

Sheila Thomas



I am Sheila's daughter Lorna, and I feel so privileged to be here today at this celebration of my mother's life. I volunteered to do the eulogy because I have inherited my mother's love of storytelling... like so many of the McLennan clan, I too have the "gift of the gab." My remembrances are in the form of a letter.

Dear Mom,

It was only days ago that we were enjoying our Christmas together.

You delighted us all when you took the gold bow off of the present Ken gave you and then tied it in your hair. We have so many photos of you like this—putting on a costume piece and striking a pose. Such playfulness is one of the qualities we so admire in you.

In the last few days I have been talking with your nieces and nephews from Medicine Hat, Foremost and Ottawa. These conversations with Glenda, Don, Archie and Rod, triggered memories I have about the early days of your first family. Let me tell you what I remember. I recall that your parents Christina and Willis came here from Scotland in 1907. Apparently they were on their way to Argentina but got delayed in Canada because their sheepdogs were quarantined in Montreal for six months. Your father wouldn't leave them behind because these dogs, invaluable to him for herding, only understood the Gaelic. I always thought it was kind of funny that we owe our existence in Canada to a couple of sheepdogs.

Your parents ended up settling on the "Argyle Ranch" in Airdrie, then they relocated to Calgary. That is where you were born on May 8, 1917. Your parents named you after a Scottish lake, Loch Shiel. You lived in Calgary with your parents and sisters May, Barbara, Kathy and brother Willis for the first few years of your life. But when your parents moved to the Clinton Jarboe Ranch, or the 7-7 ranch, you stayed in Calgary so you could go to school. You lived with the Porritt family. I am sure you missed your parents but you have told me what a kind soul Mrs. Porritt was, and how you enjoyed playing with your good friends Mary Porrit and Verona Hays. I know that on weekends you took piano and Highland dancing lessons. You danced in Drumheller on July 1 for the famous Edmonton Grads basketball team. You also took tap and acrobatic and danced at the old Grand Theatre. We still have some of your costumes.

Recently, I have been looking through some of your old photo albums. As you were growing up, you and your sisters wore an amazing array of dresses and special occasion gowns. Many of those dresses you kept and have stored carefully in an old trunk. You have also kept many letters from the past. These letters hold a great deal of

information about what life was like for your friends and family in the 30's, 40's and 50's. Sometimes we have been critical of you because you have held on to so much. Perhaps the reason you have kept all these things is because you have a compelling need to preserve the past of our family, to honor the lives of our ancestors. We appreciate your persistence in holding onto these family photos, letters and clothing-- for they have become our family treasures.

You called recently to tell me that you had been talking with Madge McAdam and Jean Urquhart, two of your classmates from nursing school at the Holy Cross Hospital in Calgary. Madge was also your roommate during your three years of training. It was harsh training. You worked 12-hour shifts and you never missed a shift during those three years. A mother superior was the head administrator of the hospital and nuns supervised your residence. You had to be in by 9:30 on Friday nights, 11 on Saturday and 10 on Sundays. You were paid \$5.00 a month. Any breakages of medical equipment were deducted from your pay and you had to buy your own syringes for the patients. The dress code was very strict—you wore stiff colors and caps. You were taught to obey authority, to bury your emotions and to be in service to others. These lessons guided you throughout your life. You are a person who always thinks of the well being of others, and in difficult times you swallow your tears and get on with doing the work that needs to be done. An example of your selflessness is when your father had a stroke in the early 1940's. You stopped working at the Keith TB sanatorium and moved to the ranch in order to be with him. You were there for two years.

The ranch. It was on the north side of the Red Deer River, 17 miles west of Bindloss, in SE Alberta. The ranch house was at the bottom of a steep, steep hill, and well back from the river bank. The ranch consisted of a log house, hired hand quarters, barn, chicken coop, outhouse and a chuck wagon. So many times I have heard you share the fond memories you have of that special place. As well as nursing your father as he convalesced, you helped your mother with chores. I remember you telling me how she wore silk stockings on her arms to protect her skin from the unrelenting sun, as you worked together in the garden tending to the potatoes, cauliflowers, tomatoes, pumpkins, and corn that grew seven feet high. You hated the mice and gophers and rattle snakes, but you enjoyed sightings of white tailed deer and coyotes. You also enjoyed playing with the ranch dogs—dogs with creative names like Tiddly Winks and Gimme. You weren't much of a cowgirl but on occasion, the hired hand John Tkachuk would saddle up the horses and you'd go riding, sometimes with friends like the Hardwick sisters, who'd drop by for visits. You also enjoyed special times with brother Willis and his wife Mildred who lived on an adjacent ranch. There were quiet times as well, visiting with sister Kathy who still lived at the ranch, and sister Mae who lived on the Fisher ranch with her husband George Campbell. You enjoyed reading letters from sister Barbara. It was wartime and she was serving in the air force as a . I know you loved the serenity of the praries, the coolies, and the river bank but you had to return to the bustling city when your father needed further medical treatment. You

were staying with him at a Calgary hotel when you met Alan Thomas. He was working as the hotel desk clerk and you were introduced to him by a mutual friend.

You and Alan were married on a beautiful sunny day in Calgary on August 16, 1947. All of your relatives were there, as well as Alan's brother Esmore and sister Gwen. After the ceremony you had supper at the Palliser hotel and went to Banff for your honeymoon. Dad had worked at the Banff Springs Hotel as a postmaster when he first moved to Canada from Wales, and so that is where you stayed—in the majestic Banff Springs in a room with a view of the Bow Falls. Perhaps that was the first opportunity you had to spend time in the mountains. Ever since then I know you have loved to holiday and go for hikes in the Banff -Jasper area. In your retirement years you even joined the Edmonton Trekkers so you could hike regularly in the mountains.

But when you were in your 30's, holidays were few and far between, because that is when you became a mother. You had three children in six years, first Brian, then Ken. You had me when you were 36. It was a demanding time, but you had many friends who helped you, including the Bannintines who lived next door. You were distressed when you found out Alan, who was working for Swift Canadian, was being transferred to Lethbridge. In Lethbridge there was no schooling or physiotherapy available for Ken, who was born with a disability--cerebral palsy. Many times you have spoken of how hard it was for you to leave him with a family in Calgary when we moved to Lethbridge. For five years he lived with several families—much as you had done when you stayed in the city to go to school while your parents lived on the ranch. Ken lived with families in both Calgary and Edmonton where he received schooling and physio. I think it was because of those five years of separation that you made a life long commitment to assist Ken. You have cooked for him, fed him, done his shopping, taken him to innumerable social events and accompanied him on many trips. Just last summer you went to New Brunswick with Ken and other members of the "Swinging Spokes"—a wheelchair square-dancing group. Yesterday, when I asked Ken what the impact of all of this devotion was, he answered "It gave me a sense of self worth."

Your generosity of time and spirit has extended to others in your family and community. Soon after we moved to Edmonton in 1962, dad became ill and you cared for him until his death in 1975. When Brian and his wife Genny had their two children, Carrie Ann and Scott, and when Phil and I had our children Cayley and Alex, you became a devoted grandmother. You shopped for almost all of their clothing during their childhood years. Just this week when I dropped over to your house I found bags of clothing for young children in your bedroom, despite the fact that your grandchildren are in their teens and early twenties. You have continued to buy clothes for the children of your neighbors and relatives—including many beautiful hand knit

sweaters. Many times Brian, Genny, Ken and I have marveled at the array of bags scattered throughout your home—bags containing the latest new bargain. These bags seldom contained anything for you.

There are so many other things I know and admire about you mom. But perhaps the most striking quality is your love of people. You have more address books and personal phone directories than anyone I know. I have been amazed at your ability to recall names and dates and places as you share stories. So many stories. Perhaps because you lived alone for 27 years and didn't have anyone to chat with during the day, you saved up words until they spilled out when you met people at the mall or social gatherings. I know how much you have enjoyed sending and receiving letters from your many friends and relatives in Canada, Scotland and New Zealand. The camaraderie and support you have found with the women you play bridge with has meant so much to you. And of course, your visits and conversations with Kay and Les Reid sustained you through many challenging times. I am glad you have had so many friends and family affiliations over the past 85 years. You have deserved every one of them and I know they love you.

I look forward to collecting more of your stories in the future mom. But for now I say good-bye.

TRIBUTE

Hello, my name is CarrieAnn, I am the oldest of Sheila's four grandchildren. My brother Scott, my cousins Alex and Cayley, and I are honoured to have the chance to give thanks to our Grannie for the time she spent with us.

It has been said that in life, " There are no mistakes, no coincidences.

All events are blessings given to us to learn from." (Elisabeth

Kubler-Ross). For Scott, Alex, Cayley and myself, there have been many

events in our lives that we have been able to share with our Grannie, that

we have been able to learn from. These events may have taught us

generalized lessons such as respecting our family, or more specific lessons like how to use a flour sifter. Thank you Grannie for all the events we were able to share with you.

Thank you Grannie for awaking our sense of touch; for the hugs, the back tickles before bed and teaching us to knit. Thank you for washing our hair and insisting that it be washed in the kitchen sink, not the pink bath tub.

Thank you Grannie for spoiling our senses of taste and smell. Scott compares every turkey and gravy meal to yours. Thanks for your peanut butter or oatmeal chocolate chip cookies, the ones with the imprint of your fork on top of them, the porridge at breakfast with the little islands of milk and a little bit of brown sugar, and Cayley thanks you for always peeling her apples and pears. Thank you for teaching us table manners, we will be sure to keep our elbows off the table.

Thank you Grannie for stimulating our sense of sight; for making shadow puppets of doves or rabbits on the wall, for taking us to the Citadeal to watch plays, and for always cutting out the comparison comics in the Journal for us to look at. Thank you for all the impromptu phone calls letting us know which figure skating or nature program we could be watching on TV, and for the phone call on this Christmas morning, asking us to watch the Queen speaking on TV.

Thank you Grannie for helping to tune our sense of hearing; for your stories about your school days with the Porritts, which reminded you of stories about your days on the ranch and the dogs there, which reminded you of your neighbors dog, and how the children next door sang Christmas carols to you,

which reminded you stories of your other nice neighbors from Germany, anyways....., your stories were endless, quite literally sometimes, but thank you for sharing and asking us to listen.

You also helped to train our ears to appreciate music. Cayley thanks you for supporting her singing talent by always watching her performances or

competitions, Scott for listening to him to play the ukulele on our trip to

Hawaii, and Alex thanks you for listening to him play at his piano and

saxophone at his recitals. And of course with music there is dance. Thank

you Grannie for taking us to all to the ACT dances, for introducing me to

Scottish/Highland dancing and driving me in your unique golden station wagon to my lessons. Cayley thanks you for waltzing with her in your living room for over an hour one night, and we all thank you for dancing, just a few days ago, on Christmas day, with your bow on your head.

Thank you Grannie for your hospitality. Alex marveled at how each time he was mowing your lawn you'd stop him half way through and offer a snack or a drink or a break to come in and watch a bit of TV with you.

Thank you Grannie for teaching us generosity and kindness. You were

constantly shopping, but rarely for your self. Thanks for all the pairs of

pajamas you bought me and Cayley thanks you for all the socks and underwear. Thank you for always asking about our friends and genuinely caring about how they were doing, and even buying them clothes from time to time. Thank you also for sharing stories and keeping us connected to our cousins in Medicine Hat, Foremost, Camrose, Calgary and Ottawa.

Thank you Grannie for all the little things that meant so much to us, like

taking us to the library and teaching us to read. For taking us to Gold Bar

park, for letting us climb your tree, and for teaching us proper phone

etiquete. Thank you for always taking us on walks to the Reid's house down the back alley, and Scott thanks you for letting him zoom around in Uncle Ken's wheel chair when he wasn't using it himself. Thank you Grannie for keeping track of how tall we were on your kitchen wall, and for measuring Alex and Cayley's feet on card board, so that you would know what size of shoes to buy them when you went shopping.

Thank you Grannie for your smile, your kindness, your spirit and your

friendship. Scott, Alex, Cayley and I are so lucky to have had you as our

Grannie. We will always be reminded of you when we drink a cup of tea, and will remember from time to time to drink it with our pinky fingers up. We will be reminded of you when we see flowers, especially pansies, and will remember to comment on other people's gardens. Thank you for all the stories of people and places and although we may not remember every story perfectly, we will always remember you. We will miss you Grannie. Thank you for you.