

Fanny Pulfer (Beamish) 1890-1933

Submitted by Jan Linnell, granddaughter

It is a challenge to write about a grandmother I did not know and have the story reflect her reality, but I have pieced together what I believe honours her life.

She was an Ontario girl, born in the small village of Hastings, into a large close knit family. Life was not easy there but the physical closeness of homes, school and church helped form ties of support.

My grandfather was visiting his family and she caught his eye in 1907. He would have been considered a catch as he had gone west in 1898, homesteaded successfully and became a landowner of acreages that would have impressed the farmers of Ontario. He was ten years older and "tested," so was deemed a suitable husband. In 1908, they were married in Ontario and she left all she knew for the plains of the prairies.

It was a stark view out of her window in the home her husband had built for her. In spite of the indoor plumbing, electric lights, and a coal furnace, all considered luxuries at that time, especially in a farm house as town homes were just getting these amenities, no trees softened the horizon or sheltered from the winds. The closest neighbor was almost a mile away. No lights pieced the darkness of night.

Fanny became pregnant with her first baby Arnold who was born in 1909, at home, as was the custom. A second baby, Beryl, followed in 1910. This time an entry in Grandpa's ledger shows a bill paid to a doctor for "three months treatment for nerves ". From this single entry and previous ones for a doctor, I wonder if she suffered from post partum depression unknown at that time as a serious signal. Her life could not have been easy as child care and housework was gruelling with diapers, feeding and managing the household in such conditions. Every woman at that time shared the same work load so sympathy would be scarce.

A third child, Max came along in 1912. She was just twenty-one, married four years with three children under three years old! Unfortunately baby Max caught dysentery, common in those days. The doctor said there was nothing he could do, but Grandpa hired a nurse who vowed to save this baby; she did and my dad survived. What did this event do to Fanny? We know she longed for her family in Ontario as she wrote often and even visited one winter.

The next few years were marked by progress as farming was good. The first car was purchased in 1912, allowing for easier trips to town and church so more interaction was

possible. In 1916, a trip to California broke the long winter for this family giving them all some sunshine.

Fanny had another baby, Donald, but he died as a newborn in 1917. I do not know how this affected her, but can guess it was stressful. Women were expected to continue to give birth and carry on as if nothing had happened as society was very much bound by convention and rules of behavior. She had two more children after, Doug born in 1920 and Dorothy in 1922.

In 1926 there was a trip to California again, this time with just the two little ones; the older children were left in the hands of a capable woman. Was this an attempt to break the “blues”? As it was not a common thing to do, I can only guess.

Over the years women had made some strides in equality as the ability to cast a vote was attained in 1919. A story is told about my grandfather and grandmother going to vote. He asked her to hold the horses while he went in, but he immediately wanted to return home without giving her a chance to vote as he knew she was going to “cancel” his as they had two different beliefs. I can only imagine the conversation on the way home! (I do believe she did get her vote!)

Fanny had some independence as most farm women did with her ducks and chickens as a source of her own money. Grandpa was a generous man as he noted many orders of clothing and household items from Eaton’s in his ledgers. Also noted were transfers to her account, one for as much as \$500.00, a considerable sum in 1918.

Family, church, and community gatherings filled her life as the boys grew and went off to school in Moose Jaw, but came back to work on the farm. Beryl too left to go to Teacher Training in Regina, teaching at Willow Bunch. Doug and Dot were like a second family with the eight year gap keeping life busy with music lessons, school, and community.

Telephones installed in 1919 helped bridge the gaps too although party lines meant guarded chatter, as listening in was a handy way to keep up with the neighbours.

The 20’s were very progressive times as groups were forming to such as the Grain Growers and The Homemaker’s, forming in 1929, with Fanny as the first president. These organizations were essential to rural living as so much ongoing education was needed to keep up with discoveries and inventions.

Fanny gave a talk on “labour saving devices” which included the idea of the kitchen as the “main part of the house” and needed a window over the sink “to let the sunshine in”. Of note is the way she organized her week:

Monday - washday

Tuesday - ironing and Grain Growers

Wednesday - dusting, churning, and mending

Thursday - dusting and a half-holiday

Friday - baking and fish

Saturday - cleaning and scrub

Sunday - rest and church

As she concluded “by planning we can have a little time for recreation along with our work”. I am sure mothering took many hours that she did not account for in her weekly plan. Pictures of the family over the years show a closeness with love shining through. She had much to be proud of as her family looked so strong.

I do not have any knowledge about any depression she may have been suffering other than a reference in a letter from her mother in 1932. “I was sorry to hear that you not been well but I do hope that this finds you better again .You will miss Beryl no doubt. I was surprised to hear that she had gone back to teach again so soon as I had thought you would have her with you all winter.”

Questions arise as to what was wrong? Was she depressed? Pictures from that time show a vibrant woman but was she suffering from menopause and its hormonal see-saw? This time period was a wasteland in which treatment for any mental condition was bordering on cruelty. The Weyburn Mental Hospital had opened in 1921 and much secrecy surrounded the life behind the windows of this edifice at the time, the “biggest building in the British Empire.” Horror stories abounded of husbands bringing their wives to the door and leaving them to whatever lay beyond. Staff were housed away from the rest of the community adding to the mystery as to what went on “out there.” Drugs and talk therapy were many years in the future so hope was thin.

Whatever her demons were, they triumphed as she took her life on May 13, 1932, the day before Mother’s Day, leaving a devastated family.

Beryl came home to take care of Doug and Dot, as they were twelve and ten at the time. Max continued to live at home while Arnold lived close by with his new wife and baby. My grandpa stoically grieved alone virtually cutting himself off from others unless it had something to do with farm work. Grandchildren came along allowing him to immerse himself in them as a relief.

Looking back and trying to understand the constraints of the times, I still feel such a sense of loss for a woman I did not get a chance to know. Her life haunted me especially when we returned to the farm in 1976 with my family and I stood at the

window where she had stood with more understanding of childbirth, the "baby blues", depression, life issues, and the role of women in our society. Oh, to talk to her now! What a gift that would be.

I would tell her of her legacy of over 100 descendants and more on the way with successful sons and daughters becoming farmers, teachers, doctors, nurses, surveyors, business owners, writers, contractors, welders, computer techs, fire fighters, lawyers, life coaches, accountants, veterinarians and good people who formed wonderful families, all here because she came to be a farmer's wife in 1908. She did not live in vain!

Fanny's Poem

One time I got to thinking of the time we women spend
On the humdrum work of living and the tasks that never end.
So I counted up the minutes and the answer made me think

And so I got to hating the dull thing I had to do
Life didn't seem worth living till the kitchen work was through
And I'd stand there washing dishes in a mood as black as ink
'Till Father cut a window in the wall above the sink

And then as I stood working I could look away so far
Past the meadows to the marshes where the redwood lillies are.
And in fancy I could wander down the blossom bordered stream
And my homely task was finished when I came back from my dreams

And now it isn't drudgin' and the reason is I think
That the window let my thoughts out above the kitchen sink
For fancy lightens labour I can face things with a smile
- Mrs. R.C. Pulfer