

The Queen Is Coming to Tea!

By Joyce Wells

The letter from Dad in faraway Saskatchewan arrived with my breakfast tea that morning in March 1959. Mother and I had arrived in London at the end of a trip around the world, and I planned to work there for a year.

As I slit the envelope I remembered Dad's earlier letters about government officials coming to inspect our farm. The Queen wanted to see a Saskatchewan wheat-and-livestock farm, and ours filled the bill. But so did several others. I could hardly believe the news. On July 22 the Queen was actually coming to our house for tea!

Mom caught the next boat home. And ten days before the royal visit, having begged two weeks leave from my employers, I flew to Regina. My suitcase held one special dress and a china tea-service. Mother had spotted the set with its golden-wheat design in Oxford Street, but had put such luxury out of her head. Back home, preparing for the blessed day, she knew she *must* have it for the Queen.

At the airport my 21-year-old brother, Stan, was excited enough, but my eight-year-old brother, Ken, was beside himself. He babbled all the way home. As we turned into our lane, pride welled up inside me. The Wells' farm did not suffer by comparison with the misty green of England. This was home and all that was dear. Grandpa had built well when he arrived in 1906 to settle on land where "the dirt stuck together when you spat in it" – the unscientific but practical method of finding clay-based soil that would hold moisture.

The 320 acres he first found had grown into the farm I came home to this day. My grandmother Effie had watered young trees from the experimental station with countless hand-carried buckets, and now a windbreak of poplars, elms and spruce protected the building and gardens. Lilacs enclosed the garden, delphiniums stood tall in their variegated blues, and the Hansa bush roses and late peonies indulged themselves in satin luxury. The perennial garden was my mother's signature upon her father's farm.

"It all looks the same, Mom," I said, sitting down in the sunny kitchen, "except I can't see a single corner that needs cleaning."

"I should hope not! I even cleaned the attic. I don't want a single speck of dust on my mind come the twenty-second. It's not just for me, it's for every farm woman in Saskatchewan."

How to Behave. Dad felt the responsibility too; the same kind of patriotic call that had compelled him to join the Army in World War II. As for the countryside around us, it was abuzz with rumour: The Wellses had been paid vast sums by the government to let their farm be used; the Wellses had paid the *government* vast sums.

While the rumours whirled like dust devils, Dad and Stan worked steadily. The rusty barbed wire and old machinery parts were hauled to the dump. The barn was whitewashed. Weeds were dug out, grass mowed down.

The government protocol officers had instructed that there be no major face-lift of our property – or ourselves. We were not to dress formally. We should first address the Queen as "Your Majesty"; after that we could call her "Ma'am." On first meeting, Prince Philip was to be called "Your Royal Highness," and subsequently "Sir." Beyond that, we should behave "as if neighbours were dropping in."

Well, not *quite*. Mother insisted that water for the tea be supplied from the royal train lest our alkaline well water play havoc with the royal stomachs. A protocol officer had said not to worry about feeding the press. But Mom, a

rural schoolteacher, gave him the look she reserved for naughty pupils and ruled that reporters should have coffee, 100 box lunches and picnic tables.

Dick Beamish, a reporter for *The Family Herald*, arrived on July 21 to interview our family. Finding us in a flurry of last-minute chores, he offered to help. Moments later, clippers in hand, Beamish was on one side of our long, tough caragana hedge – the first thing the visitors would see – and I was on the other. All afternoon, arms aching, we kept at it. The hedge was finished by supper, and so were Beamish and I.

What to serve? "Nothing sticky!" a protocol officer warned. "She probably won't eat anything anyway." But who ever heard of a tea break on a farm without cookies and cake?

"Your Job, Ken!" Our neighbours couldn't meet the Queen, but Mom resolved their children would play a part. So the local 4-H Homecraft girls took on the baking. Cookies: oatmeal-walnut, raisin-spice and icebox. Fruit bread: date-nut loaf, cherry slice and lemon pound cake, sliced and spread with freshly churned butter. The senior 4-H girls would be waitresses; the boys would display homegrown produce and livestock in the barnyard.

At last it was July 22 – weather fit for a queen with sunshine and, of course, a Prairie wind. We had worked four months for this day – and were still working. I was on my knees rewaxing the kitchen floor when two immaculate,



Queen Elizabeth saying goodbye to the Wells Family

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red-clad Mounties loomed over me. They were here, they explained, for a final check.

“We need a family member to accompany us,” one of them said courteously.

“Impossible,” Mom said. “We’re busy.” And she seized the school bell that summoned little Ken from the far corners of the farmyard.

“Take these officers on inspection,” she ordered. “Show them *anywhere* someone could be hiding with a gun. This is *your* job, Ken!”

“Sure, Mom.” Ken was wide-eyed with self-importance. The Mounties were in for the inspection of their lives.

Through the raspberry patch, not around it, scrambling up into trees in gleaming RCMP boots meant for stirrups, not climbing.

“The woodpile!” shouted Ken. “Enemies might be hiding in the woodpile!” Down on their stomachs they went, inching their way through tunnels in the woodpile cleverly designed for spies and saboteurs, not to mention small boys. Afterwards the Mounties thanked Ken with thin smiles and gratefully withdrew.

We checked our watches. Everyone who qualified as “family” was ready: Grandpa and Grandma, Aunt Iva and Uncle Ralph, numerous cousins. Suddenly the cry went up: “They’re coming!” Scarcely breathing, we waited in the lane. Then the motorcade was pulling in and the Queen was being helped out of the car and introduced to Mom and Dad. She wore an olive-green silk dress with black polka dots and a close-fitting green straw hat. As host, Dad – tall and tanned in new slacks and open-neck shirt – introduced his family. As I felt the firm, brief pressure of her small gloved hand, I knew that Queen Elizabeth was real! She was smiling at me, and speaking, and somehow managing to put me at ease in my own home.

Moving smoothly down the line, she paused as cousin June, age six, performed her long-rehearsed curtsy. Prince Philip, debonair and smiling, stopped to chat with each of us. Then Dad, motioning down the lane, said to the royal party, “This way, folks.” A photographer caught his outstretched arm at an angle that make it look as though Dad had his arm around the

Queen’s waist. A reporter heard the word “folks.” The next day photos and captions proclaimed, “Folksy farmer slips arm around Elizabeth!”

Ceylon Preferred. As we trooped down the lane, Prince Philip glanced with annoyance at the press tramping through our potatoes and corn. “That lot aren’t doing your garden any good!” he told Mother. No harm done, she assured him. At that point, she would have tolerated a herd of buffalo.

In the dairy barn, the Prince was intrigued by our automated milking and watering systems. “Treating the old girls a bit fancy, aren’t you?” he said to Dad.

“A constant water supply increases yield,” Dad explained. “And without piped-in water, I’d spend all winter chopping holes in the ice.” The Queen turned to my grandfather.

“Tell me what it was like when you first came here, Mr. Thomas.” And Grandpa told of how he’d ploughed the empty rolling grassland; of how he and Grandmother at first lived in nearby Tuxford, where he did carpentry in order to save money to build a two-room shack.

Tea time was near. Mother approached the lady-in-waiting: Would Her Majesty prefer China tea or Ceylon black? Back came the word: The Queen liked Ceylon. Ken raced the message to the kitchen like a courier carrying a state secret. As we strolled towards the house, Prince Philip fired knowledgeable farming questions at Dad.

The Queen was more interested in domestic details. She was surprised that we produced almost all our own food, and even more surprised that a very large amount of land seemed to support a very small number of people. But we were raising grain to feed thousands, Mother said.

Indoors, our variety of large and small electrical appliances, commonplace in most Canadian kitchens, caught the royal eyes. As for our 20-cubic-foot deep freezer: “Look at the *size* of it, Philip!” In the living room, Mother asked if the Queen would prefer her tea in the parlour or on the lawn.

“What have you prepared?” the Queen asked.

“We’ve made plans for either,” Mother assured her.

“It looks very pleasant right here,” said Her Majesty, settling into an

upholstered armchair that would ever after be known as The Queen’s Chair.

Mother drew the curtains, closing out prying eyes and camera lenses, and the Queen relaxed. Prince Philip and Dad joined them, still talking about farming. In the adjoining room Stan and I had tea with the lady-in-waiting and the equerry, who were at all times within the Queen’s line of vision. Grandmother presided over a garden party for the rest of the royal group.

While Mom, with obvious delight, poured from her golden-wheat teapot – and with equal pleasure watched the Queen actually *eat* an oatmeal cookie – she and her royal guest chatted like any two mothers.

“I do miss the children when we are on a long tour like this,” Queen Elizabeth said, sounding homesick. “We phone them every day, and that helps. Anne is a real little morale booster.”

A prearranged nod from Mom brought Stan and me in with the family guest book. I handed it to Prince Philip who, without pausing in his conversation, passed it to the Queen. She signed and passed it back. He waved it about as he kept on talking.

“I believe the Wellses would like you to sign that, Philip,” came the wifely reminder.

“Oh, of course, of course!” And he signed in a generous hand.

The royal couple twice brushed aside hints from the equerry that it was time to go. They seemed to relish the informality. At the third reminder they rose to leave. The Queen thanked us for our hospitality. Unexpectedly, Mom found herself speechless. The Prince saved the day by discovering he’d left his hat in the kitchen. Before any of us could fetch it, he was pushing through the swinging door himself, giving the 4-H waitresses the thrill of their young lives.

With a flash of the Queen’s special smile and wave, they were gone. For Grandpa the day was the culmination of his life. “I never thought, when I turned the first sod, that our reigning monarch would someday visit my farm,” he mused. For the rest of us it was a treasured memory to be relived again and again.

And to this day an unwashed porcelain cup with a trace of faded lipstick on the rim is enshrined in a glass chest in Mother’s china cabinet – our lasting memento of the day the Queen came to tea.

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