

LIVING BEHIND BARBED WIRE

Lois Edie Allison
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At one time in my life all my family lived behind a high barbed wire fence for many months. It was not a concentration camp but it certainly had the same forbidding look. It happened during the Second World War when I was eleven years old.

In 1939, when I was ten years old, the Second World War began. The following year in late October, a section of land (one square mile) in the RM of Springfield, Manitoba, was chosen by the Dominion Government to become the site of a Cordite Plant. Cordite is an explosive powder used in ammunition. It has the appearance of heavy ropes, or "cords". The military forces used the cordite in wartime.

The location was probably chosen because the main line of the CNR railway ran through the property. The site was also close to Winnipeg and Transcona where workers would be available, and could travel by train to the plant.

The section of land chosen included the Edie family's home quarter section. It also included land and homes owned by three other farm families. The land was very good farmland, some of the best in the municipality. Also purchased was the adjacent property where our school, the Oak Hummock School was located.

Our parents had not told us children that our farm had to be sold. Probably they were waiting for the appropriate time to break this news to us. However, it was not the kind of news that could be kept quiet. One October morning when we arrived at school, a group of our schoolmates gathered around to inform us that the Edies had to move because their farm had been sold. Of course we did not believe them. Our father would never sell the farm. The whole idea was incredible. That was a very long day. On arriving home and questioning our mother we found out that it was indeed true. Because of the war the government was taking our land, and yes, we would have to move. She did not know where we would go but we must move out in the spring.

Defense Industries of Canada was in charge of construction, which began that fall. The plant was known as Transcona Cordite, because it was just a few miles east of that town. Local farmers helped with the hauling of building materials by truck and by team and sleigh. Basements were dug for the large buildings that would soon be erected. The excavated earth was used to build up two huge mounds or bunkers at the south side of the property. Much later we learned that the bunkers were situated around two nitroglycerin storage areas and that the purpose of the bunkers was to protect other buildings in case of an explosion.

Soon an eight-foot high wire mesh fence topped with an outward slanted ledge of barbed wire enclosed the entire section of land. Our farmyard was behind the fence. An opening in the fence allowed us to go in and out. That winter we went to school by going out the

opening and continuing the two miles to the school, travelling by horse and cutter as usual in the winter. However, the school was now on the outside of the high fence.

We could see the fence every time we looked out of the school windows. Some of the schoolboys got the idea that they could climb that fence. It was a great challenge! At least two of the boys managed to get over the barbed wire protruding at the top of the fence, climb down on the other side and then climb back out again. My brother Norman was one of them. He also climbed over the fence by our house. I tried to do this also. I managed to get as far as the barbed wire, and then got scared and climbed down.

One Sunday afternoon during that winter, my father took the toboggan and all six of us children and headed towards the nearest bunker. We planned to do some sliding on the slopes of that "hill". A guard appeared and ordered us to leave. Dad told him that we lived there. The guard stated that no one lived there and that we were trespassing on government property. My father pointed to our farmhouse. "We live over there," he informed the guard. The guard then ordered us to return to our house, which we did.

For the remainder of the winter of 1940 and into the spring we continued to live behind that fence and went about our daily tasks and chores. Our father purchased the Bert Studham farm two miles away. We would move in the spring.

Spring came. The crabapple trees in our garden were in bloom. As I stood there gazing at the blossoms above me it occurred to me that we would not be picking the apples again. Suddenly, I wanted something to remind me of the place that was my home. I went to the house and found my precious Shirley Temple book. I took it to the garden, placed some of the crabapple blossoms between the pages and closed the book.

Preparations were made for moving day. Our house had been sold and would be moved away. My father had a herd of Holstein dairy cows. The stone milkhouse was carefully taken down. The stones from the walls were hauled to our new location and the milkhouse was rebuilt there. The cows were herded to our new farmyard. Boxes and more boxes were packed and loaded into the trucks. Finally the day came when we would sleep in our new house. Without ceremony we left our old place behind.

We had two hired men who had worked on the farm for some time. They moved with us to our new place and again lived in our house. During the first year in our new home, these men also worked on construction jobs at the Cordite Plant. They drove to the site with teams of horses from our farm to move gravel or to mow grass and make hay or do other needed maintenance. Mother packed lunches for them.

Our dog, a German Shepherd named Pal, missed his former home. He would run after the teams and follow them back to his old territory, now behind that high fence. Sometimes he went on his own. After some time, the opening in the fence where we had gone in and out of our yard was closed with a locked gate. Inside the fence was a wide cinder path where armed guards now patrolled on foot.

One day one of the hired men was going back to the plant site with a team to make hay. He saw Pal inside the fence, trying to get out. He stopped, took the shovel he had with him and proceeded to dig a hole under the fence. When it was big enough Pal crawled, under the fence and escaped to freedom. When my father heard about this, all he could do was shake his head and say, "It's a good thing a guard didn't see you!"

The plant operated twenty-four hours a day from 1941-1945. At the peak of employment there were more than 3,000 workers, working in three shifts. Three daily trains carried workers from the Union Station in Winnipeg and from Transcona to the Cordite Plant. Also, many local residents were employed there. Security was high. There was a great deal of secrecy. Photos were not allowed. To this day, no photographs of the plant have ever been circulated. Perhaps none exist.

When the war ended the Cordite Plant was closed. The buildings were dismantled and destroyed. Bulldozers demolished buildings, which were then burned. The remaining cordite was hauled to a burning pit and burned. There were numerous loud blasts and vibrations.

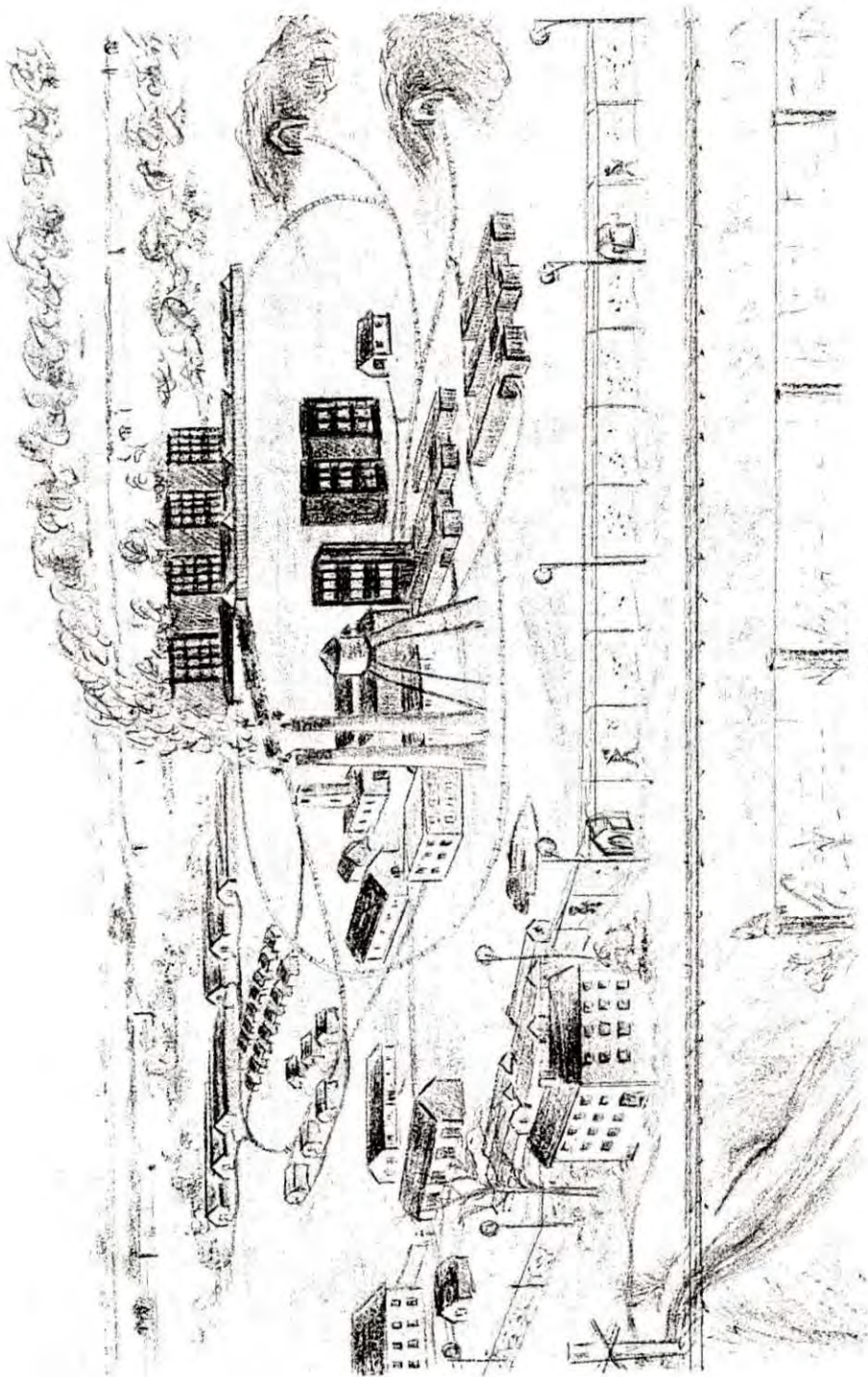
There was one particularly loud blast. Nearby residents saw clouds of bad-smelling yellow smoke. They complained of damage to their houses. My uncle Stewart Edie's house located just across the road south of the plant had the front windows damaged. Also, bricks in the wall of the house cracked.

In 1949, War Assets Canada put up the section of land for sale by tender. My father, Bruce Edie, purchased it, thus again becoming owner of the property that he had previously owned, plus the rest of the section.

The land resembled a war zone. The once fertile farmland was crisscrossed with gravel roads and paths, and littered with debris. Old basements and water-filled holes and the bunker "hills" made it dangerous for humans and livestock. It was no longer suitable for grain growing.

Some time later, my brother Norman bought the land from our father. After much work to make the area useable, parts of it became pastureland for his cattle.

Years passed. One day I returned with my husband to see the place where I had lived as a child. It was unrecognizable. The maples and spruce trees were gone. A ditch crossed the area where our garden and fruit trees had flourished. Grass grew tall where our dairy barn had been. I could not tell where the house had stood. There were no signs that it had once been a busy farmyard where six children played. As we drove away, I found myself deep in memories of the past.



Cordite Plant