

MY LIFE STORY

Verna Grace Caunter (nee Weedmark), in her own words, dated from January 22, 2000, to October 27, 2003.

Typed and edited by Marcia Nerenberg (nee Caunter, daughter), November 22, 2006.

I was born on January 20, 1907, in the small village of Beachburg, in Westmeath Township, County of Renfrew, in the province of Ontario, Canada, to Hiram and Emily Weedmark. I was the sixth child. The first five were Alma (December 12, 1894), Ida Mary (October 29, 1896), Willard (December 24, 1898), Winnifred (July 3, 1902) and Evelyn (September 18, 1904). Two more children came after I was born – Muriel (June 22, 1910) and Eunice (May 10, 1914).

My first clear memory is of peeking through the banister spindles to see Alma saying good-bye to mother as she left with Jake to go to Pembroke to be married. She may have been twentyish. I know when Willard came home from the war, we were on Main Street. When Alma was married, we were still on Beach Street. So we made that move between early 1900 and 1910 to 1912.

I was eleven and a half years old when Willard came back from the war. How proud I was to go down for the mail, or whatever, with him!

Our wonderful old house was a fascinating one with all odd areas. Outside one upstairs bedroom, with wonderful old-fashioned windows, was a locust tree. When in blossom, it smelled so sweet with millions of bees busy in it. We wondered where their hive was and wished we could

get the honey! The back and front verandahs were covered with Virginia Creeper which all summer had many little nests for tiny birds. I never saw hummers (hummingbirds), but wrens and goldfinches were there and the odd robin.

I've always felt we kids were lucky growing up but now I feel we were blessed.

We were given chores as we grew: gardening, taking care of the hen house and cleaning the barn. We had a couple of cows and my dad had two horses for his work of moving and building houses and barns, etc.

We had a large garden with three apple trees and as many plum trees. There were wild strawberries and raspberries in the pasture area as well as tame ones in our garden. When blueberries were in season, dad would hitch the horses and take a



bunch of us to pick some. We also grew our vegetables for winter use. We had corn for the

cows, corn for the table and corn for popping! We helped with the hoeing and with the hilling of potatoes, etc.

Photo: Hiram and Emily Weedmark. About 1945

Hiram: born February 21, 1868 – died April 2, 1946

Emily: born July 22, 1870 – died March 5, 1961

Our property went back from Main Street to the correction line. It was twenty-five acres which doesn't seem much but it did then. We had some pine trees at the back end and, later, when I was in training and so homesick, mother sent me a little, cotton bag full of pine needles from those trees.

They were a great solace and full of thoughts and love. It is amazing I hung in with no hope of seeing them until I graduated and earned my way home.

In 1918 the flu epidemic laid a lot of folk low in our little burg. Our mother made so much soup, jelly and custard. Evelyn, Muriel and I went from one end of the village to the other with sustenance for the older folk smitten with it or households where all were down. Eunice was too young for this. I don't know if she ever heard of those bad times. Mother was the last to get sick and I wonder if one of us brought it home to her.

We went to Sunday school on a regular basis as well as church and, later, choir and playing the organ. We all filled one pew and we behaved. No nonsense was tolerated and we were not allowed to criticize or gossip. "We needed to keep our own yard clean" and see to our behaviour. Dad didn't let us whistle. That old saw, "A whistling maid and a crowing hen will surely come to some bad end" is one we heard frequently. None of us aspired in that area.

We all were musical and had early piano lessons with our practicing done on our "Karn" organ, occasionally getting to a cousin's to practice on a piano. Our mother had a lovely, though untrained, soprano voice. Dad played the violin for some old standards but was "without pick" on old-time stuff like jigs and reels which was "fiddling"! A stand-out was the choir (most of them) coming to our house on Sundays and going through the hymn book. Nothing but hymns were played on the Sabbath. Dad would play the violin and mother would add her fine voice. This was "the stuff of which memories are made" a la the old song. Music was our mainstay.

On Sunday afternoons, we girls took our Sunday school papers, etc. outside to lie on pine needles and enjoy the day. We spent rainy days in the home.

At Christmastime, there were concerts in the church and a fowl supper at which all worked who could do anything. There was always a tall fir tree with lighted candles on the widespread tips of the branches. There were never any accidents. Years later after the Union in 1925, this fine, old building burned down as a result of flying debris from a huge barn fire (our old neighbor's barn on Beach Street). Old folk rejoiced because, after the Union, the church was sold and became a garage with men swearing and expectorating. The hymn, "Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow", was sung by a very elderly Sunday school superintendent on her knees in the snow! (The United Church was inaugurated on June 10, 1925, in Toronto, Ontario, when



the Methodist Church, the Congregational Union of Canada and 70 per cent of the Presbyterian Church entered into an organic union. Joining as well was the small

General Council of Union Churches, centered largely in western Canada.) *Photo: Verna Weedmark 1927*

Halloween nights were fun with homemade costumes and apple bobbing in tubs of water. There was very little mischief. The old privy was turned over and the democrat (a light, four-wheeled, horse-drawn vehicle having two double seats, one behind the other) was found in the pond once. In winter, skating took place on that pond.

We had lots of relatives. One ran the grist mill (a mill for grinding grain) with the pond providing the power. Lorne, a cousin, was the butcher in Beachburg. Many were in business and all played hockey when hockey was played for the love of the sport and not for money.

With the war over, my brother, Willard, who had fibbed about his age when he enlisted (he was only sixteen), became a fireman in Ottawa.

Ida had a good job as a secretary to a district attorney in Michigan, U.S.A., and later married a deputy sheriff there, so we didn't see her often. She was clever and lovely looking. Ida had no children.

Alma had married Jake Costello. He was of no relation but we had mutual relatives. Two of mother's sisters married two "Young" brothers whose sister married a Costello. So our families were known, if not familiar, to the younger ones.

Alma and Jake came west to a small Saskatchewan town to homestead with a friend of Jake's named Tom. They were very lonely and asked dad and mom to let one of us come to them for Christmas. They could find train fare for one of us, but not two. They and my parents decided that I should be the one to go. It was very exciting as I had read all of Zane Grey and Harold Bell Wright's books. I traveled with dad's Masonic pin on my jacket and it must have helped as I had a very fine trip and learned something of everywhere we passed. I can't recall the exact dates but the trip took about three days, I believe. I can't say what it cost Alma and Jake to get me out here.

I had a great year with Alma and Jake. I learned much about the west while cooking and keeping house. After a lovely winter, they put Alma's piano on a sleigh and took it to a schoolhouse where they held dances. Alma would chord and Jake and Tom would play "fiddle". I learned a little about dancing – the one step, two step, polka and the schottische.

We didn't have the opportunity to learn to dance at home. Our strict upbringing didn't include going to dances. No teacher of dance or money to pay one was available. Consequently I was not in Archie's (my future husband) class who learned, as a boy in Scotland, at a school where he was sent at five years of age, where his uncle was headmaster. I never became a good dancer. Having acted the male role at dances while I was a nursing student at the Regina Grey Nuns Hospital, it was difficult to be a lady. I was happy to see Arch gliding around with a lady in his arms at the McCallum Hill Christmas parties year after year. I got satisfaction out of being able to play, on the piano, almost anything I was asked, for the carol singing, after the dancing was over. (For this, and for nursing Mrs. W.H.A. Hill for three weeks one July and for Archie's devotion to the company, I have received, for the twenty-ninth Christmas, a very beautiful poinsettia from Fred Hill.)

There, I've been digressing! It is difficult not to digress where it seems appropriate to do so!

To come back to the year at Alma and Jake's, Alma had a "cutting" horse called "Tiny" who could "turn on a dime" as the saying goes. Another horse, "Dot", had thrown Alma twice. One day Alma had gone off riding with Tiny. Jake got out

Alma's riding habit (outfit) and told me to don it and come out to the barn. He told me two things – to duck my head and to hang on for dear life – which I did. Dot raced seven miles over dust-packed fences to the home of Alma's friend, Nellie, who was a teacher. Nellie thought it was Alma coming and couldn't believe that Alma would allow me to get on Dot. Alma, of course, didn't know!

Needless to say, for some months I was happy there. I did my chores and rode Dot the rest of the time. Alma was glad as it left less time for me to play "Now The Day Is Over" and "The Day Is Past And Over" every evening and to talk about going home so much. Besides a pet lamb, Alma and Jake had thirteen cats that they kept outside. Some would come to the back steps for petting, etc.

When September came, I started home, stopping off in Regina to see relatives I'd never met except for one named Verla, although I couldn't remember her from Beachburg. Uncle Ben and Aunt Mina wanted me to stay a little. Uncle Ben ran a good business called "Springdale Dairy". A customer of his and his wife had just lost a third child at birth. She was in bed with phlebitis, (the inflammation of a vein), and was mourning her loss and bad fortune. They talked me into being a cheerful companion for a while, saying I'd be well paid and go home with some money in my pocket. Her two doctors, Jaques and Harrey, influenced me toward a career in nursing! I had decided that if anything negative cropped up, I'd quit my little job and go home but because these two good doctors were serious enough to speak to Sister O'Grady, the Superintendent of the Regina Grey Nuns Hospital, when I got a call to go and see her, it was like a dare! I

did it and by February or early March, I was a "probie" (a nursing student who is on probation)! I had just had my nineteenth birthday and decided to quit being a kid and apply myself.

My nursing training took three years. I don't know how I did it. I guess the holiday with Alma and Jake helped me, along with the lady whose companion I was for five to six months. I graduated as a registered nurse in 1929 at the age of twenty-two.

After I graduated, I found a "home" with the McWatters who were like family. I did twenty-four hour duty with cardiac, obstetrical, etc. cases. I worked in people's homes which was very different from a hospital setting where everything is at hand. Many registered nurses wouldn't do twenty-four hour duty as it necessitated getting out of bed to cope with whatever. Some affluent homes had maids so no meal preparation was



required. *Photo: Verna Weedmark 1929*

Some nursing situations were interesting. In a fairly well-off household, there were six youngsters. I slept with the mother, with the seventh baby in a basket on a chair beside me! The doctors said that not many registered nurses were "game" or "smart enough" to manage, to "make do" or to "substitute". So I was kept busy and was paid in cash in each instance. Some nurses did not get paid and never did receive their due, even though they may have had their cases in a hospital situation

with all the proper equipment at hand, with no "making do".

Because of the foregoing, I had been able to save practically all I earned. I bought a train ticket to Beachburg and got home on December 23, 1929! It was wonderful to see my parents and sisters. I got to ride on a double sleigh (two horses) out a little way in the country to dad's "woods" and got a beautiful fir tree and some cedar branches for our home. There was, of course, no mistletoe! We helped pile logs (which had been felled, trimmed and left to season) onto the sleigh and got on top and rode home! It was all just as it had always been except we all were a little older.

I was home for the length of my train ticket (three months) but those years in the west had made a "prairie rat" or "dog" or whatever out of me. I was a great mix of sorrow and anticipation to get back nursing. So I returned and to McWatters where it was a "home away from home".

Things were tough during those times of "The Dirty Thirties" and the family moved several times to manage. Helping us with the first move, after my return, was Archie Caunter, a realtor with McCallum Hill and Company. We all fell for him! That was April, 1930.

Nurses were on everyone's "can't afford" list. I got a job at The Glasgow House (R.H. William's General Merchandise). I sold infant's wear, hosiery and jewelry.

All that year, Archie and I spent all our spare time together. We decided we could rise above the drought and



poor incomes as well as anyone and so were married – not on Halloween - but the evening before, on October 30, 1930, in St. Andrews's United Church where I had gone to services as my hours on Sundays allowed. Reverend Harry Joyce married us and Aunt Mina and Uncle Ben were our witnesses. *Photo: Archie Caunter 1932*
Archie: born March 22, 1896 – died July 2, 1971

Archie was still with McCallum Hill and Company and had to take several cuts in salary. Nursing was nil so, again, I secured employment with The Glasgow House and clerked for a while until things picked up in nursing.

We lived in a three-room suite in the Kennedy's house at 1934 Retallack Street for a while. They became our Regina parents! Then we lived in Albert Court for six months looking after an elderly lady who paid the rent. At the end of that experience, we went back to Kennedy's. Their daughter, Mary, was very ill in Quebec so they were glad to have us back. Mary died, at the age of twenty-nine, shortly after we returned. After that, we were their family. They had a nephew and his wife but they did not do anything for Mr. And Mrs. Kennedy (Da and Ma). Mr. And Mrs. Kennedy loved us, especially since Archie was of Scotch background! Once, we looked after a parrot for a doctor who was taking a sabbatical leave and Mr. Kennedy got a little amusement over it. Eventually, Da and Ma purchased a small bungalow on Victoria Avenue. Later, when they both passed away, they left me this little house. We gave certain possessions to folk I knew would appreciate them. Then we rented the house for a few years before selling it.

For a while we lived in a second-floor suite in the Redlyn Apartments. That is where

we met the Crapper family. Archie got permission from Mr. McCallum to use their old summer cottage at Saskatchewan Beach. Velma Crapper and I would stay out at the cottage and Archie and Borden would come out on weekends.

Then, on November 16, 1935, we finally had an addition. We named him Allan Gerald Charles Caunter.

The arrival of Gerald sort of changed some things but not too much. I didn't take on any cases except to help neighbors and friends when required, with baths, enemas or hypos (when ordered by a doctor). However, when W.H.A. Hill called on me, I worked for him for three weeks in July one year.

When Gerald was about two years old, Archie and I scraped together \$100.00 to buy Mr. McCallum's cottage at Saskatchewan Beach. The cottage was a shell but there were two lots and nice trees to the east. We enjoyed many bonfires and wiener roasts with the McCallum Hill staff out there, but mostly, it was just us and our friends.

In early 1941, we took in a child to help out some friends and after she'd been with us for a month, there was a dramatic change in her, and in us, too! The Children's Aid Society said that if we wanted permanent custody, we could adopt her, and so we did! We named her Marcia Jean Caunter - Jean for Mrs. Kennedy.

Gerald, Marcia, Archie and I loved that old place at Saskatchewan Beach. For many years we spent as much time as possible out there. We all enjoyed its simple life for years before we got electricity. It was nice to finally have power for the fridge and for

lights, but we hung on to the old cookstove! In the summer of 1953, we moved from the 26-block Garnet Street to the 23-block Garnet Street. Our new house had four bedrooms which gave us lots more room. It was much better for all in many ways.

Gerald got married and had three children - Hilary, Drew and Shannon. Soon after Shannon was born, they moved from Regina to Vancouver. Gerald and his wife, Lorna, were eventually divorced and Gerald remarried a girl named Melinda. They had one son, Christopher. Gerald and Melinda are now separated.

After we'd been living in our new house a while, I was begged to help with the nursing shortage. I then took a little refresher course - spinal cases, brain surgery, etc. - and took on a job at Wascana Hospital, eventually becoming a supervisor there.

Soon after Marcia completed high school, she got a job as a secretary at the Red Cross. Not long after, Archie suffered a heart attack but recovered. He was not allowed to use the stairs so he slept downstairs on a hide-a-bed. Then I fell and broke my right hip. All this gave Marcia a lot of extra work to do.

Marcia was married to Bruno Nerenberg in July of 1966. Three sons were born to them - Michael, Brent and Mark.

On June 30, 1971, Archie suffered a massive heart attack. In the hospital, he was put on life support. Gerald came quickly from Vancouver. On July 2, around 4.20 a.m., soon after the doctors insisted that Gerald and I go home to have a break and to freshen up, the hospital

called to say that Archie had gone. I feel they discontinued the life support, which had been instituted until Gerald got here. Gerald could see it was to no purpose, which I knew when they started it. Marcia was in the General Hospital and gave birth that morning, just four hours after Archie had passed, to her third son. The funeral was on July 5 and though there had been no newspaper because of the July 1 holiday, there was a wonderful turnout of friends, some having to stand. In a couple of days, Gerald returned to Vancouver.

For a month after Archie passed away, I took in Marcia's second son, Brent, who was thirteen months old, while Marcia recuperated from her cesarean section. He was great therapy for me.

Quite soon, some of the doctors and staff at Wascana Hospital started urging me to return to work, saying how much it would help me to cope and how much better to finish my time. I was going to be sixty-five years of age in January (1972) and I could retire, not quit! (I was told that the vets and the hospital had already planned a retirement party for me!) They were all so sincere and I did see that it made more sense, so I returned to work, and found how much it did help me over the hurdle. I was grateful. And I did have a good send-off in January!

I remained at 2324 Garnet Street until the summer of 1985 when I sold up and moved to Vancouver. With Gerald and Melinda, I bought a nice house on 46th Avenue. Gerald had his shop in the basement where he fixed and restored pianos. He also kept on with his band, The Counter Points, with Melinda as vocalist. Our home was just a short walk to Knox United Church on Balaclava Street, where I sang in the choir

and made good friends. I also joined the "Rip and Stitch Club" at Knox Church. (I still send letters to members of the club. My letter to any member is shared at their meetings. I get letters back, which is nice.) I became a volunteer at A.S.K., a senior's day care. Doctors recommended the seniors and a registered nurse ran it along with a few of us retired registered nurses.

In 1993 or so, we sold our home and bought another nice home in Tsawwassen. I joined the United Church choir there and again made nice friends, one couple in particular. He was an organist and she was a pianist. They would pick me up for choir practice and for church, as did another good friend.

In May of 1996, we sold our home and Gerald, Melinda and their son, Chris, went to live in Costa Rica. They had been there previously to visit, and loved it. I flew to Regina to spend the summer with Marcia and Bruno before leaving, in September, to join Gerald and his family to live in Costa Rica. It was great in some ways; I enjoyed the warm weather and the flowers and birds. However, after five months I decided to come back to Canada – to Saskatchewan, really.

I stayed with Marcia and Bruno until the fall and then moved in with a good friend for a couple of months. Finally I found a basement suite in a block I'd watched being built almost across the lane from our house at 2324 Garnet Street. It wasn't the greatest but there was nothing else to rent in the cathedral area. As the 2300 block of Garnet had been my home for so many years, I did want to stay in the area, close to all my old haunts – the church, shopping mall and library, etc. I was even given my old phone number which I had had since

1930 when Archie and I were married! Soon I was back in the old groove, helping out in the Westminster United Church choir for memorial or funeral services and on Sundays in summer when the senior choir took it easy.

In March of 1999, I had a mishap while in the laundry room. I tripped and fell which resulted in a femoral displacement, not a break, thank the Lord. While I didn't require surgery, it was capably corrected by Dr. Kim. For eight weeks I wore a full-leg cast, after which it took some time to get my knee back to almost normal. I spent a month in respite at Pioneer Village (nursing home) in a wheel chair where I had good therapists. There I played the piano for church services and helped with games. When I finally was able to go home, I bought a good walker. I made great progress with the help of a therapist who came to my home regularly. All summer and fall, I was out and about with the walker until I graduated to two canes and then only one.

In January 2000, I had a chance to get out of my basement suite. Mary Mortin and Betty Hailstone suggested I look at a suite which had become available in Cathedral Courts on 13th Avenue. Betty was the manager there. As it was still in my home area, I decided to look at it. The suite was large and bright with one bedroom. The building even had an elevator. I liked it. So, with the help of Marcia and Bruno, I moved in near the end of February.

On nice days, I often go out to walk or to shop, etc. I try to get out twice a day but sometimes it is only once. In inclement weather, I don't go out at all. I walk to church, which is only a block away, but in the winter, Mary Mortin picks me up each

Sunday morning. Bless her! Marcia takes care of my bed linen (stripping and makingup the bed). She could do the laundry here but does it her way and takes it home to wash and returns it! She also does a lot of chores for me that I can't do very easily. Marcia and Bruno "fill the breach" when necessary. God bless them!

I have spent many weekends at Marcia and Bruno's cottage at Heritage Valley on Long Lake. I especially like to be there in the spring when all the birds have returned and start setting up housekeeping. I remember one lovely October day last year when they invited me to go with them to close that home for the winter. I saw some waterfowl as well as a vast number of Canada Geese gathering on fields in preparation to head south. While at the cottage, I had an interesting ride with Bruno on their quad (all terrain vehicle) to see all the new cottages being built. We had taken our lunch which we ate on the front deck overlooking the lake.



Whenever a mass is held here at Cathedral Courts, I play the organ for it. I am happy that I can use any one of the three pianos here. I like to get that exercise for my hands, particularly the right one, as every time I've

had a fall, or something, I've damaged that one more. *Photo: Verna Caunter January 20, 2006 (her birthday at age 99 years)*

Today is October 27, 2003. The temperature is +11 degrees and the wind is N.W. 81K gusting to 98K

Signed:
Verna Caunter

Summary:

This book is dedicated to the life and times of Verna Caunter, who will turn one hundred years of age on January 20, 2007. What is written here is to preserve Verna's memory for her children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and her many friends.

The venture out west, all alone by train at the age of eighteen, took a lot of courage and determination from this Ontario girl. Leaving her parents and her sisters at such a young age must have been very difficult. During her first few years in Saskatchewan, Verna would have been quite lonely and homesick for her family back east. My hat goes off to her for coming out west and helping to build Saskatchewan into the great province it is today.

Soon after Verna became a graduate nurse, she met Archie Caunter. The two fell in love and were married in Regina on October 30, 1930. Times were tough during the thirties but through their hard work and doing without many things, they managed to scrape through. Verna had a unique way of dealing with life's upsetting moments; she would count from one to ten and by the time she was finished counting, her frustration had subsided. In 1935 they had a son, Gerald, and in 1941 they adopted a daughter, Marcia, to complete their family. The Caunter family spent many happy summers at their cottage at Saskatchewan Beach.

July 2, 1971 was both a sad and happy day for Verna. She lost her loving husband, Archie, after almost forty-one years of marriage. Four hours later, her grandson, Mark, was born to Marcia and I. Verna took in and looked after our one-year old son, Brent, for one month to help Marcia so she could care for the new baby. Having Brent with her at this time, also helped Verna cope with her sorrow.

As Verna is about to become a centurion, she continues to live on her own, in a suite at Cathedral Courts in Regina. With the help of her daughter and some close friends, she is able to keep her independence and maintain a fairly healthy life.

As her family continues to grow, Verna has been blessed with seven grandchildren and eight great grandchildren. She has been a true pioneer who came out west when very few people lived here, doing her part to make Saskatchewan prosper and grow. I am very honored to have been part of her family and want to thank her for bring up such a fine daughter, my wife, Marcia.

Editor:

Bruno Nerenberg



Verna Caunter 2001