

Timothy W. Shire  
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## The night before Christmas, 1955

### Charlie and Mary's Christmas Eve mass

It was the night before Christmas in the fierce winter of 1955. My family was living in the tiny hamlet of Vandura, seven miles east of Langbank, seven miles west of Kelso and about twelve or thirteen miles north of the largest community in the area, Wawota. At that time, the farms were very small, usually not more than a section or two, while there were still a few half section farms in that part of Saskatchewan. All in all it meant that the rural population was substantial. The small and medium farms were mixed farms with a few head of cattle, some pigs, a few dairy cows for cream and milk and a blend of chickens and ducks. All of the farms had at least one work team of draft horses and a light team for the cutter in the winter. My father was the foreman of the CNR track crew, it was his first permanent job as a

foreman. He had joined the railway in 1947 and worked his way to being a relief foreman and in the summer of 1955 we moved from Langbank and our little house downtown, across from the co-op store, to the foreman's house in Vandura, called the section house. It was a two story house with a large kitchen and a small living room on the first floor and two bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs. It was located only a few yards from the track on the north side and the tool house a bit to the west, east was the small longhouse style station with its platform. I don't remember a station agent, I think that was something that had been closed out a

short while earlier, but the little building did have a large waiting room with a pot bellied stove and an office.

In the fall and spring the section crew would sometimes go to the waiting room for coffee and would be joined by farmers delivering grain, or just dropping in to visit.

Vandura was a very small place it had a general store that supplied us with pretty much what we needed, but often it ran short of things and in that winter, running short was par for the course. Winter had arrived quite suddenly in late October blocking the road to Wawota and to anywhere else for that matter.

My mother was expecting and right after the first storm of the coming winter my little brother Allan and I went with my dad in an attempt to go down to Wawota to get some things. We tried, we shovelled, we got stuck with others attempting to make the trip that Saturday, but having pushing out our car and several others, there was a little cursing and we had to turn back. The car was put in the section house garage and remained there until April when a bulldozer punched through a road. I finished the school year off in Vandura before we moved, just the seven miles to dad's new job as the permanent foreman in Langbank.

Now being cut off without a road out or in was not such a bad thing, because there was a passenger train west every night around 2:00 AM and east every night well before midnight, bringing mail and the things that a community needs. On Wednesday, there was the weigh- freight, a train that brought less than carload lots

(LCL) that was unloaded at the station that same train usually spotted grain cars and picked up filled ones from one village along the line to another.

There was a pool elevator, the elevator agent was a pleasant man and his wife was definitely nice to me and wanted me to visit often and play with their daughter. She was a nice little girl, a year younger than me and I was less than enthusiastic about the idea. Their house was sitting on the outskirts along the little road that went west and turned north over the track and accessed the elevator which was on the siding north of the main line.

Mr. Simon ran the post office, which was the core of the community. He not only looked after the mail that came and went, the parcels from Eaton's and Sear's, but at that time, the post office also offer bank services. I liked him, he was always cheerful and truly seemed to appreciate the people he served. His family was related to the mattress manufacturer.

There was a United Church with a young minister perhaps a student. Mr. Comstock was the teacher who had a frail wife who was memorable and seemed to have materialised out of a Dickens story. She did not walk, but had to be carried, wheel chairs did exist, but no buildings at the time were accessible but she was able to get around her own house on wheels.

There were only a few other houses. A cattle farmer, named Basil Coffee had a corral and barn right beside his house smack in the middle of the little place. He had a rather miserable son, Ronnie, who was a bit older than me and I don't remember him being at school very much and they had a daughter named Dorothy, who was adopted, or was a foster child. She was a teenager with long

brown hair and the walk of a person who worked long and hard each and every day, for indeed she was the main person who fed the cattle and did the chores.

West of Coffee's was the post office, Charlie Lawrence's house, Walter Wiperwitz's house, the Church, the church manse and to the south was the school, near it was the teacher's house and east of it, Nick Wiperwitz's place. There may have been a few other houses, but not many. Charlie, Walter and Nick all worked on my dad's gang, Nick was by far my favourite. He had served in World War II and as a result had what today would be called post traumatic syndrome, it was then called "shell shock," but it was Nick's odd behaviour that included some mood swings and when he told stories he was eloquent, but he had a whole set of ticks that would interrupt or embellish his comments. A shrug, a facial expression with a twist and then combinations of both. But that was Nick, everyone accepted him and after listening to him, I would, when I was sure no one was watching, try to recreate those interesting ticks. I got the shrug move down but that was it.

The general store on the road into the village was the first building on the east side and was on a bit of a rise, it was lower towards Coffee's place with a bit of a slough nearby, then the ground rose a bit to the southwest where the school yard was located. From the section house and its garage, which by mid December had a huge snowbank about half way up the doors, it was down a slight hill, down past the post office up hill slightly to the school yard. Just inside the school yard on the right were the swings, on the east side was the barn which had doors in need of repair and the one room school stood in the middle.

Though the enrolment was smaller, it really didn't seem that different from the two room school in Kelso where I had attended grades one and two, as the one

room there was always closed up anyway. But in Kelso, there were fifteen of us in grade one, in Vandura I think there were four in grade six including me. In between, I had gone to school in Langbank, which had two rooms, one room was from grade one to seven and the other, grades eight to twelve. It seems odd to think about it now, but I don't remember the teacher that well. It was my first experience with a man as a teacher and for some reason, the whole world revolved around my fellow students instead of the teacher.

Keith Lewis sat behind me and seemed to have an endless repertoire of vile jokes. He was not an especially good student but a cheerful one. His little sister, Bernice was a true delight, freckles, a quick laugh and almost orange hair. But the darling of the school was "PeeLou," Patsy Lou Mclean. She was in grade four with blond hair, colourless skin, huge blue eyes and everyone in the whole school adored her. She was small for her age and a type one diabetic. She hated that needle she needed each noon hour before lunch and somehow it became my chore to administer the insulin.

Her best friend was my cousin Gloria Jean, we were good friends as well as cousins even though I was guilty of more than my share of teasing.

There was an interesting pair of sisters, Anne and Linda. Anne had dark hair and Linda blond, though they were a year apart they tended to dress alike almost all of the time. They were short and a bit plump, but really treated me well.

For me, going to school each day in Vandura was really something I looked forward to, not because of Keith's dirty jokes or PeeLou's smile, no, it was Maureen and Marlene. They were both the same grade as me and my goal that whole year

was just to make them like me. You see this was long before school buses and as I said, the roads were blocked in late October. Keith and Bernice, Marlene and Maureen each drove a buggy to school in the spring and fall and in the winter, they had open cutters, Marlene and Maureen's was plywood and painted bright Santa red. I had grown up in a village and was not a farm boy, so horses were awesome and I got to help the girls hitch up their horse every afternoon when they went home from school. Keith and Bernice sometimes came to school with a single horse, but often had a team with a bunk sleigh. Gloria's dad or brother brought her the mile or so from the north side of the track with a team each day, as did Patsy Lou's parents.

With the Christmas concert behind us, school closed for the holidays and my mom left. Her doctor thought it was just not sensible to wait until delivery time in an isolated community, so a few days before Christmas, she got on the passenger train and went to Kipling, almost forty miles away, where she stayed with a family until three days after Christmas when she brought my sister into the world, nineteen years ago on that same day she died.

So here we were for the second time in my life, my parents were not together and we as a family were not together for Christmas. Only three years earlier, my dad had an appendectomy and spent Christmas in the hospital in Wawota, fighting for his life with a wild infection. He had arrived at the hospital the night of the staff party. Both doctors had been drinking and were in no condition to do surgery but father's acute condition was not something that would wait and they knowing full well they were unfit for the task, had no choice. On that Christmas Eve my mother was told he may not survive. After almost two weeks in the hospital he was able to win the battle and was there with us in 1955.

Dad, Allan and I were determined to make this a good Christmas. We had a nice tree in the living room, the first time anyone had a Christmas tree with electric lights in Vandura. Well that's not exactly correct, because Gloria's family farmhouse less than a mile away had a wind charger electric system and they had electricity, but Vandura had no electrical power until September of that year.

SaskPower ran a line into the little hamlet and put up three street lights. My dad was given a long set of poles with a grappler to change the bulbs, which by the way was quite an operation, waving that set of poles, plugged into one another, to grab the burnt out light, then unscrew it bring it down, put in a new bulb, then guide the apparatus back way up there, to screw in the light. The houses and other buildings in Vandura were not wired and our friend and neighbour from Langbank, Jack Hurst, came and put a few lights and plug ins in the section house then went about doing the same in other houses. CNR was not enthusiastic about installing electricity in its buildings, so there was no power up stairs in our house.

Before freeze up and before the road was closed we got our refrigerator. Father bought it at the McLeod's store in Kipling and loaded it on a push car and brought it to Vandura on the push car behind the section gang's jigger. (Some people call a railway inspection car a "speeder" but we called it a jigger.) It was quite a sight to see the fridge arrive standing on the push car with one of the guys leaning against it to make sure the big white tower did not topple over. It is just the way it is, winter comes to south eastern Saskatchewan gradually most years, getting colder as each day's time of sunlight grows shorter until today, the shortest day of the year when most years it is almost always below -25°C just as it is this year.

Christmas Eve in 1955 was cold and the snow depth off of the trails was nearly to my waist.

It was a tradition for my father to celebrate Christmas Eve with his work mates and friends and that usually involved a little drinking. This year was no exception, my older cousin Beverly and a friend of his, and some other folks came and went from our electrically lit kitchen that evening. Around nine, it was decided to break out the Christmas gift father had bought for Allan and I. It was a table top hockey game with hand nobs at each end and levers to move the goalies from side to side. Allan and I helped rip off the wrapping paper and remove it from its box then we put the metal Maple Leafs in white sweaters on one end and the Habs in red sweaters on the other end. Dad let us try it out, but of course this thing required some skill and strength Allan was just six so he and I just did not have the finger strength to make those players spin to get a good shot away.

Soon a tournament was under way and Allan and I watched for a while then retreated to the darkened upstairs. We had a coal oil wick lamp in our room so we played with our stuff for a while then dangerously used the lamp to create smoke puffs to simulate four-ten and four-oh- nine, the two big daily freights that went by, one in the early morning and one in the evening. We soon tired of that and Allan was getting sleepy, it was about ten-thirty when we heard more company at the porch door and we came down stairs to see who it was.

There, was the roughly dressed Charlie Lawrence, now he always looked pretty tough, he was a small strong man who I thought was just a bit slow. Never said much when stories were begin told around the pot bellied stove in the tool house or at the station, but Charlie was a hard worker and father respected his



effort, often having to get him to slow down and pace himself. Charlie was in regular winter get up for the time, a fur hat with ear flaps, a big scarf, a dirty brown parka and high-topped clipped winter overshoes over his work boots. Charlie's mission was to see if dad had a radio battery.

Radios, before there was electricity in houses, were powered by huge dry cell batteries. Lead carbon things made of a light cardboard box, cardboard like you would find in a cereal box and almost always damp with acid at one corner or more. Inside was an array of what looked like aluminium tubes filled with a black paste and a solid carbon rod at the core. These cells were wired together and were not rechargeable. They were big and heavy, about eight inches wide, ten inches tall and up to eighteen inches long. They had no handles on them and to carry one you had to carry it like firewood, only the down side was without a coat on, you would burn your arms with the acid and with your coat on, damage your sleeves. Charlie's radio battery had died and he was hoping his boss had a spare one. No such luck, so dad offered Charlie our radio and off he went, returning in about twenty minutes with his wife, Mary and a sleigh or toboggan to haul the radio home.

Our radio sat against the wall in the kitchen and was about four feet tall. A wood affair with that huge battery sitting on a shelf at the bottom. Dad and cousin Bev wrestled it to the door and outside onto the blanket on the sleigh. Mary cover it up and together she and Charlie trudged off into the darkness toward the street light not far from where they lived.

The reason for the radio was it was Christmas Eve. Like Charlie, Mary seemed a bit slow but she was a dedicated Catholic and longed to hear Christmas Mass. It was just after eleven when they left us and certainly, that Christmas Eve

they would have the monster of a radio sitting in their house and have Christmas music and the words of the Latin Mass would have fulfill Mary's deep need to feel connected to the rest of the Catholic world, from their little place in Vandura, snowed in for over a month, but still able to share the moment.

Allan went to bed, I remember reading something that night before I blew out the coal oil lamp, long after midnight, with the sound of our hockey game clattering away in the kitchen and the laughter and voices cheering with each goal.

The following day we would get up, share breakfast and Allan and I would open our other presents before we put on our parkas and winter boots to march across the slough north of the track and up to my uncle and aunt's house, where we would spend Christmas day and evening without our mother.