

Some of the words: Swimming pool

Grace Hols

Remember the saying “A picture is worth a thousand words”? Well, I have a lot of pictures: black and white, some already fading. So I am trying to write the words, or at least a few of them. This process involves an intimate study of a photo, to the point where I take a magnifying glass to zoom in and capture details otherwise overlooked. The result of all this is a growing collection of vignettes that I am calling “Some of the words.”

Swimming pool

It’s a blistering day in August 1952. The oat crop is thick and tall and ready to ripen, and the daisies are in full bloom amongst the wild grasses that make up most of the yard.

I am surprised to see the daisies. Mom made it a mission to get rid of them as much as she could, spraying them with who knows what and pulling them out roots and all if she had the strength. Dad had taken classes in agriculture before he came to Canada, and one thing we heard repeatedly was that daisies were a sign of bad soil and a poorly managed farm. In those early years, though, with a house full of young children and a farm to build up, pulling daisies out of the side yard was probably not a priority.

A clothesline has been strung between two poles, and a third pole with a nail on the end holds it up, although this day there are no clothes drying, and the clothespins hang idle and unevenly spread along the metal line.

The mower Dad uses to cut the hay has been parked for the time being, since the hay is already cut and packed into the barn loft, and it is too early to start cutting the oats.

In the background, already twisted from sitting on its side, is the large wooden crate Dad made in Holland before he and Mom emigrated. It was into this

crate, or *kist*, that they packed the oak table and chairs, the two *rookstoelen* ('smoking chairs'), the pots and pans, the less fragile wedding gifts, books, clothes, and whatever else would fit. It even held a large engine, awkward and heavy, because Dad knew they were heading into the northern Canadian wilderness and he thought he might need it as a generator or something. There wasn't a lot of room. I know Dad reluctantly sold his piano and Mom sold the bedroom suite she had saved so hard for. They needed that money to pay for the passage to Canada. I wonder how they moved that large crate around? Did they have loaders or cranes to transport it from the house to the ship when they were ready to leave on the *Volendam*? The crate later became a storage shed, but what I remember is that we used it as a playhouse, parked on its side.

In the centre of the photo is a large galvanized metal tub with two handles. I think my sister has it, or whatever is left of it, today. She's the sentimental one in the family, although she says it's because she loves the "shabby chic" look. Her house is full of old things, or things made to look old.



In our "swimming pool", 1952. From the author's personal collection.

But in 1952, inside that tub, which really wasn't even big enough for an adult to bathe in, are three children. They are not having a bath, because you can see bathing suit straps, and the girls have big white ribbons in their hair. No, this was an early day version of a swimming pool. This was a big deal. There was no running

water, so early in the day Mom must have used the kitchen hand pump to fill pails of water and carry them out to the tub in the yard. The water would have been ice cold, coming from the well hand-dug by my dad and his brothers when we first moved out to the farm. So the tub had to sit in the sun for a few hours to warm up, and I can imagine we would have run out often to check if it was ready. The way to check was to stick our hands in, and to look for the small bubbles that would collect under the water along the inside of the tub. Probably the tub of water would have been incentive for us to get our chores done, for we all had chores, even the little ones. Feeding the chickens, collecting the eggs, sweeping the porch, or folding towels would have happened quickly that day.

But there we are, chores done, the water warmish, three of us crowded together in the tub, hair ribbons askew and big grins on our faces, squinting into the sun for a photograph. A large cloth of some kind lies next to the tub, ready to receive us when we have had enough of the water. Lying on a blanket in a wet bathing suit with the sun to warm and dry me was an absolute treat in those days.

