

Inga Mathilda Marstead of the Abbott District,
Brokenshell Municipality, South Saskatchewan
Submitted by: daughters Ruth Prost and Alice McNaughton.

This is our tribute to Inga Mathilda Marstead from all of us, her family.

Our mother Inga Mathilda Kampesather was born to Gina and Erland Kampesather in Skabu, Norway, in the municipality of Gudbrandsdalen. Her father owned land and a farm with electricity. He was a general in the Norwegian army and a counselor in their district. All of his children were educated which was not all that common at that time.

Gina, our grandmother, passed away when our mother was only twelve years old. The running of the home fell on Mathilda's young shoulders. It is very hard to imagine. She and her brothers milked cows and there were many goats and farm animals to care for. She cooked, cleaned, and helped to raise the two younger children in the family, a lot to ask of someone so young.



In 1925, when she was in her early twenties, she married our father Ivar Marstead. He came from the same Skabu district. They knew each other well as he and her brothers were old friends. They married in Lillehammer, and went by steamer ship to Liverpool, England. She knew they were going to America, but I'm sure she had no idea how far away it was or how long the trip was going to be. In those days you put your complete faith and trust in your husband to know what was best. It was a long, lonely journey for her as she spoke no English.

Father had traveled to the United States many times. He had purchased land in Alekbo, North Dakota, where they were to go to live, but immigration had a quota system in place and it was full at that time. They would have to wait a full year. They came to Canada, near the United States border, to stay with some of father's friends and work until they could return to the United States. They liked Canada and the people and with the persuasion of Jim Stewart, a friend, they bought land with a small house near the Stewart farm. The house was very small and dirty as an old fellow had stayed there before. After much scrubbing by Mother, they moved in just before winter. It was so cold that she had to wear overshoes in the house to keep warm. By this time they had welcomed a son.

And so began the years for these two on a farm nine miles north of Radville with no trees, no electricity, and no phone on two quarters of land. They had many good neighbours who helped each other as everyone was in the same situation.

Mother, being an intelligent person, soon learned to speak English on her own, reading and writing it as well. Remarkable! She was a wonderful cook, bringing with her the cooking skills of her homeland. She made many soups, different breads, and cheeses. She grew a large garden and preserved the bounty for consumption all year round. There was no supermarket in those days! Meat was preserved by salting it and storing it in large crocks, or by canning. Loads of grain would be milled for flour to last for the whole year (you hoped!). It was wonderful, healthy food!

She was a great seamstress; she made all her daughters' clothes and her own on a Singer treadle machine bought second-hand. It still works! She used brown paper for a pattern, laying it on us, making an armhole bigger or smaller, a dart here and there. She turned Dad's old suits and coats inside out and made coats and jackets for us. They looked tailor-made. Flour bags and sugar sacks were washed and made into tea towels and pillow cases. I believe our bloomers were also sewn from flour bags. Dad's old woolen underwear lined many a quilt for the winters.

The Great Depression era came and with it the drought of the thirties. Dirt storms were so bad that soil lay in drifts and Mother hung wet tea towels on the windows so they could breathe in the house.

Plagues of grasshoppers and army worms cleaned up what was left of anything green.

Dad left for Manitoba to work on the threshing crews to make some money. This left Mother alone with their family, milking cows, doing all the other farm chores as well as caring for a growing family. Our brother was old enough to help and when he and Mother milked, it was at the pasture gate. She told us younger children years later about seeing hobos riding on top of the trains. There was a rail line nearby that ran from Moose Jaw to Radville and beyond. Sometimes someone would come by walking and she fed them what she could spare. She never feared them. They would never take anything unless they could do some chore for her. They were good, honest men just down on their luck. There was no work until World War II. They were all wanted then.

And so the war years began. Mother felt fear and anguish for her family in Norway. Mail had to be sent through Dad's brothers just across the border as Canada was at war with Germany, and Norway was a German-occupied country. The letters Mother received were censored - long, black marks covered some sentences to conceal what may have been revealing information. The letters did not come often. She worried a lot and sat up many a night mending or sewing when she couldn't sleep.

During the war years, things improved generally as the crops improved. Mother began raising turkeys. They were the most stubborn birds. They would lay their eggs all over the pasture and if you tried to move them, they would not set again. So off she went in Dad's overalls to bring feed and water to these stupid birds. We had to cover them at night with a wooden crate so the coyotes would not get them. This was the only time we saw Mother in pants; otherwise she wore a clean print dress and an apron. She always told us you can be poor but it costs very little to be clean. This was a concept that was instilled in all of us.

The turkeys, though stupid, were a cash crop in the fall. A killing bee would happen and neighbours would come to help. They stacked them up in the cold porch like logs - so many birds - and then they would be off to Regina for sale.

Then a terrible thing happened, Dad contracted sleeping sickness. He was very ill with a high fever and was delirious. Mother nursed him the best she could, but imagine the terror and worry for her, miles from her family, with no phone. She never learned to drive. I believe my older sister walked to the closest neighbour for help and a doctor. By then Dad was getting better. Thank goodness he was strong and healthy before this happened. Many in the district were stricken and many died.

Poor mother, all these things were so hard on her and health soon began to fail.

Conditions improved on the Marstead farm during the late forties and early fifties, but Mother went through many surgeries for kidney stones and experienced a lot of pain and endured many hospital stays. She lived to see a few of her grandchildren which gave her much happiness. She did not get to return to her beloved home in Norway though, much to our regret.

She and Dad raised five children, one son and four daughters, in a happy and healthy environment, teaching us all a strong work ethic which we have passed on to our own children. She passed away at the young age of 54 in March, 1957. She was, in our eyes, one of the true pioneers and immigrant mothers, who, against all odds, contributed in part to our province, and all our lives, and was a friend to all who knew her.