

Some of the words:
Een boer met 'n hondje

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.”

Een boer met 'n hondje

My father was the youngest of six and grew up on a farm in Holland. When he was still very little, someone asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up. His answer was immediate and unswerving – he would be “*een boer met 'n hondje*” – a farmer with a (little) dog. He had a natural love for animals and wanted to have land of his own on which to raise a herd of cows.

By the time he had grown up, however, it was the 1940s and a lot had happened to make that almost impossible. The Second World War had left the country in shambles and the family farm was too small to subdivide.

So when he was first married, in 1947, Dad worked for another farmer. He was up at four a.m. to begin milking 20 cows by hand. Breakfast was at six, usually buckwheat porridge. At ten there was a warm meal, and then he had an hour and a half free before going to work in the fields. At four it was time to milk again.

The milking was twice a day, seven days a week, with barely enough time off on Sundays for him to rush to church on his bike, pulling on his good coat as he pedalled. Eventually he had one Sunday off a month.

He liked the work, but not the long hours, and not the fact that he couldn't be his own boss. Two years of that was enough. A brother and a sister had already moved to Canada and the letters they sent back to Holland contained glowing

reports of a land of opportunity: land was plentiful and cheap; there were mountains, rivers, and wildlife. Dad remembered the Canadian soldiers rolling their tanks through the streets in Holland at the end of the war, throwing cigarettes and chocolate bars and bringing liberation. Canadians ranked high in his estimation and Canada seemed like an exciting dream worth pursuing. He started filling out emigration paperwork.



*Albert Seinen, here about four years old, was born with a soft spot for animals.
From the author's personal collection.*

In the spring of 1949, he and his little family arrived in northern British Columbia, where he immediately found work in a logging camp. Almost as quickly, he got a dog, a black and white mutt that is proudly included in our earliest photos of that first Canadian winter in the bush.

After a couple of years of working to save money, he bought 110 acres of farmland for \$800. He continued to work in the lumber industry for the first years, but his goal was to be an independent farmer, living off the land. In his spare time he built a house, a log barn, a chicken house and a pen for pigs. He worked longer hours for himself and his family than he had ever worked for anyone else. Soon there was a milk cow, there were chickens for eggs and meat, long rows of

vegetables for eating and selling, and fields of oats and potatoes. The family grew to six children. Dogs were a regular part of our daily life.

Dad was all about being self-sufficient. He was a hard worker to start with, but growing up during the Depression years of the 1930s and then experiencing World War II had taught him to be innovative and self-reliant.



*Living in a logging camp; my dad with me and our first dog during our first winter in Canada.
From the author's personal collection.*

In Canada, he had his own little sawmill and enough trees on his farm to make lumber. So he hooked up a belt and pulleys to run the mill, and soon green planks of freshly cut, fragrant spruce and pine were stacked up to dry in large triangles in the new clearing by the house. Eventually a milking parlor was constructed to hold several cows and a new electric Surge milking machine. My father loved to sing, and his clear tenor voice could be heard daily above the noise of the machinery as he belted out hymns and songs from the war as he worked.

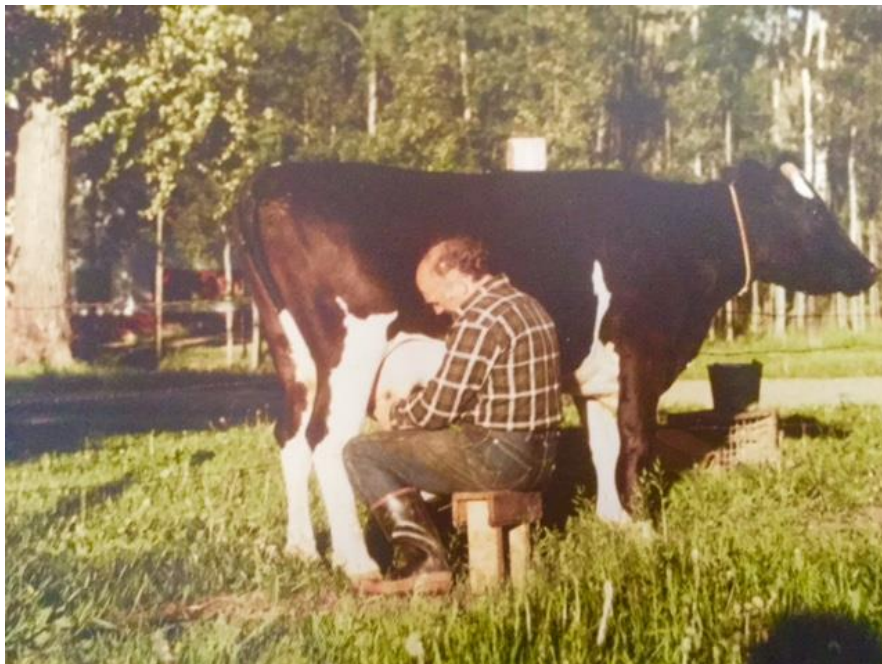
He built a large barn with an attached dairy, all the while scouting neighbouring farms for good dairy calves. His herd of cattle grew. They were mostly black and white milk cows, with an occasional brown one thrown in. He had names for them all and kept track of their gestation periods, writing names and dates in pencil on the inside walls of his new barn. He shipped off cans of milk to a plant in another town.

After successfully applying for a Grade “A” dairy licence, he began to sell milk in glass bottles around town. He made it a family business, with the younger ones feeding calves, the older ones helping with the milking and washing milk bottles. Mom used a hand-cranked bottling machine in the corner of the dairy to produce wooden crates full of finished product for Dad to deliver to his customers.

Not long after things had begun to go well in his dairy, a large corporation made plans for a lumber mill in our little town, and those plans included a takeover of the land that Dad had worked so hard to build up. He was bought out and had to move. He did buy more land, but was never able to return to dairy farming and bought beef cattle instead.

I don’t remember any complaining or expressions of dismay at this new turn of events. Dad embraced the unexpected opportunity to build up another farm. He single-handedly cut down more trees, made more lumber and began constructing another barn, another house. To him, the possibilities in this new country were endless, and, until the day he died at age 90, he always had a farm, a building project on the go and a dog in his backyard.

In Canada, my father had accomplished what he had set out to do. He had his own land, he had a dog and a herd of cows, and he had a family to share it with. He couldn’t have been happier. He had fulfilled his dream of being “*een boer met 'n hondje*”.



Dad kept a cow to milk by hand long after the dairy was sold, and this chore, carried out on a homemade stool in the early morning or evening sun, was always something he enjoyed.

From the author’s personal collection.