

## **My First Train Trip – As a 4 month-old in 1947**

Let me introduce myself! I was born on July 4, 1947, in the quiet little Manitoba town of Neepawa – west of Winnipeg and just southeast of Riding Mountain National Park. My mother, Edna Mary (Dench) was 30 years old. My father, William Greenwood Dench worked for the railway, and was stationed way up north on the Churchill railway route. He was stationed in the communities of Wekusko, Wabowden, and Pikwitonei, served by trains known locally as the Muskeg Special, because of the boggy terrain the tracks traversed for hundreds of miles.

My first four months were pretty typical of most Canadian-prairie-born children. Neepawa was the birthplace of my mother, her mother, and of author Margaret Laurence. It was a sleepy little town, and we lived close to a cemetery, one of whose ornaments was a tall stone angel, which often frightened me when we walked past it. As a new-born, I had no idea what it was, but seeing it always made me cry!

As soon as my mother felt we were strong enough to travel, she made arrangements for us to board the Muskeg Special in Neepawa and make the many hours trip northward. Since my father worked for CN(?), we were welcomed at the station like old friends! We were going on a freight train. The engineer took one look at my mother, and said, “Mary, you look exhausted! Let me take the baby up in the engine, and you go back to the caboose and sleep for 24 hours, if you need to! I’ll see that the fellows keep quiet, and feed you well!” I can’t imagine what my mother’s thoughts might have been, but she was very glad of the relief; she had met some of my father’s trainmen, and felt no unease at leaving me with them!

Of course, I had no idea what was happening, but in just a minute or two I found myself shifter from one pair of hands to another, and up I went into the loudest, noisiest, smelliest, hottest place I had ever been in! It was much later that I realized I had been located in the cabin(?) – I don’t know what it was called, but it was where the black stuff was shoveled into the fire of the huge steam engine that was going to pull us northward into the barren regions of northern Manitoba! It was warm, and I felt like my mother’s arms were rocking me, and I must have fallen asleep ... a horrible screeching sound awakened me, and I cried for milk! A face I didn’t know smiled at me and took me from the ledge I was on, and warmly rocked me back and forth, and along came the bottle I craved.

I wanted my mother – the smell of her, the warmth of her – but the nipple between my lips soothed me and the warm milk slid down easily, and I faded back into sleep. I became accustomed to the movement and its sounds became less and less frightening. The men’s voices were soft and gentle, but sometimes I would be awakened by an unfamiliar face close to mine.

For a long time the series of loud, rough noises, the screeching sounds, the nasty hissing, and the blasts of terrible heat became familiar. For a long time the only light around me came from that hot fiery square in the black wall. But I wanted my mother's face – her breath – her voice!

I slept, awakened, slept, and awakened, and then I heard my mother's voice! The face in front of me was hers, and I could smell her! All was well, but part of me was VERY uncomfortable, so I cried and cried. Most of the scary noises stopped, and suddenly I felt really cool air on my face – that was scary, too! My mother unwrapped me and then wrapped me up again, and I felt really good! The rough hands took me, and they changed, and then they were my mother's hands again, and we walked for a very long time beside the train. Then I was handed back and forth like before, and then it was my mother.

We were somewhere quiet, and even when we started to move, it was much quieter than before – no scary noises, and the hot thing was gone. I fell asleep again, and when I woke up, there was no movement. We were in our new home in Pikwitonei, in a boxcar outfitted like an apartment. My mother didn't put me down much for a while, and my new life began! Next time I'll tell you about being shunted, and Lucky, the Indians' dog!

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