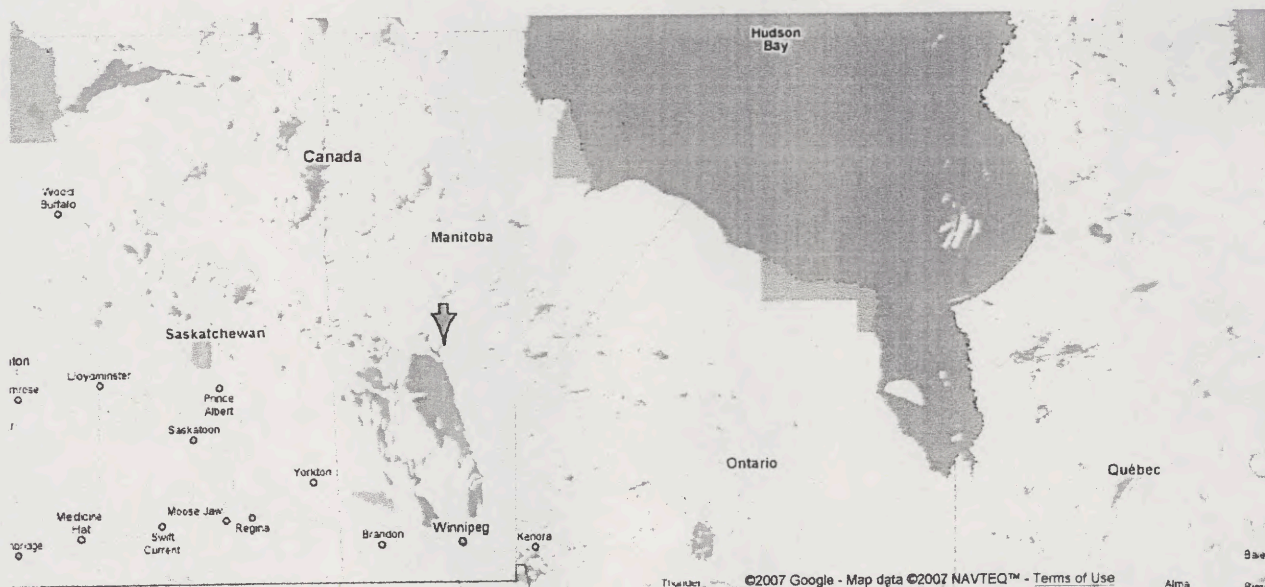


A Northern Adventure

My adventure at Norway House, Manitoba
August 1957 to June 1959

by
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2007

My memories of living in Norway House and
teaching at the Norway House Indian Residential school.



*Margaret A. May
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1957-1958

The adventure began on August 31, 1957. The family drove us from our home in Winnipeg to Selkirk to board the S.S. Keenora. I was sailing north to teach at the United Church Indian Residential School on the Norway House (Swampy Cree) Indian Reserve. My sister, Sheila, was joining me for a week before she returned to her studies at the University of Manitoba.

The Reid family was a nomadic Canadian family - Dad worked for the CNR, Mom stayed home to raise her three girls. We had lived in several major centres in South West Ontario. In 1953 Dad was transferred to Edmonton (we thought it was the end of the world!) - it was a major uprooting from a corner of Ontario. We loved Edmonton. I took my teacher training at the University of Alberta and taught in Edmonton for one year. But I was looking for an experience beyond city teaching. I was an active member of Robertson United Church (now Robertson-Wesley United Church). Our minister Rev. Dr. Douglas Smith, encouraged me to consider a United Church Mission School. I considered, applied and was accepted to teach at the Norway House Indian Residential School. I chose Norway House as the family had been transferred - again - this time to Winnipeg and Norway House was due north at the top end of Lake Winnipeg.

Travel on the S.S. Keenora was an adventure in itself. This boat carried cargo and passengers to many communities on its way north. At each stop a canteen on the lower deck was opened and the locals rushed on board for such treats as ice cream, pop and other goodies. Sheila and I had a small but comfortable cabin with bunk beds and a sink. After Sheila had taken a glass of water to swallow a sea-sick pill we noticed a small sign over the sink - it said "for washing only - do not drink" - it did not appear to affect her. The boat was an important lifeline to these isolated communities.

On board with us were other teachers heading for Norway House - Marion Service, Chris Zimmerman, Theresa Robicheau, Florence Pockett and Shirley Robinson - we had a good opportunity to begin to get to know each other. Other passengers were heading North to their homes and work places - natives, nurses, teachers, clergy, H.B.C. staff, etc.

After our three day trip we disembarked at Warrens Landing and transferred to the smaller M.V. Chickama. The cargo was transferred to the barges attached to the Chickama and we continued our journey along the Nelson River.

Norway House was an old, historical, settlement spread for many miles along the Nelson River. There was reserve land and non-reserve land. The last stop for the Chickama before heading back to Warrens Landing was Rossville. This was on reserve land and here we found the United Church Mission (James Evans Memorial United Church), the United Church Indian Residential School and a separate day school, the Indian Agency, a small Hudson's Bay Company post, a small Roman Catholic Church, the Indian Council House and quite an assortment of dwellings.

The residential school had staff bedrooms and dormitories for the children on the second floor, classrooms, auditorium and common rooms on the main floor. In the basement were a kitchen, dining room and a separate staff dining room, store rooms and a play area.

Looking back 50 years these are the people I remember: The teachers were Marion Service, Shirley Robinson, Chris Zimmerman, Florence Pockett, Theresa Robicheau, Keith Johnson, Cameron Reid, Alvin Funk and me; the supervisors Mr. Jones (he & his wife lived at the school), Walter Sealy and Doreen Henderson; the Chaplain/Women's Missionary Society worker was Margaret Martin; the cook was Mrs. Buchanan, the matron was Miss McNaughton. Keith, Cameron & Alvin lived in an old house on the property but ate in the staff dining room. Principal John Dennys and his wife Louise had their own house.

I lived in the teacherage, with Marion, Shirley and Chris on the second floor of the Day School - it had four bedrooms, two bathrooms, living, dining area and kitchen with a wood stove. On the main floor were three classrooms & the office. The furnace room, home economics room, a woodworking shop and a play area were in the basement.

My classroom was in the Day School. In my first year all my pupils were reserve children in a grade 2/3 class - ages 8 to 15. Progress was slow for many of the children - this was partly due to the language barrier - schoolwork was in English - the students were accustomed to talking and thinking in Cree. There were no restrictions on speaking Cree outside the classroom. The students were shy and unresponsive and it took time to gain their trust. Attendance was very fluid as children were frequently ill, stayed home to care for siblings and families went off fishing or trapping depending on the season.

The theory behind the separate school buildings was that day pupils from the reserve would attend the smaller school and those in residence would use the classrooms in the large school to lessen the contact among children and thus lessen the risk of local disease, lice, etc. spreading to those who lived in residence. This didn't really work as the children mingled and played together outside the classroom so the decision was made, in my second year, to mix students in the classrooms.

One procedure that was part of the daily routine was the nourishment dose for the reserve children, many who arrived undernourished. In the classroom was a barrel of skim milk powder, mugs and a large container of hard tack biscuits (full of vitamins and minerals). First thing every morning I would mix cold water and powdered milk in a large pot (there was a sink in the classroom) so that it had a chance to thoroughly mix & dissolve. Cod Liver Oil was also on the menu but how to deliver it to so many children? I obtained a large squirt bottle and shot a large squirt into each open mouth. This was a daily routine for every reserve child - a mug of milk, a very hard biscuit and a squirt of Cod Liver Oil.

There was a lot of love in that school. The children in residence came from distant reserves - Oxford House, Island Lake, Nelson House, God's Lake Narrows and South Indian Lake. The teachers were in charge during school hours, the supervisors responsible for them outside of the classroom.

The teachers were a dedicated group - mostly young with strong United Church roots. We spent many out-of-school hours with the children - planning and carrying out special events, teaching Sunday school, leading groups such as Mission Band, Explorers and C.G.I.T. We took turns leading morning chapel. I loved taking the children on field trips in the surrounding bush - they taught me so much about the environment that was so familiar to them. Often we built a fire and toasted marshmallows.

Hockey was a favourite sport. A large rink was built in the fall and many exciting games were played throughout the winter. These involved residential and reserve children and adults as well as players from up the river. On occasion we would travel north to Cross Lake, a two hour Bombardier ride, for a game with the Cross Lake Roman Catholic Residential School and they would bring their team to Norway House.

The school was on a large piece of reserve land and there was easy mingling of the school residents and those who lived on the reserve.

The teachers were also involved in reserve activities. We provided the music for the Sunday morning English church service. I played the organ and formed the small choir with help from some teachers and two or three girls from the reserve. I gave piano lessons. C.G.I.T. included girls from the school and the reserve. In our teacherage we frequently had reserve visitors drop in and they often stayed for a meal. Since the variety of food at the H.B.C. store was limited and very expensive our first task in the fall was to make up an order for supplies for the coming year. This order was sent to a wholesaler in Winnipeg who had to ensure it arrived at Norway House before the Keenora stopped running prior to freeze-up. We needed lots of storage space, more than our cupboards and fridge could hold. We used our ingenuity to store the surplus food. There was a flat roof over the Day School classrooms which we had access to through the fire escape door off our living room and which was quite inaccessible to people and animals on the ground. The weather was cold so we could put some of our food out there such as dry goods, eggs and meat. They kept well for a long period of time but when the eggs turned black and the meat turned green we had to admit they were well past their "best by date".

In mid September 1957 we were faced with a major challenge - the flu epidemic hit Norway House. On September 16th sixty students and some of the staff were down sick. School was cancelled and the few staff who were well enough pitched in to tend to more important needs. We comforted the sick, scrubbed floors, served juice & meals and Aspirin, washed faces and hands, fixed beds, took temperatures. In a few days more children and most of the staff were bedridden. By the end of the week Louise Dennys (principals wife), Reg Brown (U.C. Minister) and myself were the only well adults looking after many sick persons. Our major problem was exhaustion. However we weathered this crisis and school and life returned to normal.

In late October one of my mothers came to school to advise me that her daughter would be absent for some time as she was being treated for V.D. This prompted us to show a film on V.D. to the C.G.I.T. girls (school & reserve) at the church hall.

December saw us busy with Christmas preparation - a trip into the bush to cut a Christmas tree, building a manger scene, C.G.I.T. Vesper service, Christmas concert and special Christmas music. My class came up to the teacherage to bake cookies.

Many of us flew out to spend Christmas with our families. Flying back on January 5th we had another adventure. When the Norseman left Winnipeg the weather was clear but as we approached Poplar River we ran into a snowstorm and had to land. Ken Crassweller was the teacher, minister and post manager there and he was delighted to see us. All ten of us on board were teachers from Norway House so we took over Ken's teacherage. The boys slept on the schoolroom floor, the girls in the teacherage. We cleaned his place, baked and did a lot of back book work for him. We all enjoyed this interruption and the weather was clear to fly on to Norway House the next day.

The next few months saw us planning community parties at the Residential School, badminton tournaments in the Day School basement, entertaining in our teacherage, attending social events at the Council House. We had a Bombardier trip to Cross Lake for the official opening and dedication of the new United Church and to visit Rev Bob & Wilma Lindsay.

We had an active Teachers Association for all teachers at Norway House. This included the Roman Catholic and Anglican Missions and the provincial school (for non-treaty children). I was named Secretary-Treasurer. We made plans for a Teachers Convention in March which was attended by teachers from Norway House, Island Lake & God's Lake as well as the Indian Agent Mr. Staunton and school inspectors from Winnipeg. The inspectors seemed pleased with what they saw.

Marion, Shirley, Chris and I were finding life "over full" with school and community activities so we hired Donald Queskekapow to come in every day to clean, wrestle with the wood stove and make some meals. This was such a help and she participated in many of our activities.

March saw Norway House hit the headlines in the south concerning another event. Word got out to Winnipeg that Mrs. Calico Jones of Norway House had given birth to quadruplets.. There were many calls from reporters to the hospital and any other sources they could think of. The story was partially true - quads had been born to Mrs. Calico Jones - but Mrs. Calico Jones was a cat. This cat lived in one of our school buildings and the story had been leaked by a staff member. The principal and the Indian Agent were not amused.

I was fortunate in that I had good friends at the Norway House hospital which was several miles up river and I frequently made short and overnight visits there. In summer it required a boat trip but in winter it was a good walk. At Easter I walked there to spend the week but the week was cut short as break-up approached. The father of one of my pupils who worked at the hospital came and said the ice was rotting and I'd better return to Rossville with him that evening. I felt quite safe with him as he tested the ice all the way and at times we had to take quite a circuitous route. My Indian friends knew this country well and I knew that walking or riding a boat in questionable conditions would be safe.

A fairly regular event - depending on weather & season - was a trip up river (about 8 miles) to visit the Paupanekis family and hold a service. This was a large devout United Church family who always gave us such a warm welcome. We traveled by boat in the summer but it was a long, cold walk in the winter. Max was the grandson of Rev. Edward Paupanekis, Cree missionary at Cross Lake in the early 1900's.

Spring brought its own excitement. The open water meant that we could get around by boat again and that the Chickama would arrive with fresh meat and produce. It also meant Field Day for all the schools in the area which was held on the commons between the Council House and the school. It was also a good opportunity for community service, as my class went out to clean up the broken glass and other garbage which cluttered that green space. It was a successful event, especially since Rossville took top honours.

June was a much quieter time. My classroom was down to six pupils as most of the reserve families had gone off to Warrens Landing for the fishing. I took the remainder on frequent field trips and picnics. The residential school held a graduation banquet and proficiency prizes were awarded. This was followed by a dance for the seniors. On June 24th the residential children began the many flights required to take them back to their home reserves. The teachers were also ready for the summer break.

1958-1959

August 25 saw school staff on board the S.S. Keenora eager for the start of the new year. Lillian Anderson and Don Leary, new teachers, joined our happy group. As the M.V. Chickama chugged along the Nelson River it was good to see familiar places and faces. During that week children from outlying reserves were arriving by bush plane (usually a "Norseman"). I had the opportunity of flying as escort to God's Lake Narrows. While sitting up front with the pilot (and sharing his meal) all the children on board were bringing up their last meal. We helped the children settle in, did some prep for the upcoming school year and visited our friends around the community.

There were other staff changes. Wyn Gall had replaced Margaret Martin as Chaplain/Women's Missionary Society worker, Brian Orvis had replaced Walter Sealy as boys supervisor. Mrs. Casson was the new matron and Mr. Hayes the new Shop teacher. Anne Harper took the place of Doreen Henderson as girls supervisor.

Visiting, up the river, and around Rossville was such a pleasure for me. I felt welcomed by natives and non-natives wherever and whenever I dropped in. My three housemates (Marion, Shirley & Chris), all came from a farm background and they enjoyed spending Saturday mornings baking bread and other goodies for the week. That was not "my thing" so I was free to go visiting. We shared household duties (except baking bread) - two of us prepared meals for a week and two of us cleaned up after, then we reversed the procedure the next week. Donalda Queskekapow came in every day to give us a hand as well. We continued to do a lot of entertaining for our native and non-native friends and neighbours. Donalda eventually moved in with us as her mother was sent to the "San" with T.B. We continued to be very involved in extracurricular activities in the school and the community. There were many young people wandering around the reserve so we started up a Young People's group in the Church Hall. This turned out to be a very successful venture - attendance was consistent and we planned many fun activities. There was a very faithful group of young men who attended - one of the drawing cards, I suspect, was the young, attractive, fun teachers who made it all happen.

There was an exciting event in early October which could have been disastrous. We were awakened at 4:30 AM with the news that two sheds on the property were a blazing inferno. The high wind was blowing huge sparks across the other buildings. All the staff and children were evacuated to huddle, in the cold, on the commons. Men from the school and the reserve were successful in putting out the fire and about 6:30 AM we were able to crawl back into our beds. School was postponed until the afternoon.

Later in October I was surprised and delighted to see my Dad walking across the commons. He had business in Northern Manitoba and I knew he was hoping to get in to Norway House. A TransAir plane had taken a charter to The Pas that morning & Dad had managed to come back on the return trip. It was such a pleasure to be his tour guide over the next six days and to introduce him to my many friends in the community. It was the Thanksgiving weekend and I had more free time than usual to be the host. Dad thoroughly enjoyed his time with us and experiencing this new world of mine.

There was a meeting of the Norway House Teachers Association at the end of October and I was elected as the new President.

Early November saw the ice building up along the river edge and we knew freeze-up would soon be upon us. This meant we would be restricted to Rossville until the ice was strong enough to travel on. The planes would go out on floats and not return until the ice was strong enough to land on their skis.

James Evans Memorial United Church was rejoicing in the new electric organ which had arrived on one of the last trips of the Chickama. That was progress but I missed the old pump organ.

Freeze-up was a good time to think about and make plans for Christmas. A few of us teachers decided to take two of the more mature boys, Luke Harper and Murdo Linklater (from Nelson House, I think) out to Winnipeg for Christmas. We made, wrapped and delivered gifts for many of the old folk on the reserve. We took the C.G.I.T. Vesper Service to the hospital for staff and patients. There was the Christmas concert to prepare for.

In December we flew off to Winnipeg for a well deserved (or so we thought) Christmas break. Luke Harper and Murdo Linklater went with us. It was their first time "out" and what a time they had. They loved the escalators in department stores. They were interviewed by the Winnipeg Free Press and appeared on CBC radio and TV. They celebrated Christmas Day at our home. It was a wonderful and rewarding time for them and for us. We returned to Norway House by train to Wabowden where we stayed overnight at the Silver Leaf Hotel as it was late and too dark to take a charter flight.

Our overnight stay at the Silver Leaf Hotel was a story in itself. The building seemed very old and fragile, reminiscent of Gold Rush days. To accommodate the many transients - mostly workers on their way to and from bush camps - cots were set up in the large hallway on the second floor. Around this hallway were the bedrooms which we were fortunate to get. There was no insulation and thick frost covered the outside walls. Toilet facilities were rather primitive. The men in the hall dorm made use of several large oil drums which were scattered around this large space. We preferred a little more privacy and hauled one of the drums into our bedroom. We slept in our outer clothes including our northern parkas. The bedrooms had doors but no locks. Sleep was at a minimum as we competed with the noisy beer parlour underneath us and the noisy fellows in the hall dorm outside our door.

We flew on to Norway House, in a TransAir "Norseman" the next morning after a very memorable Christmas.

In January we had a Norway House Teachers Association meeting at the R.C. Mission. The priest and nuns were so hospitable. Some of the nuns had been pastry bakers in Belgium and they could sure put on a delicious spread. Plans were now underway for the Teachers Convention.

There was a strong ecumenical atmosphere at Norway House. The Anglican Mission, the R.C. Mission and Residential School and the United Church Mission were all on very friendly terms and there was a lot of cooperation and dialogue.

Also in January Norway House hosted the meeting of Presbytery. What a great time of fellowship, food and discussion. Glen Thompson came from Berens River, Glen & Joan Stewart from Nelson House, Bob Lindsay from Cross Lake, George Millard from God's Lake Narrows, Dr. Ken McLeod from United College in Winnipeg. Don Richardson was the minister at Norway House. There were good Bible Study sessions, great discussions and fellowship during this time. We all appreciated this time we had together. The school got a new "Bombardier". This was an essential transportation means in the winter and the old one was constantly breaking down.

In February we took the "Bombardier" to Cross Lake (about 2 ½ hours north) to cheer on our hockey team which was playing the Cross Lake Residential School team. It was also a good opportunity to visit Rev. Bob & Wilma Lindsay. The Cross Lake team beat us, but our team had beaten them at an earlier game played at Norway House.

One of our teachers, Keith Johnson, went out to the sanatorium suspected of having T.B. He was given the all clear and returned in March.

In February we had our annual Teachers Convention. All schools and teachers at Norway House and Cross Lake participated in this very successful event. Father Levasseur, our highly respected local R.C. priest gave a very inspiring message "Cultural Differences - How to Overcome - of Natives and Whites".

We experienced spring break-up in May which was later than usual. Once the waters were navigable it was Treaty Time. The natives gathered from far and wide for feasting, sports events, dancing and the delivery of treaty money to all treaty natives by the Indian Agent. It was a very colourful few days with the Mounties in their red serge and many of the natives in traditional costumes. Many of the local homes were surrounded by tents set up by those natives who lived in distant parts of Norway House or outlying reserves. They all wanted to be close to the action. The celebrations and hoopla went on well into the night (and following morning). School attendance from reserve children was rather sparse.

It was early June before the Chickama was able to make its first trip along the Nelson River, hence our first fresh good of the season. I took advantage of the opportunity to go on a couple of illegal expeditions. The Chief's son, Alec Duncan, was a very good friend and he was going fishing and hunting which were both out-of-season. This was too good to pass by as I was just interested in the experience. So off we went - and didn't get caught. I shot a .22 rifle for the first and last time.

It was also time to make the rounds of the community to say farewell to so many good friends. I was moving on. I had decided to return to my roots in S.W. Ontario.

My time at Norway House had been an experience of a lifetime. I had learned so much about our native brothers and sisters in this northern, isolated community - their lifestyles, their challenges, their hurts, their amazing sense of community, their care and concern for each other. It was a sad farewell.

I had many opportunities to share this experience and what I had learned when I went to London. In my grade 5 class I taught about our aboriginal sisters and brothers even though it was not part of the curriculum. I took them to visit the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford. Over the next few years I received and accepted many invitations to share my story and show my slides to church and community groups in London and the surrounding area.

In 1978 I returned to Edmonton and once again have had opportunities to be involved in the aboriginal community and the many struggles they encounter.

I am grateful for those people in the United Church and other groups who choose to walk beside them.