

Eva Miller nee Thomas (1915-2004)

Submitted by: Janice Vilcu

My mother Eva Miller was born February 17, 1915 near Holdfast, Saskatchewan, the sixteenth of eighteen children, to German immigrant parents John and Mary Thomas. When Eva was only a few weeks old, her mother was admitted into the North Battleford Mental Hospital due to ongoing manic depressive episodes and the rest of her life was spent in and out of hospital. Mom was raised by her father and her older sisters.

Because of her father's failing health, Mom quit school at about age thirteen to work as a hired girl. At this time she, her sister, and brother were living in Weyburn with their father in a house on South Hill. She felt it was time to take care of herself and help supplement her father's meager income.

She talked fondly of several of the people for whom she worked, especially the Roberts family who lived in Weyburn and had a set of triplets. It was a lot of work looking after three babies at that time. There were no disposable diapers and certainly no electric clothes dryer or automatic washing machine.

Living next door to the Roberts family was a lady named Mrs. Quilty, who took a liking to mom and when time allowed would invite her over for tea and a visit. She taught mom to sew and to quilt, skills that served her well over the years. As a hired girl, wages were room and board along with a few dollars a month. She gave her father a bit of grocery money and occasionally, as a very special treat, she would take her dad to an afternoon picture show. Eva saved up to buy material to sew herself clothes and became a talented seamstress. She could draw a dress pattern on brown paper, figuring in frills and tucks to make the outfit special. She dreamed of owning high heeled shoes so when she got a little older and after much saving of pennies, she splurged and bought a lovely pair. She loved wearing her high heeled shoes.

Mrs. Roberts and Mrs. Quilty were special mother angels sent into her life; they were surrogate mothers, who by their kindness, helped her become a loving mother in her own right.

Times were difficult, money scarce, and the day came when the Roberts family could no longer afford to pay her wages. Sadly she had to look for other employment.

On January 23, 1934, she married my father John Miller, a local farmer. They began married life with seven dollars between them and no material possessions. After the wedding, they lived for a time with John's older brother Frank, who was married to Mary, Eva's older sister, in the house on the farm the two brothers worked together.

In the spring Uncle Frank approached my dad to give him some brotherly advice. "For crying out loud, John, take your wife to town and buy her some proper farm shoes before she breaks her ankle in those cock-eyed high heeled shoes of hers." The high heels were the only shoes mom owned besides her winter boots.

Their daughter Audrey was born in December, a month before their first anniversary. In the spring they moved a mile away to a house that was little more than a glorified granary with tar-papered walls. The only heat source was the wood and coal burning cook stove. There was no electricity, and no water except for a hand pump over the well in the yard. They didn't have a telephone. Transportation was by horseback or with the team of horses and a wagon or sleigh.

Just after Christmas of her second year, Audrey became ill. At about the same time Dad

ended up in Regina hospital with trachoma, an infection in his eyes. Mom begged the doctors to let Dad come home as Audrey was so ill and kept asking for her daddy. Penicillin had not been invented yet so the doctor who was summoned could not prescribe a cure and infection raged through her little body. The doctor gave no hope that Audrey would recover. They allowed Dad to come home and my parents held and comforted their precious baby. On January 19, 1937, she died of pneumonia. They buried her in the lonely country cemetery on the family farm, SE1/4 34-7-13W2. In 2002 we replaced the simple wooden cross on her grave with a permanent marker.

A month after Audrey's death on a cold February day, Dad and Uncle Frank took Mom, who was expecting a baby and already in labor, by horse and cutter to the town of Ralph. Through the cold and over the snow banks, they relied on the faithful horse to get them the three miles to the store in Ralph. Dad prayed the cutter wouldn't tip over in the deep snow as it often did. They used the telephone at the store to call Dries Taxi Service in Weyburn to send a cab to transport her to the Weyburn Hospital. The taxi driver was a nervous wreck by the time he got Mom and Dad to the hospital but all went well and a daughter Mary was safely delivered.

In 1944 Mom and Dad bought their own farm. Six more children were born into the family:

Alex, Ron, Fred, Jim, Stan and Janice.

Mom dedicated her life to caring for her loving husband and family. She was kind and gentle, taught by example, having the patience of a saint. She rarely raised her voice and was never judgmental or condescending. She treated her children's scrapes and cuts with iodine, gave drinks of hot milk with butter to cure a hacking cough, and rubbed chests generously with Vicks Vapor Rub. She dried tears with the corner of her apron and soothed loved ones with gentle hands and generous hugs. She was always there for her family. She cooked and cleaned, grew a huge garden, preserved and pickled much of our food for winter use. She was organized, neat, and tidy. "A place for everything and everything in its place" was a motto she lived by.

She knew how to butcher a chicken and fry it up for supper as delicious as could be. She loved to bake cakes, bread, buns, donuts, and pies. Meals were happy times, with good home cooking and family gathered together sharing conversation and laughter. Life was different in her generation. She did not have a driver's license nor did she feel the need for one. Driving from their farm to Weyburn, nine miles away was a long trip, even after the horses were retired to the pasture and replaced with a

car. They went to town on Saturday after lunch to shop for groceries and were always home before supper. Sunday was a day of rest meant for church and family. Vacations were for the rich and famous. They never took a holiday unless it was to visit family.

They survived those early years of icy cold creeping through the thin walls in winter, drought and never ending dust of the 1930's, crop failures and the stress of where they would get the money to buy winter coal and groceries. Everything that needed to be accomplished involved hard manual labor, a strong back, willpower, and perseverance.

When mom talked of these times, she didn't dwell on the sadness or the loneliness and deprivation, but would rather tell of the community dances where Dad would play his violin accompanied by Uncle Frank on the guitar and harmonica. There were picnics and neighborhood gatherings on Sunday afternoons with ball games, three legged races and games of horseshoes.

She told of her friend Minney who lived across the road. In the summers before Audrey died, they would take turns baking bread and share the fresh loaves so only one kitchen would get heated up from the fire in the cook stove. In the cool mornings they would wander the pastures together talking and laughing, pulling their children in a small wagon as they gathered dried cow manure to be used as fuel in the cook stove. I would always wrinkle my nose at the thought and Mom would explain that it burned hot and fast without any smell and saved their precious coal and wood supply. "You do what you have to do," she would tell me with a smile.

We honor her as we go about our daily lives, remembering the life lessons and skills she so patiently taught us. Our mother was an extraordinary woman living an ordinary life with hope, strength, patience, and love.