



The Nicholson Family Letters for Spring/Summer 1911

with background notes.

Primary Resource to be used with *Threshold Girl*, the novel, by Dorothy Nixon.
www.tighsolas.ca/page10.pdf.pdf

North Bay, May 27, 1911

Dear Margaret,

You will see by heading of this letter where I am today.

This is a town of about 8 thousand situated at the end of Lake Tamiskaming. Flora can look it up for you on the map in the secretary.

I left Ottawa at 12 50 PM. Arrived here this morning at 9 am.

When leaving Ottawa last night they gave me a ticket over the CPR for here, also a berth ticket which I enjoyed very much. The porter made me a nice bed in one of the lower berths.

I got up this morning at 7 o'clock. Went into the diner and had breakfast which comprised 3 eggs, one baked potato, 3 rolls, and a glass of milk. And a toothpick served on a silver tray for my entree where I washed my fingers in a silver bowl.

All at the expense of the Transcontinental Ry.

On arriving here I went and saw the transport engineer and he sends me to Cochrane where the Tamiskaming and the Northern Ontario intersects--with the orders for my destination about 50 miles east of Cochran on Division D.

But I will be on the rails and I will be pleased not to have to walk. I leave here tomorrow at 5:20 am. Will stop at Cobalt for three hours then proceed to Cochran. I am supposed to get to Cochran at eight tomorrow morning.

I will try and write you from there, Now the distance from Ottawa here is 23 miles and from here to Cochran is 252 miles from Montreal to Ottawa is about 120 miles with 76 from Montreal will give you some idea of how far I am from home.

But I can cover the distance quicker then when I was in La Tuque, only it will be more expensive to go home when I do.

When I arrive at destination I will try and give you a better idea of where I am.

But so far they have treated me fine. I only saw Parent for a few minutes, he had arrived from Chicago and was busy in his office. He said he thought I would be suited with my change.

Will tell later. Hope you had a pleasant time in Montreal with Marion. I will send you address to write to as soon as I arrive. And will try and write you tomorrow from Cochran.

I am taking things cool and intend to do so, do not worry about me.

I am feeling fine and the Commission is paying the bill as I go so I am not worrying about it in the least. I cannot think of any news so I will close for this time.

You will have quite a time to read this letter as I am writing in a hurry along with being a poor writer. Love to Edith and Flora also to yourself.

Your affectionate husband, Norman.

...In May 1911, Norman Nicholson, 60, former dealer in hemlock bark and leading citizen of Richmond, Quebec, leaves for a second stint as Inspector on the Canadian Transcontinental Railway, a Laurier Government initiative.

He had been fired in May, 1910, from his first stint working near La Tuque, Quebec, for going absent without leave.

At that time, Norman, a devoted family man, had been overcome with worry, mostly generated by his only son, Herbert, 26, who had just been caught 'borrowing' sixty dollars from the Eastern Townships Bank where he was employed as a teller.

Norman had been working on the railway, inspecting ties, for 2 1/2 years. He was hired shortly after the collapse of the Quebec Bridge, and that was likely no coincidence.

In early 1907, with his bank book balance at a paltry 33.00 because of the decade long decline of the Eastern Townships bark industry, Norman, applied for work with the railway.

In July 1907, despite having area Liberal M.P. E.W. Tobin as a patron, he was informed by a letter from the CTR's head office that they had their full complement of inspectors.

Then came the infamous bridge disaster, on August 19th, which made headlines around the world, and

which killed scores of men, most of them employees of the US contractor and Mohawk labourers from Caugnawaga, south of Montreal. (Kanewake).

The bridge had been a component of the Canadian Transcontinental Railway, one of Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier's initiatives.

Suddenly, there was a need for inspectors at 'end of steel.'

Margaret and Flora Nicholson 1910

Dufferin Street,

June 6, 1911

Dear Norman,

Your letter with your address just recd this evening so I thought I must write at once.

Seems such a long time since you left.

I also recd a letter from North Bay and one also from Cochran. You certainly have done very well about writing, only I was longing for the address.

I came home the Sunday after you left, came out on the late train. Edith and Flora had retired but they were not long in coming to the door.

It had been a very hot day in Montreal but when I got here it had rained and was quite cool which was a pleasant change.

Came up in the bus.

I stayed with Marion all the time in Montreal (Boarding House on Tower) and only stayed at the Cleveland's the day you left. Dr. C. said he had not seen you for such a long time.

I am very glad that you are to be on the rails. Hope you will like the Scotchman better

than the last (supervisor, an Englishman). You will because he is Canadian.

I have figured the distance.. over seven hundred miles.

Still, I see this letter recd tonight is stamped Cochran the 5th was not long in coming that distance, the delay was East of Cochran.

I have not heard from Herb since you left. I am looking for a letter in two days as he would likely write Sunday.

Although, he missed writing one Sunday.

I wrote him after you left, but you better write and send him your add. Anything I get will mail to you.

I have not heard from Marion since I came home. I think she will come to Richmond as soon as school closes.

I got the cheque for 10.95 from your man. Edith took it to the ET Bank and had it cashed so we will be all right for a while. I also got receipt for money sent for Westminster and Presbyterian. (Magazines, both Presbyterian.)

Sorry you forgot the mirror. The other things I will mail you at once.

The weather has been cool here just as you have it there.

Evenings we are glad to sit in the kitchen. The days are fine to wash so we have got our washing and ironing done.

We could not get a man to cut the lawn last week so Edith, Flora and myself thought we would try it on a nice cool day. We mangled the front but could not attempt the back.

Charlie Moore did the back lawn Saturday and is to do the front tomorrow night. He has promised to do it once a week in the evening as he works in the Boston and Last Factory. (With Grand Trunk Railway the major employer in Richmond.)

We really were too tired, we will not try it again. I don't think.

Tonight Flora and I went up to Bella's (Sister, Isabella Hill, around the corner on swank College Street. Edith walked down to the mail. Clayton (Isabella's husband) took us down to the mail in his auto, then brought us home. It is running fine now.

He was out in Kingsbury Sunday. William left Monday on his trip out West. He has a ticket on the CPR He came down to bid us goodbye, did not know you had gone till he came to the house. Seemed disappointed he really seemed so lonesome going. Too bad he was going alone. I told I wish you were going with him. I gave him Herb's address).

Montgomery (next door neighbour) is working at his new garage. Says he has all the men he wants now. Skinners (other next door neighbours) are having the same pleasure in their auto. Going all the time. Earnest and wife left Monday for Montreal. We had them in for tea. Saturday eve then we went over and played cards until near Sunday morning.

They took Edith to South Durham one day last week, stayed for tea there. They all seemed to enjoy our tea as they are all fond of my home made fresh bread.

Now I am glad that you are particular about your diet and that you are feeling well. I trust you will take good care of yourself around and about the trains.
Tell me how you like this work.

Flora is keeping very well. She comes home every afternoon at 3 o'clock studies for a change and stays out on the veranda. The vines have filled in so we can sit there the

whole afternoon.

Our Church sale is Wednesday and Thursday so they will be by about that this week. Edith is feeling well and is getting with the work all right...Later....

Miss Denton called me to go down to the hall at 9 am. I thought Edith would finish this letter and send it on. Sorry it was delayed. The great crowd that was expected did not turn out. We are going back this afternoon will tell you how much we make.

Had a letter from Marion said she got your letter.

Hoping to hear from you again very soon,

With much love Margaret.

Town life in Richmond, Quebec, in 1911 consists of walks to the mail, afternoon teas, both given and received, and a long list of daily chores. (Margaret won prizes for her baking.) And church duties of course. Daughter Edith, 27, is back at home, from her teaching job in the city. She does not have a diploma so cannot get a higher paying position at the Montreal Board, like her younger sister Marion. She works at Ecole Methodiste in Westmount, converting Catholics to Protestantism. Flora, the youngest at 19, is in the crunch year at St. Francis College, a distinguished local institution. She must pass her exams if she is to be accepted at Macdonald Teachers College and earn a diploma and a decent living as a teacher. The problem, she freezes from nerves at exam time.

Composition, French and Latin are her trouble areas. The Nicholsons live in a prestige area of town, which explains why both neighbours - as well as the brother in law - have brand new automobiles. Motorcars in 1911 could cost as much as a house (\$2,000 range) and you couldn't get them on credit. But they were definitely, the "in" thing, especially in towns like Richmond, especially with men. And everyone seemed to enjoy car rides, men and women alike. The Nicholsons are in no position to buy an automobile. Their financial situation is precarious. Well, they are broke, basically, and 'house poor' as they owe a large mortgage on Tighsolas, their charming brick home, built in 1896. When Margaret first learns that her neighbour is looking to buy a car, she writes to her husband "I would rather have a fine horse any day than a motor." She feels cars to be foolish and dangerous. Clayton Hill's auto has lately broken down and he had to pay a great deal for repairs, with amuses Margaret greatly.

The Clevelands are family friends who live on Lorne, near McGill. He is a dentist. They are wealthy enough to have a live in maid, a young English woman, newly arrived from the UK. The 1911 census reveals that most people on Lorne had maids. Still, there was a servant problem in 1910 in Canada. The Census also reveals that only two families living in the Nicholson's Richmond neighbourhood have a live in maid.

Margaret to Norman

June 10, 1911

Dear Norman,

Your letter to Edith received Friday morning. As she was not here I opened it.

She had left an hour before with Dr. and Mrs. Skinner for an auto ride to Montreal left here 10 am arrived in Waterloo at 12.30 had dinner left at 2 o'clock arrived safely without any stop. In Montreal at six pm. They said when leaving that they would be home Tuesday; she said they had a delightful ride. She was staying with Marion.

I had a letter from Herb Friday night. He is very well said the last letters went to Qu'appelle (Saskatchewan). They were diverted by some mistake and he was longer in getting them. (An excuse for not writing sooner?) He said the manager was going to have his holidays and that he was to be manager for two weeks. Says he does not like the town one bit and if he does not get transferred will leave. I hope he will stay and get a transfer before long, I hope you will write him to stay until is sure of something better. I am going to.

Just when Flora and I were preparing for the Ladies Aid meeting, 16 women!, Aunt Christie and Malcolm arrived from Lingwick. Aunt C. was away two weeks. M. went up to meet her stayed one week. (That was his first trip to Lingwick. I don't think he was

much taken with the place there are not many young people there. Of their friends.)

They did not send any word that they were coming. Uncle Alex came down about 5 o'clock to meet Christie and take her home.

Mrs. Nielson (another visitor who'd been there for 3 days) went up to Bella's And Clayton and Bella took her out in the auto.

So F and I are having a quiet time. It will be a rest for her as her exams begin tomorrow morning; she is very well.

I was quite tired after all this but feel quite rested now as Flora and I were alone last night. We did not get up until quarter to nine and we both went to Sunday school.

Morse cut the lawn once, took him three evenings, clipped it one eve, he does it well. But said he would not promise to do it regularly.

We put our plants out and beans in. Taylor said he would put the tomatoes in Tuesday. Says his own were not in Friday when I spoke to him. He is so slow.

I will enclose you a clipping from the paper about Dr. Moffatt's loss. Mrs. Montgomery was telling me that they had offered him 50 cents on the dollar, that is a loss of 4,000, he was in Sherbrooke Friday. I supposed he made it on stocks so he need not feel it so much. Mrs. Moffatt was working at the sale but did not mention it to me. Only she was rather short in the temper. They have sold all their horses.

Uncle Alex had a great many questions to ask (about you.) He knows more about that part of the country than I could tell him. Had to come up to the office (home office!) to look at the map, of course. Cochran was not on it. We found Lake Abbot, a mining town he said it was.

Is that place in the woods from Cochran?

I was trying to tell him it was quite civilized around there.

I hope you will like the crew. Too bad you have to walk so much.

I will tell Alex all the good points, he always wants to know your business before you know it yourself. He is jealous if anyone is doing well.

Dan and Grandma are well. (Sickly brother and aged mother.)

I did not get the Herald last night, hope you got it. Let me know if you feel any of the indigestion.

With Much Love,

Your Loving Wife
Margaret.

Visitors, visitors. They could be welcome and unwelcome in 1911, but you still harboured them, because in turn they harboured you. With no maids, visitors could be a lot of work.

Dr. Moffatt was the Nicholson's GP and he also was related to them by marriage. He was a victim of an Eastern Townships stock market swindle, the Nicholsons cut out a newspaper clipping.

He soon moved to Vancouver.

Linguick was nearby farm country, (the Malcolm in the letter above walked from Linguick to Richmond) and where the Isle of Lewis Scots of Quebec landed in the mid 1800's. Norman's people were from there (The Gore) and Margaret's from Kingsbury. Both places are on Google Maps.

June 15, 1911,

Dear Norman,

You're letters of the 11th and 12th just received. I hope you have already received one from me with Herb's enclosed.

You will be surprised to hear that Edith had a trip to the city by auto (with the Skinners). She had a delightful trip, no breaks or stops and arrived home at 7 o'clock safe and very hungry. We had everyone come in for a cup of tea and I had just baked bread so they thought that was fine.

Edith had Lulu Stevens sewing for a few days, so I got her to do same for me. I had my muslin dress also one from the print you bought me. And my white skirt. So we won't be sewing all summer as we used to do.

Charlie Wilson came up and told me he could not do the lawn, so I will have to look for someone else tomorrow.

Old Mr. Hill died yesterday at 5.p.m, the 14th. Funeral Saturday, the 17th. Masonic. I went up for a while this evening.

Today Mrs. Campbell, Grace and Bert called. They were asking for you. I told them it was a great deal better than La Tuque. I trust it is.

Is the handcar safe? It will be easier than the walking. Happy to hear McKechnie is all right. If he is a Liberal and a Mason he will be better!

I am sorry you are having such a hard time with flies. Well, their season soon will be past.

Well, the Census man was around. I gave him your age as 60. Was I right. You know I always save a few years for myself. He did not take Herb's or Marion's. So that is over.

Flora will finish her exams tomorrow. She has kept well. The weather has been cool, so

that made it pleasant.

Dr. Moffat's loss is the talk of the town. Dr. Skinner said he has heard they will not be able to pay him for than 15 cents on the dollar.

Marion is not going to wait for the wedding (Isabel McCoy's) as it would keep her too long in town.

As you can see by Herb's letter he feels lonesome to think of you being so far away, but if we all keep well, we will all be together for the summer months. (?)

We will manage everything here all right until then. Only it does seem ages since you left. We have not got used to staying alone.

Kenneth got your letters. Big Kenneth said he thought you were taking Laurier's place while he was away at the Coronation.

He told me to tell you he said so.

Christina Watters went into Montreal to May's graduation, which is today. Henry is coming up he can get away.

Right now, Edith is at the Skinner's playing cards. Flora is looking over her lessons, so I thought I would write to my best fellow.

(Uncle Dan says you are all right on the railroad. He was often out in the woods, he says. Still I think 63 miles a long distance. Is it all woods from Cochrane? Will the work last long there?

I have mailed you your check book. We have not seen the Herald all week. Take good care of yourself. I will write again soon.

With much Love,

Margaret.



Census Page for Nicholsons.

The Skinners are Frank and Ruby, son Floyd.

May Watters is a niece of Norman's and is graduating from Macdonald Teacher's College. According to the Census Records, her family lived in Kingsbury. (The Census has them as Waters!) May stayed with the Nicholsons, likely to attend St. Francis, from 1908-1910. She is the same age as Flora but one year ahead at school. Henry is Dr. Henry Watters, of Newton Center, Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston. He is a kind and devoted relation. May and Flora visit him in 1908 (and ride in his Stanley Steamer and visit Nantucket) and Edith and Marion visit him in 1912.

"Big Kenneth"... These Scots tended to rotate but a few names, Malcolm, Norman, Kenneth, John.. so they needed ways to distinguish one from the other.

Isabel McCoy is the daughter of family friends in Montreal. They live on Hutchison and in the 1911 Census Isabel is listed as 'professeur' earning 700. a year. Marion earns 650. in 1912. May, if she gets a job on the Montreal Board, can expect to earn 550. to start. Were she a male graduate, she would earn 800. to start.

The Herald is the Montreal Herald, one of many, many English Montreal Newspapers in the 1910 era. The Star, The Gazette, the Standard were others. The Nicholsons also subscribed to the Montreal Witness, an evangelical, pro temperance, pro woman suffrage paper. Newspapers were the communications medium of the era and newspaper publishers wielded a huge amount of influence. Some commentators complained that newspapers 'were all that people read nowadays.' Thanks to Marconi, newspapers were shrinking the world. His radio waves, just being discovered in 1912, would rally the working class masses and create a socialist paradise, or so the Italian inventor hoped.

The pencil has faded on the Census form, but Norman puts his salary at 1,200. That's 100 a month. Unfortunately, it gets halved later on in the contract.

June 21, 1911

Tighsolas

Richmond Quebec

Dear Father,

Just a few lines to give you a little of the news. The station was burned to the ground this afternoon ! It started about half past four. Flora went down to see it with Paul. And at six Dr. Skinner took Mrs. S, Mother, Flora and myself down in the car. All that is left are the tall chimneys so I guess we shall have a new station at last. (Richmond is half way between Quebec and Boston and owes its prosperity to the railroad.)

I have been up for breakfast and every morning since I came home. That is quite a record, don't you think. Monday we had a large washing, got up early and had it all finished and out at a quarter to eleven. And finished the ironing today. We are still busy with the sewing.

Marion's school (Royal Arthur in Little Burgundy) finishes today so she will be home soon. I saw by the paper last night that Isabel McCoy (teacher and family friend) was to be married July 12th.

I had a splendid trip home from Montreal and tomorrow the 22nd I am going to North Hatley with the Skinners. Will be back that evening. They are very kind to us.

Flora is feeling better since the exams are passed. (Results would be posted in the local paper later on.)

Yvonne Villard (daughter of Principal Villard of Ecole Methodiste) is coming out next

week for a few days. Miss Wilson's barn is not yet finished, Walker is still working. They have the foundation very well along at the Montgomery's.

Another Bryant preached last Sunday evening. He was through the General Assembly. I cannot think of any more news so will close. Hope you are well and that the fly season will soon pass.

We are all well. Write soon.

Flora got your letter With much love, Your affectionate Edith

Richmond

Tighsolas

Sunday June 25

PM

1911

Dear Norman,

Your letter with enclosed photo of my old chum received was very glad to see you looking so well and comfortable. You seem very stylish with curtains on your windows. I suppose that is for the flies.

Your letters are not long on the way so makes it better for us all. I am glad you are having an easy time.

Marion is not here yet. She wrote that she would be with us Monday at 7 PM.

Miss McCoy's wedding is the 12 of July so I hope she won't think of going to it.

Mr. Beiber had quite a bad accident with the auto on the 22nd. Mrs. Beiber's brother was here about 11 o'clock in the morning. They started for Windsor. Mr. Beiber running the car. John Harkensen sitting in front with him, in the back Miss Beiber (Marjorie) and

Mrs. Beiber.

Mr Henry and the three children (were) coming home, He was running fast as usual, he struck the sand.

There was something wrong with the steering gear they say, however, the car turned over, some were thrown out, but Mrs. Beiber and Marjory were pinned under.

Marjory crawled out when they lifted the car but Mrs. Beiber was unconscious for some time. They brought her back in an express wagon and had the doctor waiting at the house. She has no bones broken, only badly bruised about the chest side and back. She is in bed - I think for a good while. I was in to see her last night . She does not complain. Is so thankful that she or some of the others were not killed. All the others escaped without any injury.

Mr. Henry is still here. The car was sent to Danville by express the next morning, badly wrecked. Mrs. Beiber told me he would not listen to anyone about his fast running, but she think he has had a lesson. He makes light of the accident, says Mrs. Beiber will be out in a couple of days. I have my doubts.

Later 26th, Monday.

Edith went to Lake Arrill Saturday afternoon with the Skinners. Took Miss Sparrow, too. They returned this morning at 10 o'clock.

Had the time of their lives. Stayed one night at Lake Arrill, which is four miles from Morton Mills.

The Montgomerys took Flora and me for a little run around the town yesterday evening.

Dr. Villard's daughter came this morning to make Edith a visit. Will stay until Saturday. Dr. Skinner met her at the train with the auto. They certainly have been very kind to us.

Edith is with them all the time. I have not heard from Herb since the one I enclosed to you.

We had a call from Mrs Goff of Portland today, that is Jessie McNaughton. I took her over to see Grandma. Then down to McC's. She is having tea with the Alex McLeary at Keenan's Hotel.

I mailed the Times and Record. Mrs. Moffatt was up. I have not seen the Dr. to speak to. People think he has lost all he invested with White.

I got notice of Flora's school fees.

I am keeping the other things straight, only have not paid Mc Rae's bill since you left. It is not much.

Marion has just arrived. With much love

Your wife Margaret.

It was the Age of Anxiety and Age of Excitement. In one letter we have a graphic account of an auto accident and also tales of sundry delightful car trips. There's a subtext here, too. All the Nicholson 'friends' had automobiles but they could not afford one. Indeed, they had once owned a horse, but now only had a fine carriage stowed in the barn. They tried to sell it, but to no avail. However, the Local Provincial MP, Peter Mackenzie, Finance Minister and graduate of St. Francis College borrowed the carriage, in 1912, to do a little local electioneering. Clearly he knew better than to appear too uppity to the local farmers.

Dr. Moffat's loss may be the talk of the town, but it has negative effects on the Nicholsons, too. Moffatt is one of son Herb's many creditors, and although a close family friend, he presses the family to pay up, now that he's in such a fix.

Tighsolas,
June 28, 1911
Richmond Quebec

Dear Father,

Your will see by the heading where I am. I only got here Monday evening for I went to Hudson with the Fields' and had a fine time. They have a cottage by the lakeside and they also have a motor boat where I spent most of my time.

Then one of the men there had a yacht and he took us for a sail from Hudson to Ste. Anne's and back and after all I find Richmond quite a nice place although it looks queer without a station.

Did I tell you that we really have got an increase of salary for next year so that I will be getting \$650 next year and they have given me the next class on my way to the top so that my work I hope will be easier.

The next time you see me you will find me sporting a pair of glasses. I had Dr. Byers examine my eyes and he said that I should wear them all the time but I find that very hard to do and a great deal of the time they stay in their case.

Mother, Edith and Flora have gone to our opera house to hear the famous Lorne Elwyn and I am keeping house with Floss for protection from the tramps. Last night Dr. Skinner took us for a ride from Corris nearly to Trenholmvile. It was great and the first time I have been cool for a week.

Since I have not been here very long I have not any Richmond news so will close for this time.

Lovingly,

Marion

Hudson is a picturesque town on the Lake of Two Mountains, just off the island of Montreal. In 1910 it would have been a vacation site. Ste Anne is at the Western most part of island and where Macdonald College and Macdonald Teachers School were situated. The campus now houses John Abbott CEGEP (Junior and Technical College) but also McGill Faculty of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences.

On May 1, 1911, while still at school in Montreal Marion sent this important letter to her Mother.

Tower Street,
May 1, 1911
Dear Mother,

This is just to let you know that I am still alive and as homely as ever. Got your letter with news of the dance in it and had it not been that I was so bloomingly poor, I might have called on you and perhaps stayed over night. Edith will soon be going home - in about two weeks I think.

There is not much doing now but the Horse Show which as I have not a beau I am not going. Mrs. Ellis (boarding house matron) had two tickets sent to her for tonight so she is taking Edith with her.

I was up at the Cleveland's Wednesday evening to play bridge and last Friday Mrs. Wylie phoned and asked me to tea to meet a nice man. Of course, I went on the jump. The man turned out to be a Mr. Blair from Three Rivers, a brother of Margaret McLeod's husband.

I have had my white coat cleaned and am getting a new skirt to go with it and last Saturday I got busy and washed and ironed my linen one. It is time for me to go out and eat so will say adieu for the present.

Lovingly, M A Nicholson ESQ (Men only wrote esquire after their name; this is a joke)

The Horse Show was a yearly event. In a special feature in the Montreal Star about the Horse Show the year before in 1910, it was written: "The automobile shall never replace the horse in man's affections." Whoops!

Young women in 1910 were still introduced to young men through connections, not through chance meetings, or on the Internet dating sites.

Bills bills bills. The Nicholsons left behind household accounts from 1883 to 1921 and well as a number of invoices from the turn of the last century and the First World War. Their average yearly expenditures: \$350. to \$500.

Richmond
Tighsolas
July 9 1911

Dear Norman,

Your letter dated July 2nd with cheque for \$20.00 received. I will attend to the bills. Thanks for the same.

I just got a bag of flour (2.90) and I am owing my grocery bill at Mc Rae's.

I have been having Stanley Hill (teenage nephew) cutting the lawn. He does it very well. I pay

him 50 cts a week. I notice the weeds in the gravel are showing up. The garden looks very good everything doing well.

Peas are ready to use, are having some for dinner today. I put the paris green on the potatoes twice.

Flora and I. Mrs. Montgomery came over to tell me that the bugs were eating up my potatoes.

I was waiting to get someone to do it for me, as that was one thing I never attempted and thought I could not do it.

But when she interfered thought we would try if. (Mrs. M was possible worried her potatoes would become infested.)

So one dark night, Flora got the lantern and we went out when the bugs were asleep and gave them their dose. We dressed ourselves in the shed. You ought to have seen us. When we got through left our clothes there. Went to bed and dreamed all night that the bugs were crawling over us.

Uncle Dan was up yesterday (brother?). He's only been up once before since you left. He has so much to do with his own garden he thought everything was looking well.

He rides around with Clayton in the auto. But for over a week the auto is being painted. They are getting it fixed up to go down to Lindonville to his Aunt's Golden wedding this month.

Grandma is up at Bella's (sister, wife of Clayton, mother of Stanley)for a few days.

We have had dreadful hot weather. Just fancy, one night we slept out on the veranda. Took our mattresses down. The Skinners were sleeping in theirs so that we were not afraid and we had Flossie (Dalmation)with us but yesterday afternoon it rained so last night was cool.

We all had a good sleep and today is fine. We feel like working. I hope you did not have this extreme heat. We had quite a cold wave about the 24th but no frost.

I hear the presentation to Sutherland is Saturday. Smoking concert in the town office. Mrs. Beiber is improving but not able to be dressed yet. Majory Sutherland keeps about the same.

Mr. Montgomery seems to be getting on well with the house, working at the wood part now. The barn is finished. Had one coat of paint. Will be light, as ours.

The wood (for cooking) seems to be holding out well. I have not heard about Flora's exams yet.

Aunt Christie Watters has gone down to Boston a week ago. They did not come to tell us when she was going and we have not seen her since she came home.

I mailed you papers Gilbert (Norman's brother in Alberta) sent you. I wonder why he sent them? Is it that you might see Borden's speech? (Head of Federal Conservatives.)

I have not heard from Herb since the one I mailed you. Hope he will write soon. I was in hopes he had written you. Will write you soon again. Trusting you will keep well. We are all very well.

Miss Villard stayed from Monday until Friday.

Yours with much love
Margaret

I think you better save the little personal. They are apt to get into other people's hands. M

...The postscript to this letter says it all: Be careful what you write, you never know who will read the letter. This is something to remember as you read the Nicholson letters. They were edited as they poured out of the pen. At the same time, these letters are much like phone calls (they were substitutes for phone calls as Long Distance was far too costly to use, despite A T and T's efforts in their advertising to get era mothers to use the phone to keep in contact with wayward children.

\$2.90 for a barrel of flour. Nicholson 'store accounts' reveal that figure to be a bargain. The usual cost of wheat flour was around \$4.50 to 5.00 a barrel and stayed stable throughout the Wheat Boom Era. However, Margaret writes bag, so perhaps it was half a barrel.

There was a heatwave in Montreal in the summer of 1911. There was a heatwave in the UK as well, which precipitated an exodus out of London and a number of strikes. According to the Gazette, for those Montrealers who want to escape the heat, the Princess Theatre was hosting a travel show, "ideal location as the theatre is always cool" with 'scenes' of the South Pole with penguins and ice floes and polar bears(sic).

J.C Sutherland was the town druggist and also a former Secretary of St. Francis College at the turn of the century, when it had been affiliated with McGill University. In 1911 he was appointed Superintendent of Protestant Schools, a position second only to the Minister of Education.

The Nicholson's home town was a seat of Protestant education in Quebec; the first protestant school in Quebec was established in Richmond in__.

Clayton Hill, Margaret's brother in law, is in the tombstone business. He is, not surprisingly, very well off, as that business in 1912, in Richmond, didn't want for customers. He also votes Conservative, which irks the Nicholsons, no end. So does brother Gilbert out in Alberta, evidently.

Edith and Herbert. The beautiful house in the background is likely the Skinner's home. They appear to be doing extensive renovations in 1911, while living in the house. (Both the letters and 1911 Census confirm.) They also spend a lot of time taking trips in their new auto.

Qu'appelle Sask.

July 10, 1911

Dear Father,

Sorry I have not been able to write you before.

I have tried every day for the last three weeks but for 15 days I was managing the branch and was short a man all the time.

I had to work Saturday afternoon and Sunday as well as work on Coronation Day and Dominion Day.

The manager only got back from his holidays two or three days before the end of the month. It was the end of our half year and with so many balances and reports to send away, I only finished the last of them Thursday.

I had a visit from William Neilson about two weeks ago. He is taking a fine trip and said he is enjoying himself fine and was sorry you were not with him.

He had his whiskers cut off and when he spoke to me at first I did not know him.

Flynn who worked with you on the NTR called for a few minutes at the office to see me.

He is traveling for some wire fence company from the States.

Do not think you will have any trouble with the cement. It will surely be more pleasant where you are now than it was around la Tuque.

I do not like this place and hope they will not keep me here much longer.

I have just been stealing a look through the Manager's correspondence and in reply to

a letter from head office asking if he had found things in order upon his return after spending his holidays, he replied that he had found everything in perfect order.

Now I have not any more news so will have to close. I was at church with the Masons a week ago today.

Will remember what you said about staying where I am.

Do not want you to ever think that you should not advise me what to do. Any time that you want me to do anything or suggest anything just tell me without making any bones about it.

Now you may have some trouble getting any sense of this letter as this is a new typewriter for me and I have to go so slow that before I finish a sentence I have forgotten how I started it.

Hope this will find you well as it leaves me. I am writing Mother today and hope it will find them all very well.

Your son,
Herb

On the first stint on the railway, 1907-1910, Norman Nicholson was a timber inspector, checking out the integrity of railway ties. He kept records of ties inspected. He found it very rough at 'end of steel' in LaTuque, Quebec. In 1911, he is working as a concrete inspector near Cochran, Ontario. He also kept notebooks recording how much concrete was poured to make each culvert.

It is the Wheat Boom Era, with 'a town a day' being built out in the Canadian West, if you believe an article from a 1910 Technical World Magazine. In fact the Canadian Immigration people published a very flashy Western Canada Magazine to promote life in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta and to a lesser extent, British Columbia. Rural Britishers, Americans (but not Black Americans) and Northern Europeans were invited to apply, but not those swarthy southern European types.

For many years the Nicholsons had been contemplating moving out West, like so many of their friends and relatives. This kind of thinking continued into the war years. Alas, the West was no place for a failed businessman in late middle age and Norman's friends and relations out there told him so in their letters. No one offered him a safe haven.

Tighsolas

July 12, 1911

Dear Norman,

Your letter of July 10th received tonight and as you are not getting your mail regular I thought I'd better write at once.

I had a long letter from Herb last night. He said he was writing you. He had a very pleasant visit with Mr. Neilson he had been acting manager for 15 days while the manager was having holidays so said that was the reason he was so long in writing.

I mailed you papers that Gilbert sent from Edmonton. Too bad they cannot put the mail in at Cochran. They always save money at the expense of the working class.

I see where the Government has or is talking of voting seven thousand for a reception to be given this Duke of Connaught the 12th of October. (Governor General)

Sir Wilfrid was given quite a reception at Montreal. (Upon return from Coronation.)

We had very hot weather just as hot as in Montreal. I see by your letter that you did not escape. Was in hopes that you'd have it cooler being so far north.

We are badly in need of rain have but for a few days it has been much cooler and we are able to get our rest at night. The garden is looking fairly well, the lawn is quite brown in some places, and this week thought I would not have it cut. I'm letting it go until the middle of the week I think. I told you that Stanley Hill was doing it.

Billie Hill cut the hedge when I went to pay him he said Mr. Montgomery settled for the whole thing.

The Montgomery's seem to be getting on well with the house. Have it all boarded in.

We have been reading the accounts of the dreadful fires at Porcupine and Cochran. There was a sketch of a map in the Witness. Thankful that you were farther East.

Monday July 17th

The sick people are some better. Mrs. Beiber has gone down to the sea side with one of her sisters from Quebec. Marjory is keeping a little better.

Old Mr. Smilie was buried Wednesday from our church.

Grandma was no feeling well for a few days. She is up at Bella's.

They had the auto painted just got it Saturday night. So yesterday they went out to Kingsbury.

Sutherland has not had an offer for his house yet.

It was sad Earnest Hall losing their only child little girl aged six years. She was buried same day. Mrs. Craik went to her funeral and Mr. Hepburn met them at church.

Marion went to Miss McCoy's wedding she returned this morning she had a very nice time. I think now she will settle down.

The Skinners went to Weedon Saturday by Auto. Last Wednesday they took Flora to Sherbrooke, left at one o'clock returned at 7 pm. Friday they took Edith to Nicolette Lake. They are very kind to this family.

Dr. and Mrs. Moffatt came up one evening and took us for a ride in his auto, he runs very nicely, not too fast. Beiber is the talk of the town.

Dr. was asking for you. He thought when you were on the rail the sit was not so bad as the walk. Mc Morine was asking for you also.

In regard to Flora's exams, you will see that she failed in French. Her name did not come out in the paper and she is feeling pretty badly about it. However, she can enter Macdonald. Had a talk with Mr. Carmichael. So you better make light of it for she did study hard. She just gets nervous at examinations times. When I hear about the marks, which will be a few days, will write you.

Just at time of writing it is raining hard. I hope you will take good care of yourself. This heat is very trying. We have all kept well.

Hoping to hear from you soon,
Your loving wife

As Flora failed her final French exam her name was not printed in the Richmond Times Guardian with the names of all the other graduates. There were few secrets in this town of 2,500, as Margaret's letter makes clear.

It is no surprise that Flora's failure did not keep her from entering Macdonald. They were in dire need of teachers in 1911. Flora would go to Macdonald on a scholarship for rural students, who it was hoped would graduate and then go work in rural schools. But the need for teachers in the big city were even greater.

The relentless heat in 1911 caused forest fires in Northern Ontario, not far from where Norman was working. The Gazette for this day blared a headline: North Ontario Swept by Fire. South Porcupine, Cochrane Wiped Out! Fires were always a concern for these workers building the railroad. But railroad work, in general, was very dangerous.

The Reception for Laurier and the Coronation Contingent was in Quebec City. The large crowd on the dock let out three cheers as a band played "O Canada." Laurier returned from this trip a SIR.

Norman in Mason Regalia.

July 17, 1911

Dear Father,

Have just come home from Isabel's wedding and since it seems so nice and easy I think I will follow her example - that is providing I get the chance.

The whole Smith family were there and as soon as they found out who I was and who my relations were they were great friends.

They all said they knew you and Peter said he had stayed at the Gore once with Grandfather.

Isabel and Allan and the McCoys are all going to live together and I think they have one of the nicest flats that I was ever in.

Do you remember me telling me of a Mr. Blair from Three Rivers I had met.

Lately he has taken me to the theatre several times and when I was at the wedding he came up to see me and saw me off on the train this morning.

When I told mother a while ago that I was going to invite two girls out for a while she suggested that I had better ask some men. So we have been bothering her and telling her she is anxious to get rid of us.

I supposed mother has given you most of the news so there will be none left for me.

Lovingly, Marion

Tighsolas, Richmond

Marion Nicholson had a wicked sense of humour and she often joked about marriage and about being 'an old maid.' Her sisters, never. But, then, this Hugh guy looks promising.

The McCoys lived on Hutchison. Near St. Viateur. Marion had boarded when first moving to Montreal in 1908. Theirs likely would have been a newish building, because that area, Mile End was booming.

In 1957, St-Viateur Bagel was founded by Myer Lewkowicz and has since become a Montreal institution. Nothing tastes like a Montreal bagel; well, maybe a New York bagel.

In the 1910 era, Montreal smoked meat was born after a Mr. Schwartz from Roumania immigrated to the city and started up a delicatessen on St. Laurent, which would have been called St. Lawrence back then.

The 1911 Census does not have Isabel's new hubby living there yet, and the Census person gets Isabel and her Mom mixed up! (The census taker was clearly Francophone, so this might be the the problem.) Isabel gives her 'ethnicity' as Irish, like her Dad and the Mom says she's Scottish. Oh and the McCoys don't have a live-in maid, but many families living on the street do. On this one Census page, there are 'servants' from the West Indies, France, England, Sweden and Quebec, all girls aged 16 -21. Some other servants enumerated on the same street are as young as 12 and 14, while others are in their 30's and 40's.

An article in an era Macleans asks whether American Negroes would make good chefs for Canadians. The answer: No, they are not used to economizing.

Richmond July 26, 1911

Dear Norman,

Your letter to Edith also one to Marion came in last night's mail. I was glad to see snap shot of you. We all thought you looked very comfortable in a Morris chair.

You seem to have a comfortable looking room and that Mr. McKechnie is quite a nice looking young man.

We were all over at the Skinners as it was raining and he got our mail, so they all had a look at it.

It is just two months today since you left Montreal. Has the time seemed long?

We have been having rather cool weather lately - just as you speak of there. Monday it was so cool in the dining room that we had our meals in the kitchen.

The garden looks well. We have had peas, beans, and beets. The corn looks fine. We have not tasted our potatoes. The Hill's are using theirs. We have plenty of old ones. I like them better.

The weeds in the gravel are almost as bad as when you came home last summer. I got Stanley one day, for a little while, but he finds that harder than the lawn and has not come back in a week. And I don't want the girls to try it as they have sewing to do.

I've taken your plan and we are taking turns about the house work.

Marion and I were on duty in the kitchen last week. This week Edith and Flora have charge of the kitchen and they get up and make the fires. I don't dare go down to breakfast until I am called.

I was telling them I would not go away for this was change enough for me.

I am glad you got Herb's letter. Dr. Skinner will be going west in about six weeks. He will try and see him. Sophia Nicholson (brother Gilbert's daughter) is out in Flodden. I hear she is going to Edmonton in a few weeks.

Last Friday Dr. and Miss Skinner took Edith and Marion to Newport VT. Left here at 8 30 and were there for dinner in Sherbrooke for tea, back home at 10. 30 pm. Going a distance of one hundred forty five miles all in one day! Don't you think that was pretty good motoring? They were back very tired, especially Edith.

I am enclosing a letter Mr. Rothney (Principal, St. Francis College?) wrote. If she has passed with such high marks in all other subjects as Mr. Carmichael (teacher?) seems to think she will put in her application to enter Macdonald and will take the French as Mr. Rothney suggests.

She can go with Marion when she starts. They may have to go a day or two earlier. When the final marks are printed, will send them to you.

I am quite busy trying to get Flora's things into shape. She is not looking very well, but seems to have a good appetite. I got her bottle medicine. At least Edith is taking it; it's what Moffat ordered for Edith last fall.

Hope it will do them both good. Marion is looking well. I hope you are feeling well. Write soon.

Yours with much love,
Margaret.

The Nicholson's were in tight with all the education professionals in Richmond. In 1909, when Flora was failing Composition and Latin, Norman told his wife Margaret to speak to the teacher, to make sure he put more emphasis on the subjects she was failing. Hmm. Failing French wasn't such a huge cloud over Flora's head; in 1921 officials at Macdonald Teachers College were still complaining about the poor French skills of the incoming students, especially those from rural areas.

Edith seems to like her medicine. Many cold medicines at the turn of the last century contained alcohol and/or opiates. In the U.S. they cracked down on these ingredients in 1903, with the Pure Foods Act. In Canada, things were more lax; that's why the patent medicine people moved up to Canada in droves and settled in Brockville, Ontario, across the lake from New York State and shilled their snake oil stateside by mail order.

Qu'appelle Sask. July 29, 1911

Dear Father,

Your letter of the 19th arrived two or three days ago and was glad to hear from you.

We are not very busy in the office just at present so think I had better answer you now as later on I am to be in charge again while our manager relieves our Wolsley Branch.

I would like if they would make me Manager of some of their Branches as I feel that I could handle one.

Suppose it may come if I can only wait, seems a long time though.

You asked about the crops. In my opinion, well, I never saw anything that looked nearly as fine but as it has rained almost every day for the last two months and is at it again today. The grain has kept growing all the time instead of heading out, and at present there is only parts here and there that are properly headed which means, of course, that unless we get some dry hot weather at once there will not be time before the frost arrives in the fall for it to mature.

The farmers were all smiling for a long time but are now beginning to look less hopeful.

We have not had a bit of warm weather that you could speak about.

Have done considerable automobiling all summer and we have only had one night that you could feel comfortable without an overcoat.

I do not think or rather do not know what to think about an early general election. Do not think it is or should be necessary to appeal to the country on the question of Reciprocity?

It seems to me that the representatives now in Parliament are sent there just for this purpose. This class of men are far more able to deal with a question like this than about seventy five percent who vote.

Would like to see the thing passed myself and think it will.

There is a lot of opposition here, of course, drawn principally from party feelings, this being a conservative stronghold.

Lake, the man who we heard so much about in the East, is the Member (of Parliament) and will I think be elected quite easily.

There is some talk in the papers of Sir Walter Scott, the Provincial Premier, running against Lake, also Judge Brown, Dr. Moffatt's friend who came from Huntington originally, resigning from the bench to contest this riding but I do not think either would have much show.

Lake did not have a large majority by any means at the last election but Scott does not seem to be very popular and the other man is not well enough known, was practising law in a small Western Town called Mossimin until only a few years ago when he got the appointment of Judge for that district.

Now I wish you would not apologize for advising me as I know that you have had far more experience than I have and what is more, you never advised me very wrong yet, and wish you would remember that I will always be glad to have your advice any time.

You asked me if I thought the chances for making money were any better out here than in the East.

I think they are, but the the 'get rich quick period' has past in any part of the West that I have seen, except for the man with money - and the man with money can make it other places just as well.

Now I would rather buy real estate in Montreal than Winnipeg.

May not be able turn it over quite as quickly but you are always sure of being able to get your money any time you want it.

Our Manager here is an Englishman, and although I am not just exactly struck on him, I can't say that I dislike him and he uses me very well.

Edith has had some fine rides with the Skinners according to the cards she has sent me. Marion will certainly have a fine salary next season, Mother tells me.

I am going to write to Mother today. Hope Flora passed her Exams.

Well, think I will have to stop this time.

Hope this will find you feeling as well as you look in the snap you enclosed.

I showed it to a man in town here and he said I should be ashamed to be so homely when I had such a good looking father.

Glad you have a good Chief and hope as you do that you will have him for a long time as you have to work for these people.

Your son,

Herb

In 1910 Sir Wilfrid Laurier went out West by train to promote Reciprocity, Free Trade with the United States to citizens of Canada's newest provinces. That same summer, a group of actors working for Thomas Edison's Film Company, under the direction of American J. Searle Dawley, journeyed out West making silent shorts in promotion of the Canadian Government's Immigration Drive. 13 films were made, ten of which were melodramas.

One of the actors talked about the experience for Western Canada Magazine.

"We had been engaged by the Canadian Pacific Railway Company, to go through the Dominion, taking motion pictures to be shown all over the US and Europe to advertise the country. We had a special train in charge of a railway official who made sure we didn't miss any good bets on the good points, and we surely took them all in.

We rode with those champions of the plains, the Royal Northwest Mounted Police. At Regina we assisted in the roundup of 5000 cattle at Brooks, where one girl in the company donned a 'divided skirt' and rode with the rest of the men. We had a fight with the Indians in Calgary and I carried a bruise given to me by one brave for a month. "Ugh, me Kill" he said which made my scalp rise and I got hold of a mounted police to make sure he understood it was only a 'pretend' kill."

Tighsolas
August 5, 1911

Dear Father

Received your letter last night. I think I am a terrible letter writer for not having written to you before but I am going to try and make up for it now by answering this one quickly.

Thanks very much for money enclosed. It will come in very handy. And thanks also for the picture of the 'washer man'; don't become too accomplished in that task because when you come home they might want you to practice it here.

I have been accepted at Macdonald College for a model diploma. So my fate is sealed and I am to become a school marm!

Marion says she thinks there must be something wrong with them when they have decided to allow me to go there.

Macdonald opens Sept 5th. So does Marion's school so we will go in together. I am to room with a girl from Kingsey, Mabel Shaw is her name. Do you know the Shaws from there?

Marion Watters knew her last year, said she was very nice. One thing, she will know all the ropes having been there last year.

In regard to money matters you have to pay a month's board in advance, which is 16.00 and two other deposits. Marion is writing a note in this letter and says she will explain about them.

Have not been out to Kingsbury yet but intend to go out there soon, for a few days.

May Watters has been accepted in the Earl Grey School in Montreal. Do you know where that school is? (Corner of Bellechasse and Christophe Colombe.)

Our Marion has written to Mrs. Ellis to see if May can board there. It would be nice if she could. (Boarding House of Bleury.)

Aunt Christie isn't home yet from Boston. She seems to be having a fine time. She is coming home with Annie (cousin from Lynn, Massachusetts) when she has her holidays.

Henry (Dr. Henry of Newton Center, Massachusetts) has decided to go west on a trip. Too bad you couldn't go with him.

Uncle Clayton and Stanley have gone on a trip to Megantic in their auto.

They went for a week but as usual they have stayed two, so Marion and I had to mow the lawn.

I suppose you will be surprised to hear that Jim Smith has left Uncle Dan's .

He is boarding now at Mrs. Chapman's, the one that kept house for Mrs. Carpenter. I wonder what Sissie will do now? Now I must stop as it is near tea time.

Your loving daughter,

Flora

So, Flora, just like Edith, liked to gossip. This Jim Smith is apparently a married man, having a not-so-discreet intrigue of some kind.

In the 1910 era, Macdonald College is offering free tuition to rural students. There's a rural problem in education: too few teachers willing to stay in country schools for any length of time. There's also a 'city problem' in education: not enough teachers for the growing immigrant population. That's why May Watters so easily found a post at a new city school, Earl Grey in what is now Villeray in North Central Montreal. It was working class as well as the site of one of the first public baths built in city and became Montreal's Little Italy.

In September 1908, the Montreal Gazette reported that Dufferin School on St. Urbain, which had a student population that was 90 percent Jewish, was besieged with applicants. "Police had to be called to stop stampede of pupils." The janitor had to let in but a few young ones and their parents at a time. Earl Grey opened the next year, with William Lunn on Anne Street in Griffintown.

It may have been easy for new teachers to find a job in the city, but finding a place to live was much more problematic. There was a shortage of 'respectable' boarding houses for young working women in the era. The Montreal Council of Women wanted to establish a woman's hotel, so that these young women wouldn't be tempted by the many dubious attractions of the big city.

Marion Nicholson had stayed at the YWCA in 1905 while at McGill Normal School (which later, in 1907, moved to Ste. Anne de Bellevue.) But she had despised it. "Too many rules." Her fight to be master of her own life, in an age when a woman's virtue had to be preserved at all cost, is one of the more poignant story arcs of these Nicholson family letters.

