

Please note that the following pages are an excerpt from an actual life story and have been included with the author's permission. To respect the privacy of the story teller, names and identifying details have been altered.

... As I got a little older, I loved to read. However, because my mother thought reading took valuable time away from work, there were never many books in our house. My mother would only read a paper that she picked up on Sundays from the little church store, and my father got the farmer's paper. That was really the only reading material that was in our house.

I did manage to sneak in a little reading, though. Our neighbour had a subscription to a youth magazine, which I picked up and delivered to them on my way home from school. My parents didn't know this, but after I picked up the magazine, I would find a quiet spot to sit and read before I dropped it off. The magazine had continuing stories from one week to the next. I found them so interesting. Oh, I loved reading.

I also remember when my aunt gave us a stack of old magazines that she had saved up. I knew that I wouldn't be allowed to read them. When it was time for me to make the beds in the morning, I would hide a magazine under my apron and take it with me to the bedroom. I would quickly throw the covers over the beds and then sit down and read the magazine. Well, one day my mother caught me. She was not happy. I got into so much trouble because I was supposed to be working. But, oh, how I loved to read anything.

I went to school from age six to fourteen. The school I went to was only a five-minute walk from our home. I don't remember ever having to walk in wooden shoes to school. We wore wooden shoes at home, but for school we always had shoes made by the shoemaker who lived right on our street. I have to admit, I never really liked school. I went up to Grade Seven because in those days you had to go to school until you were fourteen years old. I was very happy to be finished.

Anna finished school the year before me and she cried when she could no longer go. Not me. She loved



school and she was very bright. The teachers even asked if she could stay on longer, but my mother said, “No, I can use her at home.”

I couldn't understand why she was so upset. I was so happy to be finished. I was not a good student. That was true.

Once I finished school, I had to start working for my parents. My father would not see any of his children work as hired hands for another farmer. Jus and Anna were already working at home. Anna was very good at sewing, so she had to do a lot of sewing for my mother. I had to do all the shopping, go to the store to buy sugar or butter or whatever. I loved that job. Anna was often jealous because she had to stay home and sew. Every time my mother wanted something she would send me, and Anna was left at home. I remember, I would go to the dairy bar and they'd say, “Why aren't you at school?”

I would say, “I'm already off school; I'm finished school.”

I was so proud to be finished school. I was kind of small for my age, so they could hardly believe that I was finished with school.

It wasn't just shopping for me; I also had to milk the cows. When I finished school my father said, “Okay, now you have to learn to milk a cow.”

We had nine or ten cows, which was not a small farm at that time. My father would stand behind the cow and hold the tail. He'd say to me, “Now, this is an easy one for you to learn on.”

I had to go under the cow and I was sitting there shaking, my feet, my hands. I couldn't get any milk to come out. At first my dad said, “You can do it, Rite.”

Eventually he said, “I don't think you'll ever learn how to milk a cow.”

I was so afraid that the cow would kick me, or hit me with its tail. My brother Jan was one year younger than me, but he already knew how to milk a cow. I did eventually learn how to milk. In fact, I got to be pretty good

at it.

Our farm was right in the town. My father sold off parcels of land to townspeople to build houses and then he bought additional land outside of the town limits for farming. Because of this, we had pastures scattered all over. We were always saying that we were more of a farmer on the street than in the field because we had to travel all over to our land.

After finishing elementary school I wasn't quite finished with learning. My mother thought that I should go to sewing classes and learn to sew. I didn't like to go, but I went for half days, every day for two years. I hated it! And, I wasn't good at it. I can still get mad when I think about the first year exam.

It was a nun who taught the course. For the exam, I had to sew something in front of her and two other people who were marking us. They gave me a pattern and some material and I had to cut out the pattern and sew it up. They watched me closely, so I was already nervous. When I was cutting the armholes, I cut along the wrong lines. It was a big mistake and I didn't have enough material to redo it. I said, to the nun, "I've made a mistake in my cutting that I can't fix."

But talking to her made no difference. I had to continue with the sewing even though it was impossible to do it well. I tried my best to fix it, but I couldn't. I felt so bad. I didn't finish it. I couldn't finish it.

At lunch time, all of the students took a break and when we got back the girl sitting beside me said, "Hey, look! Look who did this for me during the lunch hour."

Her sewing had been all pinned up nicely for her. Everything done perfect. I was so mad! We all knew that the nun did it for her. This girl's father was the butcher in our town and every morning she'd bring meat from her father's shop to the convent. This girl could do no wrong. We all knew it. She was the teacher's pet.

When the day was over, the students had to wait outside for the nun to call our names. It was a bit scary. Actually, I was really scared. I already knew that I wasn't going to get a good mark. When they called my name, I went

in and they said, "We're very sorry, Rite, but the cutting mistake you made was too big. We can't give you your diploma."

I walked out to the schoolyard where the other students were sitting, took my bag, and threw everything out over the yard. I was just about to run away when this different nun, Sister Francina came running to me. She knew that I had failed. I was so upset. I said, "That nun's a very mean person."

She said, "Oh, oh, oh, Rite, you shouldn't say those things."

So I told her how she had helped the other girl during lunch. She said, "Is that the truth?"

I said, "Yes, that is really the truth." She didn't say anything else to me.

The following day someone came to talk to my mother, and I was allowed to continue with the second course. Apparently, Sister Francina had reported what had happened to The Mother Superior, and I was allowed back. I didn't want to go back, but my mother said, "No, you have to go back. You can do it. You have to learn to sew." So I did.

When I went back for the second year, the nun who taught the lessons was very nice to me all of a sudden. She would say, "How's your aunt in the mission doing?" and all this stuff.

I couldn't stand it. I would say, "I don't want to talk about my aunt with you."

She'd say, "Well that's not a nice thing to say."

I didn't care. I just couldn't be friendly towards her. Never. I was so mad. At the end of the second year, they told me I could redo the exam to get my diploma, but I said, "No. The school year is over and I'm not doing that exam again."

I didn't go to school anymore after that. I quit. You know, those kinds of experiences go deep into your mind for years and years. I can still get mad when I think about it.

For years after that, I continued to work on the farm helping my parents. When I turned sixteen I was allowed

to join the young girls club, which I loved. My sister Anna was in it as well. We had so much fun. Our club was for farming girls. The working class and upper class girls had separate clubs. We were divided up according to our social standing, but all the clubs belonged to the Diocese of Breda. Jose was my good friend and neighbour from across the street. She belonged to the Working Girls Club. At Christmas all of the clubs would get together for parties, girls from the whole parish. So Jose and I got to have fun together in that way as well. We enjoyed those parties.

May Fest was held every spring and was an event where all of the clubs from the diocese would come together. It was generally held in a farmer's field where there'd be dancing and singing, and performances. Even though we belonged to different groups, we all knew the same songs, so everyone could sing together. Later in the day we'd separate into our own groups for a picnic. This event was always so much fun.

At Christmas and Easter, our club would make up shoeboxes filled with candy or Easter eggs and other nice things and bring them to people who were sick or housebound. They were thankful and always enjoyed getting this box of things.

It was never far to go to an event, so we would walk and we'd sing the whole way. We had so much fun. I enjoyed this club up until the day I got married. I belonged to it until I was twenty-nine years old. When I was in my twenties, however, I was responsible for organizing things for the club. I didn't like that as much. Participating was a lot more fun.



I always looked for something that was similar to this club in Canada for our girls. But, you know, there really was nothing like it. I always wished I could have given our girls that life because for me it was a very happy and memorable time of my life.

This wasn't the case for all young people in Holland. Some people had to work as hired help on farms as soon as they finished school, fourteen years of age. They'd work away from home all week and then bring the money home to their parents on Sundays.

We never had to do that in our family. My father didn't agree with children going elsewhere to work. Each time another one of us finished school he'd say, "Oh well, we'll plant a few more potatoes."

He always made sure there was enough work for his kids at home. And there was. We worked hard. We picked raspberries, black and red currents, and stuff like that. I know it was also a matter of pride, for my father.

When I got a little older, I wanted to get away from home a little. There were people on our street who owned a leather factory and were looking for help in their house. Their next-door neighbour had hired help, so I know it was a status thing for them to have hired help as well. I worked for them two days a week, from eight o'clock until five o'clock doing laundry and cleaning. My father really didn't like me working there. He used to say, "It's only a ten-minute walk. You're not taking the bike."

So I walked, and then he'd say, "Now I have to fix the soles on your shoes. You're wearing out your shoes to walk there, and then you have them on all day as well."

Even though he didn't approve of me going to work, he still put the new soles on my worn-out shoes. Every morning when I arrived to work, I had to clean the sidewalks at the front of their house, where all the neighbours could see me. I tell you, my father did not like that. I worked for this family for a couple of years and got paid one and a quarter Guilder a week. When their second child was born, they wanted full-time help and my father would never allow me to do that. But, I got to work for a couple of years, so I was happy with that.

It was shortly after this that the war started, and the man from this family was killed by a grenade while standing on the street. There were three men killed. I felt so bad because I knew this family so well.

I remember the day the war started. My brother Jan and I had left home at five o'clock in the morning to milk the cows that were in pastures away from our house. We thought it was odd to see so many people looking out their windows and standing on the streets – already at five in the morning. We didn't have a radio at home, so we had no idea what was going on. When we got close to our pasture we met people who told us that the war had started, that the Germans had invaded Holland. That was May 10, 1940.

By the time we got back from milking, our parents had already heard the news. It was a scary day. A little airport that was near to our home had already been bombed. Over the months and years that followed, it became a common sight to see German planes flying over. Alarms would go off regularly which meant we had to find a safe place in the house or cellar. My dad and my brothers built a shelter in the ground. That was scary as well; we were afraid they would be bombed while outside building the shelter. My brother Bert had to serve in the Dutch army for a minimum of eighteen months as a 'walking soldier'. He had to fight on the ground, but was never really trained properly. He knew how to hold a rifle, but that was all. Holland was not at all prepared for a war. Rifles were the only weapons they had.

I remember one day when Jan and I were milking in a pasture that was a distance away from our house. The Brits had dropped a bomb on our side of the road. We saw it happen and ran to the ditch along side the road. I remember saying, "Janus, we have to go to the ditch, they're bombing."

Jan said, "But my cow isn't finished yet."

He was like that, never got overly excited. A farmer came by with a bunch of kids on his wagon, and they joined us in the ditch for safety; the whole bunch of us in the ditch. I remember holding on to those kids and praying, one Hail Mary after another. We were all so scared. Nineteen people died that day. I'd say that's the closest

we ever were to the dangers of the war. The Brits had bombed on civilian land in error. It was a big mistake.

The war went on for over four years. The south part of Holland, where we lived, was liberated in October 1944, but the rest of Holland wasn't freed until after the winter. A few weeks before we were liberated, Janus and I were working in the field, digging potatoes. All these glider planes flew over in one long stream. There were so many of them; they kept coming and coming. It was a wonderful sight. We were very excited.

October 18, 1944 was the day we were liberated. It was a Friday afternoon, Janus and Bert and I were in the cellar of our house. Everyone else had joined the neighbours in the factory across the street where they had a big cellar. The whole neighbourhood went there. The fighting went on all night. We didn't sleep much that night. In the morning we looked outside and the streets were lined with army tanks: Canadians and Brits. People were all over the street celebrating.

We were lucky in the south part of Holland. The north of Holland had to go through the winter in war, 'the hunger winter,' they called it. It was always said that people didn't have food, nor wood to heat their homes. They took doors and shelves from their homes to burn them for heat...