The Mitchell Clan* *Part One: Fred & Lizzie*

Nancy McMinn

It was a fine day in mid-August. The year was 1874. Wedding bells rang out at St.Paul's Church in Bury, a town not far from Manchester in the north of England, for twenty-four year old Frederick Shaw Mitchell and twenty-two year old Sarah Elizabeth Crossland, as they walked back down the aisle as man and wife. The wedding was an elaborate one. The wedding breakfast ran to eight courses and included oysters, salmon, lamb cutlets with green peas, tongue, chicken, turkey forcemeat, pigeon and mushroom pie, game pie with truffles, capons, grouse, jellies, dessert creams, puddings, cheesecakes, fine pastries, trifle, sweet soufflé, fresh fruits and sorbets.

photo courtesy Nadeane Hill

Fred & Lizzie, about the time of their marriage

As was the custom in those parts at that time, Fred and Lizzie embarked on a walking honeymoon, covering as much as twenty two miles a day! During his boyhood, Fred had spent many hours rambling among the neighbouring woods and hills where he became an avid birdwatcher. Lancashire, as well as nearby Yorkshire and Derbyshire abounded in beautiful scenery, alive with birds and wildflowers, were he and his bride could walk, and all within easy reach of the area where they were to live.

Fred was the son of John Mitchell, a successful industrialist whose own life mirrored the evolution of the Industrial Revolution. John Mitchell's father had been an unsuccessful farmer, so at the age of ten, John had become a hand weaver. By the time he was thirty-one, he was part owner of a spindle and roller factory. At thirty-nine he was a manufacturer of cotton velvet as well, and by the following year sole owner of the spindle and roller works, for which he obtained a large contract for armament parts to be used in the Crimean War. He was probably the first in the country to forge such parts by machine, rather than by hand. Later he took his sons into the family firm. Like many prominent industrialists of the time, he also held political positions and, during much of his later life, sat on the Clitheroe town council as alderman, mayor, or acting mayor.

At the time of their marriage, thoughts of homesteading in the wilds of Western Canada were far from Fred and Lizzie's minds. Their future was firmly set. Fred was a partner in the firm of John Mitchell & Sons, and manager of the family owned Primrose Paper Mill, which was situated on a tributary of the Ribble River near the town of Clitheroe in Lancashire. A few years after their marriage, Fred and Lizzie moved into "Hornshaws", the magnificent stone mansion which Lizzie's father, Robert Crossland, had built for them. They were raising a family. Fred was also working on his "magnus opus", *The Birds of Lancashire*, the first ornithology of the county. When it was published in 1884, the book was enthusiastically praised by the natural history publications of the time—Ibis, Field, Nature, and the Zoologist.

But fate had other plans for these two and their growing family. Before the advent of steam, water power was the force which drove the Industrial Revolution, and factories of many kinds sprang up alongside the streams and rivers such as the Ribble, which which drained the rugged topography of the surrounding areas. Print works, bleach and dye works, tanneries, cotton mills, paper works, as well as breweries and slaughterhouses, all took water to run their machines or to use in the manufacturing process, then channelled the waste water back into the streams. Efforts were made in various ways—settling ponds, fine screens, etc.—to reduce the refuse finding its way into the waterways. Nevertheless, once lively brooks and rivers became turbid and foul, and ultimately uninhabitable by fish and the organisms on which they fed. To make matters worse, these streams often served as sewers for towns like Clitheroe, which lay along their banks.

The Ribble River had been a famous fishing stream, one of the finest salmon rivers in the United Kingdom. Wealthy individuals owned the fishing rights along particular sections of the river. In 1880, Mr. Ralph John Aspinall, high sheriff of Lancashire and owner of large estates along the Ribble, and Mr.Hick, his wealthy tenant, took the Mitchells to court for allegedly polluting the river. They claimed that due to noxious effluent from the Primrose Mill, fish, especially salmon and trout, were prevented from reaching Mr. Aspinall's stretch of the river, so that the most valuable fishing rights in all of England, which he owned, had been destroyed, and that the Aspinall Arms, formerly a favourite inn among anglers, no longer flourished, because the fish were gone. They claimed that Mr.Hick's enjoyment of his residence was so seriously interfered with by the odour, that if he wished to view the Ribble in front of his house, he must go armed with a bottle of cologne! Both plaintiffs and defendants brought a host of

witnesses—game keepers, fishermen and long time anglers, a licensed victualler, water bailiffs, land agents, surveyors and farmers, a fishing tackle manufacturer, industrial mill owners, print workers and a bleach worker, a physician, a surgeon, a medical inspector, chemists, and a professor of science and public analyst from the University of London. Their testimony reads like an excerpt from a kaleidoscopic Dickens novel—often conflicting, now rambling, now to the point, sometimes sophisticated, at other times rustic. The case was given uncommon prominence. The trial was held in the Court of Chancery in London, and was presided over by the vice-chancellor of England himself.

photo courtesy Nadene Hill

Mitchells' Primrose Mill at Clitheroe

The defendants argued that there had been many other polluters on the Ribble's tributaries for a long time, including the town of Clitheroe, and that tPrimrose Mill was by no means the sole cause of the trouble. In fact they had taken every measure known, to reduce the pollutants from their mill, including expensive evaporators which had been installed only a few years earlier. They asked for more time to improve their anti-pollution technology.

It was to no avail. Whether Primrose Mill was truly the only polluter of substance would be hard to say. But on the face of it the defendants never seem to have had a chance. Undoubtedly pollution was widespread in the streams of the Industrial North, and often taken as a necessary evil, given the benefits of industrialization. But it was the Mitchells' misfortune to interfere with the rights and comforts of highly placed individuals. Sporting rights of the upper classes were next to sacred. Had the effluent from the mill inconvenienced only ordinary people, who knows what the outcome might have been. Or whether there would have been a trial at all. The events at Clitheroe occurred at a time when the rights and privileges of wealthy and prominent individuals were assigned undue value. Today we have moved a step beyond those times. We still live with unacceptable industrial pollution and degradation, but it is generally human *society's* rights which are deemed most important. Yet we still have some distance to go before the usefulness of nature to human beings takes a back seat to the intrinsic value of all life.

At any rate, the judge found against the Mitchells. An injunction was ordered against the defendants, to cease turning pollutants into the stream, and they were ordered to pay all costs of the court case. It spelled financial ruin.

Fred and Lizzie must have been ready to turn their backs on those difficult times, and start a new life. The Canadian Pacific Railway was opening up the Canadian west. The government was encouraging settlement, and land was cheap. Advertisements appeared in many British newspapers. So in the summer of 1891 the family embarked for Canada. Hubert, the eldest son, spent his eleventh birthday, August 19, passing through Winnipeg on their way across the prairies towards Edmonton. On August 24, decorated with flags and bunting, and carrying railway and civic dignitaries, the inaugural train on the new line between Calgary and Edmonton reached its terminus on the south side of the North Saskatchewan River. It's a good bet that also on board was the Mitchell family: Fred, Lizzie, Jesse, Sybil, Hubert, Geoffrey and Julian.

The family had suffered a financial disaster. However it was not money but strong hearts and adventurous spirits that were the stuff of good pioneers. The Mitchells arrived just ahead of thedramatic influx of settlers who poured into the

photo courtesy Nadene Hill

The homestead at St. Albert
left to right: Geoffrey, Lizzie, Hubert, Jesse, Sybil, Fred, & Julian

prairies after 1896 as a result of the development of early maturing varieties of hard spring wheat, and the exhaustion of good available land in the American West. They acquired a section of land at St. Albert, outside Edmonton, near the historic Oblate mission where seven hundred Métis and Indians had taken refuge during a devastating smallpox epidemic in 1870. There they settled into a sod-roofed log cabin, to face the challenges of early prairie farming. Like many others before and after them, their new life was a far cry from the stately home and the life they'd left behind in Clitheroe.

photo courtesy Nadene Hill

"Hornshaws"—English industrialist's version

But Fred could not shake his background. He was known as "The Dude", and for his fastidious habit of washing and ironing the grain sacks before sending them back to the mill.

At the homestead near St. Albert, the family grew to adulthood. Perhaps Fred and Lizzie would have remained at St. Albert for the rest of their lives if Sybil, their second daughter, had not become the wife of Frank Gregory, an English immigrant who had settled in the Highlands. After their wedding in Vancouver in April, 1902, Frank brought his bride back to his homestead at Fizzle Lake. A few months earlier, Sybil's sister, Jesse, had also been married. Her first job was as a housemaid at "Bonniebrook", the Bernard ranch near (now part of) Calgary. She had met young George Bernard on his return from travels in B.C. and the Klondike. They were married in Vancouver, in January, 1902.

photo courtesy Nadene Hill

"Hornshaws"—Highland settler's version

The Highlands was sparsely populated in those days, and perhaps young Sybil Gregory was lonely and missed the sister she'd grown up with in Alberta. Perhaps their parents were simply following family tradition, hearkening back to the time when Lizzie's father had provided Fred and his young wife with the imposing home they called "Hornshaws". Whatever the reason, in 1902 Frederick Shaw Mitchell purchased Sections 19 and 20 in the Highland Land District, property which included a small body of water that is named after the family. Early in 1903 the young Bernard family, now including two month old Eric, moved into the house that still sits on a rocky knoll just north of the junction of what are now Millstream Lake and Munn Roads.

There they lived for the next five years. They had a second child, Dorothy. The two families—Gregory and Bernard — were very close, visiting back and forth on an almost daily basis, as they helped one another with the practical and personal challenges that filled pioneering life. With virtually no support from outside—no social services, little money to pay for food, fuel, transportation or professional aid even were it available—they were on their own. And the comfort and sense of security from living close to an extended family must have been a saving grace for those who were lucky enough to experience it. Soon after arriving in the Highlands, the Bernards pre-empted 160 acres at Fork Lake. George Bernard built a sturdy log homestead, "Stoneleigh", and about 1906 or 1907, they moved even closer to the Gregorys' home at "Lakelands" just across the road at Fizzle Lake.

Meanwhile, back on their Alberta homestead, life was changing for the Mitchell family. In 1906, Geoffrey, the second son, had died at the age of twenty-four. Both Hubert and Julian were grown men. In 1908 Hubert married Minnie Fielders. They would move to Lloydminster to farm and raise a large family. There was little to keep Fred and Lizzie at St. Albert any longer. In the far away Highlands were their two daughters, several grandchildren, and the property they'd purchased in 1902. So about 1908 they sold the homestead,

packed up their belongings, headed for the west coast, and took up residence at the little house on the rock.

Moving from the old life in England, first to homestead at St. Albert, and now to the Highlands, the Mitchell family had experienced a sea-change in lifestyle. Their home also underwent a metamorphosis. They named their Highland home "Hornshaws", after the mansion at Clitheroe, and settled down to become part of the developing Highland community.

By 1912 Fred was postmaster for the post settlement known as "Millstream". He took over from Elizabeth, Caleb Pike's daughter-in-law, who ran the post office from the Pike homestead. In those days, post offices in scattered rural areas were located in the home of the postmaster or postmistress, wherever that happened to be. Look carefully at the cover illustration, and you will see the small postal slot in the outside wall of the house, near a window. In Elizabeth Pike's day, and likely in Fred Mitchell's as well, a hollow tree, probably near the present junction of Millstream and Millstream Lake Roads, served as a convenient sub-postoffice where Highlanders posted their letters and picked up their mail.

Near the house at "Hornshaws" was a small, low log cabin which presumably was the first habitation on the property. George and Jesse had fixed it up and rented it occasionally to fishermen or hunters. Up to that time, when settlers needed to purchase supplies, they had to drive with horse and buggy the long day's trip to Victoria and back, often starting before dawn. Or they could send an order by mail, have their goods shipped out by rail, and meet the train in Langford. Fred Mitchell, still the entrepreneur from Clitheroe, set up the cabin as a storehouse, hauled in sacks of salt, sugar, flour, and other commodities, and became the first ,and to this day, the only grocer and general storekeeper the Highlands has ever known. As time went on he took on other responsibilities. In 1924 he became a justice of the peace and was appointed official Provincial game warden for the area. He continued to run the grocery business and remained active in all of his public offices until his death in mid-February, 1929. After Fred died, Lizzie remained in the Highlands, but went to live with the Gregorys at Fizzle Lake. She died in 1937 at the age of eighty-seven.

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Mrs. Regina Schaerer

as told to Thelma Fayle

Highlander: I hear that you've done many wonderful things. I don't know where to ask you to begin.

Mrs. Schaerer: Well what are you interested in?

Highlander: Tell me where you are from and when you came to Canada..

Mrs. Schaerer: We came in the 60's to Fort St. John because when I was a girl of 14 in Switzerland I saw some slides from Fort St. John that showed red cows. It was a stupid reason but we were young and fell in love and we wanted to come to Canada. So we picked Fort St. John because of those red cows. At that time Switzerland was still a little bit pedigree conscious and my family didn't dislike Fritzy, but he was a farm boy and they thought that was a big problem. So we ran away and got married in the minister's living room when we arrived in Fort St. John. Canadian English was so foreign to us that we could hardly understand a word and when the minister said "You may kiss the bride" we just stood there until he made some kissing movements with his lips. And then we knew we were married. We rented a sawmill cabin for $5 a month and went to work on a farm. We had no bed, just a little air-tight heater and some sawed off logs and 75 pounds of dried beans. That was it. We ate a lot of boiled beans and faced our first harsh Canadian winter. Luckily a neighbor told us about a cook's job at the sawmill, and I decided I wanted to be that cook. Of course, I had never cooked before, but I told them that I had. I knew I would figure out how to do the job. The boss told me to remember that sawmill guys would be happy if I just cooked a lot of spuds.

So Fritzy and I decided to take the job and load up on spuds. I knew that cabbage was cabbage, and potatoes were potatoes but I didn't really know what spuds were. So when I saw turnips and didn't recognize them, I thought they must be spuds. And those poor guys. For two weeks they got huge bowls of turnips for breakfast, for lunch, and for dinner. Lots of them. They were mashed, sliced, diced, with pepper, with butter...

Highlander: They probably thought it was a Swiss dish.

Mrs. Schaerer: Well I'll tell you after two weeks they hated me. And there was no meat because it was a poor camp. So one day one of the guys came in and said he had shot a moose. I did not go out to see it because I thought he meant it was a mouse —that's the way we say it in Switzerland. I thought these Canadians were primitive to be catching and eating mice and I didn't look forward to cooking it.

But when I was getting the stove ready to cook we put some high-test in to get the flame going and a big fire started. Fritzy and I were pitch black with burnt hair and the big boss came in and that turned out to be the end of my cooking career. They couldn't get us out of that camp fast enough.

We couldn't find work because of our language skills and we just got colder and colder in our little place and the ice got thicker inside of the windows and the snow blew in under the door. You see that was before the dam was built and it was a lot colder then.

A few days after our wood ran out, a neighbour came over to check on us since he couldn't see any smoke. I was bundled up in my parka and I was pregnant and hadn't eaten for a few days. This neighbour got the doctor and brought us some wood and food.

They were wonderful people. Things really got better then. We had a beautiful little boy Fedija and Fritzy found a job. He was so happy. And we bought a little log shack out in the bush for $20.

At four months my son got very sick. I wrapped him up in a quilt and walked into town. When I got there they told me I was just a worried mother and gave me a prescription and sent me home. It was terrible weather—a blizzardy night just like a cow's stomach, and I walked home with him in my arms.

After two days he was even sicker and at 4:30 in the morning I had to walk back to town because our car battery had burst from the cold. Do you have children?

Highlander: No I don't.

Mrs. Schaerer: Oh well then you don't know that children never have the decency to get sick at convenient times. It is always the middle of the night. Anyway he died that night on the Alaska Highway. So it wasn't always fun in those days.

Highlander: You had a hard time.

Mrs. Schaerer: Now that I think of it, it was hilarious how we tried to survive, but we had our share of hard times. Another son was sick as well. He was born with no abdominal wall. They told me he wouldn't live and it was only a matter of days because he had a rare genetic deformity called Eagle Syndrome. But three months later he was still alive and one day I walked into town to take him to the hospital. And you know, we were very shy and intimidated because when you are a foreigner you don't have a lot of courage. In Switzerland you don't ask for help because if you work hard you can always make your way. But things were different for us in Canada.

When I got to the hospital the nurse bandaged him up and I knew he was uncomfortable. When she told me he would never walk, I pulled up my

courage and took him back home. I decided I didn't want my son to die in that place.

At one point he was very sick in hospital from an infection and they did not expect him to live. I went to see him and they wouldn't let me in because it was past visiting hours. You know we had to be very rigid about the visiting hours with dying children for some ridiculous reason. This was the reason I later joined the Hospital Board committee to have the visiting hours changed.

One night I looked at my boy and he couldn't even use his arms properly and I said to Fritzy, "this boy is going to walk." I put corsets on him and would make really delicious food that smelled good and I would put it on the floor in front of him and he would scream and I would cry, and it was all such a drama. But in time his arms got really strong and on his second birthday he stood up and walked backwards. He was the feistiest little kid. He would skate and ski. Just think about how much stomach muscle and balance those things take. And he had no stomach muscle. Oh yes he is just amazing. He is 33 now and married and in his last year of architecture.

The third of my seven children was also sick with cancer and with every experience I became more confident and gutsy in dealing with doctors and hospitals and children.

photo courtesy Regina Schaerer

Fritz & Regina Schaerer with daughter Saryta graduating at UVic in 1995

Out of the blue I had a phone call one day from a man who said he had my boy in his office. Francoise, who was 9 or 10 at the time, told the man that he heard on the radio that there were foster children in his office and he thought one might be a good older brother for him. So that was the start of our first new addition to the family. He was with us for two years and from then on any time social services had a difficult or unadoptable child, they would come to us. They brought a cute little girl to us who was about eight. She looked like a little ragamuffin that had fallen off the garbage truck and after a few minutes in the house she said to the social worker "Ya I like it here, I'll stay."

So I gave Tracy a bath and when Fritzy came home from work that night and all the kids ran up to him and gave Daddy a hug and a kiss, she joined right in. Fritzy was looking at me and mouthing "who's this?" while she was giving him a hug. So many of the kids came and then they never left. The social workers in Fort St. John were just wonderful, if there was a problem we discussed it with them as a family. A family of 13 kids!

We took all of the kids, 16 that summer, camping for two months in BC and Alberta. We got a big van and 24 sleeping bags since a couple of the kids were bed wetters, and a huge coffee pot and pan and then each one had their own plate and cutlery. We came to Vancouver Island and I couldn't believe those trees. I had never seen cedar trees in my life and I tried to describe them as "spruce trees with flat needles" and all of those flowers and bushes. They were something.

We decided it might be a good thing to come to this place for a new start for everybody, especially our new children. Their histories wouldn't be known here, and many of them had been with us for years by then and we would just be a big family. The social workers in Fort St. John gave us their blessing but cautioned us about the differences in a larger city.

Coming to Victoria was a mistake. Although our new neighbors, Gary Willner and his wife Donna were truly truly wonderful people. They saved our family from being ripped apart, and I will always be thankful to them. But so many people went out of their way to destroy us, all under the guise of saying they meant well. Few took the time or made the effort to come and get to know us. It reminded me of stories I had heard about pre-war Nazi time—how people would inform on each other with anonymity and without any accountability, and they could totally destroy lives. That was how I felt when people who didn't even know us, would report on our family. Until then we had always been complimented on our children. At one point, W5 did a feature story on our big family.

We didn't know about septic fields when we came here. We never had one in Fort St. John or in Switzerland and I guess there was something wrong with ours and someone reported us to the health department. Well they came and told us that they would take our children away to protect them. They said they were worried about the kids. After that our car broke down and that gave them another reason to want to take our kids away. I began to feel terrorized and threatened and Fritzy ended up in the hospital with a bleeding ulcer. You see he is very quiet and the nicest, gentlest man and always a good hard-working father with lots of patience. We just didn't know what to do any more.

Well the health department gave us an ultimatum. We had to put in a new septic field or we would lose the children, so we just dug that whole field by hand. That was when Gary Willner came down in a station wagon and loaned it to us. He helped us out when we didn't have much money, he would fix our car and not charge us, and I will never forget him. When other people accused us of polluting the environment or of abusing our children or our dogs, Gary was so wonderful. Someone reported us to the SPCA and when they

came they told us not to worry, the only thing wrong was that maybe our dogs were a little too fat!

We felt that we had no more parental authority when children would come home and say that the social worker said this or that and it was contrary to our views. For example we didn't agree with the children going out after 10 o'clock at night. What would they need to do at that time? Pick daisies? I don't think so. No child who has parents who care is wandering out at that time.

You know I had seven girls and not one of them got pregnant. Sometimes they didn't like the rules but now, years later, they are grateful.

The poor kids got different messages from the social workers and their parents. A spanking has never traumatized anyone. But ripping a child out of a home can traumatize a child and the whole family for life.

Under the guise of 'protecting children' so many children are scarred for life. I think we all should be concerned about the lack of freedom parents have. Social workers have so much more freedom and they are often inexperienced people who do not understand the dynamics of a large family. How can anyone relate to family problems when they have no families and haven't lived through it?

One little fellow of mine had to write a journal in school of what he did on the weekend. He wrote that he had to scrub the floor and split wood all weekend. According to him, he had a hard life. Now please look around. This is not a big floor, and I had plenty of kids, bigger than this little one, to split wood. But that's how he saw it and that is how his teachers saw it.

We were invited to the Lieutenant Governor's home because six of our children received the Lieutenant Governor's Award and it was the first family where six children received that award. While we were there, a wedding party came through and one of my little fellow's teachers was in the wedding party. The next week in school when the boy wrote in his journal that he had to spend the whole weekend fencing the property, the teacher was actually apologetic to me. She knew then.

Our family was pulled apart in those years, but we have come together again. Sundays are still family day and the children are all grown and we enjoy each other. But the memories of the insults and the terrorizing are still bitter.

Highlander: And I'm sure many who have had to deal with this may not be as strong as you.

Mrs. Schaerer: They give up. I used to talk on the radio about society's responsibility to foster children. I wrote articles. I initiated the first foster parent's group in Fort St. John. I started that 'foster parents week'—awareness building. I love flapping my lips to make change. I did it because I felt foster parents took so much abuse. I would never encourage anyone to foster now. I know too well. You live with those children, you watch how they do, you see the sorrow in their hearts, you watch them bloom and you see them come out of it and talk to you about it, and you know what is good for them and you know what isn't. And the moment you say 'no' to something a social worker is proposing you are in trouble. A child will be taken away, and it will always be justified.

And you know they pay you for foster children. It is enough to clothe them and feed them well, really nothing more. Kids can be very rough on your things. Social workers are paid to help the children. Teachers are paid to help children. Physicians are paid. But foster parents who are with the child around the clock—"oh, they do it for the money". Why shouldn't they at least be compensated for their costs?

Highlander: Would you do it again, now that the kids have turned around and they are lovely adults?

Mrs. Schaerer: Never. Never, ever, ever. We only have one life and it has just about been destroyed by fostering children. It almost cost me my marriage. So many foster parents' and group home parents' marriages are broken.

I finally had to leave. I loved the children for all that they were, but I had to leave. When I was very young I had worked for the Red Cross in Katmandu and around that area. Fritzy said "Why don't you just go away and pick up your old work and see how you feel." He took care of home while I left. I wrote to one agency and told them it had been so long since I worked, but asked if they needed someone. Within a week I had the O.K. And once your name is in and you make a reputation it is not hard to get work with international agencies.

I chose to do things I was interested in. I went to Mali, Porkino Faso, Senegal, Mauritania, right across the Sahara. I set up feeding stations for children, and each one fed around 1,000 kids four times a day and I was in charge of assessing dietary needs for the convoys coming in from Ghana that brought the food. We looked at dietary deficiencies. There was a lot of blindness and edema.

In the feeding stations we only fed the children under five. The older children and their parents had rations which came from Ghana and were donated by US aid. I would go on the distribution networks and we would give the nomads their rations. You know in every feeding station we buried at least 40 children every night.

A few I remember. A father came in and was holding his screaming little boy. He said that was all that was left from nine children and four wives. And this little boy's bowel was sticking out this long. And it was full of maggots. The father just looked at me and said "Please help me." The doctor said that he would probably die because the mucous membranes dry up very fast and would get all brittly. I thought if he was going to die anyway, I may as well try. So I took the antibiotic ISA, and alcohol and a sewing machine needle and some camel hair. I wrapped up the bowel and cleaned off the maggots and the boy was screaming. He had no pain killer. And then I slowly pushed it back and told his father to sit here and hold him while I sewed with the sewing machine needle and the camel hair. Then I had to leave for three weeks.

When I returned the boy was doing well. It was a real success, but there were so many that weren't.

Highlander: Where did you get your energy to do so much with your life?

Mrs. Schaerer: I have had a wonderful husband, who was a good father. Of course, we have had our ups and downs. One thing I want most in life is for my kids to be happy in their lives. I don't want Einsteins or Oppenheimers, I just want them to be happy people. It so happens that some are very clever and ambitious and some are pretty laid back.

One good thing about going away and doing the kind of work I did, was that I knew I could make a difference there. And when I came home I felt better. But I continue to come and leave for assignments. My last international agency job was in Yugoslavia. Sometimes I go for weeks or just days, but sometimes months.

Highlander: Do you want to stay here in the future?

Mrs. Schaerer: This is our home. I absolutely love the Highlands. This is our little paradise.

Highlander: It's so beautiful just sitting in your kitchen and looking at all the bird houses in your beautiful rock garden.

Mrs. Schaerer: I carried all of those rocks in ice cream pails.

Highlander: Tell me how you got involved in palliative care.

Mrs. Schaerer: When I returned I did contract work with Social Services as a child care worker. I really enjoyed working with families as a whole. I could understand them. But one day I was in a meeting, listening to social workers talking about a family where the 15 year old son didn't communicate well with his father. Well, I thought, give me a 15 year old that communicates well with his father. Give me one. And I will say he is a saint. Mother Theresa reborn in a young boy's body. Do you know teenagers who communicate well?

You really have to feel for these parents, because I think that 99% of them try their very best. But just because parents are strict and have expectations, that is not reason enough to take a child away. It is a different story if there is physical abuse. Then they should leave.

So at this meeting I said to myself, "What the hell am I doing here? I don't even want to be here anymore. At that point I stood up and left the meeting and told them I wouldn't be back.

I continued to work for international agencies. I met a woman from one of the organizations I worked for, and she thought I would be good to work with one of the quick response teams in Victoria. That is how I started working in palliative care, and I really liked it. I mean I *really* liked it.

It is not very glamorous or high-paying, and you are never going to get a medal for it. You are basically a glorified housekeeper. Most of my patients are dying. They are on morphine, bed-ridden, and usually incontinent. I have gone into homes where there is total squalor. The carpet was so soaked in urine—they couldn't make it to the commode anymore. The fridge was full of rotten food. You couldn't tell the true colour of the nightie any more. Where the chesterfield was soaked because they couldn't get off of it.

And then I would work the whole night long. You clean and wash and scrub. You scrub the little patient and you make a clean bed. And then when the room is clean and the air is fresh and they are laying there saying they feel so good, it is rewarding. And then they will say, "I really like porridge with whipping cream." So you make that or chocolate pudding and they are so happy.

I simply keep them clean, make their food, and help them exercise. I love making those little old

photo by Don Benn

"So you make that or chocolate pudding and they are so happy"

people comfortable. I know that I might be the last face they are going to see before they leave this earth, and I know they have walked for 80 years or more. And they have a right to have the last days of their life be the very best.

Some people ask if it is depressing work, but I don't think so. They are going to die anyway and I can make things nice. There is a big difference if I am there or if they are in a hospital. They know I care. And I don't call them by their first names either. There is none of this "come on now Daisy" stuff. It is always 'Mrs. So and So'. I treat them with the respect they deserve. This formality is a bit of being stuck in a Swiss time-zone.

Sometimes they are expected to die in a few days and they live for a couple of months because they feel so good because you fed them and kept them clean and kept them company. And they laugh at my stupid jokes all the time. You get to really love them and you feel a little bit sad when they die. It is a very human experience.

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