

Growing up in Scotland

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In spite of the war and the years afterwards I had a very pleasant childhood. From my advanced age my memories are all of being warm, safe, sheltered and loved. Oh it wasn't idyllic but don't we all remember best the good things? For me it's the family gatherings which happened somewhere most Sundays. After the meal on fine days we'd all go out for a walk – with Mother's side it would often be to check out the cemetery plots (and this was not a morbid thing. It was natural for us to include those who had gone on before.). When it rained we'd play cards or board games, adults and children together, and end with a sing song. We each had our "party pieces". To this day there are certain songs that bring a tear to my eyes as I remember the person who'd sing it. With Dad's family we always had to admire Grandpa's garden then take a walk in Alanton Woods. But the best times were the drive home. Me in the back seat wrapped in a traveling rug (the car either didn't have a heater or it wasn't very efficient) Mother and Dad in front and Dad singing all the way. He had a very good tenor voice.

I had 1 sibling – a brother who was 11 years older than I. I worshipped the ground he walked on and it was returned. My earliest memories all include my brother. According to my Baby Book my first real word was his name, my first steps towards him. He'd tie a pillow on the bar of his bicycle so that he could take me for a ride. Edinburgh zoo used to have an elephant and a camel you could ride. My brother took me with him on those. I remember visits to an indoor amusement park (I think it was in the Waverly Market – where the shopping center is now) and going down a huge slide and riding in the dodgems with him (bumper cars). Then there were the hours spent on the beach when I'd follow him into the water, in fact there was one time I nearly drowned I'd followed him so far. Neighbors had a pool table in their house and my brother not only tolerated me being there when he and his friends were playing pool but he'd stand me on a stool and help me use the cue. Later on when he got his driver's license and was allowed to have the car for an afternoon he'd take me to visit relatives. If Dad had known how much fun we had on that road from West Calder to Forth with all the humped-back bridges on it - bouncing along from one hill top to another – he'd have had a fit!

And then came the war. I was old enough to know what it was all about yet young enough not to be afraid. In fact it was all quite exciting – the troops, the armored trucks, the tanks, the bombing, the fighter planes and their dog fights, but most of all the camaraderie.

First there were the rumors and the preparations. We were issued gas masks which went everywhere with us for the next 6 years. We had monthly gas mask drills as well as fire drills at school. The cloakrooms were banked with sandbags to make them into our air raid shelters – and they were used. Each morning after an air raid there would be another alert as they sent over reconnaissance planes to assess the damage. Our village was on the main rail line between Edinburgh and Glasgow. The rails were visible in the moonlight and the bombers were able to come in over the North Sea and follow them towards Glasgow and the shipyards. We were also situated about 10 miles directly south of the Forth Bridge, the shipyards and the oil refineries so we saw quite a bit of action

mainly early on but sporadically throughout the war. The Forth Bridge was a prime target for it was the main rail connection between the bases in the north and south.

There was an air base just beyond our village. It was used mainly as a prisoner of war camp and since the prisoners worked either at the railway station moving munitions from one train to another or on the farms we saw them all the time. They were transported in canvas-sided trucks which were open in good weather. There were guards with them but I never remember seeing a rifle. Mother's relatives were mostly farmers so we often visited farms. In those days when the hay was cut and dried it was raked into hay-ricks which were then taken to the farmyard on a flat bedded thingy pulled by a tractor. Many times I've ridden on the tractor between the field and the farmyard alone with the German prisoner. He ate 2 meals a day with the family so he most certainly wasn't anxious to escape!

Kirknewton is a very small village about 16 miles west of Edinburgh in a farming area. In our school there were 4 teachers for 7 grades. There were 12 of us in my class. But small as the school was and even during wartime we had visiting art, music, PE, and sewing teachers twice every week. At age 11 we had to sit the qualifying exam to decide whether we went to high school or junior high. I wasn't the only one in my class to pass the exam but I was the only one to go on to high school. I traveled by train to West Calder while all the others rode a bus to East Calder. This meant that by age 11 I had virtually left the village. It was still my home till after I'd married but I grew away from my friends there since our paths seldom crossed after primary school.

High school was very different from here. We took the same classes every day for a whole year. PE, art, music, English, Math, History and Geography continued and Latin and French were added. I don't remember how we managed to fit it all in but somehow we did. In the 5th year (your grade 12, I guess) we had to sit our Highers in at least 5 subjects. The Highers were essentially standard exams. Every 5th year student in Scotland sat the same exam on the same day (in March I think it was), the papers were packed up and sent to a central place to be scored and the results weren't known till several weeks later.

Sunday school was for children only. Teenagers and young adults attended Youth Fellowship. There actually were 3 small villages all within a couple of miles of each other (Kirknewton, East Calder and Oakbank). We shared a minister. Services were held in 2 of the villages but Youth Fellowship only in East Calder (the largest village). I had friends from High School there – again I was usually the only 1 from Kirknewton attending. I don't remember much about the Sunday evening meetings but I do remember the dances, the trips to the Edinburgh Tattoo, the evenings out at some hotel in Edinburgh where we attended their monthly dinner – dance. Then there were the barn dances in the spring at some of the local farms – held in the loft of the barn after the hay that had been stored there had all been used. Probably best of all were the dances held a couple of times a year in the “Co-operative Hall” with the Jimmy Shand or Ian Powry bands playing. As I said at the beginning – looking back – I had a fun time.