

### **Ethel Grace Surring nee Ward (1887-1942)**

by Iris (Surring) Johnson, granddaughter  
use of family history written in "The Surrings A  
Saskatchewan Pioneer Family" by daughter  
Sylvia Surring Birnie

Ethel who was born March 14, 1887 on a farm,  
north of Summit in the rolling hills of Roberts  
County, South Dakota, USA was one of a family  
of seventeen. Her parents were Ida Jane Fosler  
and John Ezia Ward. Her grandparents, Louis  
Ward and Mary Magdeleine Cummings were  
both born in Canada. Her siblings were Mary,  
Walter Charles, Alice, (Ethel Grace), Bessie,  
Nellie, Samuel, Hazel, Lyle, John, Clarence,  
Daisy, Ralph, Milton, Theodore and Florence.  
Five of the seventeen died in infancy.



The family home was built of wood and was  
small with one large main room and two smaller  
bedrooms to the north. A ladder built into the wall  
led to the upper area under the roof where the older boys slept. There were straw-  
filled mattresses and homemade quilts and comforters stuffed with wool, washed and  
carded by Grandmother Fosler.

When they were twelve and eleven years of age, Charlie and Ethel were caught out  
in a storm and nearly froze to death. The doctor, who lived twenty miles away,  
wanted to amputate their hands and feet but Ida wouldn't hear of it. She had treated  
them with soft cloths saturated with a mixture of goose grease and coal oil for three  
days before the doctor had arrived. Ida decided to use her own remedies spiced with  
love and strengthened with her faith in God and prayer. "More things are wrought by  
prayer than this world dreams of" became a guide to Ethel throughout her lifetime.  
The healing was a long slow process but the children didn't lose their limbs.

Grandmother Fosler (Harriet Hams) lived with the Ward family. She was always there  
in her corner beside the Franklin stove, her small hands making the knitting needles  
fly or darning socks and mittens. Ethel was petite, four foot eleven, very slight with  
tiny hands and feet. As an adult she wore size three or four shoes and gloves as  
small as she could buy. When she was thirteen, after the evening meal she washed  
the dishes. Then it was her job to carry her younger brothers up the ladder and put  
them to bed. This is where Edward Surring first saw Ethel, her small form halfway up  
the ladder, shoulders drooping under the weight of a small brother. As she was  
descending the ladder she missed the last rung and was caught by brother Charlie  
who propelled her in Ed's direction and introduced her as "my clumsy sister". Later  
when she bent to pick up the second of her young brothers, she was startled by Ed's  
voice saying, "Here, here. Let me. He is much too heavy for you."

Edward Frank Surring was born May 24th, 1873 in Martin County, Minnesota. He had  
left home in Iowa at fourteen years of age after completing grade eight. He had a

sense of adventure. He worked in a store and at a logging camp, drifting from one job to another eventually reaching South Dakota. He built a house in Summit where he his sisters and a brother lived. Here he learned about harvesting and threshing. One fall they pulled onto the field of John Ward, Summit, South Dakota. When threshing was done, Ed spent as many Sundays as he could at the Ward home. He had a horse and buggy and Ethel loved to go for drives with him. Ed was restless and ambitious, forever seeking a better life. He wanted to own property, a farm of his own, to settle down and have a family but he couldn't ask a woman to be his wife until he could support her. At that time there were rumours about Canada and posters everywhere describing that great unsettled land to the north. A quarter section of land (160 acres) could be had for ten dollars. Applicants had to live six months for each of three years on the land and break ten acres.

The Soo Line Railway had been built from Minneapolis, Minnesota to Portal, Estevan, Weyburn, and Moose Jaw, opening September 24th, 1893. In 1901 Ed was on that train. He got off at Weyburn, North West Territories. The land had been surveyed. A driver dropped off a group of men at a certain spot each morning. From there they did their exploring on foot. There was lush prairie grass but no trees, hills, valleys or streams. When he sat down to rest he discovered a trail, two tracks, one deeper than the other, suggesting that this had been made by buffalo at an earlier time. It led southwest. After a few miles in the distance he saw an object or a mirage which became a reality as he grew closer. It was a lone willow tree on the edge of a slough. This NE quarter of section 22-7-15 W2 became the homestead November 15, 1901 and was known as the Lone Willow Farm. A sod house and barn were constructed, land was broke, a well dug, and improvements made. Winters were spent in the USA and summers in Canada.

Ethel and Edward were married December 24, 1903. Ida made the wedding cake the beginning of December and stored it in a large crock. The wedding dress was made of royal blue cheviot serge (a loosely woven cloth of sheep's wool). It had a gored skirt, long sleeves, high collar which reached the ear lobes a ruffle outlining the yoke and a fastening at the back. There was one major problem. Ethel had no shoes to wear with the dress. Her father John had arrived home from the last trip to town before Christmas with no shoes. No doubt the money had been used for food and essentials and the shoes were forgotten. Ethel sobbed far into the night. Grandmother comforted her that night and told her she would have shoes. When she woke up there on her pillow were a pair of slippers. They were fashioned from soft suede-like leather, with pointed toes, leather soles and a small heel and were a dazzling blue which matched the gown. Grandma wouldn't comment but it was thought that they had been made from the hidden treasures in her trunk.

The winter of 1904 the newlyweds left by train for Canada. Upon arriving at the sod shack (five miles south and four miles west of Weyburn) Ethel was overcome by a wave of homesickness, the first but not the last that she was to experience in this pioneer home. She was sixteen when she married. There was one large room and a small bedroom to the north. In the middle of the large room was a combination heating and cooking stove. Under the south window was a crudely constructed table where boxes served as chairs. A washbasin sat on a box near the west wall. By nightfall the room was warm, clean, and cheerful. The kerosene lamp sent out an

encouraging glow from the centre of a well-scrubbed table. The coffee mellowed in the pot on the back of the stove Ethel discovered a small braided rug, which had been tucked in by Mother Wand, on the bottom of the trunk.

Each morning the snow had to be cleared away from the door which opened inward and a path shoveled to the barn. Eventually this path had six foot high drifts on each side. They ate plenty of turnips that winter. Potatoes were scarce. Ed shot two rabbits. Later Ethel told him she hated to cook them for they reminded her so much of a cat. Then there was a severe storm. Ed stayed up to keep the fires going. He fell asleep. Ethel shook him awake. The fire was low and it was cold and dark. The clock said 9:00 a.m. The storm had buried the buildings. Ed managed to dig a path out and upward to crawl through. Eventually under a foot of snow he found the barn roof. With great difficulty he cut a hole through the frozen sods and poplar poles so the horses could get air. Water was hauled by pail from the well and lowered to Ed in the barn by Ethel.

Parties were held in the homes. Someone on horseback brought word of a party. About 5:00 p.m. a neighbour driving a team and sleigh would begin picking up people. Violins, banjos, and mouth organs provided music for singing and dancing. Square dancing was the most popular. Cards were played. Midnight lunch was sandwiches from homemade bread, cakes, and hot coffee. One man had a cow so he provided cream for the coffee.

In the spring wild flowers grew near the doorstep. There was the crocus, sometimes called the Pasque (Easter) flower, wild yellow sweet pea, and later in the ravines violet and lady slipper. Ed needed another team of horses to farm so decided to work in Weyburn that first summer as a dray man. Ethel worked for Mrs. McKinnon, storekeeper's wife, doing housework. They used weekends to plant a small field with oats and a garden with potatoes, carrots, turnips and corn. Evenings Ed worked as a carpenter. He helped build the first house on the south side of the river in Weyburn. Early September they returned to the homestead. The crop was good and there were no weeds. In later years there were Russian thistles but they were hand-picked from the crop. The crop was cut and made into sheaves which were loaded on a hayrack and unloaded to form three large stacks.

The trail from Weyburn led by their shack and it became a halfway house for weary travelers. Indians lived south and west. Spring and fall on their way to Weyburn, they would stop for some of Ethel's homemade bread. The little bedroom was Ethel's sanctuary, a place to pray, rest, or be alone. A box beside the bed held a few trinkets and a clock, the braided rug was on the floor and in one corner stood a clothes cupboard which Ed had built. There was a chair, an oval-topped trunk, and a bed. The whitewashed walls held a picture and a small mirror.

To prepare for winter the well location was marked, a shelter built for the barn door, stacks fenced, the shack banked with extra sods and a root cellar was dug to store vegetables.

Milder weather came in January and February of 1905. There was no snow and frost had disappeared from the ground. Ed ploughed a new piece of ground.

On March 5th, 1905 after a long labour, Sylvia Mildred was born. A neighbour lady stayed with Ethel while Ed rode to Weyburn for Dr. Eaglesham, Senior. At that time a woman after childbirth was allowed to move around in bed if there hadn't been complications. She had to wear a snug fitting breast and abdominal binder. After the third day she was urged to turn alternately to right and left sides, permitted to sit up on the seventh day and get out of bed on the tenth day. A heroine in a book Ethel had been reading was named Mildred and that is what Ethel wanted to call her dark haired baby. Ed chose Sylvia, also a story book character. For a year or more each parent called the baby by her/his preferred name. Ethel gave in because as she said, "I knew Ed would never give up." The doctor continued to call this little girl Mildred for as long as he knew her as did the neighbours who cared for her when the next baby was born.

The second child was born May 30th, 1906. Ethel named her Violet Marie because she was so fond of the flower. Ethel developed blood poisoning. Her life was in danger. Ed sent for his sister Ellen, a trained nurse from Monona, Iowa. Violet was a sickly baby. Neighbours, the Staggers, whose children were grown, took Sylvia home with them to help out. They spoiled her terribly. Very slowly Ethel recovered. The first time she was allowed out of bed Ed carried her to the kitchen table. She weighed sixty-five pounds. When the time came for Sylvia to return home, the Staggers begged to keep and adopt her. It was a difficult time for all concerned. Undisciplined as she had been, Sylvia tested the patience of all concerned. This was when Ethel knew that she and Ed couldn't continue to call her by two different first names.

June 3rd, 1907 Beatrice Lola was born. It was time to build a new house. Before they moved in, a house warming was held. It was a good evening with music, singing, and dancing. The neighbours had been so willing to help at every opportunity and had given many hours of their time. However, the next day when Ethel and Ed went to clean up they became most unhappy as they saw brown stains of tobacco spit everywhere on the floor, walls, woodwork, even as high as the windowsills. Spilled beverages left their own stains. And so ended Ethel's dream of stained, varnished woodwork and hardwood floors. The new house had painted woodwork and covered floors. One special feature which delighted each generation to live here was the large window facing east which had a pane of red glass at the top that reflected rainbow hues into the room. Outside the house was painted white with green trim. Box elder and cottonwood trees were planted to the north and east, box elders or Manitoba Maples to the west, cottonwoods and golden willows to the north. A modest barn was built with a hay shed on the west side. A feed shed was added to the north wall which housed the fanning mill, oat bin, and feed chopper. Another lean-to attached to the southwest corner kept the chickens warm in winter. The next year in late spring or summer a lean-to kitchen was built over a cistern on the west side of the house.

On August 20th, 1908 Lyle Edwin was born. In December 1908, a trip back to South Dakota was planned. They hadn't seen family in nearly five years as 600 miles separated them. They were one night and two days on the train. They also visited Ed's family in Iowa. Ethel had never met them. They returned to Canada in late January, 1909.

February 27th, 1910 Ralph William was born. Neighbours and their children came to see the new baby. No one realized that whooping cough had reached epidemic proportions throughout the countryside. The four older children came down with it. April 18th, 1910 Ralph died.

Ed played violin and mouth organ. Ethel, who could chord on an organ taught the girls to sing. Her favorite song was "Red Wing". Their first ice cream freezer held three pints and Ed declared that it be filled every weekend or else he was going to quit milking the jersey cow.

On January 7th, 1913 Ruth Elsie was born. Clothing was ordered from the T. Eaton Co. of Winnipeg, Manitoba. There were two catalogues put out a year. Clothes had first been washed on a washboard and then put through a wringer. Then there was a washing machine turned by hand for ten to twelve minutes, clothes put through a wringer into rinse water with bluing to make clothes whiter, then wrung again. Next was a gas washing machine with a motor. Clothes were starched and ironing was done by sad irons which were heated on the stove.

Ethel Irene was born February 28th, 1915.

In 1902 Weyburn Plains School had been built two miles south. Sunday school and church were held here during the summer. Sylvia started school when she was seven and Violet was six (1912). Ethel was upset with happenings at the school which included an unsupervised lunch hour. Severe winters also made it hard to get to school. It was decided to send the children to school in Weyburn (1916). A place was rented and a lady hired to look after the children. When this proved unsatisfactory, they bought a cottage at 62 Prairie Avenue which was within walking distance of the school. The family spent the winter there with a hired man looking after the farm. Ed missed the farm. In the spring they moved back leaving the four older children to look after themselves during the week and to go home weekends to do laundry and prepare food for the coming week. Ed bought a piano. Professor Nidd came once a week for half an hour to teach the girls. Once the girls had finished high school in Weyburn, the house in town was sold. In 1917 Ed bought a Model T Ford with two double seats, one in front and one in back. It had to be cranked to start the motor. The car had a top and also curtains.

Elmer Ward was born December 28th, 1917. The house in town was vandalized in December, 1918. On a Saturday night after cleaning up the mess, Ed and Ethel were coming home in the dark. The car went off the bridge and tipped over in the ravine below. The front seat lay across Ethel. With a strength he didn't know he had, Ed was able to lift the car on its side. A neighbour happened to come along and took them home. They phoned for a doctor. Finally on Sunday night a doctor came but he was drunk. He hadn't brought an anesthetic. The arm was broken at the elbow and the shoulder was out of joint. After some crude attempts by the doctor at setting the arm, Ed ordered him out. It wasn't until Wednesday when their regular doctor came that the elbow was set and the shoulder put back in place. The arm healed crooked at the elbow and was never straight again.

And then came the flu of 1918-19. Hour after hour brought the "Dead Wagon" past

the Surring farm carrying someone's loved one to the funeral home in Weyburn. There was such a feeling of hopelessness. They prayed for frost, snow and winter hoping that these would somehow kill the germs. Ethel was first to get the flu, then the children. There was no help to be had. They managed as best they could each one helping as he/she gained strength. They all recovered.

Gilbert Parker was born April 19th, 1920. He wasn't a strong baby. Every winter seemed to bring a flare up of children's diseases which cut school attendance in half. While the children were living in Weyburn, an experimental serum had been developed for whooping cough, measles, scarlet fever, and chicken pox. The needle was huge and the injection was between the shoulder blades in the back. They were ill for a week with the doctor calling every day.

In the early years the adults played cards. When the children grew older, they found the cards and began fighting over them. Ethel gathered the cards, lifted the lid of the cast iron stove and threw them in. End of fighting. When the four older children were ages twelve to fifteen, the family attended a card party in the neighbourhood. They didn't know how to play. Ed vowed that this would not happen again so they learned how to play whist and cribbage.

There was never a Christmas tree. No evergreens grew naturally in southern Saskatchewan. Ed tried to grow evergreens in the front yard but it was too dry. In spite of frequent waterings, the trees died. Meat was butchered in the fall and kept frozen. There was a beef ring. Every two weeks each member in turn donated an animal to be butchered and shared. Seager Wheeler, Rosthern, Saskatchewan developed a rust resistant wheat. He earned the name of 'Wheat King'.

Then came the year when there was a good crop to be harvested. Ed hired two men to stook the grain. The men had come in for the noon meal. Ethel glancing out the window saw smoke billowing from the straw shed at the back of the barn. Lyle rushed out, whistled to the horses who were eating their noon oats and hay. They had been trained to come when he whistled and so they were saved. They were still harnessed but their bridles, which had been removed so they could eat, perished in the fire. The wind picked up and the fire was beyond control. All was lost except the house and garage which were saved because the wind had shifted. The sleeping quarters of the hired men was where the fire started. Careless smoking was thought to have been the cause. A neighbour volunteered to drive the two men back to town. Ed paid them for the work they had done so they had money until they could find another job. Such a loss! After harvest with the help of neighbours, a new, larger barn was built, this time at a greater distance from the house.

Once a year a Sunday School picnic was held a mile south at the Lucas farm where there was a large grove of trees. The girls wore dresses and the boys overalls. There was no such thing as slacks as yet. There were races, three-legged, gunnysack, free for all, and ball games. An ice cream cone was five cents. Tilting, a race on horseback, required skill, control of the horse and practice. Poles were placed equal distances apart in a huge circle. Each pole had an extension towards the outside of the circle on which metal rings were hung. A man on horseback with a long stick, horse at a gallop would try to pick the rings off the pole onto the stick. It seems they

had three turns and the one at the end of the game who had the most rings on his stick was the winner.

One night Ethel awoke to excruciating pain. She was very ill and needed an operation to save her life. The doctor recommended taking her immediately to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. The doctor made all the arrangements. They boarded the train in Weyburn to make the long, slow trip. Tests revealed that she had a kidney stone and was diabetic. The kidney was damaged and had to be removed. When Ethel was out of danger, Ed took the train home. Ethel's parents came to see her the second week after surgery. Ethel became known as "Little Canada" at the clinic. It was a long recovery. When she was finally released, her brother Charlie and wife Lizzie took her to Summit to visit her parents, brothers, and sisters. When Ed came by train to take her home, she had been away for more than a month. The operation cost \$500, a great deal of money at that time.

Sylvia, Violet, and Beatrice became teachers. Lyle farmed, eventually managing a road construction crew. Ruth and Ethel worked at the Saskatchewan Hospital, Elmer and Gilbert farmed. In 2001 the Surring family farm received the Century Family Farm award.



**The Surring Family**

Back Row – Violet, Lyle, Sylvia

Front Row – Edward, Gilbert, Ethel (daughter) Beatrice, Elmer, Ruth & Ethel Grace

Ethel passed away March 18, 1942 at the age of 55.

We think with gratitude of Ethel and her contributions as a pioneer wife in forming the province of Saskatchewan.