



Wes Froese, Manitoba - Year born 1957. "Kid from the 60s". BILLI J. MILLER



Claire Nagel, Saskatchewan - Year born 2006. "Kid from Today". BILLI J. MILLER



Max Merrild, Alberta - Year born 2015. "Kid from Today". BILLI J. MILLER



Amy VanderHeide, Nova Scotia - Year born 1986. "Kid from the 90s". BILLI J. MILLER



Shane Jones, Alberta - Year born 1978. "Kid from the 80s". BILLI J. MILLER



Faber Girls - Lily, age 5 / Addie, age 7 / Leyla, age 9. "Kids from Today". BILLI J. MILLER



Karen Fawcett, Alberta - Year born 1972. "Kid from the 80s". BILLI J. MILLER

Farm Kids, then and now

By Billi J. Miller

Recently, I attended the 101st birthday celebration of a man whose life advice to folks is: A little hard work never kills anyone, and just be kind!

I was lucky enough to interview a few near centenarians for my "Farm Kids" book, and the feeling I have about capturing that wisdom in a book forever gives me goosebumps.

Vernon Marlatt turned 101 in August and fought hard to get to that day. Pneumonia put him in the hospital just weeks before. Still, due to his charming persistence, the doctors agreed to let him out to celebrate with his closest friends and family at the Lashburn Golf Course in his Saskatchewan hometown.

Well into Vernon's 100th year, you might have caught him playing a round of golf with his friends or tending to his garden much larger than a city plot.

Much to his family's relief and happiness, he was discharged from the hospital a few days after his birthday celebration.



Vernon Marlatt, Saskatchewan - Year born 1922. "Kid from the 30s". BILLI J. MILLER

When I'm asked why I wrote the book "Farm Kids: Stories from Our Lives," the reason is quite simple. I have never met a single person raised on a farm who didn't speak highly of the experience. Not one.

To provide some perspective, since marrying a fourth-generation farmer in 2010 led to writing four books about farmers, farmwives, and farm life — I've met a lot of farm families! As a writer, I've interviewed close to a hundred people and talked to them candidly about their lives on their farms.

So when I sat down to map out the concept of my fourth book, "Farm Kids: Stories from Our Lives," I knew I wanted to interview present-day kids and men and women up to centenarians. Because after all, how better to tell the story of what life is like being raised a farm kid than to tell it from varying perspectives? Plus, they say that when an elder dies, a library burns to the ground — and I've never been one to waste books.

Back now to Vernon Marlatt. Vernon's mother lived to 102. When asked about his key memories of her, he said: "She was a hardworking lady. She was a home keeper who could do anything and everything. She would help anyone if needed. She was a great lady."

I found it touching to ask my book interviewees about their Mothers. Shane Jones (a kid from the 80s) reflected on his Mom's qualities by saying she was "always present." His mother was involved in many aspects of his life, wore many different hats on the farm, as a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN), and even so, after a long day, would still put on a ball glove to play catch with Shane. He fondly recalled his Mom dipping into the "big yellow bag of Robin Hood flour while investing hours making homemade dinner rolls and her infamous cinnamon buns."

The fondness of their moms was communicated even simpler as the interviewees' ages got younger, with then six-year-old Max Merrild answering what his favourite thing about his Mom was: "probably that she goes to town and gets lots of groceries."

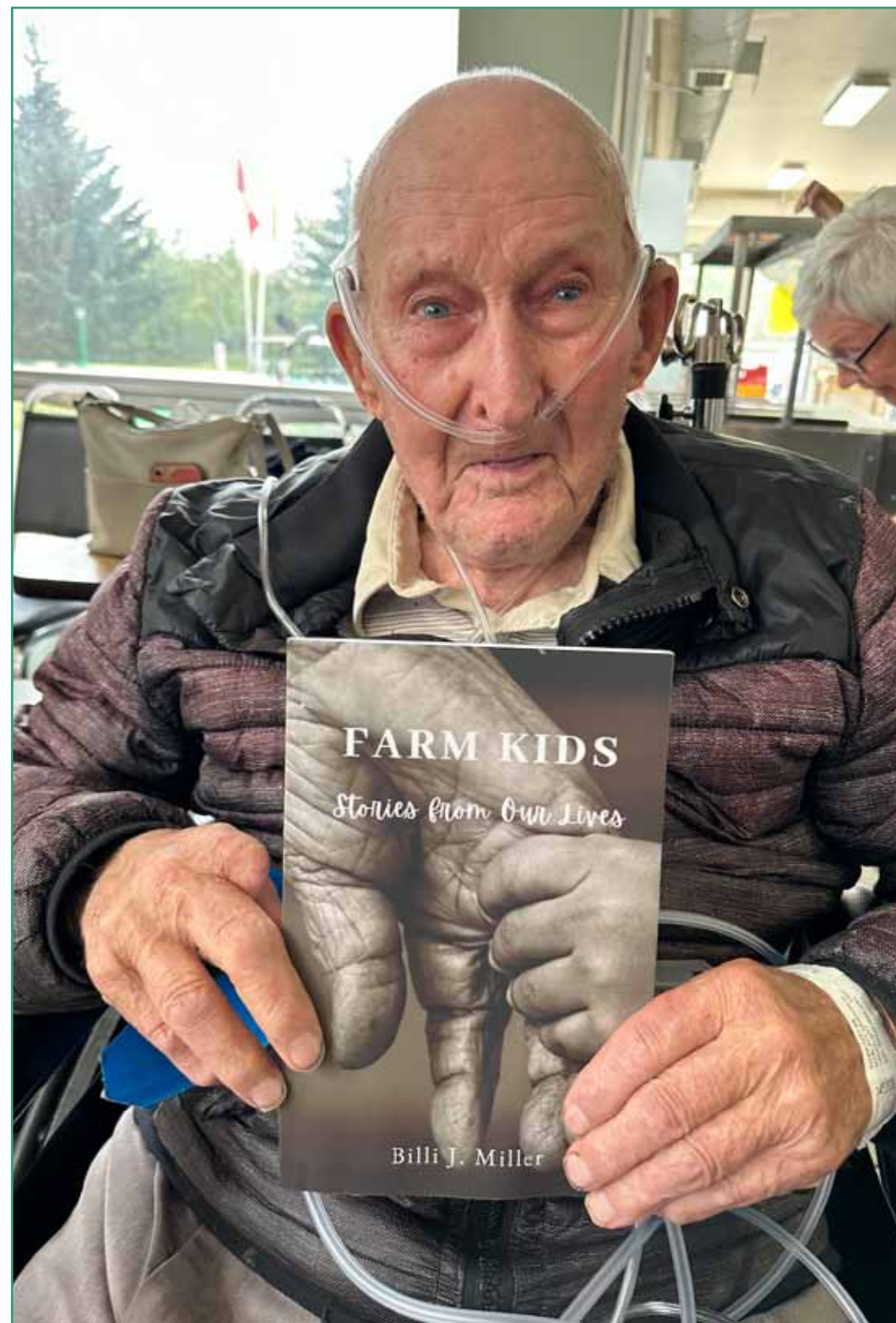
Despite what age you asked, the comments and attitudes of their fathers often surrounded them being the child's hero. That, and recollections of riding on the big machines with their dads.

Another question that had to be asked when speaking with my almost 98-year-old neighbour Ceriel Mauws was, "what is the biggest way farming has changed in your lifetime?"

Ceriel recollected: "I have seen farming change immensely — from horses to tractors, electrification, hydraulics, equipment size and technology. Major recent changes are the switch to no-till, the improvements in chemicals and other inputs, guidance systems and grain handling systems."

When asked about his favourite part of farming when he was younger... Ceriel's answer was: "Harvest time."

Wes Froese from Boissevain, Manitoba (a kid from the 60s, and husband to "Canada's Farm Whisperer," Elaine Froese) recalled his favourite "farming memory" of childhood was the physical work, driving things, and being outside. "I liked the challenge of doing things and seeing what I accomplished. In this farming, you can usually see what you have done at the end of the day."



Vernon Marlatt holding onto my book on his 101st birthday. BILLI J. MILLER

Since many of the book subjects were young, some of my interviews had to happen in collaboration with their parents. In this case, I asked their parents to tell me stories that describe "life with their farm kid."

In one such case, Dwayne Faber, who owns and operates two dairy farms in Washington State with his wife and three daughters, stepped up to the task with the following:

"Life with Lily"
While helping feed cows, Lily told me she was going to share her coke with a cow and promptly offered her straw to a cow.

"Life with Addie"
Addie: Can I have a horse?

Dad: No, horses don't make any money. Addie, after a few moments: But you say cows don't make any money either.

"Life with Leyla"
While driving between farms, Leyla asked if I was the boss. I said yes, and asked what the boss did, with excitement at her response. She replied: "The boss doesn't do anything; they just drive around."

When writing this fourth book, it was an honour for me to go back to one of the women from my Farmwives book project, Amy VanderHeide from Nova Scotia. She quickly debunked any stereotypes that may have existed prior by those who believe farm kids from today sure don't work as the kids did decades ago.

Although Amy grew up one generation removed from the family farm, her grandmother lived on a cow-calf farm next

door. So, Amy felt like she grew up on the farm raising beef cattle.

When I asked Amy what a typical day was like for her after she got home from school and what she did on weekends, her reply was similar to that of kids decades ago. She stated, "In middle school and high school, I would often get up before school to help my aunts and uncle do chores, and I would repeat that in the evening. At the time, our cows were kept in stanchions. We fed and cleaned them twice a day, and during calving, would check barns multiple times a day and move the cows from their stanchions into a maternity pen as needed."

Another "reconnection" was when I interviewed the daughter of someone from my book "Farmwives 2", Cherilyn Jolly-Nagel. Her daughter Claire was born in 2006 and provided her "teenage" perspective on growing up as a farm kid.

Claire describes her life growing up playing sports, joining many clubs, and helping out on the farm whenever possible. Her days after school and on weekends involve doing many "inside jobs," feeding animals, then off to whatever sport she happens to be playing. Then, she runs equipment like the land roller and grain cart.

When I asked Claire how she thought being raised on a farm is helping to shape her future, her response sounded much older than her age: "Being raised on the farm has given me a fantastic work ethic and a great attitude toward physical labour. Who I am and what I will become is a product of how and where I was raised. I have my parents to thank for everything I have done and will ever do."

The gratitude for this life is from the heart of hearts, my core for writing this book. I am glad my children will have this book and their life of memories to look back on. I'm grateful it gives all "farm kids" whatever age they are now, a poignant and touching look back at what their life really meant. I'm glad the parents who read it see what all their years of gruelling work really meant to their kids and families.

One of the most touching interviews in the book was from my daughter's music teacher, Karen Fawcett. Her stories and gratitude for her parents made me cry, then

was so brilliantly wrapped by saying, "I have a ring I wear, with our home quarter land location engraved. That land location is where home is, our farm, and my heart will remain."

Not only do I think you should buy this book because it has my heart in it, but also for its endless value, even for non-farmers. There has never been a time as now that we should narrow the gap between not only rural and urban, but all people.

Reading "Farm Kids" you will not only learn so much from the twenty-seven interviews, but you will learn from hundreds of others whom I asked this question: "If there was one thing you wish non-farmers knew about us — what would it be?"

Snag the book and find out what they said.

Until next time... thanks for reading my story.

— Billi J. Miller is a published author, photographer and speaker from east-central Alberta. She freelance writes from her home office and can be reached through her website: billijmiller.com. To find out where to purchase her books, you can visit: www.billijmiller.com/instores.



Ceriel Mauws, Alberta - Year born 1925. "Kid from the 30s". BILLI J. MILLER