

Leah Brock (Porter) 1888-1981

Submitted by granddaughter Audrey Nerbas (nee Brock) May 2014

Knowing only the timbered landscape of her home, notably called Forest, Ontario, 21-year-old Leah Porter's first glimpse of Saskatchewan, its treeless vastness and wide open spaces, enthralled her. She recounted her fascination with mirages and on one visit back to Ontario was asked if she had seen a mirage. "Often," she replied. A woman exclaimed, "Oh, why didn't you bring one to show us?"

This young teacher had left home and family, travelling by train to Moose Jaw where her groom Joe Brock was at the station to meet her. They married August 27, 1909, in the midst of harvest season, and headed to Joe's homestead by democrat, an open horse-drawn buggy. The farm was located near McTaggart, five miles west of Weyburn. This would be their home for nearly 49 years until they left the farm in the hands of sons Bud and Russell and moved to Weyburn.

When they arrived, a threshing crew was in place, complete with cook car. That was the only harvest for years to come that Leah would escape cooking for large threshing crews. Along with her own family which grew to nine children, it wasn't unusual to be feeding many of these crews for up to three weeks at a time if poor weather interrupted the harvest. Gas thrashers had not yet become common and were fuelled by wood, coal, or straw. She recalls seeing smoke from 15 machines rising skyward one fall morning.

Leah experienced her first Saskatchewan blizzard December 31, 1909. She never forgot the terror of that sudden storm. It blew out during the night but by morning 29 people in the province had perished.

Early years were busy with raising the children, helping her husband establish additional land in Ogema and in the Brokenshell area. This meant packing up the family and moving between locations for as much as six months at a time. Leah said that though this was difficult, it gave her an opportunity to expand her horizons, make friends with people she wouldn't otherwise have met, and the opportunity to see the growth of the new communities along what was still the new rail line west of Weyburn. Joe was also a land locator so he often left her in charge of daily chores, livestock, and generally keeping everything together.

One afternoon, after several incidents of cows escaping the pasture, Leah loaded the two youngest children in the democrat, along with a few fence pickets, barb wire, etc., to repair a broken fence about five miles from home. It took longer than expected and was dark when she finished. Getting disoriented, she ended up in a slough and one of the horses, deciding to go no further in the sloppy deep mud, lay down and refused to move. After numerous attempts to prod the horse into movement, Leah took the reins in one hand, the fence post in another, and began to vigorously apply the same to the rump of that old mare. Those that knew Leah would be inclined to consider her a kind

and compassionate person. However, right there that old mare came to learn that such was not necessarily true. That mare scrambled to her feet with mud and water flying in every direction, made hasty tracks for the opposite side of the slough, and brought democrat, howling children, and above all, that angry woman swinging that fence post to firmer ground.

With such a large family accidents were frequent and there were other losses and disasters--fires took barns, horses, harnesses, and feed a couple of times, as well as fields of hay; drought and insects plagued crops. Joe contacted typhoid fever and was hospitalized 100 days. But there many good times too, including exceedingly kind neighbours that came to their aid many, many times.

Although there seemed to be no end of hard work, there were many simple pleasures. Many of these took place at West Weyburn School—picnics with races and contests, ball games complete with much food, and school concerts. The school also had occasional church services and for several years was the scene of a regular Sunday School. These were times of coming together, sharing laughter and making memories for those of all ages.

Berry picking was one of Leah's favourite times, although these often became adventurous excursions. They were worth it for the fruit that would be a welcome change from the homesteaders' staple desserts—syrup or prunes. One such trip to find Saskatoon berries was in a friend's very old, very unreliable vehicle to Qu'Appelle in the very lean 30s. They left early one morning and 'fairly split the wind at as much as 15 miles per hour', getting to Qu'Appelle area in the middle of the afternoon. They got lost and while endeavouring to turn around on the narrow roadway, the car just came apart! Using some bailing wire, they managed to make enough repair to reach a farm yard on which there just happened to be lots of berries. The farmer made them welcome. They had taken along a tent so spent the next 24 hours there. They went home with not only a nice supply of fruit but with happy memories of people who share their good things with the less fortunate.

Both Leah and Joe kept involved with the community with Joe being a member of the West Weyburn School Board for many years, and serving as a councillor for Weyburn Rural Municipality, and Leah being heavily involved in church work, West Weyburn School, and other local community activities.

In 1958, Joe and Leah moved to Weyburn. When Joe passed in 1967, Leah transferred her dedication to whatever needed doing. Her biggest complaint with her grandchildren was that they wouldn't do something productive while sitting in front of a television or riding in a car. This was a woman who never sat idle. It was not uncommon to see her with knitting in hand, doing a crossword puzzle, and carrying on a lively discussion—all at the same time.

Leah was active in the United Church all her life, very involved in the Saskatchewan Co-operative Movement, and in 1944, was one of the eight charter members of the Weyburn Credit Union.

She was secretary of the Women's Section United Grain Growers for 31 years. In April 1947, she wrote to a member of the Board of Transport Commissionaires of Ottawa, demanding that the Board hold sittings in Western Canada to enable the group to present their case in opposition to the 30% increase in freight rates—whether she received a reply is not known. She was also secretary for Farmer's Union Local, Aid for Aging, and Pensioners and Senior Citizen's Group.

By her daily life, she passed on examples of thrift and sharing as her sewing machine hummed—patching quilt tops—and as her needle passed miles of stitches in quilts, sending them to faraway places through the Unitarian Society. This Society awarded her its highest possible honour in 1980—the Gold Pin. In 1973 she was Weyburn's Lady of the Year at age 85. In 1980, at age 92, she was Oungre's Saskatchewan Pioneer Queen.

As she reached her 90s, one of her favourite comments was: "I'll just bake some cookies and take them to the 'old' people on this street."

She would acknowledge the many changes she had witnessed in her lifetime, and recognize that not all 'oldsters' were inclined to feel that all changes are improvements over the old ways. However, she would go on to say, "When we are through changing, we are through. Let us use such influence as we have to ensure that changes are for the better."

Leah continued to live alone in her home contributing to her community where she could and happily sharing her knowledge and love with family and friends until she passed in 1981. She is but one example of a pioneer woman who was self-effacing, but willing and capable to do what she could to improve life for her family and neighbours.