

Yorkton Stories

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Ruth Shaw: her story and the stories she wrote

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Dick DeRyk:

To the many new residents who have arrived in Yorkton in the past 25 years, the name Ruth Shaw likely isn't one they would recognize. But to those who lived here in the latter part of the 1900s, the name and the woman who bore that name, was an unassuming but powerful force in helping the province and beyond know about Yorkton through at least three major roles she played in the city – as a writer and newspaper reporter, as a tireless volunteer with the film festival, the exhibition association and other organizations, and as the manager of the Yorkton Chamber of Commerce. But before we get into all of that, let me first inject a personal note. Ruth was a second mother to me. When I came to town as a rookie newspaper reporter in the spring of 1967 and settled into my desk at the back of the Yorkton Enterprise office on Third Avenue, not more than two days had passed when a woman showed up and asked if the new reporter was in.

Yes I was, and I met Ruth Shaw, the reporter and distribution manager of the Regina Leader-Post, which had a major presence in Yorkton. She had heard there was a new reporter at the Enterprise, and she welcomed me with an offer to help me learn who's who and what's what locally, which was invaluable to someone who had arrived in town only days before. When we would cover meetings or events, she took me under her wing and made sure I was introduced to those who I needed to meet, and filled me in on who they were, and any relevant background information.

It's how I learned very early on that if you were covering an NDP meeting during an election campaign – provincial or federal -- often at the Legion Hall or the old St. Mary's Hall, you could put your pen down for 20 minutes while one Alex Kuziak preached the gospel of the CCF/NDP to the faithful in dramatic and sometimes heart-wrenching style, to solicit and elicit donations to the cause while the pails were passed along each row.

Together Ruth and I reported on every turkey dinner, significant meeting and event held in the city. I say "turkey dinner" because Yorkton was then the self-declared Turkey Capital of Canada, with large turkey farms east and west of the city. And every important guest at every important meeting in the 1960s received a small ceramic turkey from the city, reminding them of our claim to fame. At the time, the Regina-based Leader-Post devoted page three to provincial news, where the stories filed by their southern Saskatchewan bureaus were published. It was a time when newspapers were still the authoritative source of news, and the big city papers still cared about what was happening in rural areas. The newspapers arrived by truck from Regina, and local paper carriers, mostly school age kids, delivered them door to door. I don't know what the circulation numbers were at the time, but would guess that well over half the houses in Yorkton had the daily

paper delivered. There likely are still a few people in Yorkton who earned their first dollars delivering papers six days a week.

Ruth was thrust into the job with the Leader-Post when her husband Cliff, a noted horticulturalist and naturalist in his spare time, died unexpectedly of a heart attack the opening day of the 1959 Yorkton Exhibition.

In September of 2001, Ruth talked with Terri Lefebvre Prince, then the city archivist, as part of a project that recorded the recollections and stories of 37 Yorkton residents. That project spanned about 10 years before and after the start of this century. The city of Yorkton has made those tapes available to us, along with others from that era, for which we are grateful. It allows us, in some instances including this podcast, to tell stories in the actual voice of those no longer with us.

We begin Ruth's story with her telling about her early life, her husband Cliff, her work for the Leader-Post for 16 years, and then her work with the Yorkton Chamber of Commerce.

Ruth Shaw:

I was born on a farm at Drinkwater, which is just out of Moose Jaw, in October 1918. I was the daughter of Oscar and Jesse Fessler. I got my early education there. Went to normal school in Moose Jaw and graduated in 1937. And then I was a country school teacher for four years. Those were the years where I taught for the love of teaching rather for the money. Then in 1941, I went to the Leader-Post for \$50 a month cash. My childhood girlfriend was married to the circulation manager of the Leader-Post. Tom Melville Ness offered me the job. So I went in the circulation department there.

That's where I met my husband. My husband Cliff was a good friend of Tom's. He brought Cliff into the Leader-Post as district manager. And then in 1943 we were married. Cliff was born in a little town called Elgin, Manitoba. His dad was a blacksmith. Walter Shaw was a blacksmith. And he moved to Bulyea, Saskatchewan, and that's where Cliff was brought up in Bulyea. In 1944, Christmas '44, Cliff was offered the position of bureau manager here in Yorkton with the Leader-Post. And that entailed circulation and reporting.

Cliff died in 1959, and the Leader-Post offered me his position as bureau manager. My children were 10 and 12 when Cliff died, Douglas and Karen. When you have two children to feed, you don't think of anything else but to make a life for them. I was with the bureau for 16 years. When I took over from Cliff, I had never been to a political meeting. I had never been to court. I was with the ladies' groups and so on in town. And in those years, women were either teachers, nurses, or secretaries. I was the only woman in that group. And as such, I sort of said, Look, Ruth, you're a woman. Now to make your mark, you've got to work twice as hard. However, not the businessmen of Yorkton. I just walked in on Cliff's heels. They accepted me as a person. And the police, the city office, all the businessmen, they were just wonderful to me.

As you know, I was green. I was scared because I had two kids to bring up. And I can't say enough about the business community of Yorkton. Cliff was born in Elgin, Manitoba, and he came with his family to Bulyea. That's where he was brought up. Cliff was a child of the depression years, and it was hard to get jobs. And it was hard to get more education. He couldn't afford to go away to get more education. However, he did go to Regina College. He got his high school in Regina College.

And then Tom Melville-Ness came out from Scotland. He is a graduate of Edinburgh University. He came out to Canada to make his fortune. And he landed up in Bulyea. Well, then Tom and Cliff became very good friends and they started painting houses. Well, Bulyea is a little village and there wasn't much business. So they went into Regina and they had a store. Tom was before his time because he was interested in health foods. It was sort of a health food store. Well, at that time, health food stores were not popular like they are today, and the boys went broke.

In the meantime, Cliff was a naturalist. Bulyea is a great place for birds and plants and so on. And the museum in London, England got in touch with Cliff and asked him to collect insects up at Waskesiu. The museum provided the tent and all the equipment. It was in the summertime. So Tom and Cliff went up to Waskesiu. They got the agency for the Leader-Post. They delivered the Leader-Post each day to the different cottages. And Tom had a beautiful voice and guitar player. He was the romantic interest on the moonlight cruises on the lake.

When the fall came, Tom was offered the job with the Leader-Post in Regina. And Cliff went down east and he was a gardener for a while. And then he became a milkman in Winnipeg. All the time he was in Winnipeg, he worked with the museum. He helped construct these bones and collected insects and collected flowers and so on. And then Tom brought Cliff into Regina in the Leader-Post the same year I came. Then Cliff joined the Natural History Society in Regina. He worked with the museum there. The war was on then. And Cliff he was a very short, and of course they turned him down. So he tried to get in as an entomologist, and of course he didn't have his paper. And Cliff was also, with his work in natural history, became a very good photographer, but then they didn't take him as a photographer either. We came here in '44, Christmas '44, and Cliff joined the Natural History Society. Mrs. Priestly was a war bride from the First World War, and she had her degree in entomology and biology, and she was very interested in natural history, and she started the Blue Jay.

Dick DeRyk:

The Blue Jay was, and still is a publication of what was then the Saskatchewan Natural History Society, now Nature Saskatchewan. It is published four times a year, one issue per season, and is now in its 83rd year.

Ruth Shaw:

She gathered these high school kids, Ruth Smith, Stuart Houston, they were kids then. And they used to put the Blue Jay out on pages. When we moved here, Cliff became very good friends with Mrs. Priestly, and they birdwatched and they collected plants and so on. After Mrs. Priestly died, the Saskatchewan Natural History Society took over the publishing of the Blue Jay. And Cliff was their first, he was the first provincial editor of the Blue Jay. Cliff collected plants from this area and their common name, their Latin name, where they were found, and their habitat, and so on. After his death, I had two apple boxes for all the regional high school was just constructed, and they had an agriculture department. So I gave these plants to the school. He was a great one for encouraging the planting of trees in town here. And the discouragement of cutting them down.

After Cliff's death, city council named Shaw Park. That used to be the old Victoria School ground. It was a great honor for our family. He loved Yorkton too. And he collected beetles. He was the only one that collected beetles in Saskatchewan. And when we first came here, he had a stick

with a bag on the end of it. And my job was to lay down on the culverts and sweep up these beetles for his beetle collections in the museum in Regina in the Natural History Society.

Dick DeRyk:

Ruth helped put Yorkton on the provincial map by chronicling events here as a reporter, and her subsequent work with the Chamber allowed her to promote our city and its businesses.

Ruth Shaw:

In 1975, Don Harris and Brent Logan asked me if I'd like to take over the managership of the Chamber of Commerce. I didn't know whether I should or not. I phoned my son who was going to university at that time. And I said, Do you think I should? Because I was going to take a decrease in salary. Doug says, Take it. He says a person of your age should get out of the rut. So I was 22 years manager of the Chamber.

Chamber started trying to be everything to everybody, and you can't do that. So it was when Terry Ortynsky was the president of the Chamber, he brought in a consultant, and she worked with us to show us where we were going, how we should go. After those sessions, we came up with our aim, which was to promote the interests of business and to encourage economic development. That was our mission. It changed the focus of the Chamber at that time to that. Then it was when Donna Brown was president, we brought in Newport Business Consulting, and it was a period of ten months, and we had most of the businesses in Yorkton, plus from Melville and Canora. They'd have speakers come in and talk about each aspect of business. It changed the attitude of the business community from one of despair to one of hope. I think that was one of the biggest accomplishments. To this day, some of the people that took part in it, they still use it in their business. It was a change of attitude. I enjoyed being with the Leader-Post. I enjoyed that work. I met a lot of very interesting people during those years. And then I enjoyed the work at the Chamber too. I guess I'm a naturally, I wouldn't call it snoopy, maybe curious is the word. I like to know what's going on in the world about me.

Dick DeRyk:

Many things were going on in her world throughout the 38 years she worked at the two jobs in Yorkton, and in the previous years when she stayed at home to raise their family. Through all those years she assisted as a volunteer with most projects and events in the city. Among them was the Yorkton Film Society, which evolved into the Yorkton Film Festival. Ruth was the last of the original founders and on the occasion of her 90th birthday in 2008, her friends, family and the festival established the Ruth Shaw Best of Saskatchewan award, which to this day continues to recognize the best film made in the province, the province that has been her home all her life.

Ruth Shaw:

Before I took over from the Leader-Post, I was involved in the IODE, and I was involved in the Red Cross. That's when I became involved in the film festival. Then the Arts Center, the Arts Center started out, the IODE used to have craft shows. And then the lady who was in charge of the Saskatchewan Arts Board, she came up and they had an art show and they had a concert and so on. They funded them. And at the end of the time, she came over to the office and she said, you know, we spent a lot of money. She says, we've got to have some kind of an organization. She says, Who would you suggest that would be a good person to organize it? So I said, Well, Joyce Matheson would be the ideal person. Joyce was the one. She was the mother or the grandmother

or whatever you call it of the art center. And it grew. And then we decided to have an art gallery. And Meta Lang was the first person to look after it. From there, where the Godfrey Dean is, there was a little cottage. And we had that. That was where we used to have our art centre. Then when it was sold to build the Godfrey Dean, we moved over to the old Victoria School. That's where Queen Elizabeth's Court is. And we had two rooms or three rooms there. And then, of course, when the Godfrey Dean was built, we moved into the Godfrey Dean.

Dick DeRyk:

Following her retirement, when she was in her 80s and at an age when most people would slow down, Ruth decided she wanted to learn to use a computer so she could keep in touch by email with friends and family. I was among friends who helped set that up for her. Typing wasn't a problem – she continued to use the two-finger hunt and peck method on a new keyboard that didn't much resemble the old Underwood typewriters we had used in the news business. But there was a bit of a learning curve when it came to the technology, and I would troubleshoot when technology didn't co-operate – dial-up internet was still a thing at the time. After moving into the Aspen Bluff Villa care home in her late 80s, she continued to reach out to family and friends around the world, she read the newspapers every day, on paper and online, and was a voracious reader of non-fiction books.

She wrote an extensive series of short pieces based on her personal recollections and her knowledge of local history. They were published in a local weekly newspaper, and on one of the early Yorkton websites I developed in 2000, YorktonOnline.com. She wrote 113 columns in total, written over a span of about three years. I still have all of them.

Ruth Shaw:

I write a column for Dick. He has his website and I write for Dick and then he sends it to the paper. Anything I could think of. Which was mostly history. I send it to Dick on the computer. I'm not terribly (computer) literate. I know how to send stuff and I have email. It's very interesting because I had a reply from a girl in the Ukraine. She used to teach here at Secret Heart. She was a nun at Secret Heart. And apparently when I was with the Chamber, and she used to come and get information from me for the school. And she went there in '91, I think, and she happened to hit the website. She said, you know, I get lonesome once in a while. And I had a one from Australia. People that have read it that grew up here or were born here long before my time. And it's interesting.

Dick DeRyk:

These are a few of the stories she wrote. I chose ones that give a glimpse of some interesting Yorkton people, businesses, events, and her personal recollections. Where there is more recent information, I make mention of that.

Stories of winters past

Everyone seems to be surprised that we have had so much snow this winter, but some of us older ones remember the high snow banks that we waded through to get to school. As a child I remember snow banks so high that we could not see the barn. This snow bank was still in existence when the dirt started to blow. The blow dirt blanketed the snow bank and even in the middle of July we could dig down and still find the frosty stuff.

In the early years before good roads, cars were put up for the winter and transportation was by horse and sleigh. Farmers replaced the wheels on the grain wagons with runners. The wagon with a layer of straw, along with fur rugs and foot warmers was the mode of travel.

Enclosed cutters were also used to take children to school. It is said kids only stayed home from school if the weather was too cold and windy for the school horse, not for the humans.

In 1946-47 Yorkton had a terrific snow storm. Streets were blocked and even the milkman and his horse could not navigate the streets.

The train between Yorkton and Melville was stuck and the machinery that was sent out to open the line was buried on the snowy track. The CPR track was open, so passengers and supplies from Regina had to go to Lanigan and then from Lanigan to Yorkton. My husband was bureau manager in Yorkton for the Leader-Post and the papers would arrive in Yorkton about 2 a.m. instead of the usual afternoon time. In the rural areas, the snow was piled so high that it was impossible to blow the snow to open the roads. There were stories of people getting lost and depending on their horse to take them home safely.

Who would want to live in a country where there is no snow? What would they have to complain about?

Shinplasters and chickenfeed

A friend going through the attic of a deceased relative came upon a box of old coins. The silver coins were well worn and it was not possible to see the dates on the coins. Among the collection was a small five cent piece. I remember as a child this small silver five cent piece, about as large as a fingernail, bought an ice cream cone from Ashwin's drug store or a bag of chocolate chips candies--small triangular bits of confection similar to the present day Crispy Crunch chocolate bar.

Then there was the shinplaster--to the uninitiated, let me explain that the shin plaster was a small bill, about half the size of an ordinary bill and worth 25 cents. There is a story about a British war bride of the first world war who was shopping in a Yorkton store when the clerk asked her if she wanted her change in shinplasters or chicken feed--the slang for small change. The bewildered woman said she had no need for shin plasters and she had no chickens to feed. The embarrassed clerk just gave her the change without further conversation.

When first I took over the Leader-Post newspaper bureau in Yorkton, the paper was 75 cents a week. At the time, it was very common for paperboys to receive 50-cent pieces in payment. Now you never see this coin. In former years before the federal government printed money, each bank printed its own bills. My friend has a \$10 bill printed by the Bank of Nova Scotia.

Some years ago, one pay period George Morris of Morris Rod-Weeder paid his staff in \$2 bills. The city was flooded with the bills, which although common in eastern Canada, were not often seen in the west. The sudden appearance of the bills demonstrating the economic impact the Morris company had on the city.

For some reason or other, mutilated coins or ragged bills are passed on to paperboys. When I was with the Leader-Post I found a \$1 bill that was green on one side and the blue of a \$5 bill on the other side. Thinking that someone had foisted a fake bill on the paperboy, took it to the bank. Apparently when the bills were being printed a mistake was made on one sheet. Ironically instead of passing it on to the paperboy, the customer should have been treasured it, as it was considered a collector's item.

With the loonies and the toonies, \$1 and \$2 bills have also become collector's items. Sometimes when my purse is misshapen with the weight of these coins, or pockets seem to wear out quicker, we look back at the convenience of paper money.

The travels and tribulations of a historic chair

Tucked away in a corner of the ground floor of Yorkton City Hall sits a high-backed, richly carved oak chair. If this historic chair could talk, what a great story it could tell. In 1917 Mayor James Peaker presided over the Town of Yorkton council meetings sitting in this regal throne-like chair. It looked impressive, but was likely very uncomfortable during long drawn-out council meetings. At the end of his three-year term in 1919, the council of the day presented him with the chair. After his death in 1931 the chair was taken to Leaside, Ontario, by his son Larry. The chair was then given to Howard Talbot, the mayor of Leaside. The following years were not kind to the chair, and it was in the process of being carted off to the garbage dump when it was spotted by Edward Harding of Leaside, who recognized its worth and took possession of it. He restored the chair and presented it to the town council of Leaside.

When the chair was restored, it was discovered that a plaque was attached to the chair, with the following inscription: "Presented to James E. Peaker, Esquire, Mayor 17-18-19 by the council of Yorkton". Though the town of Leaside had previously been known as Yorkton, there was no record of a Mayor Peaker during those years. Someone remembered that there was a Yorkton in Saskatchewan, and a letter was sent to the council here telling them about the chair and inquiring about a mayor by that name. A reply was immediately sent back to Leaside, stating that indeed Mr. Peaker was mayor of Yorkton during those years, and that his daughter, Mrs. E. E. Crosthwaite, was anxious to have it back as a remembrance of her father.

Subsequently the chair arrived back in Yorkton and on October 4, 1967, Mrs. Crosthwaite presented the chair to the City of Yorkton in remembrance of her father. The chair was accepted on behalf of the city by Mayor William Fichtner, who spoke of the contribution Mr. Peaker made to council, the school board and the business community of Yorkton. The presentation of the chair to Yorkton City Council coincided with the 100th anniversary of the year of Mr. Peaker's birth, and the 50th anniversary of his first term as mayor the Yorkton. And so the chair sits today in City Hall, a historic reminder of the contributions of the many people who gave of their time and talents to make Yorkton a great place to live, work and raise our families.

Update: The chair at present is in the council chambers. For a while it was displayed in the lobby, and may return there, Mayor Aaron Kienle says, with the city considering making a corner of the lobby into a area to display council history – the photos of former mayors are already on the walls.

When the drive-in theatre came to Yorkton

Those who were here at the time will remember the excitement in Yorkton when the Rothstein Theatre Company of Winnipeg opened the drive-in theatre on what was then the outskirts of the city. According to a June 1950 report, the \$70,000 facility was opened with great fanfare. There for the occasion were Mayor Clarence Langrill, Nat Rothstein and his son David of Winnipeg, Ken Mayhew, and Bill Johnson, manager of the Rothstein Theatres in Yorkton.

Bill Johnson will be remembered as an alderman, and a past-president of the Kinsmen Club and other community organizations. He was, for many years, the manager of the Rothstein Theatre interests in Yorkton. The company already owned and operated the Tower Theatre downtown, which is still here. The new business venture was located "on the crest of a hill, one half mile east of the city on the outskirts of Broadway Street." It was the outskirts then. This space is now occupied by Wardale Farm Equipment, at what has become one of the busier commercial intersections of Yorkton, where Broadway and Highway 9 meet. The city limits now extends far beyond this location. At the time the theatre was built, the city pretty much ended at Dracup Avenue. Where the Imperial 400 and Superstore are now located, there was nothing but slough water and ducks. Everything east of that was farmland. No malls, no car dealerships, no big stores.

The drive-in theatre was the first in Saskatchewan to be installed with individual speakers for each car, and was only the third drive-in theatre in the province. Constructed to withstand winds up to 100 miles per hour, the screen tower measured 48 by 52 feet. The theatre was constructed to hold up to 450 cars and had a staff of 15 with Len Manahan as the manager. A well stocked canteen dispensing lots of pop and popcorn catered to those who attended the theatre.

The drive-in theatre was a novel idea at the time. Couples with young families could take their children, bed them down in the back seat of the car, and enjoy an evening out without the expense of baby sitters. Stories are told of cars coming to the gate of the theatre with only one of two persons in the car, but when it was parked the trunk would be opened and out would come as many as could be stuffed in the trunk. The drive-in was a favourite place for courting couples, and many a mother warned her daughter about proper behaviour at the theatre.

Gradually the drive in theatres lost their appeal and closed. Only a few remain in operation in the province. But the drive-in theatre certainly did have its place in the entertainment world of the 40s, 50s and 60s.

Update: The Imperial 400 motel, then at the edge of the city, is long gone. The building operated for a while as a motel under different names, and was torn down a few years ago. It is now the site of Yorkton's second McDonalds restaurant.

The many judges of Yorkton

I don't know what would be normal for a community the size of Yorkton, Ruth wrote, but it seems to me that this city has contributed an unusually high number of judges to the legal system of our country.

In 1998 at a French immersion seminar for justices held in Quebec, Judge Jamie Saunders of the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia was keeping a list of the judges who were born or raised in Yorkton. Judge Saunders was born in Yorkton. His parents, Jean and Jim, were from Nova Scotia but had come to Yorkton where Jim was employed by the Hudson Bay Company, which at one time operated in the grand old building now occupied by Hurst's Furniture at the corner of Broadway and Second Avenue, and later in what is now the Dowie's Stationery building on Second Ave. They subsequently returned to Nova Scotia.

On checking around, he found that the following judges from across Canada have that common connection to Yorkton:

Hon. Brian Dickson, former Chief Justice of Canada, recently deceased;

Hon. Willard Estey, retired from the Supreme Court of Canada;

Hon. Madam Georgina Jackson of the Saskatchewan Court of Appeal;

Hon. Madam Constance Hunt of the Alberta Court of Appeal, who now also sits on the Nunavut Court of Appeal;

Hon. Mr. Justice Jim Shabbots of the British Columbia Supreme Court;

Hon. Madam Justice Nancy Morrison of the British Columbia Supreme Court;

Judge Linton Smith, Senior Judge of the Saskatchewan Provincial Court.

An impressive list of legal talent to have been produced by our community. Judge Morrison of the Supreme Court of British Columbia has been asked to speak at a Women Judges' Conference in Beijing, China. She will be speaking on Women and Labor Laws. The National Women Judges Institute of Canada is putting on the conference for the Women Judges of China from Nov. 29 to Dec. 3. Attending this conference will be two or three women judges from each of the 30 districts in China.

Nancy, who has strong ties to Yorkton where her father was a lawyer whose practice was in the building now bearing the name Morrison Place on Fourth Avenue is a much sought after speaker, especially on women's issues.

Update: The list Ruth provides are judges with local connections who served on higher courts. But when it comes to judges at other levels with a strong connection to Yorkton, either because they were raised here or worked here, there are more, some of whom were appointed long after Ruth wrote that column. My personal recollections would now also include her son Doug Shaw, who is a retired judge in Thunder Bay; Jim Milliken, longtime Yorkton lawyer who served as a judge in Prince Albert; Felicia Daunt, a judge in Prince Albert; Pat Koskie, a family court judge; and provincial court judge Donna Taylor.

The building where Nancy Morrison's father William practiced law is still a law office, and has been since it was built in 1965. At the time it housed both the Morrison law firm and the accounting firm of Parker and Quine, now known as BakerTilly. The law firm has gone through a succession of partners, and the name of the firm changed to reflect those partnerships. Among those who practiced law there in past years were Richard Hornung, Pat Koskie, Marv Wentzell, Ron Wrubell, Arliss Dellow, John Stamatinos, Richard Leland and Thomas Campbell. It is now known as Kondratoff Persick.

We conclude Ruth's story, and stories, by recalling she was named Yorkton's Citizen of the Year in 1989, and in October of 1999 was the recipient of the Chambers of Commerce Executives of Canada's Excellence Award for her meritorious service to the Chamber and community. She received the Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal in 2002 and in September of 2013, two months before her passing, I had the privilege to present her with the Yorkton Chamber of Commerce Life Membership. Not to forget that she was named a senator of the Yorkton fair board for her decades of work with that organization, both as a volunteer and in her role with the Chamber of Commerce.

Her obituary states this: "Ruth was fiercely loyal, had a wonderful sense of humour, was principled, stoic, determined, hard-working and courageous in the face of adversity. She was a great storyteller, eyes twinkling, with an incredible memory and firm opinions. Her love was unconditional."

It also points out that her life spanned a remarkable period of time. In 1923, when she was five years old, she rode her pony to a one-room school. Ninety years later she was on her computer in a care home, keeping in close touch by email with her family and friends across Canada and overseas. That was Ruth.

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