

Helena Unger Jones

Nov.22, 1902- Dec. 2, 2002

Helena Jones was a strong and practical woman of the earth. She came from the Red River country of southern Manitoba, a place of both opportunity and unrest at the time of her childhood. She was plucked from a high-risk family environment and dropped into the nest of a family travelling west across the prairies. Helena Jones experienced environments that ranged from underground dwellings, prairie dust storms, drought, and harsh winter blizzards to situations of extreme deprivation during the 30s. Her calm, patient, accepting, and positive attitude which I came to know, must surely have served her well throughout her life. She was known for her creativity, her resourcefulness, her love of nature and animals, and her open- hearted way of living a life as a prairie farmer's wife.



However, the story I want to tell of my pioneering grandmother is about the story that was never told. This is an untold story of a 100 year old breast cancer survivor who died in 2001; outliving the small town she and my grandfather farmed near, Talmage, SK. Although some family members may know of her diagnosis and subsequent treatment, it never resonated through my generation. No stories of this floated over kitchen tables, or at family picnics, or even at her death. From my earliest memories she was a woman with one breast. I don't know how old she was when she underwent a mastectomy. I don't know if she was diagnosed before she married and had children or if she suckled five children from one breast. I don't know what the conditions of treatment at the time entailed. I don't know how she felt when she was diagnosed and I wonder if she had anyone to talk about it with. The busy work of rural life on the Canadian prairies kept women close to the hearth and home, caring for their immediate needs and that of their family. For many women this resulted in an isolated reality. I don't know who cared for her when she came back from surgery. Were the men who became husbands and fathers just after the turn of the century capable of caring for such an intimate women's wound? Was it my grandfather, or other community women? Or was she alone, changing bandages and wiping seepage, washing the bloody rags, hanging them out to the winds, and binding herself again?

Did she find her arm moved and felt differently after the incision healed and the gap closed? Did she stop amid her day, sit in silence with only the songs of birds and the constant breeze, and contemplate her loss? Did her love of the birds, the ground, and the sun soothe the gaping hole on her wounded chest?

I do know that she seemed in no way self-conscious about it. She wore cotton t-shirts and denim trousers as she worked on the farm, and a dress when she went to church, but to my knowledge, at least in the time since I was old enough to notice what my grandmother wore, she did not wear a bra. She made no attempt to hide the

fact that she had but one breast under her soft cotton shirt or to improvise or attain any type of prostheses.

There were no fundraising campaigns or movements to increase awareness of breast cancer, no press for checkups or mammograms. I don't remember my mother or my aunts talking about any of this. Did she have women friends to share her feelings with. Was there a shoulder to catch her tears? Were there tears or did they dry in the wind as quick as they were shed, a salt trail on her face. No time for self-pity between scalding chickens, digging the garden, harvesting, taking fresh bread or jam to a neighbour, or making that quilt. Or maybe those circles of resilient and resourceful women did share the pain, the burdens, the fears as they gathered together to lighten the load of many labour intensive farm chores and tasks. I do remember the names of some of the women that held a certain reverence, respect, and perhaps love when she spoke of them; Mary, Letitia, Eva... and others. Were they the unsung circle who today would sport a pink ribbon on their lapel, or work the design into their communal quilt? I hope so. I hope she did not have to experience this alone.