

Edmund Belke
by Son Theodore Belke
Polish Immigrant
Pulaski
June 17, 1930

CANADA'S IMMIGRATION MUSEUM
PIER 21



Belke family's 1930 passport photo
Robert Belke, middle L to R Augusta Belke, August Belke, front Eric,
Emma & Edmund Belke

Edmund Belke's Story

1930 was a very exciting year for us. My brothers Robert and Eric, my sister Emma and I sensed that the big people in our household were

making many plans. Well, actually Eric didn't notice important things yet, he was just a baby less than 2 years old and Emma was Mama's girl - only four. But Robert and I were big boys, he was ten and I was seven so we knew there was going to be an adventure.

Our parents August and Augusta were making important decisions which led to big changes for us all. Our family had lived in Poland for over one hundred years and now our farm and home were going to be sold. Four generations of Belkes were born and lived on our farm in Michelsdorf. Over the generations as our family grew it became harder and harder for the small farm to provide for all of us so we knew our parents were right. It was time to move on. Our parents had letters from friends in Canada and they said it promised new opportunities, a brighter future for all of us.

Soon the farm in Michelsdorf, our ancestral home, was sold. The proceeds from the sale of the land were divided between my Dad and his seven sisters and brothers. With two steamer trunks, assorted hand luggage with personal effects and \$365 our family started the long journey to find a new home. When we left our village for the last time, our friends and relatives cried. We knew that we would never see them again so we cried too.

We left Poland, sailing from Danzig on June 6, 1930 on the ship Pulaski. I remember the big ship and its many new exciting features. Robert and I soon made friends with other boys our age. As we became bolder we started exploring this huge vessel. We soon found out that baggage carts had a dual purpose. We climbed onto the cart and wait for a big wave to tilt the ship. Away we would roll, a free and exciting ride until we hit the railing of the ship with a heart-stopping thud. Then with the next big wave we started all over again. It was great sport, but when the sailors found us they were not amused and sent us packing. That did not keep us from exploring even further afield. We soon found there was a huge kitchen with good things to eat. To get rid of us the cooks gave us something round with a hole in the middle dusted with white, sweet flour. We were told this was a doughnut. Was it ever good—must be Canadian.

After eleven days at sea, on June 17th, we landed in Halifax at Pier 21 and entered the huge building. A friendly man wearing a uniform greeted us. He asked my parents a lot of questions, checked all our baggage and then wished us well in our new country. We were finally in Canada.

We traveled by train from Halifax, Nova Scotia to Edmonton, Alberta arriving on 23 June. What a big country! This is all Canada? After a short visit with friends in Wetaskiwin we took another train to Fairview

which was twenty miles from Hines Creek, Alberta. The homestead my family filed on was nearby and it would be our new home.

One hundred and sixty acres just for \$10.00? We soon learned this was not a big bargain after all because the land had to be cleared of big trees and underbrush and the sod broken before we could think of seeding a field or even planting a garden. It was very back breaking work. We kids helped with piling and burning brush before the sod was broken and then with picking the roots. Mosquitoes and sand flies set the pace. We did not dare stop work. Standing still meant being attacked by the viscous insects. The first priority was to build a house because winter would soon be upon us. With the help of our new neighbors and using the spruce trees on our land a log house was built. In this new house three more children were born; Adolf, Helen and Theodore.

A church was one of the first community buildings the settlers built. On Sundays we all went to church. On Saturdays children learned the catechism and also learned to read and write the German language. The minister who served this small congregation taught these subjects. Lutheran congregations in the United States provided additional financial support. Each fall, they would also send boxes of clothing which were a great help for this community. During the first few years on our homestead the country was in the depths of a massive depression and we were poor but with the support of generous people and hard work we survived these difficult times.

The community also built a school. This was a two-mile walk through the bush. At first it was just a path but in time it became a wagon trail. In summer we walked barefoot to school. In the winter we wore our second hand shoes and our second hand clothes to help keep warm. We were not the only ones who learned to speak English when we arrived at school because there were many other children from other parts of the world learning a new language as well. We began our school days with the singing of 'Oh, Canada' and then we would recite the Lord's Prayer. We were all of different religious and ethnic backgrounds but we all wanted to learn how to become Canadians. Despite our differences we respected our elders and neighbors and their property. At the closing of the school day, we all sang 'God Save Our King'. Even though we were poor, we were proud to be part of this new country.

I remember one spring when the snow had just melted. It was a warm sunny day so all the boys decided to walk to school barefoot rather than wear the ill-fitting shoes. About noon it started to snow, so the teacher seeing that we had no shoes sent us home early, hoping we would get home before the snow got too deep. Halfway home our feet were numb with cold. The only way to warm them up was to climb onto a wooden

fence. We must have looked like a flock of pigeons, sitting all in a row, trying to warm up our feet. A kindly neighbor saw us and called us into his newly built home where he gave us socks and mittens to wear on our feet. Boy, were we ever a happy thankful group of kids. This, of course was typical Canadian spring weather.

Our nearest hospital was thirty miles away. We had only a Public Health Nurse serving the whole area. Usually our parents were our medical advisors. When I was in my teens, I had rheumatic fever. The Nurse was called to help out. She stayed a couple of days bringing my fever down. I survived.

Living in the northern part of Alberta, we did not have any fresh homegrown fruit, nor could we afford to buy any. Instead we picked wild saskatoons, raspberries, strawberries, blueberries, etc. which we canned for a welcome treat during the long winter months. We had no problems with any of the wild animals, but believe me there were plenty of signs of bears, wolves and coyotes. Our parents reminded us to always make lots of noise when walking in wooded areas. One day Robert and I went picking saskatoons. We found a nice stand of berries and were busy picking when we spotted a black bear enjoying the saskatoons on the other side of the bush. Did we ever let out a yell! The bear took off in one direction and we scooted away for home in the opposite direction.

After school hours, in the wintertime, we had our own little trap line. We hunted and trapped squirrels and rabbits and muskrats. These we skinned, stretched and dried behind the kitchen stove. The sale of these furs paid for the rifles, shells and other equipment that were used to hunt moose and deer during our teen years. In those days guns were part of our survival equipment.

My parents must have wondered about the validity of their decision many times during the years their family was growing up. Although it was a good decision, the timing of arriving in Canada with four young children, just in time for the Great Depression created many worries. There was little or no 'outside work' and as Mom said, "If there hadn't been lots of rabbits in those first years, we probably would have starved". Mother worked continuously, cooking, sewing, gardening, caring for animals and kids, but the toil and strife did bring its rewards. Poverty was not something that deprived us from achieving our goals. We learned the new language and new ways and left our mark in this New World. Following our parent's example we worked. Everyone went to school. Some of us did work that is visible and stands as a monument. The rest of us worked for less visible but nevertheless worthy goals, earning a living and raising our children to be good citizens. Our ever growing

family is truly grateful for August and Augusta's decision to come to Canada.

Canada is our home. God bless our land!