

Alice

by Isabel Showler

Alice was the last work Isabel Showler completed before she died in February, 2006. She put together memories and family stories to create a chronicle of a life in Toronto.

permission to walk down the street from the railroad station and back, to see what East Germany was like.

Back in London, she had some time before taking the boat to Canada. One of the things she missed was hot buttered toast. She asked the waiter, and the next morning, she had four triangles of hot buttered toast under a silver cover. She finished them off, and the following morning, there were eight triangles of toast. Finishing those, on the third morning, there were 12 triangles. "Shall I try for 16?" she asked herself, decided 12 were enough and left one triangle uneaten. From then on, she received 12 triangles each morning.

Alice returned home and kept up a correspondence for the rest of her life with people she had met in Europe.

Following her trip, Alice lived for five more years, visiting family in New York, Indiana, Calgary and London Ontario. When the race tracks were operating, she went to the races almost every day and played bridge at night. She was always independent, and no one was caught up in long-term care for her. She died of stroke, after six weeks hospitalization, in which time included her 85th birthday.

She lived to see Toronto change from a small town, with privies in the back yard near the horses' stalls, to a big city with huge enclosed malls. She marvelled at it all. The words "good old days" never crossed her lips.

Alice

Alice Wright was born somewhere near the corner of Spadina and Harbord, and moved as a toddler to Bathurst and Harbord. She was grown up before she discovered that those streets are not Bathur and Harbour.



She was born in 1879, and the city was smaller then. This was probably outside the city limits. She used to tell of her mother making fresh bread one day, and sending little Alice with a loaf for her aunt Carrie, who lived on Clinton Street. She took a shortcut through the fields and was frightened by a cow, which smelled the fresh bread. She dropped the bread and ran all the way home.

The schooling was mostly at Victoria Street School, the family now having moved to Victoria and Queen, the site of the present St Michael's Hospital.

The family business was that of a plasterer including the decorative ceiling ornamentations often seen in old homes. James Wright also did some sculpture.

Much of the family attitude toward people of other races was determined by James Wright. When he first arrived in Toronto after some time at sea, he was applying for jobs as a plasterer, and finding it difficult. There were many arrivals from Britain claiming skills they did not have. "No English need apply" was sometimes added to advertisements because of this.

James managed to get a job working on a new home. He found himself working next to a very large, very black man. Somehow he considered this beneath his dignity, and asked to be moved. The foreman told him, in effect, "That is your work; if you don't want it, you

When Alice's mother had reached 75, she went on a Cook's tour of Europe. After some period of healing, Alice felt it was her turn, and just after her 80th birthday, she went on her own tour. She bought a Eurail pass in Canada, which gave her all the first class rail travel she could do in two months. She went by boat from Montréal to London, and there she spent the rest of the month adjusting to the time change and enjoying London and the genteel old hotel, the Mascot.

Thoroughly adjusted to the time change, Alice set out on her adventure. She went by herself, by train. She would sleep sitting up, then get off the train and sightsee during the day. That evening, she would get on another train. She managed to see nearly all the countries of Western Europe. The exceptions were Norway and Portugal and one or two Balkan states. Her little anecdotes almost left out the names of the countries where particular occurrences happened. I suspect she couldn't remember. When she got tired, she would retreat to Monte Carlo, where she would recoup her strength and her finances, staying at a small pension and playing the tables.

She inadvertently took a train for East Berlin, not realizing that it was in Eastern Europe.

She argued vehemently when they asked her to pay the fare, but finally capitulated. Now that she was in East Germany, she felt she should be allowed to look around, and got

She shoved the man toward the door. On opening the door, she discovered a policeman, who had been looking for this man, who had burgled another house on the street. The hand in the pocket turned out to have been holding a gun. Perhaps it was this type of proactive activism which made her offspring move in that direction.

John started building a large house at Winderbrook, a co-operative community. It was while he was building this that he took the first of three or four strokes. Fortunately, the house was almost finished.

Alice sold the house on Elm Ave. and a rather small summer cottage that John had built. After his stroke, Alice kept John at home for a year or two. Then he became worse and had to go into hospital. During this hospitalization Alice took one of the three shifts of nursing so that John would be quiet and comfortable at the most difficult time for him, the evening. She was 73 at the time.

On Alice's birthday in 1956, John died.

Alice's first adjustment to life without John was to go to New York City and spend about a week in a hotel there, becoming accustomed to her new situation, with plenty of distractions available when she felt the need. After that, she did a circle tour of her offspring and allowed herself to become accustomed to the new freedom that came with her loss.

can quit." James went back to his boarding house, not sure what would happen the next day.

That evening, James looked out the window and saw his black acquaintance walking down the street. He was much bigger than James, and James was frightened. When his landlady called him to the door, he went with trepidation.

When he arrived at the door, the man said to him, "Mr. Wright, I am well-known in this town, and can get a job anywhere. You go back to that job tomorrow, and I won't be there."

James said that he would go back to the job the next day if the man would be there, and they became fast friends. From then on James Wright had no tolerance for any variety of racism, and taught this value to his children.

Alice studied elocution. She entered a competition at Massey Hall, and won the gold medal. In later years, she would dress up and recite poetry. One of her favourites was "The Life Boat". Another would be "The World is Just a Bubble, Dontcha Know". For this, she wore my father's tuxedo.

It was the custom in those days to leave school at age 14. Alice found a job at Copp-Clarke, the publishers. They worked a twelve hour day and a six day week, and wages were around two dollars a week. Alice was ambitious. She moved from job to job, until she

found one working for a money lending business, York Loan. She was on her own much of the time, collecting from small borrowers and depositors. Some of the time she worked in smaller cities around Ontario. On one visit to a home to collect some money, she found a house in uproar because of the small daughter in the house. She had acquired diphtheria. She seemed to be choking with the closure of the windpipe this disease can cause. Alice asked for some "unslaked" lime. She poured water on it and held it to the child's head. The fumes seemed to cause the child to cough, and tear the apparent membrane choking her. This was the turning point, and the child recovered.

John Alexander went to Church Street School, then worked at his father's business until 1901. John was the second of ten boys and one girl born to his family. All these boys (six reached maturity) went into the father's business as their first employment.

By 1900, Alice and John had become engaged. They saved with great dedication to having a nest egg for starting their own business when they married. Around 1900, John Alexander and his older brother Henry, joined the Forty-Eighth Highlanders Regiment Band. The band toured, mostly in the United States, for two years. By the time of their marriage in 1903, Alice and John had accumulated \$2000. They were very careful not to spend money on dating and courtship. Their favourite times were

be married in September, and the family had no base of operations for this. Alice rose to the occasion. She made her own dress for the wedding, Isabel made hers. The wedding cake, cookies, sandwiches, etc. were made by dint of Alice visiting her daughter-in-law and her sister, and baking up a storm in their kitchens. She rented the ground floor of a large house on Bloor Street for the day, furnished it with some of her own furnishings from the garage, and entertained more than a hundred guests.

John carried on with building a new home across the street from the old one. By the time it was finished, it had cost about \$17,000, and they could not afford to live in it. They sold it and bought a small apartment down in the Beaches.

After living the "gypsy life" with much of their treasures packed away in storage, they moved from rented room to house to apartment. About 1951, they bought a house on Elm Ave. and settled down a little.

It was while they were living on Elm Ave. that Alice was visiting a friend on North Sherbourne St. Four women sat, playing bridge. Suddenly, the door opened and a man walked in. Alice jumped up, grabbed his arm (his hand was in his pocket) and said, "What are you doing here? What do you want?" and began shouting for John (although John was certainly not on the premises).

the mortgage company. In this way, they carried on until Isabel concluded her course at university and they felt free of parental responsibilities. Careful trading in mortgages enabled John to have three or four dependable mortgages in Toronto in payment for the summer cottage, and two or three others for his equity in the hotel.

When they retired from the hotel business, John and Alice bought a large home on Douglas Drive in north Rosedale. It was a beautiful home with many special features, including four fireplaces. At first they started out, as families do, with mother and father, youngest son and daughter. But rooms were left over, so they were rented. The upper floor was rented as a flat. The youngest son left home for an alternative service work camp as a conscientious objector. That left two or three other rooms which were rented out. Alice also served meals to guests about half the time.

The stability of this arrangement was shattered when Isabel decided in 1946 to go and teach on an Indian reserve on Georgian Bay. Alice and John discovered that their gracious home, for which they had paid a mere \$6000, was now able to fetch \$17,000. They quickly sold it and bought a lot across the street. John built a two-car garage in which he stored all their furnishings. He started to build a new house for themselves.

The timing for all this was poor, as Isabel came back from her Indian reserve, wanted to



probably spent on the Beltline, a railroad that circled the city. This line went from Union Station, across the Don Valley, up to about McPherson Avenue, then west to Dufferin, then south on Dufferin and east on Queen St.

to Union Station. The fare for this trip was five cents. Sometimes they treated themselves to an ice cream. That capital investment of \$2000 was used to start an enterprise where John bought upwards of 40 houses in Toronto. Alice contributed what she could, making tiny amounts embroidering insignias for the arms of a child's "reefer".

In 1910, John and Alice bought a very large, old home on Jarvis Street, between Dundas and Gerrard. Additions were made to it and it became the Windermere Hotel, and they launched themselves into the hotel business. A few years later, a second such home, though slightly smaller, was bought and became the Westmoreland Hotel.

Around the same time, they purchased their first automobile. In those days, drivers' licenses were still unknown, so John took Alice out to the Exhibition grounds to teach her to drive, so she could drive to catch the train the next day, and bring the car back. Alice said to John, "How do I stop this if I have to stop it in a hurry?"

John said, "Step on the clutch, and then on the brake." Alice was not satisfied. She quickly took her foot off the gas and stamped on the brake. "Now look what you've done, you've stalled the car," said John.

"But I stopped it, didn't I?"

Over the years, an intense rivalry grew up on the part of Alice's brother, William, toward

there was something) and then iron the wash. Her ironing became expert. She could iron a man's starched shirt with detached collar in 12 minutes, before the days of wash and wear.

The agreement with the hotel was that they would supply the space and the hot water and soap, and Alice would wash the lace tablecloths and wash and iron the linen napkins, thus reducing wear and tear on these expensive items. For some months, it was a hectic time. Then, as her little business grew and prospered, Alice hired a laundress and her spending money was secure.

All went along very serenely for Alice for some time, until her middle son offered to send her daughter, Isabel, to boarding school, as Isabel's mental health was poor and her schoolwork was suffering. It is hard to imagine an empty nest in the midst of a 50-room hotel, but the hotel was not doing well (though the worst of the depression was over). The neighbourhood was badly run down and the hotel only just out of the hands of the mortgage holder. Alice had never really approved of this big undertaking, but she made the best of it and carried on. They were saved from foreclosure because Alice's mother held a mortgage on the hotel furniture which would have necessitated the mortgagor buying new furniture, had they foreclosed and tried to manage the hotel.

John carried on this way, gathering together what cash he could each week and going to

two or three private homes and a small factory, kept John active in his retirement.

By about 1931 the failing economy was making the financing of the hotel debt impossible. Alice had enjoyed the friendship of some of the richer people in Toronto, but the expenses were now far beyond what father could afford. She tackled this in a number of ways. For instance, she bought a yearly pass to the members' section at Thorncliffe racetrack. She also went faithfully to Woodbine, Fort Erie, and less regularly, but often, to Dufferin in Long Branch. This activity went some way to financing all other activities, but it was not a completely stable income.

Alice had several enterprises such as a key room on Queen Street, to make up the shortfall. Finally, she hit on a scheme that prospered. She had brown paper bags printed "Enterprise Laundry". These she placed in the guest rooms with instructions that they should place their laundry in the bag and bring it to the desk on the way out. The laundry would be done and returned the following day. Alice did it all herself.

Every morning she would do several loads of washing. There was a tiny back yard where some things could be hung up to dry. The room next to the laundry room in the hotel basement was fitted with heaters and racks for hanging clothes. Alice would go out for any social engagements she had in the afternoon or evening (most afternoons or evenings,

John. Even before they were adults, John was a leader in the Boy's Brigade, and they had their summer camp at Woodbine Beach. Someone cut the guy ropes on a tent there one night. John was almost sure William (known as Bill) was the culprit, but he never admitted it.

John had a pass for his car to the Canadian National exhibition. It allowed the car and two passengers access to the grounds. Bill was poo-pooing the importance of this. "Anyone can get into the grounds that way, all you have to do is to wave a piece of cardboard and drive on through. He offered to prove it, and I believe a bet was made.

The arrangement was that Bill would go through with his car, waving a piece of cardboard. John would follow close behind to observe what happened. In the operation, however, the gatekeeper jumped on John's running board and said, "Follow that car!" John tried to act bewildered and confused by the request, but eventually he had to comply and Bill was caught. Bill never did believe that John had not tipped the gatekeeper off.

Another time, Alice and John were going to visit Alice's parents' summer cottage at Bent River. Bill accepted an invitation to join them. They got out on Highway 2 (long before the 401), a two-lane highway. After a while, traffic stopped, nothing moving in either direction. People got out of their cars to chat about what might be happening. Bill got out of the car

and went walking down the highway. After a while, the traffic started to move, and as it became more normal, there was great concern about where Bill was, and how they could pick him up. When they came to the site of the accident, there was Bill directing traffic. When he saw their car, he put his police whistle into his pocket and jumped in.

Alice involved herself in the management of the hotel from the beginning. She had taken a course sponsored by the Boston School of Cooking, in Fanny Farmer. The rules for the hotel cook were simple: If they could cook it best by themselves, they were left alone. If mother could cook it better, she taught them how.

Shortly after she was married, before the hotel days, mother produced an entry for all the classes of cooking competition for the Canadian National Exhibition. She won the gold medal in all categories. She could cook!

Although she was dubious about building the new hotel, she did her part to make it work, including sewing drapes, dresser scarves and bed table covers for all the bedrooms in the new hotel.

The hotel business turned out to be a natural for John and Alice. John was an affable man with a good memory for names and faces, and an easy manner. He was also a builder, used to doing his own architecture, and dreaming big dreams.

From 1910 to the middle of the 1920s, the business became stronger and more profitable. They got used to a more-than-adequate income resulting from reasonable effort at things they enjoyed.

In about 1926, John made plans for a big new addition to the smaller of the two hotels, the Westmoreland. At this point, John and Alice moved back to the Windermere with their now four children, and began the expansion. The face was cut off the old mansion, and the new building was constructed with 42 guest rooms, dining room, large basement recreation room, and a two-story rotunda about the size of four bedrooms. Each detail was John's dream, from the polished slate floor to the colour of the paint on the walls.

The place opened to a full house during a large Shriners' convention, and for the next couple of years, enjoyed great success.

Now that the hotel dream was finished, builder John looked for a new project in his favourite field. Although the summer cottages at Lake Simcoe had been sold, John had a building lot on the south side of the road, with about eleven feet of lake frontage. He built his most expansive summer cottage yet, about 40 feet by 25, with a living room, dining room, breakfast room, kitchen, bathroom and two bedrooms downstairs. The upstairs was never finished although three or four of the bedrooms were. This building project, along with