CLAUDIA MITCHELL

9. OIL RIGHTS/RITES: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS A TOOL FOR DRILLING

I am standing in front of a video installation depicting a large two-story wooden house being moved across Trinity Bay in Newfoundland. The installation, focusing on *les trajets* (travelling objects), is part of the 2010 exhibition *Journeys: How Travelling Fruit, Ideas and Buildings Rearrange Our Environment* at the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) in Montreal (CCA 2010), and the actual moving of the house comes out of a large relocation project in Newfoundland and Labrador in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. The project attempted to address economic pressures (especially as a result of the depletion of fish stock) by moving whole communities to areas where it would be easier to deliver such basic services as health and education. The video—part of the Resettlement Collection of the Maritime History Archive at Memorial University—fascinates me as it captures an almost hour-by-hour moving of the house. We see the house, pulled by a small boat, bobbing around in the water, and then the house reaches shore, only to begin a new episode of moving. This time it is a bulldozer that tugs it, pulling it up the bank and onto what looks like an alder and blueberry field. The whole daytime community—young boys, toddlers, women hanging out the laundry, the retired—are out in full force to view the move, and I, as a viewer of their viewing, am swept up in their excitement.

But what comes over me as I stand in the Canadian Centre for Architecture and watch the video is the memory of another two-story house: the farmhouse in Manitoba, one of the three Canadian prairies provinces. I spent the first six years of my life in that farm house, and I have the recollection that it too travelled. It was moved off our property when my parents had a brand new ranch house built on the farm in 1954. The large wooden dwelling was sold and relocated to the edge of the town of Virden a few kilometres away. As I watch the video, there are two things that begin to preoccupy me. One is the actual moving of our house. How did the house get moved, and why do I have no memory of that? Where was I? Did the large wooden structure lumber over the prairie land? Why are there no photographs of this? The second—the focus of this chapter—is social and relates to memory and the conditions that led to the moving of the "old house," as it has come to be called, and the building of the "new house," as we still call it all these decades later. Where does memory lead us, or where do we lead memory? And what sets off memory?

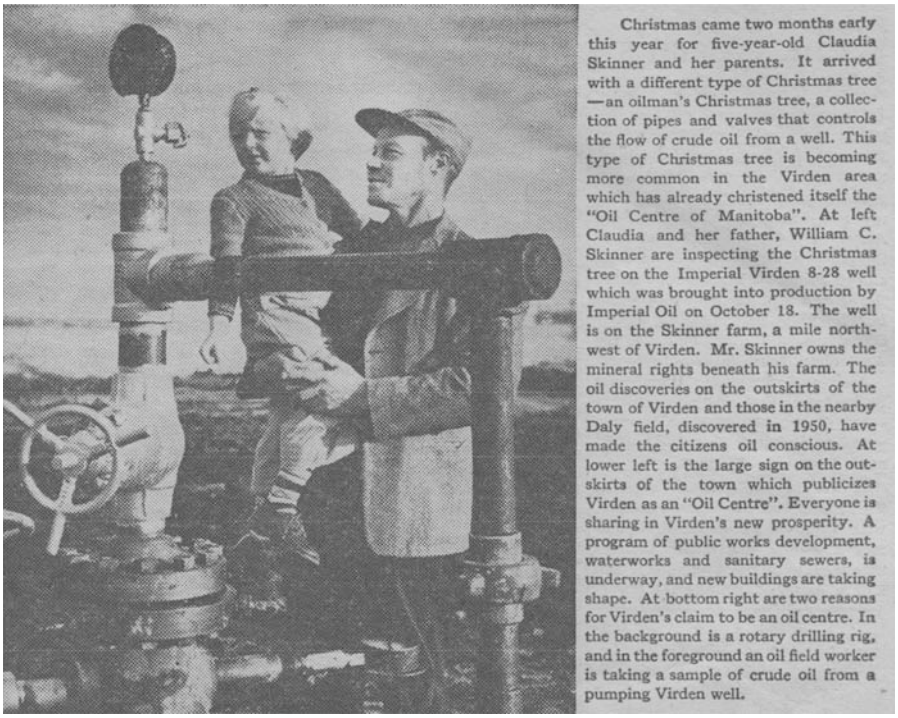
I would describe this chapter as an investigation of memory through autoethnography. Mostly, I am interested in dispelling the prairie/plains myths found

T. Strong-Wilson et al., (Eds.), Productive Remembering and Social Agency, 123–137.

in movies and poetry and popular discourse more generally: drought, depression, American renditions of Sally Fields and losing the family farm, migration, the loss of rural communities, and ghost towns. In so doing, I investigate prosperity stemming from the oil boom of southwestern Manitoba on the Canadian prairies in the 1950s. Simultaneously, I acknowledge the burden of a certain amount of self-consciousness in trying to write about both prosperity and oil in the current age of environmental awareness about oil—the 'stuff' of spills and of political conflict in the Middle East. Caroline Ellis and Art Bochner define autoethnography as "an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth ethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract and resist cultural interpretations" (2003, 209). In this chapter, I work with a series of newspaper clippings and other textual evidence that speak to the iconic representations of the Prairies. I 'read' these clippings against a reality that was, in a sense, the antithesis of iconic prairie life. Let me say from the outset that the 'doing' of the writing is at once both easy and challenging, and if it sounds now like some sort of stream-of-consciousness piece, it is because that is the way I have encountered the evidence. This evidence can't be read as a linear story but rather one moving across generations—from my parents to my brothers and me and to our own children.

"A NEW KIND OF CHRISTMAS TREE"

Where to begin? My investigation starts with a newspaper clipping that appeared in 1953 in the *Virden Empire-Advance*, a small-town prairie newspaper (see Figure 9.1). The little girl in the picture is me. I am five years of age—a bit old, perhaps too old, to have my father hold me. At least that is what my Aunt Dodie, always with a slight edge to her asides, is sure to have said upon seeing this photo splashed all over town: "A big girl like you being held by daddy?" But there I am—there we are, my father and I—and let's not forget the real 'character' of this photo: "an oilman's Christmas tree," a wellhead, what the newspaper describes as "a collection of pipes and valves that controls the flow of crude oil from a well."[1] The picture you are seeing (Figure 9.1) appeared in the weekly newspaper of 'a well-to-do agricultural centre,' the place where I was born, but there was a similar photo that appeared in the *Winnipeg Free Press* two months earlier. Figure 9.1 appeared in the 1953 Christmas edition of the *Empire-Advance*, so the idea of "a different type of Christmas tree" as the article calls it makes sense, I suppose. It is the right season. In the *Winnipeg Free Press*, it is referred to as a "new kind of Christmas tree,"[2] though in that case—more than two months before Christmas—it is hard to imagine that anyone would have aligned the intricate collection of pipes and valves with a Christmas tree. But this, of course, is all very symbolic, and the deep structure is really about apparent wealth—a gift: "Christmas came two months early," says the *Empire-Advance*. The articles in both newspapers



Christmas came two months early this year for five-year-old Claudia Skinner and her parents. It arrived with a different type of Christmas tree —an oilman's Christmas tree, a collection of pipes and valves that controls the flow of crude oil from a well. This type of Christmas tree is becoming more common in the Virden area which has already christened itself the "Oil Centre of Manitoba". At left Claudia and her father, William C. Skinner are inspecting the Christmas tree on the Imperial Virden 8-28 well which was brought into production by Imperial Oil on October 18. The well is on the Skinner farm, a mile northwest of Virden. Mr. Skinner owns the mineral rights beneath his farm. The oil discoveries on the outskirts of the town of Virden and those in the nearby Daly field, discovered in 1950, have made the citizens oil conscious. At lower left is the large sign on the outskirts of the town which publicizes Virden as an "Oil Centre". Everyone is sharing in Virden's new prosperity. A program of public works development, waterworks and sanitary sewers, is underway, and new buildings are taking shape. At bottom right are two reasons for Virden's claim to be an oil centre. In the background is a rotary drilling rig, and in the foreground an oil field worker is taking a sample of crude oil from a pumping Virden well.

Figure 9.1. Claudia's Christmas tree 1 (© 1953, Virden Empire Advance).

stress this: "Mr. Skinner [my father]," the *Virden Empire-Advance* says, "owns the mineral rights beneath his farm." The *Winnipeg Free Press* says, "Mr Skinner owns the mineral rights on his farm." The *Empire-Advance* goes even further and notes the following: "Everyone is sharing in Virden's new prosperity. A program of public works development, waterworks and sanitary sewers, is underway and new buildings are taking shape." I had forgotten about the term waterworks, but that is what they used to say: "Do you have the waterworks?" or "Are you getting the waterworks?"

I decided that I should include both news clippings so you can see for yourself the slightly different angles taken in the photos. My daughter Sarah pointed out that at least in Figure 9.2 I am touching the wellhead. There is some justification for being held up by my father alongside my Christmas tree. The two photos are clearly from the same batch, judging from the clothing my father and I are wearing. I do remember the sweater that I have on. It was a dark pink—dusty rose is what I think my mother would have called the shade of it. What I remember about it all these years later, though I don't know why, is that it was odd because of its three-quarter-length sleeves, and if I am not mistaken, it had transparent glass buttons, which were very difficult to button or unbutton because the button holes were too small. You can't really tell from the picture. It was hand knit, probably by my grandmother.

Figure 9.2. Claudia's Christmas tree 2 (© 1953, Winnipeg Free Press).

I almost think that it might have been scratchy but that seems like a supposition. As for the striped socks, they were cotton, I would guess, and I have no memory of the oxfords I was wearing. I do remember seeing this very newspaper clipping when I was older than five but perhaps not more than ten or twelve and thinking that it was too bad that I was wearing such ugly socks. But it was daytime in the year before I started school, so I would have been in my play clothes. The pink sweater might have been my mother's idea of dressing me up because the newspaperman was coming—assuming my parents knew ahead of time he was coming. No sense of traipsing around the farm in a party dress on a weekday morning or afternoon. Or maybe the photographer just pitched up, saying he had driven out from Winnipeg (then a four-hour drive) and was wondering what the oil boom was all about and was interested to see the evidence.

That's when my dad would have taken him out into one of the fields to see a wellhead and the whole operation, and my mother would have got me into the dusty rose cardigan. In another photo from the same day, my father, mother, and I are pictured walking by a crude oil tank (see Figure 9.3). The *Winnipeg Free Press* account describes us as "Mr. and Mrs. William C. Skinner, and five-year-old

Figure 9.3. Elsie, Bill, and Claudia inspect a crude oil storage tank (© 1953, Winnipeg Free Press).

daughter, Claudia, inspecting a crude oil storage tank on their farm." I am not sure what we could have been inspecting or what skills we would have had as inspectors, but that is what we were apparently doing.

Through this small collection of newspaper clippings—carefully preserved by my mother—my sense of my place in the history of the oil boom in rural Manitoba in the 1950s is well established. The oil discovery itself, and subsequent oil production, was carried out by Imperial Oil, which of course I only came to know in later years as a transnational giant. About that I knew nothing, though I came to learn at an early age of the association between 'eureka' and oil discovery; the company that managed our wells was called Eureka Oil Ltd. Because I have been aware of the existence of these clippings, I think I must have developed at an early age an idea of myself as some sort of child star or poster girl. I am writing now from memory of certain things, such as the sweater and the buttons. Memory of such details represents one type of memory, but I am also writing about the memory of remembering, of having my mother show me these clippings. From time to time, these clippings would reappear. "Let's get out the photo box," she would say.

Although I think there might be a limit to the comparisons that can be made, I can't help thinking of two other accounts of girlhood photographs: one by bell hooks (1994) that describes a photograph of herself as a little girl and the ways in which the image serves to construct identity and one by Annette Kuhn (1995) of a school girl photograph. As noted in Chapter One, visual methodologies can be a critical component of memory work. An important part of both accounts is the fact that the photograph is lost. For hooks this involved the loss of the photos and the loss of something of her own identity:

> My favourite childhood snapshot then and now shows me in costume, masquerading. And long after it had disappeared I continued to long for it and to grieve. I loved this snapshot of myself because it was the only image available to me that gave me a sense of presence, of girlhood beauty and capacity for pleasure. It was an image of myself that I could genuinely like. At that stage of my life I was crazy about Westerns, about cowboys and Indians. The camera captures me in my cowgirl outfit, white ruffled blouse, vest, fringed skirt, my one gun and my boots. I become all that I wanted to be in my imagination. . . . Losing the snapshot, I lost the proof of my worthiness—that I had been a bright-eyed child capable of wonder, the proof that there was a 'me of me.' (1994, 45)

And as Annette Kuhn writes, "Sadly the photograph of me in my newly bought uniform is lost now, but I retain a clear sense, not just of what the picture looked like, but also of how it felt to be inside those clothes at that moment" (1995, 100). She goes on to talk about how much she minded the oversized uniform and how ill-fitting the clothes were, but at the same time the photograph is important as visual evidence of her identity as a smart girl: "And yet this uniform was proof for all to see that, as an 11-year-old bound for a good school, I was different, cleverer, a cut above the rest. It singled me out from the rest of my contemporaries. The fact that the photograph was made at all is proof that, for a brief time, at least, I was once again special, the credit to my mother I had stopped being several years earlier: the photograph was her own idea, and went to some trouble to arrange it" (1995, 91).

In my case, the newspaper clippings had been out of my reach for years, and for a time I hardly dared to dream that they might still exist. Thus, when I came across them in my own home a few months ago, I was overjoyed—but unsurprised at the content. It was not like learning in later life that you are adopted or some other family secret. The oil was no secret, and my brothers and I grew up in the middle of it.

Why do I ramble on about some old newspaper clippings? I wish I could know now what my parents, Bill and Elsie, thought of these posed photos. Since they are now dead and I was so little, there is a huge gap, of course, in what can be known. However, when I first saw Jean Bach's (1994) documentary *A Great Day in Harlem* about a posed photograph of a group of jazz musicians—including such jazz greats as Dizzie Gillespie—I remember being fascinated about the idea of working with the behind the scenes of the taking of a posed photograph. The documentary is based on a group portrait taken by photographer Jonathan Kane for *Esquire* magazine in 1959.

Drawing on raw footage of the taking of the photograph, Bach's film focuses both on the picture-taking process and the resulting photograph in *Esquire* so that more than thirty-five years later, the subjects interviewed for the film are still talking about that day. Participants talk about what they remember: how they felt about being in the photograph, where they stood, what the photo shoot was like, and so on. When I think about these people talking about being in the picture, I am reminded that my father always hated to be in photographs, so the idea of consenting to be in the photos described here where my father is so clearly 'in the picture' may have been a trial for him. In part, I am also intrigued by who's not in the picture and by the memories of the oil boom of my two brothers—school boys who missed getting into the newspaper pictures or being represented inspecting the crude oil tanks because they were older and already at school.

OIL CONSCIOUS/OIL CONSCIENCE

The *Virden Empire-Advance* claims that in 1953 the oil discoveries "made the citizens oil conscious." Shannon Walsh—my dear friend, former doctoral student, and director of the award-winning documentary *H2Oil*—would be appalled at the use of the term oil conscious to describe the 1950s citizens of Virden since their/our consciousness had nothing to do with the environment or what oil spills or salt water spills could do to the farmland or what effect the oil smell might have had on citizen health. The town's consciousness was occupied by the boom and the resulting prosperity, including waterworks and the new buildings. The situation must have been akin to other booms: finding gold in Yellowknife, asbestos in Thetford Mines, oil in Fort McMurray. The newspaper clippings don't say anything about the fact that oilmen and their families lived on our farm in trailers and skidshacks (the name for the small, temporary wooden trailer-like dwellings, I think). This might seem insignificant, but it is not if you live on a farm and are used to living at a great distance from other people. Rural space is disrupted by these trailers and skidshacks, added to the landscape along with people and traffic. It is hard to convey this in a few words, but in the days of the post oil boom—the time I most remember as I was growing up—it was all quiet again. If you should chance to hear a car coming along on the Main Road, as it was called, you would stop everything to see if it was going to turn into your long laneway, a good quarter mile away. Sometimes a car would turn in to the laneway, but it was only turning around. A disappointment. So new people—oilmen and sometimes their families, though I don't remember any specifics—lived right there on our farm. I do remember objects and things: one of my brothers sitting too close to an oil-fired space heater in one of these skidshacks, maybe on a Christmas Day visit, and melting the sleeve of his winter coat, which he still had to wear all winter. I also remember that one of the oil men left behind an enormous pair of cowboy boots that I took as my own, and I would wear them over my shoes, clomping—I think that must be the only appropriate word—around the farm as my own version of a cowgirl.

In this time of oil consciousness, our farm and many others in the area were transformed from what would have been a fully functioning mixed farm (grain and livestock) into what looked on the surface to be a Christmas tree operation of oil derricks, wellheads, pumps, treaters, crude oil storage tanks, and access roads running through the fields. It is a mini Burtynsky landscape from the cover of his book *Oil*. At times, we and the wells were one. The oil wells all had numbers—their identity markers—and these identity markers were the same for the oil wells as for the people, arranged according to Section Township Range by the Dominion of Canada as the mapping apparatus for the western provinces. Ours was 28–10-26. As a young child, once I began going to school, I had to know the location of our farm according to its section, township, and range. On the first or second day of school, that is what our teachers always wanted to know. You could live on a street if you were from the town and had a street address, but if you were not from the town, you could not just give out a postal box number or say you lived just off the Main Road or at Devon Farm. Devon Farm (that was the name of our farm) was not a real address. It was just something you decided to call your place. The real address was 28–10-26, with proper hyphens between the numbers. So the wells were named in relation to this, as in "No. 8–28."

But the derricks and pumps were not just about addresses and were far from benign even then. One of the older boys in the town decided—on a dare, I am guessing—to test out what it would mean to ride the teeter-totter structure of an oil pump. But this was no Disney theme park and like the Christmas tree wellhead, it was not an innocuous piece of play ground equipment, he discovered. He lost a leg. At another point, one of the oil derricks on our farm fell to the ground as it was being dismantled, my brother remembered, and crushed several vehicles, though thankfully no people.

SURFACE STRUCTURE, DEEP STRUCTURE, AND THE OIL BENEATH THE GROUND

"Oil, that is, black gold, Texas tea"
—from "The Ballad of Jed Clampett" (theme song for *The Beverly Hillbillies* TV show)

Since I have had so many years of intermittently interacting with the newspaper clippings, I find myself changing in terms of focus, becoming a little bit less interested in my poster child image and the human interest journalism about Mr. and Mrs. William C. Skinner and five-year-old Claudia and paying more attention to the oil itself. I am fascinated by the idea of what prosperity means and what 'owning' what's beneath the ground means. My father has been dead for more than twenty years, and the family farm was sold at the time of his death. The new owners bought the surface rights and received compensation for what happened on the surface (the wellheads, access roads, and so on), but the sub-surface we retained. The mineral rights—the oil rights, to be precise—stayed in the family. It was only at the time of my mother's death twelve years ago that I got a full appreciation of this since

we—the three children, my two brothers and I—inherited what's under the ground, even though there is no ground that we own there anymore. At least one of the wells is still operational. But at the height of the boom, our quarter section had seven or eight or more of these, though not all at the same time. Well, "No. 8–28" hasn't been retired, and we are the beneficiaries of the "Christmas tree"; we receive small but regular checks—our oil money.

So perhaps it should not be surprising that I have this interest now with oil and oil rights, what's on the surface and what's beneath the ground. I learned from my geologist brother—and he should know because he has made a career of studying what's beneath the ground—that all this issue of mineral rights and who owns what dates back to the late 1800s. Officially, and at the level of policy, as he writes, Manitoba is different from the other Prairie provinces: "As much of southern Manitoba was settled before the 1890s, the surface and mineral rights typically went together with the homestead title. When the original homesteads were sold, it was up to the subsequent owners to decide if they wanted to just sell the surface land and keep the mineral rights or sell them together. After 1890, the Government of Canada kept the mineral rights on any new homesteads, which were later transferred to the western provinces in 1930" (L. Skinner, pers. comm., December 19, 2010). This worked in the favour of my family and the family farm, but it is a different situation for Alberta and Saskatchewan: "Because most of southern Alberta and Saskatchewan were settled after this date [1890], the two provincial governments own most of the mineral rights" (L. Skinner, pers. comm., December 19, 2010).

More personally and at the level of the lived reality of policy, I am writing above about the time before I went to school, but by the time I finished the second grade, policy 'kicked in' even more. By then, we had moved—not out to California like Jed Clampett and the Hillbillies of Beverly Hills sit-com fame but into opulence nonetheless, going from the big old two-story farmhouse that my grandparents first owned and into a brand new 1950s ranch house with a massive picture window looking out over the prairie. Everything was brand new. My parents left on their first trip ever—other than a one day honeymoon to Clear Lake years earlier—driving to the General Motors car plant in Oshawa to pick up a brand new dark green and white Oldsmobile. And our whole family took the train out to the West Coast for our first summer holiday ever. My brothers and I got taken out of school early that last day of the school year—for me it was second grade and for them fourth grade and sixth grade—to catch the mainline Canadian Pacific Railway train to Banff, Calgary, and the West Coast. Randomly, as I am writing this, I find the proof of the trip in a small cardboard suitcase of photos and other artefacts in the form of a non transferable ticket, the "family plan," good for passage for two parents and three children travelling from Winnipeg to Victoria (see Figure 9.4). It is stamped June 26, 1956. I played "Swans on the Lake" from the first grade John Thompson book on the piano in the near empty dining room of the ferry that took us over to Vancouver Island, and my mother, who talked about this for years afterward, was ecstatic. Like Annette Kuhn, I, too, am a credit to a mother.

Figure 9.4a and b. Train tickets as textual evidence.

In school we studied Anne Marriott's poem "The Wind Our Enemy" as one of the few Western Canadian and Prairie-related texts. I am sure that the inclusion of the 'enemy' discourse wasn't intentional on the part of the well-meaning educational experts in Winnipeg who put these anthologies of the canon together, but that is what we were left with. And while we were reading about the soil blowing away in Marriott's poem, my brothers and I along with many others in our classes were building up another type of capital: we would come to own the minerals beneath the ground. Most other texts we studied in Literature class were about far-off England and British writers. At best on the Canadian scene, we looked at Bliss Carman and the "Ships of Yule." But we knew little about ships, even though someone referred to the wagons that brought settlers to the prairie as 'prairie schooners.' Ships meant nothing to us, and if I were directing a film of this time, I would have early 1960s

Figure 9.5. "Thanksgiving Time" (© 1953, Winnipeg Free Press).

prairie schoolchildren sit in nice neat rows staring blankly at the teacher (not from the town but a newcomer), who tries to tell (not show) about prairie schooners. Prosperity didn't quite fit into the curriculum even though that by the time I was in the fourth grade and we had many newcomers—the oil companies who had established offices, new organizations such as the Oil Wives, and all the building of modern bungalows—we children were housed in a brand new school that came out of the prosperity. Probably, many of the teachers owed their employment to this prosperity. It would be quite a few years before the advent of Media Education, however, and so although from 1962 onwards we children watched *The Beverly Hillbillies* half-hour television show every week—a parody, of course, of oil, black gold, and Texas tea—our teachers were having none of it, and we stuck to the works of Anne Marriott and Bliss Carman.

I remember that when I told people years later and at university that I grew up on a farm, I would always be quick to point out that it wasn't very far from town, which is a code for 'we did not live in the sticks.' But maybe it is a code for 'not being poor.' Digging for gold, searching for spices, drilling for oil—perhaps I should not have been so dismissive of Bliss Carman's "Ships of Yule": "When I was just a little boy, / Before I went to school, / I had a fleet of forty sail / I called the Ships of Yule." Little Bliss is perhaps writing of being four or five, the same age as me in the news clippings. This all happened before we went to school.

Somewhat ironically, I think now, another photo that appeared in the *Virden Empire-Advance* and in the *Winnipeg Free Press* around the same time (and no doubt taken by the same reporter who was sent out from Winnipeg to get a good story on the oil boom—a human interest angle on Bill, Elsie, and the family) captures the idyllic prairie farm scene of Bill and little Claudia walking past the barn during Thanksgiving time—father and daughter, hand in hand—and in and of itself another type of prairie myth (see Figure 9.5). Unnamed in the caption, my father and I have ceased to be

an interesting news item in relation to oil and have instead become part of a social construction created by the big city journalist and his rendition of 'a farm in Virden.' We are now part of what Lutz and Collins (1993) regard as a *National Geographic* sensibility—captioned for all time—preserving the notion of Daddy's little girl and harvest time in the popular imagination of the *Winnipeg Free Press* reader. I am not sure whether I really remember this photo being taken or whether I remember my parents telling the story, but it seems that my father and I had to walk up the lane several times in order for the photographer to capture just the right look of "Thanksgiving Time."

Although I have written elsewhere about the colonizing features of development-context photos produced by organizations such as the United Nations (see Johnny and Mitchell 2006), I had never realized that I, too, am one of the unnamed. The irony, of course, is that when we are allowed to be Mr. William C. Skinner and Claudia, we also are portrayed as prosperous industrial types, new age farmers, farming oil instead of wheat and owning the mineral rights beneath our feet—and forever giving up the idea of the traditional spruce or fir Christmas tree in favour of a different type of Christmas tree. Did anyone besides my parents recognize, I wonder, that it was the same farmer and the same farmer's daughter who appeared in the earlier story? In reality, the idyllic harvest landscape was disrupted by the wellheads, oil treaters, derricks, and the smell of the oil. But there is no sign of any of that in this picture.

BACK TO THE FUTURE?

Separate from what I have written in this chapter, I have long been fascinated by oil 'things' such as oil derricks and pumps. A number of years ago when my partner and I considered getting tattoos, it was an oil derrick that I hit on as a symbol. I wrote about this in the introduction to *Researching Children's Popular Culture* (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2002). I have resisted going any deeper in relation to oil, at least over the last five years, because, as I said earlier, I wasn't certain I was ever going to be able to lay my hands on the newspaper clippings that I describe here, and so I simply avoided remembering oil. Even now, I could stop writing this piece. "There," I could say, "I have written something. Now leave it alone." "You don't know where you are going with this stuff," one of my colleagues said, and she was right. All sorts of things seemed to surface in addition to the clippings once I got started. As I worked on this chapter, I found a copy of Bliss Carman's (1921) *Later Poems* along with my father's copy of *Selections of Prose and Poetry for Use in Schools* (published in 1922 and authorized by the Advisory Board of the Department of Education for use in the public schools of Manitoba). *Selections of Prose and Poetry for Use in Schools* is the anthology that my father must have studied in 1925 when he would have been in seventh or eighth grade. It contains the poem "The Homesteader" written by a rural Manitoban poet, Robert J. C. Stead. I know my father owned the book because his name is inscribed in various places in it—something I take as evidence of artefactual memory (see Chapter Four in this volume)—though of course I don't really know if

he ever read Stead's poem or if he took in anything about what it would mean to one day own both a farm and the wealth of the mineral rights beneath the land. Stead's poem seems to anticipate the oil boom in Manitoba:

> I follow the plough in the breaking
> I tap the rich treasures of Time—
> The treasure is here for the taking,
> And taking isn't a crime
> I ride on the rack of the reaper
> To harvest the fruit of my hand,
> And daily I know that the deepe
> I'm rooting my soul in the land.
> They say there is wealth in the doing,
> That royal and rich are the gains,
> But 'tisn't the wealth I am wooing
> So much as the life of the plains
> For here in the latter-day morning
> Where Time to Eternity clings
> Midwife to a breed in the borning,
> I behold the Beginning of Things!
> (in *Selections of Prose and Poetry for Use in Schools* 1922, 26)

As for me, I had never seen a single connection between *The Beverly Hillbillies* or Bliss Carman's "Ships of Yule" before working on this chapter. The idea of 'before I went to school' can only be obvious now when I am trying to recall a time before I went to school—something that would not have been easily accessed as memory when I was twelve years old or whenever we studied the "Ships of Yule." However, I find it quite strange now that there were no connections made in school between the oil boom and a poem dealing with riches, but perhaps I just don't remember. See what Carman writes:

> They stopped at every port to call
> From Babylon to Rome,
> To load with all the lovely things
> We never had at home;
>
> With elephants and ivory
> Bought from the Kind of Tyre,
> And shells and silks and sandal-wood
> That sailor men admire;
>
> With figs and dates from Samarcand,
> And squatty ginger-jars,
> And scented silver amulets
> From Indian bazaars[3]

I think we should ask primary school children to play with the idea of 'before I went to school' much more readily. Why don't we know more about childhood memory and the time before age six? A. A. Milne wrote *Now We Are Six*, but I haven't finished with the dig into 'before six' yet. But then we can do adult digs and adult drilling—something archaeologist Joanna Sofaer and her artist brother Joshua Sofaer do in a sibling research project of going back to the time of 'way before six' (Sofaer and Sofaer 2002). In their fascinating visual study, the focus is on trying to 'dig up' the infant self through a re-engagement with the places where they lived but before they could actually remember them, working with various archaeological tools such as aerial photographs and object biographies. Their idea was to use the practices of archaeology in order to explore their forgotten past—in particular, to explore the ways in which children might be included in archaeology. What their work suggests is a vast and untapped area of study that contests, in a sense, the boundaries of childhood consciousness (as well as adult consciousness about early childhood) as viewed through the materiality of objects (including photographs), spaces, and things. Their work also signals the significance of siblings research (see also Allnutt 2009; Langford and Langford 2011) and integrating their various perspectives and methods. While it is my brother as geologist who studies what is literally beneath the ground, I, as qualitative methodologist, aspire to get beneath the surface of 'things.'

CONCLUSION

Now that I have started to scratch the surface, it is hard to go back to the time before I thought of these ideas about oil rights and oil wells, though I still don't know quite what to make of it all. Should I even be writing about oil, given the political and environmental issues associated with the oil industry? I am not alone in worrying about this. In a short contextual piece at the beginning of his book *Oil*, Edward Burtynsky offers, in a somewhat apologetic way, the comment that there are many possible interpretations of his work and that people will make of oil what they will. He also writes that he realizes that the focus of all of his work over fifteen years is made possible because of oil. At the same time, there is something of an ownership issue about what I now think of as the surface rights and sub-surface rights associated with memory. The box of newspaper clippings and photos that inspired and informed this chapter also belong to my brothers, and of course to my children and grandchildren and the families of my brothers. Having put my spin on the series of newspaper clippings and other artefacts, they no longer exist in quite the same state in which I received them. Now that the images have been scanned into a book chapter and written about here, will I be able return them intact to the small brown cardboard suitcase where they have been stored so that they can be discovered again as an 'eureka' project by another generation? Or have I now contributed to some sort of drilling device? Perhaps that is what productive remembering is – creating a new space, a critical space within which to live and within which to imagine the future. In this case I am thinking of those who come after me and who may not know what to do with the small

brown suitcase of artefacts. It seems that the title of Annette Kuhn's book *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* perfectly captures this productive state of being. The surface has been broken, and there are new depths for exploration.

NOTES

[1] This quotation and all other quotations in the chapter that come from the *Virden Empire-Advance* appeared in the issue dated December 16, 1953.

[2] This quotation and all other quotations from the *Winnipeg Free Press* were taken from undated clipping. What is known is that the clipping is from an issue of the *Winnipeg Free Press* that was published in October of 1953 just after Thanksgiving.

[3] This is a portion of the poem "Ships of Yule", which can be found in its entirety in Bliss Carman's (1921) *Later Poems*. The poem is now in the public domain and can also be read in full at http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/poetry/index-e.html

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