

# Memories of a Border Town

BY MARGARET LEES



Dick Dunbar and Clark Babcock: Dick in Canadian aviator uniform and Clark in U.S. aviator uniform. "Hands across the border."

Many interesting stories and life experiences have been written about growing up in Saskatchewan. As I lived a good part of my life close to the United States border, perhaps I can add something to the "history and folklore" of this province. But, first a little background information will clarify things.

History tells us that in 1873, the "Boundary Commission", composed of men from Britain, the United States, and Canada,

began marking the prairie section of the 49th Parallel, which formally became the United States—Canadian border. The "dirt mound" markers they put there were later replaced by steel posts set in concrete. My source simply says that the markers were placed at "intervals." (Information from "Memories of North Portal and Districts, 1904-1979")

It is, perhaps, symbolic of the kind of community that developed that in 1913, when the extensive re-marking was done, the only place on the prairies where the original mound was missing was at Portal.

The North Portal Customs—designated at that time as a "Preventative Station"—opened in June 1893. A great deal of history was happening at that time, but skip to 1904, when North Portal was designated a "Customs Port of Entry and Warehousing Port." Also, in 1904, North Portal became incorporated as a Village. (Portal, North Dakota had about the same population, but was known as a "city," to my knowledge, there are no designated villages in the United States.

With the connecting of the railways, trainloads of settlers and their goods had increased the volume of work for officers on both sides of the line. "Undesirables" trying to escape to Canada were another problem for the U.S. Border Officers. According to local handed down history, officers from both sides of the line got along well, however, and min-

gled socially when off duty.

When local people became required to "report" going across the line they thought it an infringement upon their rights at first, but became accustomed to it, as it was mostly a matter of keeping track of people. It was sometime during the First World War when the "Special Revenue Act" was passed, and Excise Tax was collected from Canadians bringing in goods from the States, on "like" goods to that made in Canada. By this time Customs and Excise Officers and Immigration Officers worked in the same building, which made for greater efficiency and cooperation.

The same was true of Officers on the American side. Though I have given a little background information to help set the scene, my aim here is to share memories about growing up in a community made up of Canadians and Americans, and a few who weren't sure which they were. I use the word "community" here in its truest sense.

I was born in the springtime in a cottage about a "stone's throw" from the Canadian U.S. border, sometime before the dirty thirties. Mrs. Jim Scott, a registered nurse, had a couple of extra bedrooms, and farm women would go into town to stay with her when it was getting near their time of delivery. My mother and her little daughter had come to town to await my arrival. There was a doctor, and a hospital, in

Portal, North Dakota. Had I been born there, as had some of my contemporaries, I would have had dual citizenship.

The evening of my birth, the doctor was called out from the Saturday night movie to usher me in. I have been told he grumbled a little at missing the grand finale of the show.

One of my earliest memories is of a Bowery Dance on the American side. It was a combined celebration of the United States' Fourth of July and Canada's Dominion Day, (as we called it then.) I remember the music, and my father, with his long legs, twirling my mother around to a lively Polka, my baby sister perched on his arm, her blue voile dress fluttering in the evening air.

In a corner we children kept time to the music in our own way, as the music rang out across the border.

In the afternoon there had been a parade, and free ice cream, and, at midnight, the fireworks.

At these celebrations there was joy and pride in being American, a pride that was infectious, and we celebrated who we were.

On Saturday nights in the

summer, it was a family outing to dress up and go to town. We walked the sidewalks on the Portal side and visited with friends, both Canadian and American. A rare and special treat was a Charlie Chaplin movie. The nearest movie theatre on our side was about 35 miles away. It didn't matter that small towns like Portal were showing the movie long after it had made the rounds in larger centres.

As our farm was only a half mile from the border, we often walked across the line to visit a friend, Mrs. Johnston, without going the extra distance to report at the U.S. Customs and Immigration Office.

Occasionally a U.S. Border Officer on horseback or in his marked car would happen along and stop to chat. No one ever made us go into town to report. (Our side didn't have "border officers" on patrol; the Mounties took care of that when necessary.) I was especially interested in Mrs. Johnston's books — most of them having been bought for her daughter, now grown. Titles ranged from Little Women to Arabian Nights. I was allowed to borrow one at a



Canadian Customs building at North Portal, SK circa 1955

time, returning it before I was allowed another one. Such an arrangement involved considerable border hopping, but it enriched my life.

The U.S. Customs Officers never searched our buggy or sled when we drove to the Portal side. The carefully wrapped crock of butter underneath the seat wouldn't have mattered to them anyway. About the only foodstuff they worried about was citrous fruits, mainly because of disease. I'm afraid that when the Japanese oranges came to the Canadian side for the Christmas season, some American friends had big pockets.

Our crock of butter got traded for items like canned fruit, sugar (cheaper over there), and coffee. Oh, how my parents loved the American coffee. I'm not sure why it was so much more popular than what we bought on the Canadian side, but it was.

In the same way the Americans relished the Canadian jam in cans, (the re-

usable lids made the empty cans a useful container too), and the English Bone China carried in the R.H. Douglas General Store.

When we brought our groceries through the Canada Customs, the Officers would usually wave us through. Sometimes when we insisted on showing what we'd bought, the duty wasn't worth the paper work. It wasn't wise, however, to "hide" purchases, because a surprise search (perhaps when the "Super" from Regina was down), could result in a heavy fine.

There was, however, a certain amount of minor smuggling that went on fairly regularly. I remember how we could buy a nice little pair of shoes, with buckles no less, for .98 cents — that would have cost at least three dollars at Eaton's. We never really thought of it as smuggling when we wore our old shoes and left them behind.

"Scuff them up a bit in the dust," the friendly merchant said, as he tossed our tattered footwear in the pot-bellied

stove.

Smuggling the other direction was also tempting, as prices paid for farm produce in North Dakota were considerably higher than in Saskatchewan. One could, however, purchase similar food items at a lower price in the U.S. than in Canada. (Hence the occasional crock of butter under the buggy seat.)

There is a story about some acquaintances who lived about 12 miles west of us. Late one Winter evening the U.S. Border Patrol came upon a teen-aged son with a team and stoneboat" going across a lonely stretch of the boundary line with two five gallon cans of cream. Addressing the boy he asked, "Whose cream is that?"

"The cream is ours, but the cans are Mrs. Brown's," the boy blurted out. (For the scheme to work, you had to have a loyal cohort on the other side.)

The cans and the cream were seized and the game was over, but because it was deemed a first offence, that, I believe, was it.



Customs and Immigration staff at North Portal in the early 1950s