harvest. Mom was a master at stretching her provisions to always ensure we were fed. I was surprised later to discover that hamburger and rice pudding were not normally made with bread filler. We also developed super immune systems so were generally healthy growing up.



The older children went to the one room schoolhouse down the road so there really was no need to go to town on a frequent basis. Doctors from town would visit the isolated farm families with their horses and cutters on routine or emergency calls.

The outdoor well often froze in the night and had to be thawed and primed with hot water every morning. My oldest sister Olga recalls one winter, before my time, when our well went dry and she and Mom had to take a sled with a copper boiler over to Uncle Mike's farm every day for water. The water splashed out of the boiler and into her boots as she gamely pushed the sled as Mom pulled. By the time they got home her feet were soaked and freezing. This required several trips as the livestock consumed more water than the family. We had the benefit of two outhouses, our own and another at the adjacent teacherage. Two two holers were quite a luxury when you had nine people who always had to visit at the same time. No need for reading material in those days as time spent was minimized when the temperature dropped to 40 below and the icy cold winds blew up to greet you, or your older brother was banging on the door.

No electrical service meant the small farmhouse had to be heated with a woodstove in the kitchen and a box stove in the living room. These were connected to the chimney by a plain stove pipe suspended from the ceiling. We would sit around the box stove that was so hot our faces could be sweating and our backsides chilled. We'd get as warm as possible and then dash to bed under huge homemade comforters that were stuffed with chicken feathers. The stovepipes were always cleaned in the summer but a winter's diet of the local soft wood caused a significant buildup of soot and the constant danger of a chimney fire. On some cold nights the stove pipes became so hot they glowed red. My mother and older brothers and sisters frantically soaked

towels and potato bags in cold water and threw them over the red hot pipes till they cooled and the danger passed. Ever vigilant, Mom rarely had a full night's sleep.

December brought thoughts of Christmas and the older boys would trudge off into the bush with an axe and come back with a spruce or balsam which they took great pains to select. The tops of the trees were the best and sometimes when they chopped them down they did not look so good so they had to start again. Occasionally we little ones were privileged to go on the tree hunt but we were more nuisance than help so were only allowed on the shorter excursions.

As Christmas approached we badgered poor mom with daily queries of when Dad was coming home. She often didn't know and would just say in a few days. We'd wait at the speeder track, looking and listening and finally we'd be rewarded with the sounds of the sleigh bells off in the winter stillness. Soon the horses would huff and puff into view, steam rising from their backs, snorting and pulling, but happy to be home. There was no store at the bush camp so all Dad had to bring us was a huge paper bag of white peppermints, bulk cookies, apples and nuts. Simple camp staples but to me treasured treats that money could not buy. After he and the horses were rested and refreshed, Mom and Dad would go into town to do their Christmas shopping. A truck or a toy bus with my name on it may have found its way under the tree but those simple peppermints have always been one of my fondest memories of the holiday season. Was it really the peppermints or the fact that we were all together and Christmas could really begin?



The older boys were tasked with cutting and splitting the firewood and keeping the stove going. As I got older it became my job to stock the wood box every day. One night at about two A.M. the fire went out and my father got me out of bed and sent me for wood. Lesson learned as it only happened once. I went off into the dark wood shed with a lantern imagining wild animals lurking just out of the reach of my light. The wood shed was only a stone's throw from the house but to my short legs it seemed like a mile. Trembling with fear and cold I was reassured to see Dad peeking out from behind the curtain making sure I was all right.

It was a new era when Hydro finally came to our concession in the mid 1950s. Eero Maki wired up the farmhouse and my sister Olga sent a fridge from town which had to be dragged the last mile and a half on a toboggan. That McLary Easy was still going strong almost forty years later when we sold the house in town.

The first thing we kids insisted on making was Jell-O. After many failed experiments trying to make it out on the porch only to get a frozen mass of ice crystals we finally had a fridge and could enjoy real Jell-O, just like the town kids. To this day red Jell-O is still my favorite dessert.