## WORK AND PLAY ON THE FRONTIER

# Children of the Farm

By Jean Cochrane

Stephen Radcliffe was 11 when, in about 1852, he learned how to break new ground with a primitive plow, walking behind his father's oxen:

> "Now then", my father said, "when the cattle start up, lift on the handles and put the plow in about six inches deep." I did as I was told, but the plow ran to the right. "Press heavy with your right hand," he said. I did so, but the plow jumped out of the ground. The oxen were backed up and another start made. This time the plow went in to the beam. "Press hard with both hands" was the order, and the plow jumped out again. After making some more holes in the ground, my father rushed for the house, and did not come back until the field was finished.

The next spring, his lessons learned, Stephen broke five acres of sod, and the treacherous plow caught on a root. "The handles flew up and skinned my breast bone and hit me in the jaw." Neither accident nor illness stopped the work:

> The doctor gave me medicine and said I must be taken good care of or I would go into a decline. Father brought my medicine out to the field where I was working the team, putting in the crop, so I would not lose time coming in after it. My nose bled a lot for years after that, and I was quite thin.

There was not necessarily cruelty or a lack of love in this kind of treatment. Wherever the frontier spread in Canada, the wind blew chill around rough cabins and backwoods homesteads. There was very little money. There was urgency. Children were assets.

In 1854, in *A Canadian Settler's Guide*, Catherine Parr Traill referred to the contentment of immigrants "surrounded by the comforts they have won for their children". Then, in a less sentimental vein, she pointed out how useful those children could be from just past the toddler stage. They could gather eggs, carry wood, make candles, maple sugar and syrup. They could round up, feed and groom animals, sweep the house, shovel the barn, pick hops and berries and tend gardens. They could, and they did. They pioneered beside their parents, sharing the dangers, the loneliness, and the constant, strenuous effort to build a living and a life.

Benjamin Rothwell was born in Ottawa in 1835. His family moved to the backwoods of central Ontario, and he was sent from Stratford to Bradford, walking about 260 kilometers, to tell friends about some new lands open for sale. He was 13 years old.

As an adult, he wrote about helping to clear his family's own acres of untouched bush and forest:

> Though not lazy, I think still that I never worked contentedly on the farm. I had a great dread of working alone, being somewhat inclined to gloominess. But I helped my father at many slavish pieces of work.

Gloomy and discontented he might be, but he took a pioneer's fierce delight in the immediate results of his efforts. "The work of clearing up a new farm, though laborious, had attractions," he later wrote. "There's something bordering on the sublime in tumbling those mighty giants of the forests in wild confusion. Then in the summer season, the piling together of the immense crop of timber is a beautiful exercise. Then the burning of those stacks is really beautiful, especially at night."

In 1864, the travails of a young homesteader were given heroic treatment in a work of fiction published in England to capitalize on the interest in emigration and the imagined romance of pioneering. It was stirringly titled, *George Stanley or Life in the Woods: A Boy's narrative of the Adventures of a Settler's Family in Ontario.* A passage reads:

> To water the horses I used to sally out in a thick great coat with the ears of my cap carefully tied down to prevent frostbite; a thick worsted cravat around my neck and thick mitts on my hands. The floor of the stable was, invariably, a sheet of ice, and over this I had to get out the two horses, letting the one out over the icy slope at the door and then holding the halter till the second one had slid past me.
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> Of course they were in no hurry, and would put their tails up to the wind and drink a minute then look around at their leisure as if it were June. By the time they were done their mouths and chins were often coated with ice. Right glad was I when at last I had them fairly back again and had knocked out the balls of snow from their shoes to let them stand firm.

There is little of heroism or romance in the picture that emerges from real childhood memories of homesteading preserved in archives and interviews. There is acceptance, humour, some bitterness, and an obvious eagerness to break the mold, to find a wider world and release from the never-ending chores.

Farms were home to nearly half of all Canadians right up through the 1940s. By then, of course, many of them were mature and prosperous, but there were also still homesteads, isolated and remote, where primitive conditions lingered. It continued to be the way hundreds of families got a start. In 1923 the CPR carried 58,000 immigrants, many of them on their way to open up parts of the Prairies and Northern Ontario. During the 1930s Quebec actively encouraged families to leave towns to take up farming on undeveloped land.

Mary Papp's family moved to Langenberg, Manitoba, about 1890. They slept under the wagon en route from Winnipeg, and one of the babies died during the trip. Their first home was a cave scooped in the side of a hill. The second was a log house plastered with

*Opposite page: Boy plowing with his father, Swan River Valley, Manitoba, about 1915. Below: Years of hard work by adults and children were needed to create a well-ordered farm.*

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*A log house was home on this pioneer farm in Alberta.*

mud and roofed with sod. Mary and her sister Katie, with men's clothes over their dresses, herded cattle, slopped the pigs, milked the cows, and told each other stories to lighten the drudgery while they weeded grain fields and picked stones.

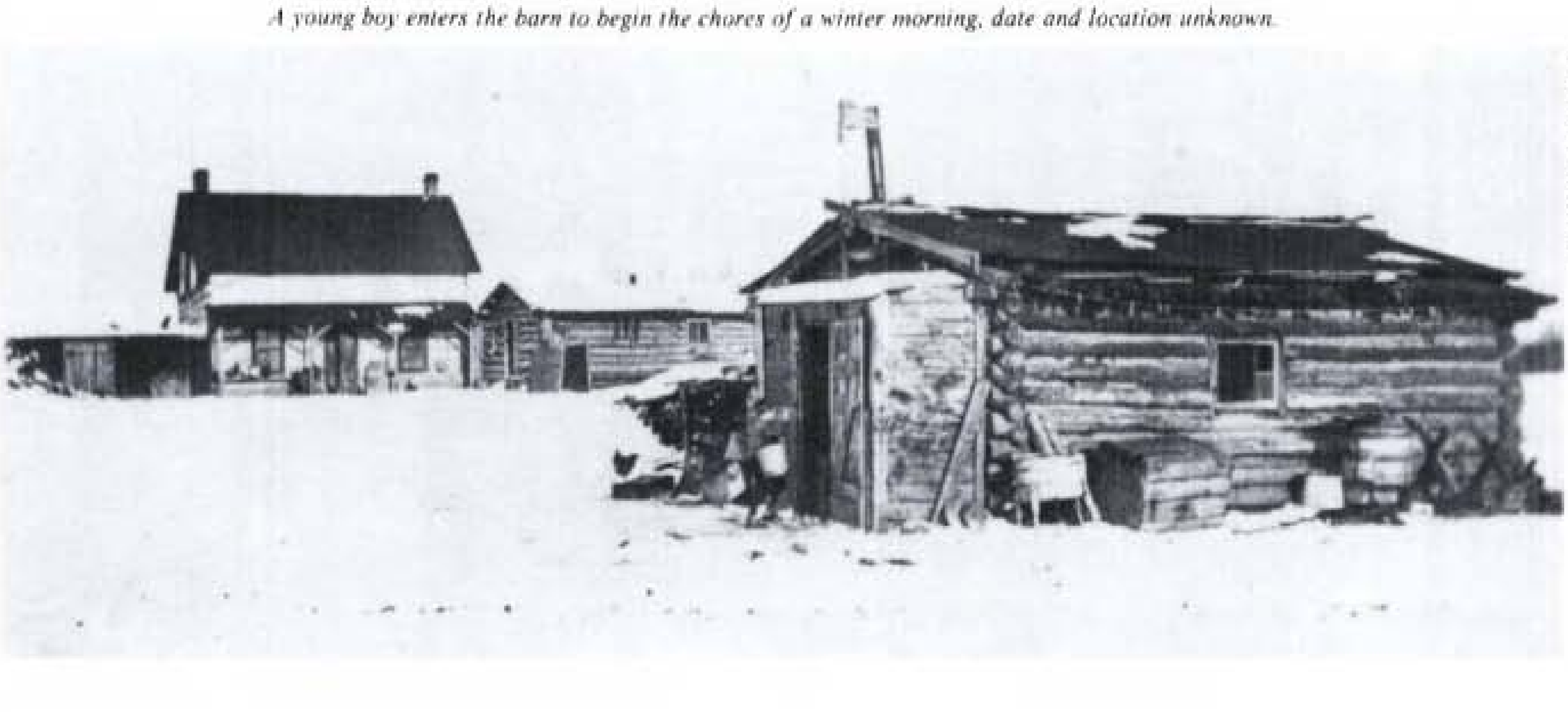
Another recalled childhood on a homestead near Indian Head, Saskatchewan, in the 1920s:

> When I was 12 I could hitch a six-horse team as fast or faster than my father. He was very proud of that, and I was ashamed, because I hated the farm. I could do the harrowing and some plowing, though not with the biggest plow. I had no brothers. My sister and I milked five cows morning and evening, and we had to keep the barns clean and feed the pigs, and if things weren't done when Dad came in, he'd be furious and bat us around. We had a half section and a quarter section and when I was 11 or 12 I never spent a full year in school, because I had to stay out to seed and harvest. But I was a day-dreamer. I read everything I could from the travelling libraries sponsored by the Homemakers' Club. A lot of it didn't mean a thing, except that I knew there was something better.

For farm children there were as many chores around the house as in the fields and barnyard. The wood stove that was often cook stove and heater had to be fed constantly, usually by a boy:

> The first thing my dad ever bought me, when I was about seven, was a hatchet so I could chop kindling.

*A young boy enters the barn to begin the chores of a winter morning, date and location unknown.*



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Glenbow Museum

*The children of Gleichen, Alberta, pioneer Walter James combine work and play, circa 1900.*

> There were 10 kids finally, and I was the oldest. Chop wood, chop wood, all the bloody time. My mother was always after me to have enough kindling to start the stove in the morning.

Girls did not always work in the fields, but there were plenty of other jobs to keep them busy. Oil lamps and chimneys needed cleaning. Steel kitchen knives were polished with brick dust. Clothes were boiled and washed by hand. "My sister and I scrubbed the wood floor regularly with brushes, on either side of a bucket. We used lye and lard, and sand to give it grit," one woman recalled later. Girls learned to make butter and honey, preserve fruit, vegetables and eggs, to smoke meat and store root vegetables.

There were large meals for large families, and larger meals for work parties. Mabel Sanderson writing of the early 1900s, said dinner for men's work bees included boiled potatoes and turnips, onions and carrots, roast beef, gravy, applesauce, tea biscuits, bread, butter, home-made pickle and ketchup and two kinds of pie. And there was the washing up afterward.

There were clothes to make and mend and alter. "Mother made every stitch we wore". Mabel recalled. "She would even start with sheep's wool, washing and spinning it. That's what you did in the winter before you went to school, you would help her pick the wool." Mabel helped to turn 100 lb. flour bags into pillowcases and tea towels. Five of them made a sheet, she remembered. And there were babies. "When there was a new baby I was taken to my grandmother's. We'd go home and they'd say, 'Have we got a surprise for you!', and I'd say, 'Oh, Ma, not another one for me to look after.' That was the only thing I resented."

Children were sometimes loaned out to work for other people, sometimes even before immigrant families reached their final destinations. Mrs. Traill warned parents to be sure to note where and with whom they left a child along their long, poorly charted route. Otherwise, they might never be reunited. The practice continued as long as there were isolated homesteads. It might be done to ease the load at home when there were too many mouths to feed. It was sometimes done in the hope of giving the child a chance to go to school, to learn a trade, to live in a better place than a lonely farm far from opportunity.

Annie Tuttle, looking back late in the nineteenth century on her Nova Scotia girlhood, wrote of her young self: "I had my 10th birthday on August 3,

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*Man and children digging potatoes on frontier farm, 1898.*

1849. Sometime in March, my Uncle Albert Lockhart came to Mother one day and said — I see and hear him yet — 'Olive, can Annie go over and help Agnes for a time?' Mother replied, 'She can go if she wants to go,' and Annie went. I am not sure that she wanted to go. I have an idea that she had already discovered the hardness of the struggle father had to meet the expenses of the growing family, and she wanted to help. So for nine months only I was their help. I could tell of different duties that fell to my lot. Mixing the buckwheat pancakes and getting up before daylight and frying them for breakfast."

Annie got homesick, and went back to her parents for about a year. Then, lured by the promise of schooling, she went to another uncle's to mind another baby and help out generally:

> Early in 1851 I was taken hundreds of miles from the home of my childhood and transplanted into very different surroundings in the home of my uncle. I do not know what it cost my parents to give me to uncle, they were so reticent. I do not remember that they even kissed me, but as the years have rolled around I have discovered that they had deep affectionate natures and loved their children even though they did not shew it except in their self sacrifices. And I believe this was one of them. All my little belongings were packed in a round basket made by our Indians. In this basket was placed a piece of my mother's ginger bread and although my stay was nearly a year and a half, yet I kept a bit of that ginger bread, a something that linked me to the home left behind.

She said her uncle thought he had adopted her, but that "aunty was exacting", and she wouldn't stay adopted. She didn't get the promised chance to attend the school. "I proved too good a nurse girl to get to school over much. I remember calculating at the time that I got six months out of the 16 that I was in Chatham."

Annie bounced back and forth between uncle and parents for several years, but even when she went home, it was to help cook and clean and knit and look after her own sisters and brothers, who numbered eleven until two of them died.

Forty-odd years later, young Gavin Green fared better. He worked just as hard as general all-purpose help, but he did get to go to school: "As there were five boys in our family, sometimes we were on short rations. Well, there was a farm had no boys and wanted a school boy to do the chores night and morning for his board. This was in the winter. "I had lots of chores to do, as the boss and hired man teamed wood to Goderich every day. I was well fed, but lonesome. The daughter would not play with her father's chore boy, so I had to play by myself when I got my work done. I was at this place about six weeks when I got fired. One morning when I came up for breakfast, the mistress said to me, 'Take that grease and grease Amelia's shoes.' I said, 'I will not.' 'Well, then get your breakfast and go home.' The word home sounded good to me."

His next billet had its own drawbacks: "I was soon lent out again for my bed and board. I was well fed at Quaid's, but the bed part! Nice bed, but my bedfellow, the hired man, was a big husky Scotchman with big black bushy whiskers, and when he undressed for bed I was scared of him, as he had so much hair on his body. Chores were at Mr. Quaid's hard work. I had to pull straw out of a stack with a wooden crotchstick like a harpoon. Easy to shove stick into stack, but manual labour to get it out again with a bundle of straw attached to it. About two hours' work after school each night to get enough straw to feed five head of cattle."

In time, Gavin actually got paid:

> In the fall of the same year, Mr. John Quaid came down to our home leading a two-year-old steer as a present to Gavin for staying on the job, pulling the straw out of the stack to feed the cattle, and doing what Mrs. Quaid told me to do and being a good boy and not saying bad swear words to the cattle or driving them to water with a pitchfork.
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> Well, I strutted around with my chest out trying to sell my steer. I felt as big and important as Big Bill McLean, the cattle buyer of Goderich. But no one would buy my steer, so we fattened the steer on turnips and killed it for beef. Weighed 400 dressed. I got my share of the steer in eats and the hide to sell for myself. So getting fired at Mr. Scott's for not greasing Amelia's shoes, I got a good character recommendation and a two-year old steer. Whether

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*Children with feed for pigs, Cremona area, Alberta, 1915.*

*Jack Barkley feeding hens on the family farm, Twining district, Alberta, circa 1912.*

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Ontario Archives

*Pioneer children, date and place unknown, collecting eggs in the barn.*

> it was fate, or fulfilment of the Scriptures, 'Cast thy bread upon the waters, and it will return to thee after many days,' buttered — this I know: I was some drover and the proud possessor of a steer for a couple of months.

For most people, there was consolation in the fact that everyone around them was leading the same sort of life, and there was pride, and laughter. Children, like Katie and Mary Papp telling their stories, learned to enjoy any opportunity that made a break. Mary wrote fondly about outings to the annual Langenburg fair.

In an 1864 essay on "How I Spent My Summer", a child who attended the Halifax Institute for the Deaf and Blind, capped his account of two days' hard labour with a memory of sunshine and strawberries:

> Last summer my brother and I reaped the buckwheat all day. After we reaped it next day in the morning after breakfast, my father, my brother and I cut the bushes until noon and at 12:00 my mother took a horn and blew in it and my father heard it and he told us to come to dinner. In the afternoon my brother and I cut bark with two axes in the barn. Then I picked the strawberries and ate them in the field and lay on the grass before the sun.

Much later, a retired teacher recalled, "We used to have to do things we thought were fun, though they were work. We helped to break the colts, running them in circles on a rope. We fed the calves out of pails with milk and water and cereal, and gave them our fingers to suck."

In his case, the family encouraged him to dream of leaving the farm. "Father and Mother were anxious that I get an education. Father didn't let me do jobs he'd think would be habit forming, because he didn't want me to be a farmer. I didn't do the morning chores, for instance. I was the smart one."

There was more than one way to be smart. A nostalgic paragraph in the Methodist *Christian Guardian* in 1887 suggests that not everyone found the pressure of work unrelenting:

> There are so many bright spots in the life of a farm boy that I sometimes think I should like to live the life over again. I should almost be willing to be a girl if it were not for the chores. There is a great comfort to a boy in the amount of work he can get rid of doing. It is sometimes astonishing how slow he can go on an errand.
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> Perhaps he couldn't explain himself why, when he is sent to a neighbor's after yeast, he stops to stone the frogs. He is not exactly cruel, but he wants to see if he can hit 'em. It is a curious fact about boys that two will be a great deal slower in doing anything than one.

Or, as a Nova Scotia woman commented crisply, "My brother Alec never did anything. Brushed his own teeth, I guess."

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