

CHAPTER THREE

Mr. Wright told me to take care of my wants by helping myself to groceries as I needed them. Stores in those days were open from eight in the morning until about eleven o'clock at night. This meant that I worked in the store from the time school was dismissed until six, prepared and ate my dinner by seven and worked again until eleven p.m. At eleven, I found myself commencing to do my homework and I usually studied for three hours before retiring. This, incidentally, became a habit of my life, a habit which to this day I still retain.

At the end of the first month Mr. Wright called me to his office and said to me: "Alfred, you have worked a month. What do you think we owe you?" I said: "Mr. Wright, that is not for me to decide; that is for you. I do not know whether I have been of any use or not. I cannot thank you enough for the opportunity you have given me and that in itself is worth more than money." He asked me if I knew what my grocery bill was for the month and I told him that while I had not yet figured it up, I was sure it was under eight dollars. He laughed and said: "Yes, it's seven dollars and sixty-five cents. If we give you the difference between seven dollars and sixty-five cents and twenty-five dollars, would you be happy?" At this juncture twenty-five dollars seemed to be a fortune. I owed Mr. Staack ten dollars. I had bought some second-hand books from grade twelve students and I could see where it was possible to pay my debts and still have more spending money than I had seen in a long time.

During the month I had become well acquainted with my high school classmates and while I did not realize it then, but I know now, many of them must have told their parents that a friend of theirs was batching in the Staack Block and working for his board, as I soon found classmates inviting me to supper, especially on Sundays.

Before I left home, Mother and Father had impressed upon me their desire that I should make the acquaintance of the Methodist Church minister and that I should make sure to attend Sunday school and church. Before the first month was ended, I had become well acquainted with the Methodist Church minister, the Reverend A. A. Lytle, and his wife. I had joined the Methodist Church and found that the Sunday school teacher who taught the senior boys was none other than our principal, Mr. H. E. Tanner. Reverend and Mrs. Lytle made a lasting impression upon me and both came back into my life in later years, as did Mr. Tanner.

On my behalf, Mr. Tanner had contacted the Department of Education and had explained what it was I was attempting to do. He had suggested, and they had agreed, that if I achieved pass marks in three or four subjects in grade eleven, it would not be necessary for me to write final examinations in the same subjects in grade ten. This assisted me greatly and while I naturally studied in my spare time the grade ten material, I devoted most of my time to grade eleven.

By the end of October, 1923, I had become well acquainted in Stettler and felt completely at home. The fifty dollars paid to me by Mr. Wright for two months' work had put me on easy street. Then tragedy struck! Mr. Wright called me into his office and showed me a letter he had received from Mr. Seth Witton of Rocky Mountain House, the owner of the store. Mr. Witton, who owned several stores, had decided to cut down his staff for the winter months and had told Mr. Wright that it would be necessary for him to layoff the staff in the reverse order to which they had been employed. Temporarily, my heart sank, until Mr. Wright assured me that he felt sure he could use my services sufficiently to at least pay my grocery bill, providing I could earn enough money elsewhere to pay Mr. Staack the ten dollars per month. He told me at the same time that he had arranged for me to talk to Mr. Staack and he was quite sure "Pete" would find enough work in his store that I could pay my room rent. Upon answering a knock at my door that evening, I found my good friend, Mr. Staack, who, incidentally, had never called me by name but had always addressed me as "my boy." He said to me: "My boy, could you write my business letters for me? If you can, your rent will cost you nothing. Business is not as good as it was and, like Mr. Wright, I have had to reduce my staff." (Incidentally, Mr. Staack's staff consisted of one other besides himself.)

My experience writing Mr. Staack's business letters was something I shall never forget. I well remember his letter to a wholesaler concerning a pair of shoes which he had sold to a customer and which were returned to him as unsatisfactory within two weeks. Mr. Staack asked me to write a letter to the wholesaler, which I did in about six lines. Before mailing same, I was obliged to read it to Mr. Staack. He listened to this short letter and with a frown on his face I can still recall his saying to me: "No damn good, boy; no damn good." He then dictated to me a letter which took at least three pages to write. He recalled his first

association with the wholesaler, mentioned the thousands of dollars the wholesaler must have made at his (Mr. Staack's) expense and in a few choice words threatened dire consequences to the wholesaler's business if he did not guarantee the shoes he had sold him and be prepared to make due restitution to his customer. As a good servant, anxious to please Mr. Staack, and knowing upon which side my bread was buttered, I wrote the letter as dictated. In my room that night, however, I revamped the epistle, reducing it to a matter of six lines and sending it to the wholesaler. In the matter of a week or so, Mr. Staack showed me the wholesaler's reply in which he had expressed his apology for the fact that the pair of shoes was faulty and had assured Mr. Staack of full restitution. Mr. Staack said to me: "Now, my boy, you will know how to deal with wholesalers. If you are ever in business for yourself, remember that the customer is always right."

As winter approached, I noticed an ad in the Stettler Independent by the Crown Lumber Company, in which they were asking for people who would unload every Saturday the boxcars of coal which came in from Drumheller. They were offering twelve dollars a car, regardless of the size of the car. Some were thirty tons and some were forty tons.

In our grade twelve class was a boy, Harold Cassan, from Gadsby, the neighboring town to Halkirk, and he, too, with a lad from Erskine, Richard Gabriel, later to become the owner of the Staack Block in Stettler, were batching and doing any odd jobs they could to help themselves through school. Harold and Richard rented a shack from the same Mr. Staack in the south west portion of Stettler, an area referred to as Staacktown. Harold and I went to see the manager of the Crown Lumber Company and offered our services. We got the job. This job I shall never forget, either.

Cars were "spotted" at the bins on Friday night and we were expected to have them unloaded by noon of the next day. We arranged to meet at the boxcar about five-thirty on Saturday morning and by the light of two kerosene barn lanterns, proceeded to load the coal into a wheelbarrow, pushed it up an inclined plane a distance of about twenty feet and dumped it into bins. We worked like Trojans and scarcely uttered a word to each other until the job was done. If it were a thirty-ton car, it took us until about twelve-thirty and if it were a forty-ton car, we were finished by about two o'clock. From there we went directly to my room where we cleaned up and headed for the Crown Lumber Company to collect our six dollars each. Saturday afternoon became a real time for treats. Instead of batching, we went across the street to the Club Cafe where we could get from our Chinese friend, Poon Yick, a full-course meal for twenty-five cents.

It was about this time, incidentally, that Poon Yick brought his young son, Harry Poon, from China. Harry could not speak a word of English, but in no time was speaking fluently and was vying with a boy who has since become a well-known man in Alberta, the Honourable Russ Patrick, for first place in grade seven.

Harry went on to become a University graduate and ultimately a Professor of English at a University in China. Upon the death of his father, Poon Yick, he returned to Stettler and with his young family, all proud of being Canadian citizens, carried on until his recent retirement the business of his father at the Club Cafe.

Though the meal cost Harold and me only a quarter, we offered one day to make a deal with Poon Yick, to work off our indebtedness by splitting wood in the back yard. Poon Yick, a very generous man, took us up on the offer and for the remainder of the winter we were always assured that in return for a few strokes of the ax, we could be certain of a full stomach.

The owner of the local theater made it a point of selling matinee tickets on Saturday to students of any age for ten cents, so while we were really "in the money" by unloading coal, we treated ourselves to the matinee and usually ended our Saturday by buying a steak at Wilson's butcher shop, which together with our own brand of French fries, we enjoyed in my room.

I was now getting along famously, in that I had no room rent to pay, so long as I wrote Mr. Staack's business letters, and I was always assured of enough work in the Seth Whitton store to pay my grocery bill.

There were two things, however, I wanted to learn, as it seemed to me that everyone beyond the age of six could do both: one was to skate and the other was to ride a bicycle. With a few dollars in my pocket and with no debts, I decided to buy a pair of skates. I believed, however, that to buy a pair of skating boots which could be used only in the winter was a waste of money. I thought it might be better to purchase an ordinary pair of farm work boots, attach to them a pair of second-hand skates and remove the blades when skating was over, so that the boots could be put to more useful purposes when I returned home at the end of June. I attached the skates which I bought from Mr. Staack for seventy-five cents and am

perhaps the only person who learned to skate on high heels.

Mr. Staack, incidentally, was a bachelor and ate all his meals at the local restaurants. He had not been in good health for some time and suffered from what was revealed to be a bad case of ulcers. About the time winter was over and our coal job folded up, Mr. Staack came to me and offered me a real proposition.

I had on one occasion when I had undertaken to cook a meal and invited a couple of my friends, invited Mr. Staack to share it with us. His proposition to me was that as he had enjoyed, as he called it, the home cooking, he would buy the groceries if I would cook the meals for him and me. This I gladly accepted, after he assured me that my cooking would satisfy him completely. After all, this meant that I had no room rent to pay so long as I wrote the business letters and helped him in his store occasionally and had no grocery bill to pay as long as he could put up with my cooking failures.

Mr. Staack enjoyed music and his store was well supplied with musical instruments. Being fond of music myself, I would occasionally spend a leisure hour sawing on a fiddle or blowing on a harmonica in his store or in my suite. Though it was anything but music, my good friend assured me that it was pleasure to his ears.

About late April or early May I could see that Mr. Staack was in failing health and three or four of us who were his friends persuaded him to get medical attention. His doctor advised a trip to a warmer climate, so he made arrangements to have a man, whose name I have now forgotten, take care of his store and arranged with me to continue to write his business letters for him. I saw him off from his store on what became, I believe, a trip to Mexico. It was only a short time later, however, that we learned of his sudden passing.

Even after all these years, I do not pass the Staack (Gabriel) Block without recalling many memories, both happy and sad, and without remembering the names of two men who, perhaps without knowing it, and certainly without any thought of recompense, helped me on life's journey. I shall never forget the names Wright and Staack.

With the passing of Mr. Staack and the consequent closing and sale of his store, it became necessary for me to search for employment in order to finance myself through to the end of June. By this time I was well known in Stettler and I found it easy to secure enough chores to keep the wolf from the door. Mowing lawns and digging gardens provided a few much-needed dollars. Mr. Wright still assured me of the occasional Saturday's work. In addition, I was again faced with the problem of raising ten dollars a month in order to pay my rent.

I discussed my problem one day with two of my classmates, Robert Roder and Art Bierwagen, both boys of German extraction, bilingual, and always in the top three of their respective classes. Art hailed from Nevis, while Robert came from a family who years before had homesteaded in what became the Special Areas several miles south of Coronation. They, too, batched together in a little shack in Staacktown which they rented from Mr. Staack for six dollars a month, furnished.

Often during my "prosperous" times I visited with them in the evening, not only to study together, which, incidentally, we did very seriously, but to practise with Bob on our fiddles. I still recall how often Art, the ever studious one, threatened to dispose of these screeching instruments if we attempted to play them before he had finished his studies.

The furnishings in this little shack consisted of a brick lined Quebec heater, an old burned-out cook stove which they dared not light, a home-made table, three chairs and a Winnipeg couch. These boys were glad to save one dollar a month each and suggested to me that I could move in with them, pay one-third of the rent, thereby saving myself eight dollars and them one dollar each. This was no sooner said than done.

Batching under these conditions was an unforgettable experience. We usually matched coins to see which one had to buy the meat and cook it. We did the same thing to decide which had to sleep in the middle of the Winnipeg couch. Perhaps I should state that while these two husky farm boys were six feet tall and weighed at least one hundred and sixty pounds, I was a wiry stripling of five feet seven, weighing about thirty pounds less. It took only one night for me to realize why our matching had resulted in my being so successful that I slept on the outside, nearest the stove. One lusty heave on the part of Bob and Art the next morning landed me in the middle of the chilly floor, my only means of getting warm being to start the fire.

I soon discovered that the securing of fuel was not at all in keeping with the coal oil stove with which Mr.

Staack had furnished me. Both Bob and Art had become very ingenious in connection with the solving of this problem and because Staacktown lay in close proximity to the Canadian National Railways, the darkness of night enabled them, husky as they were, to drag home the occasional railroad tie, unseen. In their youthful innocence they did not realize that the used ties they thought they might be stealing under cover of darkness would undoubtedly have been burned by the sectionmen a few days later. I feel sure that even the Canadian National Railways will forgive them if by any chance they happened to miss in those days a newly creosoted tie. After all, in the darkness of night, how was a young fellow to know the difference between a new and an old one?

I took my turn at the buck saw with Bob and Art and I recall very well how we stacked the lean-to kitchen of our little shack high with a plentiful supply of sawed-up ties. More than once as we looked out the window, we saw the Stettler policeman, Mr. Robert Hoe, or the local Alberta Provincial Policeman, Mr. McPherson, walking down the sidewalk or driving down the street. We turned the key gently in the door and remained perfectly still, in case they happened to be searching for a railroad tie which at that moment was stacked in the kitchen. We all heaved a sigh of relief when we realized we were "home-free".

Cooking our meals on the Quebec heater was also something to challenge our ingenuity. If you fried an egg, there was no room for anything else but the frying pan. This meant that everything had to be done in turns, so that the preparation of a meal took at least an hour and only the last thing cooked was hot when we sat down to eat. Only once a day, therefore, did we take the time to prepare what could be called a decent meal for three hungry young men.

When it became Bob's turn to buy the meat, Art and I always wondered what he would bring home next, as Bob could always make twenty cents go further than anyone I have ever known before or since. I shall never forget Bob returning home one afternoon with what he explained to us was a tremendous bargain. Mr. Wilson, the butcher, had sold him an ox heart, about the size of a football, for ten cents. None of us, despite our wide experience in the culinary arts, knew how such a delicacy should be treated, in order to make it palatable. Bob however, assured us that it was only a matter of boiling it until it became tender. This meant permitting it to boil from early morning when we left for school, until supper time. I recall very well, how, after at least seven hours on the stove, the ox heart would bounce up and down on the table like a rubber ball. While Bob did his best to consume a portion of it, Art and I concluded that it might be best to slice it up in pieces about half an inch thick and see whether or not the pieces might be used for soling shoes. Bob assured us, in his always serious way, that we were being almost sacrilegious, as there were millions of people throughout the world who would not only be pleased but thankful to have the opportunity of consuming such a delicacy. Art suggested at this juncture that he would be only too happy to supply their needs.

Bob and I were quite sure that Art had no musical appreciation whatever, as he seemed to miss entirely the thrill we enjoyed as we played "Redwing" in two parts on our violins. We had contrived between us to thoroughly torment him one evening and proceeded to complete our homework before Art had started on his. As soon as he was deep in thought over his physics text, Bob and I produced our violins and in the adjoining room were all prepared for our practice. To our dismay, we found that not a single sound could be produced from either violin. In our absence Art had contrived somehow to soap the bows so thoroughly that not a sound could be emitted.

Being well acquainted with each other's foibles, any two of us were apt to gang up on the third in order to produce what we considered to be an amusing affair at the other fellow's expense. One chilly evening I was sitting close to the stove, deep in thought over a problem in algebra, when Bob and Art commenced wrestling, in order that the winner could secure possession of our single armchair for the evening. The supper dishes were in the dishpan sitting on the Quebec heater while the water got hot enough to do the necessary chore of dishwashing. I paid as little attention as possible to the wrestling match until I found the dishpan full of hot water and dirty dishes turned upside down in my lap. At that moment I failed to see the joke. After all I expected to write a test the next morning and my textbook was now thoroughly soaked. I had visions of having to face Mr. Tanner who was, incidentally, our algebra teacher, next morning, and I had already found out that whether a student was five feet seven or seven feet five, our principal could, with a few well-chosen words spoken in front of the class, make a recipient feel as insignificant as a five-cent piece. Neither had he any qualms whatever about using the strap.

Our tea cups were of the heavy handleless type and as they hit the floor they were more apt to damage it than they were to suffer any damage themselves. As my two friends headed for the door, I hurled two tea cups after them, both of which knocked plaster off the wall without coming to any harm themselves. Not until two days later did Bob and Art return to the shack, so in the meantime I enjoyed the pleasure of the

Winnipeg couch all to myself.

Pranks such as these helped to make life interesting and while we had no money, we had lots of fun.

In due course June arrived and with it the final examinations. The last of the finals was over by twelve o'clock and by three I was ready to take the train back to Halkirk, where I had already contracted with a farmer to work through July and August and to be ready to return to finish grade twelve the next year.

I landed in Stettler with twenty cents and when I went to the depot on the last day of school, I had in my pocket a twenty dollar bill, together with the sixty cents required as fare to Halkirk.

By the first of September, I found myself again in Stettler, ready to take grade twelve, together with a couple of grade ten subjects I had been unable to work into the curriculum the previous year. I had been able to save the seventy dollars I had earned during the summer and my arrival in Stettler this time seemed like a return to old friends. Instead of batching, I arranged to share a room with a classmate from Gadsby, a young fellow by the name of George Hilton, who, as a result of the loss of a limb in a train accident, had come back to school with a view to becoming a school teacher. We lived with the late Mr. and Mrs. Andy Robinson, a couple well known in Stettler since the early days of the town.

This year was not nearly so exciting as had been the previous one, but it was certainly not without its compensations. The Robinsons took a fatherly and motherly interest in the welfare of George and me and also adopted, as it were, our closest friends, Art and Bob.

The four of us made up our minds that upon the completion of that school year, June, 1925, we would all endeavor to journey to Calgary and enrol at the Normal School for teacher training.

During my first fall in Stettler, one event stands out in my memory. Having lived all my life in Canada on a farm, I was totally unacquainted with Halloween pranks, so when, during the afternoon of October 31st, I heard several classmates discussing their program for the evening, I could not believe they were serious about many of the pranks they were proposing to carry out.

One of the dry goods merchants in Stettler was a well known man by the name of Jimmy Duckworth. In order to keep his two sons, Gordon and Walter, out of the pool room, he bought a pool table and had it erected in the storeroom behind the store. He made it known that high school boys were welcome to play pool so long as they agreed to the instructions displayed on the wall. I am sure nearly every Stettler boy of those days can recall the many pleasant hours he spent there. It wasn't unusual to see some boys sitting around studying while waiting for their turn at a game.

As soon as school closed on the afternoon of October 31st, it had been decided that all available boys would meet at the Duckworth "pool room," where final arrangements for the evening fun would be made. I, of course, had to go to work, so missed the meeting but was told by the chief promoters that two or three scouts were always necessary to alert the pranksters in case Mr. Hoe or Mr. McPherson arrived on the scene, as apparently had been their custom for a number of years.

I was therefore to be a scout, providing Mr. Wright would release me from store duties a little early. Strangely enough, Mr. Wright must have read my mind because about nine o'clock he reminded me that it was Halloween and as he knew a lot of my classmates would be out Halloweening, I could, if I wished, leave promptly at nine.

Apparently for some years it had been the custom of the theatre owner, Mr. Free, to allow school children to attend the second show on Halloween night without charge, providing they agreed to be good boys and did no damage to other people's property. When I arrived at the Duckworth pool room, the boys were holding a meeting to decide what sort of pranks they would play on Mr. Free, because, on this occasion, he had told them that it was impossible to give them free passes that night, as the theatre was filled nearly to capacity. Apparently Mr. Free had also stated that as he done his share of treating for a number of years, the boys should understand that he could not continue his generosity indefinitely and felt perhaps that other businessmen should go out of their way to provide entertainment.

The Town of Stettler in those days lacked modern facilities, the plumbing being the old-fashioned type with a biffy sitting at the back of each lot. Cesspools were not allowed; consequently, a wooden flap on the back of each of these buildings concealed one or two or three galvanized cans, depending on the size of the family. No doubt a nearly accurate census could have been taken by walking down the back alleys and

estimating the population from the number of one, two or three holers. These containers were easily accessible, as they had to be emptied once every week.

As soon as the second show was well in progress, a couple of boys entered the theatre and discovered that the manager was sitting in one of the back seats, and the ticket wicket was closed. A contingent of boys was organized quickly and in no time at least twenty of the cans just described were quietly placed in the rotunda. While this operation was in progress, a dozen other husky fellows came down the street with a four-horse grain tank and as soon as the pranksters were safely out of the building and had shut the doors, which opened outwards, the grain tank was backed across the sidewalk, making it virtually impossible for patrons to emerge through these doors, even if they could have reached them. It was only a matter of minutes before I could see from my position as sentinel across the street people coming out through the side exits and yelling for the police.

In no time Mr. Hoe and Mr. McPherson emerged from nowhere but by this time the boys had scattered in all directions, following my lusty whistle. Before I knew what had happened, I was standing between two policemen, each one holding me firmly by the arm. For some reason or other, I believed that because I had had no part in the plot, the carrying of the cans or the pushing of the grain tank, I was entirely innocent. Neither Mr. Hoe nor Mr. McPherson saw this in the same light in which I saw it and I was accused of being an accessory after the fact. They told me that only the year before they had collared one of the scouts and had allowed him to cool his heels for a couple of hours in the local jail.

Mr. Hoe's son, Eric, was a classmate of mine and he had taken me home with him on an occasion or two for dinner. I felt, therefore, that I knew Mr. Hoe and expected that he would believe that this was my first offence and that actually I had had no part in arranging the program. I am sure he was also aware in his own mind that Eric, a big two hundred pound six footer, being out Halloweening, had no doubt had a hand in the proceedings somewhere.

It was not so easy, however, to persuade Mr. McPherson that I should be released, although I am sure by this time my arm had almost trembled out of his grasp.

They both agreed they would let me go if I would tell them in which direction the boys went. All I could say was that they had scattered and had gone in all directions. By that time I had decided to go back to my room and forget about Halloweening. However, when I arrived there I found that at least half a dozen of my classmates had arrived there ahead of me and were already planning the strategy for the second episode. After the lesson I had just had, I did not relish a second experience; nevertheless, I couldn't be a piker, so went along.

This time more scouts were on the job, as it took only about four boys to push a democrat from the livery barn down to the Canadian Pacific Railroad yard where an outgoing freight train was being made up. Several clambered to the top of the boxcar, while several others stood the democrat on its hind wheels and shoved the tongue over the end of the car where the boys on top could reach it. We had just nicely got it in place and were about to tie it down when we heard the barking of many dogs coming our way. This time I joined those who scattered but the boys on top of the boxcar were nabbed. I learned later that the dogs were hunting dogs owned by a Scandinavian trainer and luckily for us their barks were worse than their bites. Several Canadian Pacific Railway officials were called and the result was that no punishment was meted out to the boys, so long as the democrat was safely removed and taken back to where it was found.

As soon as school opened next morning, Mr. Tanner came into the senior room and with a knowing smile on his face asked how many boys had attended the theatre the night before. We looked at each other, wondering whose hand would go up first but before any did, Mr. Tanner informed us that there would be a special showing for us at the theatre in ten minutes and that we would be the players. I found out then that scouts were every bit as guilty as the pranksters and that a handle had been reserved for me on one side of a can, while we delivered them to appropriate places in the back alleys.

The next Halloween I was too busy with homework to take part in any pranks.

One event which made a deep impression upon me and which influenced my political thinking a few years later was a visit to Stettler of the Right Honourable Arthur Meighen, former Prime Minister of Canada, and then leader of the Conservative opposition. It was the first time in the lives of any of us that we had seen a man who had occupied the position of Prime Minister. We had, naturally, in our studies of Canadian history, read of all of them to date and our history teacher had made special mention to us of

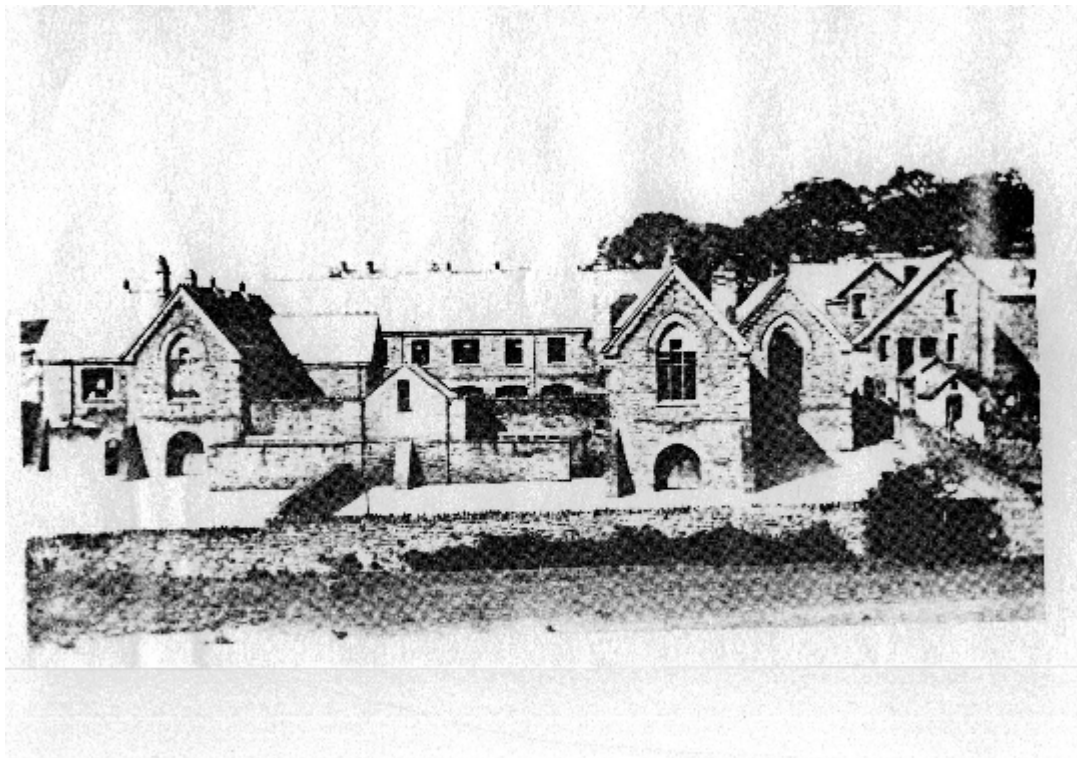
Mr. Meighen prior to his arrival.

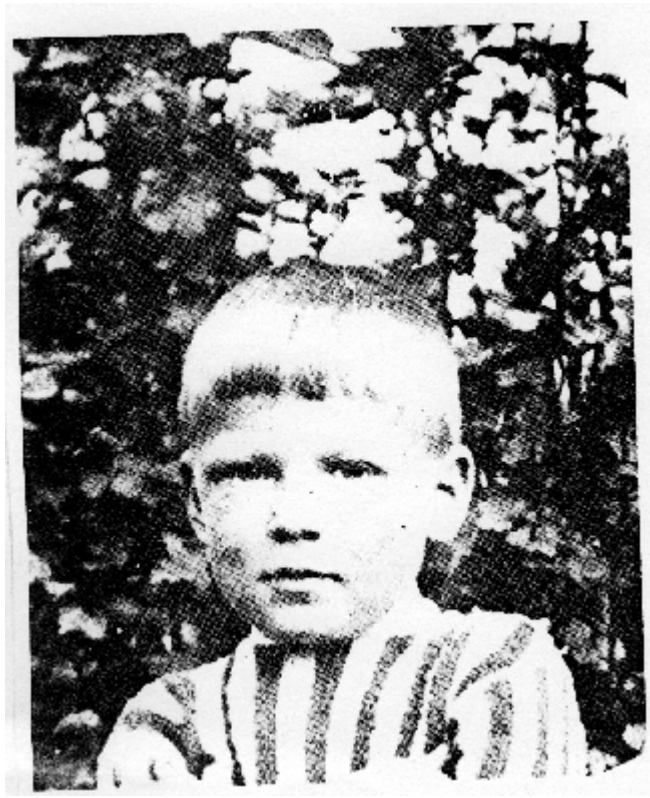
I had always taken a special interest in Sir John A. Macdonald and knowing that the Right Honourable Arthur Meighen was of the same political stripe, I was more than anxious to meet him. As he was visiting Stettler, he was invited by our school principal to come to the school and address the boys and girls. I was chosen by the students' union to express our thanks to him, following the address. A platform had been erected hastily on the school grounds for the occasion and all the classes from grade seven up, and the teaching staff, were present to hear him. Those from grades one to six were permitted a half holiday. They, too, were no doubt pleased with his visit.

Naturally, on this occasion the ex-Prime Minister's talk was entirely non-political, but, as I recall it, while he did not in any way criticize the Liberals, he made it perfectly plain to us that the only party that had ever done anything beneficial for Canadians was the Conservative party. He said he realized he was speaking to a group of young people who were still much too young to exercise their franchise. I am sure this pleased many of us who knew we were only a year or two away from that mystical twenty-first birthday. He emphasized the fact that Canada held out opportunities for the youth in untold abundance and spared no effort to impress upon us the one cardinal virtue of the Conservative party—"it had always stood for opportunity for the youth."

The memorized "thank you" speech was my first real political address. Little did I realize that in the short space of eight years I would become involved in the political life of our Province and remain so, even to the present day.

First School





Author at age 5



Cartoon by Daryl Hooke (16)