

ELFIE BRETT

IT TAKES A GREAT DEAL of personality to become a local celebrity - and a local celebrity our Elfie Brett certainly is! Mrs Brett came to Shipton eleven years ago and soon became a person of importance in Shipton Stores. The shop seemed darker when she was not there. Her speciality was in producing jams and marmalades of a very high standard. The secret of this was freezing the fruit and then using it in rotation during the year, that way every conserve was always fresh. Having once tasted her marmalade we all asked for more!

What is the background of this lively character.? She delights in telling us about her early life in Eire.

She was born in Tipperary and was educated in a thoroughly unorthodox way, going to various local dignitaries to receive specialised tuition until she was 13 years old, then she went to a girls' boarding school. In 1940 Mrs Brett, along with her twin daughters, went to Canada to join relatives there. Her husband stayed behind in a post of national importance. Elfie's account of this is vitally interesting.

"The twins were only 18 months old when we arrived in Regina but it was no trouble for them to settle in, nor for me either. My sister-in-law lived on the edge of the prairie. I found the area rather bare and dry after the green fields of home.

p.t.o.

In the fall I got the girls kitted out in snow suits, boots and mitts ready to face the cold, dry weeks ahead that Regina experienced.

The summer days slid by and one day I took the twins up the hill for a walk and came upon a herd of cows going in for milking. Being country born, I had learnt all sorts of crafts, including milking, in my youth. I felt I had to follow the cows which led me to Willie Sinclair. I asked him if I could milk two cows which I did then, and subsequently every afternoon. Willie asked me if I would like to stay until freeze up, so I worked on the farm and we lived in the bunk house which was 7ft x 7ft with 2 single beds, clothes chest, one chair and a pot bellied stove, so we were lovely and warm.

At freeze up we went back to Regina but I returned to the farm in spring and worked at milking from 4.30 am to 4.00 pm seven days a week. We went for a swim in the evening and early to bed — Willie knocked on my window at 3.30 am next morning. I did all sorts of jobs during the day, hoeing, cutting the half acre field of corn with a sickle, binding and stooking the sheaves and scuffling between the potato rows. Just after 3.00 pm, I saddled "Lil" and went off to the pasture to pump water for the cows.

The pasture was a section in area, so I had to search for 17 cows before bringing them home for milking. (By that time we had an electric milking machine). While I did this, Willie and his two-horses and wagon were hay-making.

At the end of the summer he brought the hay in for the winter. The corn we made into a round stack by the barns. Willie also made some lovely hay called Prairie Wool. How the cows loved that and the corn sheaves during the Winter!

The most exciting things about the lake were the fishing through the ice and the cutting of the ice for storage. Just before Christmas the wheels were removed from the wagons and sleds put on and studs put into the horses' shoes to prevent them slipping. I was fascinated by the way the ice was ploughed out. Huge blocks 4ft x 2ft x 2ft 6ins weighing about 400lbs each. These were moved with ease by callipers and tackle up the ramp. Willie used the ice to cool the milk by putting a large block in the water trough beside the churn. Ice was delivered 6 days a week for everybody at a cost of a dollar a week. Water was also delivered from a wooden trailer all the year round as there was no water laid on anywhere in the village.

During the summer of 1944 I painted three cottages for a local farmer and then we heard we might be going home. In the meantime we heard that my brother-in-law had been lost at sea. We had a great send off from the village and travelled by C.N.R. to Montreal, then sailed on the Rangitiki which took 17 days to reach Liverpool. As we were in an American convoy we had to wait 5 days in cold foggy Liverpool whilst they unloaded first. On our return from Canada we bought a farm in the Chilterns where we stayed for 30 years.

In 1974 we returned to Regina on a visit, to find light and power, water laid on and proper bathrooms, many people living in winterised homes and commuting to Regina on good roads — I wonder if they are any happier”

Talking to Elfie in the shop meant unveiling her real interest — plant propagation. There were unusual plants decorating the courtyard and even more specimens in the shop. Inevitably an invitation to her home followed and the lucky visitor was led from one greenhouse to another to see most exciting seedlings and a range of more mature unusual plants.

The Irish brogue became much more evident and the visitor would be filled with an ambition to compete with these green fingers — a hope cherished and quickly dashed.

Her family is outgoing too. Her twin daughters both became teachers of Physical Education, demanding jobs at any time. Now they are married with families but both were helping Elfie move this morning — 31st August 1993. It is obvious that there is a strain of superabundant energy which is passed on in the Brett family. Elfie is now moving out of Shipton to join her family in Mickleton and she leaves with our regrets at her departure but obviously with our best wishes for her happiness in joining up with her family. She will be accompanied by her dog rescued by the Blue Cross.

M. McNeill

P.S. Elfie will be selling plants and cheeses at the Village Stores in Mickleton as soon as she has unpacked!

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