



Gordon Sinclair Jr.

Diary of a little girl's life

Drawings, words remember child who died in 1909

If someone can be brought back to life, I suppose a cemetery is the right place to start.

I visited there on Mother's Day to lay flowers at my mum's grave when I chanced upon the story of a little girl who had laid buried for more than 100 years. Her sketchbook diary brought her back for me, her few relatives who survive and, hopefully, for many more children of today.

It was Elmwood Cemetery's new executive director, Wayne Rogers, who alerted me to it. He said a woman had been by the office earlier in the day, carefully clutching the diary of a nine-year-old Winnipeg girl who died in 1909.

The woman, a retired teacher named Linda Kohut, had chanced to find it in late March. She had come to the cemetery looking for the child's gravesite and the rest of the story.

The girl's name was Irene Jessie Gertrude Smith.

"If you look at it, you can see all the fashion, the food, the environment of (pre-First World War)," Linda said when I eventually reached her on the phone. "You have to see it. A little girl telling her story by way of art."

Linda gave me white gloves to open the fragile pages as she shared the story of how she came upon them. Linda isn't related to Irene.

She happened to stumble upon the diary because Sandi Lazaruk, an Elmwood neighbour who is related to Irene, asked Linda to help her clean out the North Kildonan apartment of an aunt who had died.

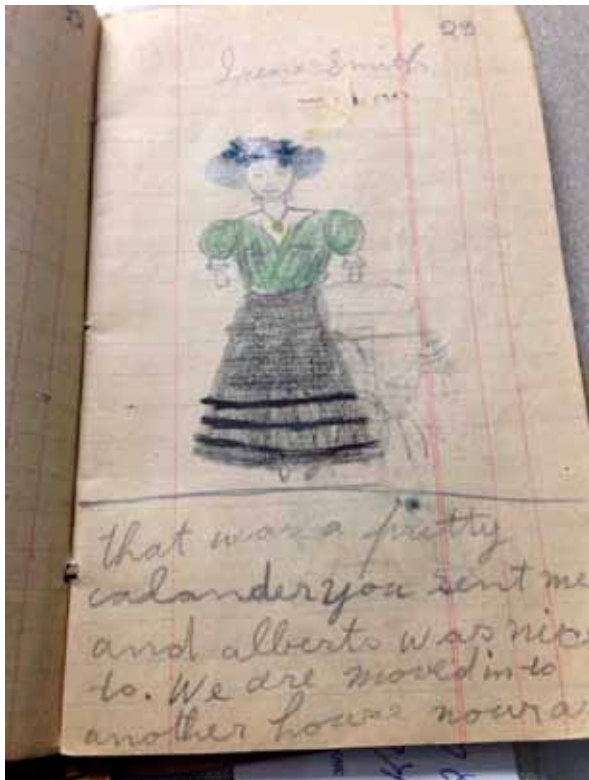
Sandi is Irene's great-great-niece. And Sandi and her 13-year-old daughter, Salina, are two of only a few surviving relatives.

Sandi had seen the diary years before, when she was younger, but life has a way of making one look more forward than back, and she hadn't thought of the diary in recent years.

"I haven't been in here since I was my daughter's age," Sandi said last month when we all visited Irene's still upright and clearly legible granite stone in the children's section of Elmwood Cemetery.

She said her grandfather, who was Irene's brother, took her to visit the grave until he died.





There are photos of both him and Irene in the same Scottish kilt and attire the family still has. And there's a drawing in Irene's book of her brother Highland dancing in the outfit.

"I would like to have met her," young Salina said as we left the cemetery. But we do meet her through the drawings and the words Irene left us in the fragile and time-tattered book that suggest who she was. She loved drawing flowers, farm horses, birds and especially families of ducks.

"Come ducks," she wrote under a drawing of a mother and her ducklings, "time you all in bed."

But there is an evident depth to Irene's sweetness the childlike drawings don't reveal.

"Over and over again," she writes, "no matter which way I turn I always find in the book of life some lessons I may learn."

All the time spent drawing, in an age long before Facebook and iPhones, suggests what the family lore says.

That Irene had polio and spent much of her time in bed at 838 Pritchard Ave., the home of her father, a railway policeman and labourer.

Irene would write her name at the top of each page and number them.

On page 64 she wrote: "I cannot think of anything else to do. I am going to draw in my other book when this one is finished."

But she wasn't to finish the book. Three pages later, in an uncharacteristic stick-figure drawing, she appears to depict a man in a hat holding a child's hand.

And then a single phrase. "Summer day." The numbered pages are blank after that page 67. Little Irene died of a chronic heart condition on Aug. 20, 1909, the same day more than 90 years later her great-great-niece's daughter, Salina, would be born. There is one more significant aspect to the story.

Linda Kohut, the woman who found Irene's diary, works with the Royal Canadian Legion, carting a trunk full of First World War artifacts with her, trying to make young schoolchildren aware of their personal histories, especially as they relate to family members who served or died in fighting for Canada.

"It's quite often difficult to engage little kids in the idea of remembering," Linda said. "But what a wonderful way when we take along a little girl's sketchbook."

That's why Irene will live again. Bless her wee heart and memory

