

## The Francis Benjamin Miller Family – His Nephews and Cousins

by Hope Healy Koontz

Francis Benjamin Miller (1837-1901) was the youngest son of a successful shipping merchant, Joseph Dundas Miller, who had died in 1847 when Benjamin was only ten years of age. Later on, Ben became a shipbroker in the firm of his brother known as the William Charles Miller Company. Ben traveled to South America, Australia and the European continent on business for the shipping company. About 1880 the William Charles Miller Company failed and Ben, at the age of 43, determined to emigrate to Canada, "The Land of Opportunity," since 160 acres of land was being given to each new settler by the Canadian government.

He married Fanny Louisa Frodsham (1849-1924) in 1876, after his first wife, Charlotte Taylor, died in 1873. In the spring of 1880 he and Fanny sailed from Liverpool for Canada on the "Rolling Polly" with Ben's son, William Joseph (1864-1904), their two and one-half year old daughter, Rose (1877-1927), and their son Frederick Charles (born 1878) and his wife's sister Emily.

Their ship entered the Gulf of St. Lawrence, sailed up the St. Lawrence River passing through the Great Lakes, disembarking in Toronto on the shores of Lake Ontario. There they met J. Lionel Ridout, a Northwest Mounted Policeman, who later married Emily Frodsham, Fanny's sister, and who spoke enthusiastically of the Birtle area where he lived. Birtle was about sixteen hundred miles away. They traveled west by train to Winnipeg, Canada, in the summer of 1880. The Canadian and Pacific Railroad had not reached beyond Winnipeg until 1882. From Winnipeg they traveled by flat-bottomed boat eighty miles to Portage la Prairie. Twins, Bernard West and Dorothy were born in Portage la Prairie, Manitoba, on June 17, 1880. Dorothy died later at the age of two and one-half. Another son, Gerald Hope, was born in December of 1881.

According to Benjamin's son, Bernard, "My father (at Portage la Prairie) gathered together twenty-six oxcarts and loaded them with a piano, an office desk, a barrel of salt, family pictures, etc. and trekked 140 miles to the homestead. There was the usual gathering of neighbors when a new barn was raised. I can remember, when very small, watching the building of a new cattle stable on our farm, with an experienced axeman (J.L. Ridout was one) straddling each corner, and the walls getting higher and higher."<sup>1</sup>

Benjamin and his son, William, bought 640 acres in an area called the "Birdtail" and later named Solsgirth in the St. James district. Their first home was a substantial log house that Ben built with three rooms downstairs and four rooms upstairs. He later added a sod-roofed barn, other buildings and animals. Three more children were born to the Millers: Gerald Hope (1881-1973), Helen (1885-1984), and Ruby Blanche (1887-1953).

When the Benjamin Millers arrived in Birtle about August 1880 they found many cultural activities such as a debating society, singing class, dances, and agricultural club, and three Protestant churches, namely, Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian. Prices per pound for the main necessities were \$4.50 for flour, oatmeal 5 cents, cornmeal 4 cents, sugar \$7, and coal oil was 45 cents a gallon. Butter, eggs and milk were scarce. There was a lumber mill, a mail service from Portage la Prairie once every three weeks, three hotels, two meat shops, and a few blacksmith shops. Horse teams could be hired to bring in freighted goods.

As a side line, Benjamin helped audit the municipal books in Birtle. Their home "Rose Vale" was used for Anglican church services before St. James Church was built in 1889. Both Ben and J.L. Ridout were instrumental in building the church. Benjamin had brought books of sermons and a piano from England. Later, the pulpit and lectern were given to the church in memory of Benjamin and his son, William.<sup>2</sup>

The Miller home was a centre for social life although Fanny Miller was never very well because of the hardships. Fanny did the dressmaking, made bread, churned butter, canned her vegetables and fruits for the winter, cleaned the lamps and lantern glasses each day, and washed the clothes in water which was hauled from the river. The clothes were boiled in tubs and handwring. After being wrung, the clothes were hung outside and froze in the winter time. She collected snow water in the winter for washing. Ironing was done with sadirons (flatirons) with detachable handles to save burned hands. Cooking was an endless job for her but a visitor was always welcome and meals were delicious since everything was prepared at home. During the threshing season, life was extra hard because feeding the threshers took weeks of planning and preparation. Crocks of butter, beet pickles, fruit preserves, and garden produce were prepared and a beef killed for meat. Breakfast for the threshers consisted of fried potatoes, bacon, eggs, bread, pancakes, syrup, and hot tea. For a mid-morning

lunch she prepared fresh biscuits, butter, jam and hot tea. She then hitched the horse to the buggy to take the food out to the men. The noon dinner had to be provided with loads of vegetables, roasts, gravy and desert. Sandwiches, cake and tea were sent out for the afternoon tea and supper was given to the weary men whenever they were through.

Ben and his sons worked a back-breaking day also. Land had to be broken with a walking plough pulled by an ox or horse. One acre a day was a good day's work. Most of the grain was hand sown with the bag carried over the shoulder. The reaping was done with a scythe and early threshing was accomplished with a flail, which beat out the dried grain against a log or floor and the straw was removed by hand. The ox and horse were plagued by the terrible hordes of mosquitoes. Often they obscured the color of the animal and a farmer could kill one hundred mosquitoes with just a stroke of his hand. The cattle would stampede wildly trying to brush them off.

The grain then had to go to the mill for grinding into flour. Frozen wheat made dark, heavy flour and the miller was reluctant to grind it because it might gum up the mill machinery. If the flour was kept for a year, it made better bread. If the farmer had more grain than he needed, he sold it to the general store in town in exchange for forty cents a bushel for groceries. Children were not left out of the chores and assisted in the small chores of the threshing by carrying out the midday lunch to the men. Special accolades must be given to the Miller family pioneers for leaving a comfortable life in Liverpool to resettle amongst strange ways and hardships.

The peaceful Sioux Indians were granted a reserve of twelve square miles near Birtle. The Birdtail nomads comprised a band of just over one hundred Indians, about twenty of whom were warriors. Although they did not like steady work, they cultivated gardens, grew corn, cut hay, aided settlers looking for strayed stock, cured fish and game and live a free and contented life.

Natural features of the Birdtail district lent themselves easily to farming, hunting and fishing. The inhabitants owed much to the friendly Sioux Indians for skill in hunting, tracking, and survival in the cold winters. It was usual to have Indians bring fresh fish and baskets made of willow to exchange for flour, bread, bacon and eggs. An Indian would glide into a home, sit down, and never say a word until one spoke to him. They liked tea and nothing pleased them as much as a cup of tea.

However, the Indians were not friendly all the time. In 1885 there was an Indian uprising starting in Manitoba which surged across Saskatchewan. All settlers were called into the Fort for safety at the settlement. Villages were raided and farms were burned and cattle killed or taken away. Benjamin Miller had built a high wall around his place and was protected from the pillaging. His nephew's home, that of Charles Edward Miller (my grandfather), was not harmed because the Chief of the Indians was his friend. Charles Edward had gone to his Uncle Ben's home during the uprising and when he returned to his own place he found the cattle watered, the house still standing, and all the other animals well cared for. The Indians said, "The Chief say take care Miller place, we do!"

Charles Edward, my grandfather, was taken into the Indian tribe and made a blood brother in a ceremony he and his family attended. The ceremony consisted of older members of the tribe sitting around the edge of the fire watching an animal being roasted on a spit. They sat on buffalo hides on a mound above the others with more hides spread out for the guests. Young Indians set about to prove themselves worthy of the honor of becoming full tribal braves. Arrows were shot swift and sure, knives glistened in the firelight and two long gashes were cut on the breasts of the young men. In the words of Bernard Miller who watched the ceremony of "the making of a brave" called the Sioux Sun Dance: "From the tall centre pole hung two ropes, fastened into the breasts of the young man... As the drum beat and the Medicine Men chanted, the brave-to-be danced, leaning back until he had broken the flesh of one of his breasts. If this was accomplished without the poor fellow succumbing to the pain, he was admitted to the tribe as a full fledged brave."<sup>3</sup>

When the meat on the spit was cooked, the Chief passed it to Charles Edward saying, "This fine white dog meat." The Millers accepted the food and then the Chief and Charlie sat in the center of the circle with tribal members passing the peace pipe from one to the other. Charlie was presented with a headdress and some tokens of friendship and taken into the tribe as a Blood Brother.<sup>4</sup>

Helen did not attend any school until she was eleven years. Her mother had obtained a governess for her children and her oldest sister, Rose, taught Helen and Ruby. Helen finally was able to attend school and by taking a Province Examination she was passed on to one grade above her level. There was only one other girl ahead of her. Gerald drove them to school in a buckboard wagon for one year and the following year Helen drove herself, her sister, Ruby, and her sister-in-law-to-be, Marguerite "Queenie" Pearson, who was later to

marry Bernard. The school was a three-mile drive which they drove until the weather registered 30 degrees below zero (-3 Celsius). Their hands became so cold they could not take the bridle off the horse and they would put the horse in the school stable until noon when they could take the bridle off and give the horse some oats. The school had hay for the horses. The school was heated by only a large "potbellied" stove which one of the men near the school would fire up early in the morning. If it became colder, one of the farm hands would drive them, or the horse was put in the livery stable. When Helen was eighteen years, she attended dances and balls with a chaperone and wore an evening dress. The boys wore white gloves and some had cut-away long coats. The orchestra consisted of mostly a piano and violin and no smoking or drinking was allowed. According to Helen, many of the dancers wore evening dress. The commercial travellers said that the ladies of Birtle were the best-dressed, best looking and best dancers west of Portage la Prairie!

Benjamin Miller died in 1901. William died in 1904, from a ruptured appendix, after having been a very well liked person and a great help to the family. He never married. "Rose Vale" was sold and Fanny, Helen and Ruby lived in Birtle for another four years, returned to England for two years, and then settled in Winnipeg. In 1913, they moved to Hollywood, California, where Mrs. Miller died in 1927 and Helen became a church secretary. Helen died in the Episcopal Home For the Aged in Alhambra, California, in 1983. Ruby worked in Hollywood for Lasky Studio, in charge of girls who typed scripts for well-known movie stars. She later worked for the YWCA and as secretary for St. Stephen's Church in Hollywood. She passed away in 1953.

Frederick Charles became an ordained minister in the Anglican Church. He married Marion Winona Saunders in 1920. She died in 1938. They did not have any children. The Reverend Frederick Charles had a church near San Francisco until he passed away in 1938.

Bernard stayed at "Rose Vale" until age twenty. Bernard did not like farming. He took a business course in Winnipeg and then had various jobs in Calgary, Brandon and Minnedosa. He returned home when his step-brother, William, died in 1904. After the farm was sold he worked for a real estate firm in Winnipeg and for the Codwell Wholesale Grocery. Later he opened an office with a man named Downing which became Downing-Miller Real Estate. Moving to Regina he engaged in real estate and insurance. During World War II he was an Inspector with the War-Time Prices Control Board in Vancouver. He retired in 1958.

There were many young English Miller relatives in the area who had followed Benjamin to Canada and would gather at Ben's home for holiday celebrations. Namely, his nephews, Al Swainson and Harry Swainson, and two brothers, George Ernest Miller and Charles Edward Miller, sons of William Charles Miller (Ben's brother) who owned the shipping company in Liverpool. Harry, George and Charles chose not to stay in Canada, Harry emigrating to New Zealand, George to Assam, India, as manager for his brother, Henry, who was the Superintendent of the Jorhut Tea Plantation, and Charles, to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to join his wife's Uncle Neville Bayley in the hotel business. George John Huntley Malcolm (1865-1930), son of his sister Emily Miller Malcolm, also settled in Manitoba near his uncle in the Birtle area.

#### Anne's Notes:

The biographical sketch of the Benjamin Miller family was written by Hope Healy Koontz, granddaughter of Benjamin's nephew, Charles Edward Miller, and great granddaughter of Benjamin's brother, William Charles Miller. Hope did much research on the Miller family during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s and this sketch was probably written up in the 1990s. Hope wrote and published a book on the Swainson family but never got to do one on the Miller family. Her research materials were left to me, Anne Field, and this sketch was in one of the boxes with Miller research findings.

Benjamin and his first wife, Charlotte Taylor, had two sons, Admiral Francis Spurstow Miller, 1863-1954, and William Joseph Miller, 1864-1904. The older son, Francis, served in the Royal Navy and did not move with the family to Canada. Charlotte was buried in Liverpool Cemetery, also known as Anfield Cemetery. Also buried there were two of Benjamin's brothers: Rev. Joseph Dundas Miller and William Charles Miller.

The "Rolling Polly" was the SS *Polynesian*, a ship of the Allan Line, later refitted and renamed the *Laurentian*. She made her first voyage in 1872 and sailors said she would "roll on wet grass," thus the nickname, *Rolling Poly*.

Dorothy Miller, twin of Bernard West Miller, died at the age of two and a half in this family history. Other sources note that she lived two and a half months. No death record has been found.

Frederick Charles Miller, who was a toddler when the family left Liverpool for the Canadian Prairie, married Marion Winona Saunders in 1920. Marion's name in family papers is *Marion Winona*, but other sources suggest *Menona* as her middle name. See: *A View From the Birdtail: A History of the Municipality of Birtle, the Town of Birtle and the Villages of Foxwarren and Solsgirth, 1878-1974*, by Marion W. Abra. She is listed as Marion M. Miller on the 1930 U.S. Census. Frederick and Marion both died in 1938, Marion in Contra Costa County in California. She was buried in Cypress Lawn Cemetery in Colma. No record has yet been found of Frederick's death or burial.

Al and Harry Swainson are listed as nephews above, but whose children they were is uncertain. Benjamin's mother, Lucy Swainson, had a brother John who had a son named Alfred. This may be the Al Swainson referred to, but where Harry fits in is uncertain.

George Ernest Miller, who went to Assam, India, to run a tea plantation, never married.

#### Endnotes:

1. Abra, Marion W., editor. *A View of the Birdtail: A History of the Municipality of Birtle, the Town of Birtle and the Villages of Foxwarren and Solsgirth, 1878-1974*, History Committee of the Municipality of Birtle, 1974.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Niemeyer, Constance Gertrude Baker. *From Stories My Mother Told Me*. Told to her by her mother, Constance Emily Miller Baker, daughter of Charles Edward Miller.

#### Other Sources:

Swainson, J.L., *Our Ancestors Arrive in Manitoba*, printed by De Montfort Press, Winnipeg, Canada, 1957.  
Wilson, E.J., *Reprints of Earlier Writings*, undated. Wilson edited the Birtle Eye-Witness from its inception in 1891-1943.