

Gloucester50Plus Write It Now Program Stories

Stories by Gail Casselman and Catherine Marsh

Winter 2019 Newsletter

Introduction: The Write It Now program (F18WIN) has been operating at Gloucester50+ Club since 2015. A new session begins each session (Fall, Winter, and Spring). Originally Olivier Fillion (1926-2000), from Alma, Quebec, began the program called “J’écris ma vie”. Olivier believed every person has a story to tell. Write It Now is not copyrighted. Olivier’s dream was that his program would spread. People do not have to be serious writers (or spellers); write just as you talk. The course is run by volunteers, so the fee is minimal. It is not necessary to attend every weekly class as everyone writes at their own pace. However, one should register during the regular registration, easily done by phone. Attendees are welcome to use story subjects from the Manual or just use their own imagination. Some attendees have even worked on short stories and poetry. Interested people are welcome to attend one class “free”; just ask for a “To see who we are and what we do!” card from the front desk.



Gail about 1949



Gail about 2008

Gail Casselman attended W.I.N. and was noted for having a HUGE BOX of ancestry memorabilia which she inherited from an aunt. She was overwhelmed by its contents so just decided to leave the organization of same for posterity! She had a story printed in Volume 1 of a two-volume book set entitled “Our Stories, Their Stories” (Captured Moments of Canadian History Gifted to Us by Canadian Seniors), published by HelpAge Canada, in 2015. Gail gave us permission to put an abridged portion of her story “A Tin House In a Small Town” on our Gloucester50+ website.

Gail’s story: In 1938 I was born in a tin house with a tin roof in a very small Ontario town. I was the second youngest of six children: five girls and one boy. I was brought into this world in this house by our town doctor who attended the birth of all children within a forty-mile radius. The house had four small bedrooms upstairs, several rooms downstairs and a cellar with a cistern and an earthen floor. Oh how I hated it when my mother sent me to get vegetables or preserves from the cellar! It was cold and damp and I was sure something terrible lurked in the dark corners.

We had no running water and no central heating but we did have electricity and a crank up telephone on the wall. No one had a private telephone line. Six or seven people shared that line so you had to be careful what you said as anyone on the shared line could listen to your conversation. As there was no water in the house, we had to use outdoor toilets in the summer and something like a portable toilet in the winter. Once a week the portable toilet was put outside by the road and the “honey wagon” came around to empty it. I never knew or asked where the contents of this “honey wagon” ended up.

I loved our summer kitchen. It had an old couch with many cushions and I spent hours reading comic books there. It was also where the weekly bath was held. An old tin tub was brought in, the water was heated on the wood stove and we took turns getting into the tub. I was too young to remember this but my older sister told me this story. One night my mother saw a man getting water from the outside pump. She brought the man in the house, fed him and let him sleep on our downstairs couch. She warned us kids not to come downstairs in the morning until called. Early in the morning she gave the man a coat and something to eat and sent him on his way. As she suspected, he was an escaped German prisoner of war who was trying to get across the St. Lawrence River to the United States. She said that the fellow was just a young boy, very cold and hungry. It seems to me she could have got in a lot of trouble for helping an escaped POW!

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Catherine Marsh has attended W.I.N. for several years and has many interesting stories to tell of her childhood in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and also in Canada, once she immigrated. Her story (abridged) is about the bombing of her working class neighbourhood in Belfast in World War II.

(L-R)-Seamus, Sean, Maureen, Catherine, Patricia, and baby Gerard in pram, 1939, in Belfast. Maureen and Catherine –England, 1990s.

Catherine’s story: I was the eldest of six children and our father was away working when our Belfast neighbourhood was bombed by the Nazis in 1939. I was ten years old. Many houses were completely destroyed and some people were killed. We were evacuated to a Boys’ School where we were told not to drink the water in case it had been poisoned. We were all covered in sooty dust and the children slept that night on top of tables and chairs while the grown-ups talked and worried. Towards morning soldiers’ trucks arrived with food, water and clothing. I squeezed my feet into a lovely pair of black leather shoes, much better than being barefoot. We were then settled into another school in the small seaside village of Hollywood where mostly elite professionals lived. Many inhabitants volunteered to temporarily house the homeless. Mrs. Cruikshank offered to take two little girls. Her young daughter, Barbara, was about my age and she chose my sister, Maureen, and me. We kissed our mother good-bye.

Mrs. Cruikshank was a very sweet and caring woman. She bathed us, brushed our hair, and removed broken glass from my feet. At dinner that night I answered questions while Maureen just cried for our mother and refused to eat. I, on the other hand, stuffed myself. I assured Mrs. Cruickshank that Maureen would be fine the next day. Before we left the dinner table I let Mrs. Cruickshank know that we were Catholics and had to go to mass on Sunday. Mrs. Cruickshank assured me she would indeed take us to mass. Emboldened by my success I then mentioned that Maureen and I could not eat meat on Fridays. Mrs. Cruikshank very kindly agreed to that demand too. (Many decades later, as an adult, I wished I had made the effort to find Mrs. Cruikshank and thank her for her kindness at such a scary time for our family. Unfortunately I never managed to do so.)

Afterword: These two stories touched my heart. They show the compassion and generosity of spirit that “ordinary people” can demonstrate during frightening events in war time. Gail’s mother realized that the young escaped German prisoner of war was just a child—a starving, cold, and scared-to-death child. Catherine feels now that she was too bold when Mrs. Cruikshank was showing so much kindness. But Catherine was only ten years old and beneath her precocity was a worried child who felt responsible for her sad younger sister, this in a strange home. Today, as back then, there are many theatres of war. Some of those are the war theatres of social media. I hope that stories like these can inspire more benevolence, altruism, and empathy among all of us, including powerful world leaders.