

Joyce Barkhouse's Gem of a Novel by Heather Stevenson

Lines that Catch – true stories of Nova Scotia

For young readers, its popularity appears timeless. In spite of bookstore options and the publicity surrounding novels like *The Wimpy Kid* and *Harry Potter* series, one of the best-selling children's books in Nova Scotia during the last week of March was Joyce Barkhouse's *Pit Pony*.

The author was born in 1913 when kerosene lamps and horse transportation were part of everyday life. Her father, Harold Killam, was a doctor; her mother, Ora Webster, his sometimes receptionist. Their small Woodville home, in the apple-producing Annapolis Valley, was filled with the family's five children and an eclectic group of comers and goers — the doctor's patients.

Joyce's childhood, typical of Maritime children in the first half of the Twentieth Century, included many outdoor activities – looking for shale to use as slate pencils, preferring ones which made red or pink marks, and going to the old swimming hole where she was taught to swim by her sister.

Experiences in the tunnel, a cement culvert, which her favourite brook passed through, may have been a precursor to her literary skills for it was here she noticed words ending in “o” made the best echoes. Being a middle child, sandwiched between two older sisters and two younger brothers, created a space into which an interest in writing developed.

“I always tried to write stories,” she says, but she also loved to tell stories, elaborating on them to hold the attention of her parents and siblings.

Her school years were spent in the two-room Woodville School, until she transferred to King's County Academy, Kentville, for twelfth grade, continuing her education at the Provincial Normal College in Truro. During the Great Depression, she obtained a position in Sandhill (East Aylesford), teaching grades one through eleven in a one-room school.

At the age of 19, Joyce published her first short story in *The Northern Messenger*, a church paper for children, and was paid \$1 — many stories for church papers, teachers' publications and *Family Herald and Weekly Star* followed.

In 1939, she began teaching in Liverpool, Nova Scotia, where she met her future husband, Milton Joseph Barkhouse who worked at the Royal Bank. Eight years of teaching full-time ended as she settled into married life, raising two children. Her

husband's job took them to Halifax, Charlottetown, and finally Montreal where she was given her first assignment — a series about Expo 67 for the United Church Publishing House. Her work started to appear in American publications, such as *Trailer Guide* and *New York Times*. But her novels would bring the most recognition.

Her first novel, published in 1974 at age 61, was *George Dawson: The Little Giant*. She is best known for *Pit Pony*, which came 15 years later and was turned into an award-winning CBC movie.

Often, in youth, something significant occurs, resurfacing in adulthood. This happened to Joyce Barkhouse. Her father's first driving horse, named Gem, was a trustworthy mare that had a homing instinct as keen as a pigeon. This ability was fondly remembered in stories told by Joyce's father. Reading about Sable Island in chapter one of an old history textbook was another. Later, she would learn about child labour in the pits. The seeds that became a love of history and *Pit Pony* were well sown.

Pit Pony was unique for Joyce since most of her previous novels were either biographies or retold myths. *Pit Pony* was historical fiction, a genre seldom written, at the time, for children. Although it shows her love for Nova Scotia and its local history, this departure from her other novels wasn't easy as she struggled for years, sometimes doubting it would be completed.

Not one to sugar-coat, she wrote about the harsh realities of life in Cape Breton coal mines at the turn-of-the-Twentieth Century, yet it's the closeness the main character, eleven year old "Wee" Willie Maclean, feels for Gem, the Sable Island mare, and the unity of his family, that gives *Pit Pony* its enduring appeal.

Pit Pony continues to thrive; it has been made into an audio book, an e-book, and is shortlisted for the 2012 Hackmatack Award.

Recipient of the Order of Nova Scotia and member of the Order of Canada, Joyce Barkhouse's belief, in our connections to family and animals, transcends time.

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