

## LOVING IT IN THE BUSH, FRED BIDGOOD AND TILLIE LINGSTRUM

In 1852 Susanna Moodie authored an account of the trials and tribulations of frontier life in Ontario. Whether Tillie Lingstrum of Westmeath read “Roughing It In The Bush” is unknown but she took a similar path when she married a man who loved the woods.



When Tillie met Fred Bidgood she was a slim teenager with long, brown hair, cornflower blue eyes, and a turned-up nose. He was eight years older with the tanned, lean frame of an outdoorsman. Fred had already seen something of the world since arriving in Canada from Bristol, England. Tillie, on the other hand, was the daughter of protective parents. William and Hannah Lingstrum lost one son on their voyage from Sweden and another in the mighty Ottawa River in the spring of 1895. They



cherished their remaining children: five daughters and a son.

Nevertheless, Fred won both Tillie’s heart and her parents’ approval and the young couple wed September 17, 1902. The fact that they did not marry in St. Mary’s Anglican Church, built just three years earlier by the bride’s father who was a stone mason and member of the congregation, suggests that the approval may have had limitations.

Fred described his occupation as “cowboy” on the marriage license. Perhaps he read accounts of the Wild West as a boy and fancied himself in that role, or more likely, he came to the Westmeath area as a cattle drover. Back then, successors of the Frasers, Westmeath Township’s premier lumber barons, were still involved in lumbering ventures in western Quebec. Cattle on hoof were driven down (today’s) River Road to Spotwood’s Ferry, and once across the river, out to the far-flung lumbering camps.

However, cattle were to play no part in Fred and Tillie’s future. The newlyweds embarked on a career of prospecting. The Klondike gold rush is a famous part of Canadian history, but many men also chased the golden dream in the wilds of Ontario and Quebec. Fred Bidgood looked for gold in quartz veins. He found fame and fortune, and like many others, squandered as much as he found. What he never lost was his love of life in the bush.

Tillie’s role as a wife and mother was circumscribed by the mores of a century ago. In the early years, she spent time in bush camps, living out of tents, shacks, and cabins. She yearned for female companionship and maintained a regular correspondence with her mother and sisters in Westmeath. When the first two of her children, Blanche and Nelson, reached school age, they were sent back to her birthplace. These school days, and many summer vacations thereafter, lead to a lifelong attachment for the Bidgood youngsters with Westmeath.



As more children were born, Tillie left her life in the bush and took up residence in Haileybury. Letters back to her kin indicate that her separation from her husband was cause for worry. For example, on June 3, 1909, she wrote, "I am anxious about Fred. He was to be here on Tuesday but no tidings."

Tillie's own safety and that of her children was jeopardized by the Great Fire of October 4, 1922. Strong winds swept flames through the forests around Haileybury and left 3,500

people homeless. A local history of the event describes Mrs. Bidgood, her children, and their neighbours as spending a traumatic night in the waters of Lake Timiskaming while the town burnt before them.

Apart from the fire, life was good for Tillie and Fred and their family of eight children. Photographs show they entertained guests, provided their children with nutritious food such as grapefruit, and afforded indulgences like store-bought dolls and sleds. Their home's Persian carpets, wicker lawn furniture, and perennial borders reflected their new found wealth. All of this was shattered on September 22, 1926.

The story of Tillie's death has been passed down through the generations as a parable about the pitfalls of vanity. According to family lore, Fred gave Tillie a luxurious chinchilla coat. One day she got caught in a downpour, turned the coat over her arm, and walked home. Soon afterwards she fell ill with pneumonia, fought for her life without the benefit of today's life-saving antibiotics, and lost. Fred was in a northern mining district and returned for her funeral. He had to explain to his children, including the youngest four-year old twins called Stanley and Audrey, that their loving mother was gone.

Tillie's family in Westmeath was devastated by the news of her untimely death. They filed away her letters and postcards as keepsakes and put her family photographs in an album. Although she died over a hundred years ago, she has remained a known relative to her Westmeath connections.

Tillie and Fred didn't get to grow old together. Instead, their golden years were spent amongst stands of pine and spruce, with the sounds of their children playing hide-and-seek in giant ferns mingling with the chink of a rock hammer.

Tillie Lingstrum Bidgood was my great aunt.

*By Patti Desjardins*

