

Stories Houses Tell



Stornoway House, East Kildonan Road

By LILLIAN GIBBONS

WHEN Donald McIvor sailed away from rock-bound Stornoway in the Hebrides in 1847 for Churchill he left a little bit of his heart behind in his Scottish birthplace; when he built his home at Red River in 1863, he named it Stornoway. His daughter, Miss Annie McMurray McIvor, 75, tells you the story as you sit in the kitchen beside the wood stove in that house, just a little north of Winnipeg, east of the river. Unless you are looking for it, you'll not notice the painted sign on a board nailed to a telegraph pole in East Kildonan as you motor along the Henderson highway: Stornoway House, McIvor estate, lot 45. And having noticed it, you'll feel abused that you never saw it before. Down that road, to the river, and the trees, goes your gaze, peering at the old, weather-beaten house in which a descendant of a Selkirk settler lived: Miss McIvor's mother, Marion Monroe, was the daughter of Annie Matheson and George Munroe, who came in 1815 from Scotland.

Logs Floated down Red River

Flat pitched roof, with its chimney pot at each end, colorless siding that covers logs floated down Red River from Georgetown, low windows with the small panes of glass that mark an "auld hoose"; a kitchen built on the end nearest you as you approach it—Stornoway.

But inside there's an old-fashioned warmth in Miss McIvor's welcome. She sits in the kitchen; her rocking chair is "father's—he was my idol." It's covered with an enormous pelt—a musk-ox rug. From its depths she listens to a radio "for company." She is 75 years old, "two years older than the house," she tells you, naming the day. "There are three double birthdays in our family—with 11 children we couldn't all have a separate day to ourselves." She's very proud of her old home, and if you're interested in history, Miss McIvor will welcome you and give you a living lesson. Her mother, born in Kildonan, was married at Norway House, and given away by Sir George Simpson—"that's he in the canoe in that H.B.C. calendar." The walls of the low kitchen were plastered with calendars, company calendars that bore pictures of the fort and company men.

Four Hams for Sandwiches

That old kitchen could tell a story: "We used to dance in here—four sets could be accommodated, when we took down the stove and put it back to the wall." Jigs and square dances were done to the music of a band from Winnipeg! "I remember three floors in this kitchen—yes, what with dancing and such a big household." The wide boards still smile up at the dancer of 50 years ago. The low beams of the ceiling have their own memories of the occasions when four hams were cut up to make sandwiches for the crowd. And the home-made bread! No end of work for a Red River party.

The chair rocked and the boards creaked; the story came out of them. In 1863, the young Donald McIvors came from Norway House by York boat—there's a picture in one of the calendars of its square sail and crew of nine—to buy the house begun by the McKays—the Hon. James McKay, of the first Manitoba legislative assembly, was a son. "Father bought three lots, nine chains and 13 links. . . . There were wild plum trees, cranberries, strawberries, nuts—and he planted trees down to the road. He used to say, as long as we have lots of land we're all right, and now the less land you have the better," sighed his daughter.

Cradle 90 Years Old

The rocking reminded the house that upstairs was a 90-year-old cradle owned by Miss McIvor and loaned by her for Mrs. A. V. Thomas' play about John Black. "It was given to my mother at Norway House, and seven babies had been rocked to sleep in it before that. When it was brought to Red River, the sail of the boat fell in a great storm, knocking the 'heads' off the cradle. But it's never had new rockers—and all of us 11 children were rocked in it, and nephews and cousins, too."

Yes, Rev. John Black had been in Stornoway many a time; this pioneer Presbyterian minister had performed the marriage ceremony in the parlor when Miss McIvor's eldest sister became Mrs. D. A. Ross. She went to live next door behind the stone wall that attracts your attention more than the old weather-washed sign.

"Would you like to see the parlor?" asked the gracious hostess, rising up out of her musk-ox rug. The house-lover had been told that this was a treat hardly to be expected; such a parlor as Stornoway has was opened only for "occasions." You passed the feet-worn oak sill into the dining-room, with its round braided rush mats made by the Indians.

"Age Shall Not Weary It—"

Past the big, cheery heater, five feet tall and on to the closed door; it was like passing the last outpost and taking off for the unknown. Then, the door thrown back, it lay there, a museum piece that ought to be preserved, felt the house-finder. Three score years and 10, it has lived its allotted span and more, yet shows no sign of time: "Age shall not weary it, or the years condemn." All over carpet, nailed tight to the wainscoting, horsehair furniture with "tidies" on the backs of the chairs, an organ with carpet-upholstered pedals, yes, and the frail centre table with the family Bible, given by Rev. John Black as a wedding present to the McIvors.

You had beheld a Victorian parlor. But come, Miss McIvor is telling about it: This mounted duck and this stuffed loon were shot by men of the family on the estate. Those dainty round "plate" water colors are by Miss McIvor and her sister; so, too, are the oils in their massive gilt frames. Leaning against the Bible on the centre table are little tintypes—Mr. and Mrs. McIvor as young married folk, and "Annie McMurray McIvor herself," proudly announced that lady. "I was 16 or 17 and that was my first silk dress." She had pearls in her hair and lace ruffles at her chin.

A leather case held a locket of long ago, the house-finder was certain: a butter medal, 1899, awarded to Donald McIvor by the Kildonan Agricultural society, "yes, indeed, there was a farm!"

Cobweb Lace Pillow Shams

Tip toe past those islands of fur rugs—prairie and bush wolves, shot on the estate—to the door of the "spare room," at Miss McIvor's invitation. See the solid walnut suite, with marble topped wash stand and the honeycomb white bedspread and the stiffly starched cobweb lace pillow-shams? Look well, you might never see such again!

Then the door was closed and the parlor retreated back into the past. You were left with your vision of things as they used to be. . . . The dining-room again, with Longfellow's Hearts-ease as a wall test: "All dear recollections, pressed in your heart like flowers within a book," . . . in your heart now, as in Miss McIvor's.

Back to "father's chair," for stories of "when I was a little girl," and went to the old Kildonan school—beside the old municipal hall—"you had to keep your feet up off the floor to save freezing." When we crossed on the ferry—where the Lord Kitchener school is, to Old Kildonan church, a hundred people all going to hear Rev. John Black preach. When father went across the ice to the store inside the walls of Fort Garry and came back with molasses—for the children; there's a picture of him in the dining-room with a grandchild on his knee. When mother was a little girl in Kildonan—"Oh, the stories she could tell, and I'm like her, I love to talk!" Indians put their hands to their eyes and peered in these windows during the rebellion days of '69. . . .

Door Carved with Penknife

The "auld hoose" has a sunwarped, weather-beaten face, and plenty of smiles. The front door, hand-carved with a penknife—"I can't just remember the man doing it," says Miss McIvor. The lock is an ancient stronghold in itself—10 inches long.

There was a kiss for parting, and the old Stornoway greeting, "Safe Home!" wished from the rocking chair.