Canada's School on Wheels

1929 – 1967

"We will have to revise our idea of education. Two boys, who could not write the word 'cat' when they came, wrote social letters after only seventeen days of schooling."

--Fred Sloman, Teacher, CN School Car #1

January, 1928

"Mama! Petunia's in my bed!"

Maggie shivered and hugged the ornery pet skunk close to her face. The snuggly black and white creature's warm softness felt good on her cold nose.

"You kicked your covers off in the night again, didn't you?" Mama chuckled as she moved about the room, folding blankets and straightening pillows.


Canada
Minaki
Sioux-Lookout
Kenora
Lake Nipigon
Fort Frances
Thunder Bay
White River
Foleyet
Lake Abitibi
Timmins
Cobalt
Chapleau
Lake Superior
Lake Wanapitei
Sault Ste. Marie
Cartier
Capitol
North Bay
Sudbury
Lake Nipissing
USA
Lake Michigan
Lake Huron
Canada
USA

"It's a good thing you made me these warm wool socks for Christmas."

Maggie put toasty feet on the cold linoleum floor. She made her bed with one hand, while holding on to Petunia with the other.

"Put the skunk out, Maggie--that clever little varmint. I don't know how she learned to open the kitchen door."

Maggie heard Mama put wood into the ugly wood stove on the other side of a swinging door that separated the tiny kitchen from the living room.

Her papa, Mr. Sloman, moved about the train car, checking the heating pipes beside the bunks lining the walls.

"I've seen how the little skunk does it. She flops over onto her back and kicks the door until it swings open wide enough for her to flip over and run through."

Mama came through the door and looked at Papa, with both hands on her hips.

"Well, I'll be snickered! Maggie, wake your sisters. The sun will be up and before you know it, the students will have arrived."

"Where are we now? Did we move?"

Maggie looked out the living room window in the train car where she slept with her parents, brother, and three sisters. The frost on the window blocked her view.

Papa moved from the back of the living room at the end of the rail car to the storage area, where the coal was kept, and pulled out a shovel.

"Yes, the locomotive hooked up our car late last night, and we're at the Nandair siding now."

"It's a good thing I put the plants in the bathtub," Mama checked her hair in the mirror over the couch and tucked in a few strays. Her braided, golden tresses wound around her head like a halo and sat atop a set of blue eyes that twinkled with energy and good humor.

Mama folded Papa's bed and made it into a small couch.

"Hurry, girls. You don't want Jeremiah Putin catching you in your pajamas."

Billy, Maggie's little brother, barreled past Maggie's bunk and into his mother's skirt.

"Mama, where's Rudy?"

"He's where he's supposed to be, in the box in the classroom. That little fox must be starved by now. You need to hurry and feed him and the other animals."

"Caw!" Jack, hearing his name, cried and flapped his wings. The crow was nearly as smart as the skunk.

"And don't forget to feed Sandy and Cricket." Papa bundled up in a jacket, boots and a hat to shovel the frozen walkway beside the train car steps.

"But it's Margaret's turn to feed the dogs!" Billy pouted and stuck out his bottom lip.

Mama chuckled, "No, remember, you traded Margaret for carrying in wood last night. She said she'd do it if you fed the animals this morning."

"Oh, yeah." Billy ran to care for the family pets.

"Tuck in your shirt, Billy. Girls, hurry up! You still need to do your chores. Elizabeth, raise the Union Jack; Joan, help Fredda get dressed; Maggie, help me with breakfast."

Mama was a skilled, efficient leader and knew exactly what needed to be done and how to assign the jobs.

The Sloman sisters dressed quickly in the cold bedroom, now transformed into a living room by their mother's swift hands. They combed their dark brown hair and dressed in wool, plaid skirts and long, warm socks.

When all the chores were done, everyone gathered at the tiny table where Mama served a hot breakfast of eggs, potatoes, and biscuits she'd made in the enormous oven of the ugly railcar stove. The black range wasn't much to look at, but Mama loved the giant, old stove because "it made the best bread." She poured Mr. Sloman a cup of strong, black coffee, and the children feasted on extra biscuits slathered with creamy butter and Mama's homemade jam, along with a thick slab of back bacon.

After breakfast Elizabeth bundled up to venture out into the frigid cold and hoist the flag at the end of the railroad car. The raised flag signaled to the families of the Canadian wilderness that the little car was open for school.

As Maggie helped Mama clear the dishes, she heard boisterous barking.

"Donna Jean's here!" Maggie shouted when she looked out the

window and saw Donna Jean riding on a sled behind six large, fluffy dogs. Not far behind was Little Arrow in snow shoes, climbing across a snow bank. Beyond the bank came a mother with more children than Maggie could count.

"Papa! I think we have visitors again."

Papa gulped his coffee, pulled on his coat and boots, and ran to greet the mother and her large passel of children.

Mama looked out the window and clucked her tongue, "There's no telling how far they've walked to get here. I better put on more coffee and warm up some biscuits. Who knows if they have had anything to eat."

Mama never allowed anyone to go hungry and played the unofficial roles of mentor and caretaker to the isolated, lonely women of the backwoods. By this time in her husband's teaching career, she had baked a million cookies, delivered dozens of babies, and taught hundreds of women to read, sew and care for children. She busied herself in the primitive kitchen and stoked her woodstove to heat the oven, while Maggie helped her little sisters finish dressing themselves and organizing their homework.

Students arrived at the back of the schoolroom section of the little train car, politely removed their boots and scuttled into the narrow room in stocking feet. The new woman's children had never seen a school or a desk before. They sat backwards on top of the desks with their feet on the attached chair. Billy showed one of the boys the proper way to sit in the desk, and they all followed his example. They were quiet and

polite, whispering to one another in Italian as none of them spoke English. Elizabeth counted heads: twenty-two.

Mr. Sloman motioned to Maggie.

"Take Mrs. Lombardi and the babies to see Mama, while I get the children settled and enrolled in school."

Maggie took two toddlers by the hands and showed the pale, exhausted woman holding a tiny baby, to Mama's kitchen. The bedraggled mother tripped over two runny-nosed preschoolers hanging onto her tattered coat.

Mama held up the coffee kettle and offered, "Coffee?"

The dark-eyed woman nodded quickly and Maggie pointed to a chair. The weary mother focused with hungry eyes on Mama as she poured a steaming cup of coffee. Maggie motioned to the sleeping baby and the woman handed her to Maggie.

"School? My kids?" the woman asked in halting English. Maggie recognized the Italian accent right away. Another student attending school in the train car was also from Italy.

"Yes." Mama offered the shivering mother a hot biscuit and honey.

"No railroadman husband--lumberman." The woman frowned and shook her head. Her dark eyebrows slanted together above a sturdy, upturned nose.

"Oh, this school isn't only for railroad children. It's for all children of Canada," reassured Mama as she motioned her arms in a big circle, as if she was embracing all the children of the great commonwealth.

"Si? All?"

Mama nodded, "Yes, all–everybody."

Mama was well-educated and understood Italian, but she always used English to help the new families assimilate. Maggie admired her mother's warm hospitality. She looked lovely, framed in the sunbeam of light streaming in from the narrow cabin window, where they sat at the tiny kitchen table.

The woman's face lit up with a crooked smile that revealed two missing teeth behind a set of chapped, curved lips. A tear slid down her cheek.

Mama patted her hand, "You can stay today and watch. If you want, you can come back on Thursday for the mother's meeting, and I can help you learn to read English, too." Mama spoke as if the woman understood, but pulled a notebook out of a drawer and drew pictures of a calendar, illustrating what she was trying to explain.

The baby in Maggie's arms seemed terribly still. Maggie felt her tiny forehead. She was burning up!

"Mama, this baby is sick!"

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Elizabeth helped her father settle his pupils into their seats. Fortunately, some of the new family's children were small, and they were able to sit two to a seat. The little classroom only held twelve desks: six along each wall of the railroad car. Mr. Sloman put a small chair beside

each desk to accommodate as many students as he could.

Joan turned to her father and held her nose. He smiled back at her. The smell of garlic, wet boots and goose grease rubbed on the children's chests to protect against illness, grew stronger as little bodies warmed up. There was no running water for baths in the Canadian outback, and some children never changed their clothes or their underwear the entire winter, which only added to the startling aroma.

Finally, every child was enrolled and had a pencil and some paper. Elizabeth watched out the window as the dog team that brought Donna Jean to school ran towards her father's hunting cabin, where she lived with her mother. Without being prompted, they would return for her on their own at four o'clock.

"Okay, children, write whatever you wish," encouraged Fred Sloman, who had to learn what each child knew. "You may draw a picture, if you like."

Without prompting, English-speaking children helped the new students understand what the teacher meant. Before long, Mr. Sloman knew with a glance at what learning level each student belonged. For the first part of the day, most of his students would start with the alphabet, several would gather around a science text, and a smaller group would continue their study of geography. Only four of his students' primary language, aside from his own children's, was English.

Elizabeth's group studied the geography of the Mediterranean, and Mr. Sloman saw one of the older Lombardi twins' eyes light up at the sight

of the little boot-shape on the map tacked to the wall.

"Italia! La mia casa!" The boy waved at Mr. Sloman and pointed his pencil in the air towards the map.

"*Si*. Italy *was* your home, but now your home is Canada." Fred Sloman picked up the globe and showed the fifteen-year-old boy where he lived in Canada, then slid his finger towards Italy.

"I am Mr. Sloman. What is your *nome*—name?"

"Il mio nome è Antonio."

"Pleased to meet you, Antonio." Mr. Sloman pointed to Elizabeth. "Her name is Elizabeth."

"Name," sounded Antonio as he drew out the sound of the 'a.' "Name, Antonio."

"Name?" Elizabeth pointed to each of his siblings.

"Maria, Zita, Mimi, Belinda, Dino, Bianca, Viviana, Guido, Vittoria, Carla, Sienna, Dante, Pino, Orlando, Enrico, Giacamo, Luigi, Santo, Sergio, Vincentio, e bambino e Gina." rattled Antonio so quickly, Elizabeth couldn't catch them all. But Mr. Sloman's keen ears caught each one, and he wrote them on his class diagram. He quickly went to each child, called them by name, and introduced himself.

The two family dogs made themselves known, tails wagging as they sniffed the goose lard rubbed on each child's chest. The children read or talked to the dogs, and showed them the pictures in books. Elizabeth finished her geography lesson, and Joan helped her father teach the little ones the alphabet, using the name of an animal for each letter.

Out of nowhere five-year-old Carla wailed soulfully in Italian. Some of her siblings giggled uncomfortably while the older sister, Bianca, comforted her little sister.

"What's wrong?" begged Fredda, filled with concern. .

Mr. Sloman was familiar with several languages, but the language of a hungry child was not that difficult to understand.

"She's starving. Go tell Mama we need biscuits."

Before Elizabeth could open the kitchen door, Maggie entered the little classroom carrying a tray of biscuits and small glasses of fresh milk. The children ate them so ravenously, the Sloman girls were afraid they would choke.

"No one can learn on an empty stomach. After they eat, we'll go outside for a spell." Papa took a swig of coffee and reached for his hat and coat.

"But Papa, it's 42-degrees-below outside," cried Maggie as she pointed to the thermometer at the window.

"It's okay. Tell your Mama we'll take the little ones, too, if she wishes."

Maggie shook her head, "I don't think that'd be a good idea. The baby is awfully sick. Mama will probably want the other little ones to stay indoors."

"What's wrong with the baby?"

"Mama thinks it's the croup. She's fixing a poultice and showing Mrs. Lombardi how to make it herself. I've been keeping the baby cool

with a washcloth. She has a terrible fever, Papa. I'm awfully worried."

Mr. Sloman checked the baby and headed outdoors to be with the other children.

"I believe in plenty *airing out* time. It makes for the best learning."

After a quick recess, the children returned inside and Mama met them with steaming cups of hot cocoa and gingersnaps. While the children snacked, Mr. Sloman read aloud from *Alice in Wonderland*. He acted out the story with such expression that the students could easily comprehend the story, even with a limited understanding of English.

After more studies it was time for lunch, but Mrs. Lombardi hadn't brought any food. Mama quickly made butter and egg sandwiches, and every child had another biscuit with honey. With every tummy full, every mind was primed for learning. When it was finally time to go home, no one wanted to leave.

The baby's temperature had significantly reduced, and Mama helped Mrs. Lombardi bundle up her brood and walk them home. She packed a basket of food and home-supplies to take with her.

"I'm going to go see what else she needs. Later, I'll send a message with the passing train and get more supplies here before we move on. Joan, you and Maggie get dinner ready and don't wait for me. Go ahead and eat when it's ready."

Mama walked five miles in the bitter cold to the shanty where Mrs. Lombardi lived with her husband and their twenty-two children. It

seemed remarkably smaller than the school train. Along the inside walls of the rickety structure and upon a rough-hewn floor lay piles of blankets used for beds. There was not a stove, only a fireplace and hearth for cooking food in a large pot. The only food in the house was a can of beans sitting on the homemade table. The linens – what there were of them – were clean. No closets or armoires could be seen. Mama assumed that the only clothes the family owned were those they wore.

"How does she live?" Mama talked to herself as she trudged the five miles back to the railroad car in the deep snow and bitter cold. She never felt afraid. Her body was strong from years in the Canadian wilderness, washing clothes by hand and walking for miles to visit her husband's students and their families. And tonight, as she walked in the light of a quarter-full moon, she had a companion. A lonely dog nuzzled next to her, searching for her hand.

"Hello there, old boy, what are you doing out here by yourself in the cold?" Mama patted the canine on the head and continued to trudge through the snow toward the coal lights, beaming from the welcoming windows of the train car. She hoped Maggie and Joan remembered to make supper.

When she finally reached home, Mr. Sloman greeted her with a sweater warmed by the blazing stove in the kitchen.

"Brrr, it's a cold one–thank-you." She removed her coat and wrapped the warm sweater around her shoulders, hugging herself. "That poor dog outside walked me home and kept a close eye on me all the way.

He has to be hungry and freezing. Let's get him something to eat."

Mr. Sloman peeked out the window and peered down at the dog pacing back and forth beside the train car.

"Mama, that's not a dog."

Mama looked down at the poor beast running beneath the window.

"What do you mean? He's right there."

"Mama, that's no dog; that's a wolf."

"Well, if I had known he was a wolf I wouldn't have patted him on the head!"

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The next day all the children returned. With the children, Mrs. Lombardi sent lunches made from the supply of staples Mama had taken to her shanty the night before. This time, only eighteen of the children came.

Antonio smiled at Mr. Sloman.

"Baby-okay."

"That's good news, very good news!" Mr. Sloman returned the boy's smile and motioned for him to take a seat.

Danny rushed in from the back of the school car.

"Help! Molly's stuck in a snow bank and can't get out!"

Mr. Sloman grabbed his coat and ran to the snow bank where little Molly lay with her skis sticking straight up out of the snow. With the help of two of the boys, Mr. Sloman pulled Molly out of the bank. Her bright

red face shimmered with frozen tears.

"You're okay, Molly. We've got you." Mr. Sloman brushed the snow off the little girl's rabbit-fur coat.

"I know I'm okay. I'm not hurt. I'm mad!" Molly hiccupped with willful sobs.

"Why are you angry?" Mr. Sloman bent down to Molly's level.

"Because I wanted to be the first one to school today."

As always, the school day brimmed with individual studies for each child. Everyone recited multiplication tables and labelled the towns on a map of Ontario. They painted a watercolour of their favourite forest animal and made a spelling list from words they could use when writing a letter. Because the school car only came to each site one week each month, Mr. Sloman assigned each child a poem to memorize and recite upon his return.

When it was time to go home, the children did not want to leave. They were fascinated with practising their new skills. Most of them had learned to write their names, and the older boys could sound out a few words in English and solve two-digit sums. Mr. Sloman sent home enough homework to keep each child busy for more than an hour each night. He also sent with them paper, pencils and books.

"I leave on Friday. That means we only have four days of school here before we break for one month. On Thursday I will leave you with homework to do each day while I'm gone. Understood?"

Mr. Sloman's passion was reaching out to the isolated children of

Canada and making the most of his time with them.

The children were eager to learn and at the end of the day when it was time to say good-bye, a few cried.

"Don't worry. We'll be here tomorrow," Billy reassured them and the Sloman girls hugged them all good-bye.

It took a lot of work getting supper ready each evening and helping their own children with their homework each night, but Papa and Mama were not afraid of hard work. They laboured together like a well-oiled set of gears: Mama kept the stove warm and Mr. Sloman kept the water pipes from freezing; Mama cooked and Papa helped with dishes.

Finally, after the younger children were asleep, Maggie and her parents enjoyed a hot cup of coffee in the schoolroom before going to bed.

"Another cup, Papa?" Maggie picked up her father's empty cup.

"Yes, Maggie, thank-you."

"Mama?"

"If you please. Just bring the pot out here."

Mama smiled but her eyes looked tired.

Maggie went into the kitchen to get the coffee pot, but as she reached for the pot she heard something move inside the stove. She opened the oven door and screamed, "Papa! There's a man in the oven!"

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"He's probably cold."

Papa and Mama pulled the man out of the oven and sat him at their

kitchen table. He had broken into the train car and crawled inside the oven to get warm. Mama heated up a pan of soup, and Maggie made another pot of coffee. The man's hands shook so badly that Mama had to hold the cup to his mouth. He drank cup after cup of coffee and soup.

"It's 60-degrees-below out there tonight." Papa pointed to the thermometer by the window.

The man didn't speak English, but words weren't needed. Someone was cold, hungry, and in need of shelter and food. The school-car shined the only light around for miles in the wilderness. And though the Slomans were warned by the Canadian National Railroad to pull their blinds at night to reduce the risk of break-ins, Mr. Sloman refused.

"Let there be light! Mrs. Pasquale told me she sat up all night to watch our lights. Ever since then, I don't have the heart to pull the blinds. We're the only light in this bleak wilderness some folks ever see."

The two gasoline lamps in the school car ceiling sent out much brighter light than the coal oil lamps along the side of the car.

"More than one lonely woman sits up at night with a sick child and watches our lights," Mama agreed with Papa. The lights would stay on and the blinds would stay up.

Mr. Sloman helped the cold man settle in to sleep on the floor with some of Mama's warm quilts. They felt no fear of him and their kindness was repaid in the morning with a simple thank-you as the man again ventured out into the snow.

"I wonder how he'll survive out there." Mama shook her head.

But she didn't have time to worry about the lone man as children arrived for school. Today would be a long day. She had plenty to do to get ready for the evening, when Mr. Sloman would teach the men of Nandair how to write their names and speak English. There were cookies to bake and warm soup to get started, along with bread for her family.

"Mama, look at Fredda's dress. There's soot all over it!" Joan pushed little Fredda towards Mama.

Fredda pointed to the smudge on her dress.

"Soot! Soot, Mama!"

Mama sighed. She'd grown used to the smell of grease, coal and steam, but the constant soot from the railroad was still a bone of contention with her.

"It'll have to do. Wipe it off as best as you can for now, Joan. Thank-you."

"Yes, Mama." Joan ushered little Fredda to the kitchen sink and cleaned the dress.

Mama never wasted time complaining and her hands were always moving. As much as she would like to wash the railroad soot off her curtains, deep cleaning would have to wait until spring. It was too cold to wash them now. Her city friends wouldn't abide by the hardships she endured, but compared with what the lonely families of the wilderness lived, she recognized hers as a life of luxury.

The school-car's small classroom sheltered children from different countries at different levels of learning. The bigger boys seemed

embarrassed that they could not write as well as the younger children, but Mr. Sloman put them at ease right away. He balanced phonics, writing and arithmetic with hands-on projects. The wilderness children may not have been good at academics at first, but they all excelled at using their hands.

Image: Wikimedia / Public Domain / Photo of inside of school-car taken by Wintershom

"Let's draw a train today and count the cars," Mr. Sloman pulled out a roll of adding-machine tape and laid it out the length of the car. The children went straight to work drawing their own train.

"Where do you think the trains go?" Mr. Sloman walked behind the children, watching each one as they worked, picking up on their strengths, and recognizing their weaknesses.

"Italia!" cried a grinning Dino.

"Ireland!" answered Molly as she raised her hand.

"Toronto!" guessed Gerald, who had never been there though he had heard of it.

"One of you is correct. Trains do go to Toronto, but they don't go all the way from Canada to Italy or Ireland. Who can tell me why?"

"They run out of coal?" Billy stuck out his tongue in concentration as he decorated his train car.

"Clever answer. They could indeed run out of coal, but that's not why."

"Trains can't swim!" yelled Donna Jean, not looking up from her drawing of a purple freight car.

"Very good, Donna Jean. They can't! Why does this matter?"

"Because they must cross the big water." Little Arrow walked to the map and pointed to the Atlantic Ocean.

"Excellent, Little Arrow! Between Canada and Italy and Ireland, there is a large body of water called the Atlantic Ocean. So, how do you think people travel there instead?"

"A big canoe!" Little Arrow held up his finger in revelation.

Donna Jean giggled, "Big ship. I had to go on one when my Papa brought us here."

"That's right! A passenger ship that…"

A steam locomotive pulling a long line of freight cars flew past the little school-car parked on the side of the tracks, drowning out Mr. Sloman's lecture. The windows rattled and the books danced on the

shelves. The children ran to the window to watch it fly by. Mr. Sloman shook his head and put his hands in his pockets. Many teachable moments were interrupted by the blasting of a freight train on its way to somewhere else.

That evening, railroadmen, lumbermen, and others gathered at the little school to learn how to write their names and to speak English.

"They hold their pens so tight the blood runs out of their hands," Mama said.

While Mr. Sloman taught the men, the women gathered with Mama in her cramped living-quarters to learn sewing and dressmaking. She also taught them hygiene, Canadian history and how to speak and write in English.

The Sloman family spent one week with the children and families who lived along the Nandair stop, before moving on to the next stop for their school on wheels.

On Thursday nights, Mr. Sloman turned down the gas lights and checked the pipes before going to bed.

"The hard part, Mama, is wondering if I'll ever get to see those children again."

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The Slomans never knew when the locomotive would hook up to their little school-car and take them to the next wilderness area, parking them on a siding where they would stay for five or six days until they moved again to the next location. Once school let out on Thursday, the

family secured all their belongings in case they were hooked up in the middle of the night. Sometimes the dishes broke anyway because the locomotive slammed into the coupling with a jolt.

Maggie took down the flagpole hanging on the end of the school car, then they gathered in all the outdoor toys: toboggans, skis, and sleds. They took down the clothesline and packed all of Mama's pretty tea-servings.

Papa put anchors on the gas lamps so they wouldn't fall off the hooks on the ceiling. The girls cleared the countertops of dishes, and all the cupboard and refrigerator doors were firmly shut. Mama filled the portable bathtub with her treasured plants. The locomotive could come during the next day or during the night while they slept, but it always came and took the little car and the teacher's family to the next wilderness site where children eagerly awaited its arrival.

During the weekend, Papa planned lessons, and Mama organized and cleaned their tiny home. On Monday, Papa asked Margaret to raise the flag on the school-car, signifying a cheerful welcome to the students in the area of Foleyet.

Earlier that morning, more than ten miles away, the Dingee children, ages nine, eleven and twelve, began their journey to school on their eight-foot toboggan, pulled by five energetic, barking dogs.

"Don't forget to pick up Kitchi and Moki!" Betty reminded her older brother, Francois. They liked to meet up with their native friends along the way to school.

"I won't! You don't need to remind me. They'll be waiting on the trail."

The dogs ran eagerly and needed little reminding of the route.

Betty snuggled into her warm fox-coat and hid her nose in the fur. Her father was a trapper, and she was thankful for the warm furs he brought home. She hugged herself and wiggled her frozen toes inside the buckskin moccasins her mother had made. Nothing would stop her from going to school. Not even frigid temperatures or snow and ice.

They arrived at the banks of the frozen lake where they met Kitchi and Moki. Nearby stood an old trapper's cabin. The wind and snow blew through the slats in the log walls, but it would be home for the children for the week they were at school. The girls helped Francois unpack the food and blankets. They repacked the bag with their books and homework and headed out and into the cold for another two-mile trek.

"Help me to tie the dogs, Alice."

The girls and native boys tied up the dogs while their big brother repositioned the pack upon his back. Everyone attached their snow shoes and set out across the frozen lake. Every thirty feet, they marked the trail with an evergreen branch in case the wind covered their tracks.

When Mr. Sloman saw the children approach, he bounded out the door to greet them. He was impressed with their commitment and that night shared his awe with Mama, "I'm amazed how far they travel to school. They're starving for knowledge!"

Nine-year-old George and twelve-year-old Nicholas travelled

forty-two miles to get to school. They worked beside the school-car, pitching a canvas tent against a snow bank. They found an old wood stove and installed it with the pipe sticking out of the canvas roof. Before going inside to warm themselves, Kitchi and Moki helped George and Nicolas thatch the fragile tent with evergreen boughs. This fortified tent would be home to George and Nicholas for a week in frigid weather. It was too far to travel back and forth for each visit.

On Mondays, children trickled into school during the morning because travel for some was hard. Not everyone arrived on time, but, remarkably, no one arrived more than a few minutes late. Mr. Sloman had given them enough homework for a month, and they eagerly shared their hard work with him.

Finally, everyone settled into a gentle hum of industry. Younger students rehearsed phonics, and the older children who needed the practice, joined in. Mr. Sloman's daughters learned Shakespeare, while others their age studied sentence structure. Everyone learned at different rates and every child received individual attention by their astute teacher. He customized the lessons, loaned out books, and created learning plans for each student, including his own children.

While one group recited multiplication tables, another looked up words in the dictionary. While some studied medieval history, others labeled towns on the map, and still others chanted rules of grammar. They all memorized poetry. There was never an empty moment. Everyone learned.

On Tuesday, while everyone listened to a chapter in *Alice in Wonderland*, a woman stumbled into the school car.

"Help me."

"Mama!" cried Davey Pacelli as he ran to his mother who collapsed on the floor.

"Maggie, go get your mother. Joan, help me get Mrs. Pacelli to the living room." Mr. Sloman's gruff voice and stern face sprung Maggie into action.

Joan and Mr. Sloman helped Mrs.Pacelli into the little cookery, but she was too weak to make it to the living room and collapsed in their arms.

"My…baby…"

"Put her down here, Joan."

They helped the frail mother-to-be to the floor, while Mama rushed to their aid.

"Mr. Sloman, leave the girls here with me. I will help her. Keep the children calm. Joan, boil a big pot of water and, Maggie, you know the old sheets I keep under the bed? Bring me two of them. I'm also going to need a thick blanket. And find every clean towel you can and bring it here."

"Yes, Mama," chimed both girls as they set to work, immediately obeying their mother.

"My…I'm so tired…" Mrs. Pacelli whispered.

Mama felt her pulse.

"When was the last time you ate something?"

"Yesterday."

Maggie brought the blanket and sheets and helped her mother tuck them under Mrs. Pacelli, who was too weak to move. The woman moaned and held onto her stomach.

"Where is your husband, Mrs. Pacelli?" Mama asked loudly.

The ashen woman writhing on the floor did not answer.

"Mrs. Pacelli, where is Mr. Pacelli?" begged Mama as she knelt beside the woman and spoke into her face, framing it with her hands.

"He's out hunting. I haven't seen him…in days…I…Ohhh!" Mrs. Pacelli rolled on to her side and clutched her stomach, crying out in pain.

"Joan, tell your father to take the children outside or begin an activity to distract them."

"Yes, Mama."

"Mrs. Pacelli, try not to cry out. I know it's hard, but we don't want to frighten the children." Mama made a knot in a towel and gave it to the woman. "Bite on this when you want to scream. It might help; it might not."

The woman could not hold onto the cloth. Mr. Sloman entered the room and stood over his wife and the sick woman.

"Do you need me in here, Mama?"

Mama nodded, "I think so. Do you think it would be okay for Maggie and Joan to take the children outside and for you to help me in here instead?"

Mr. Sloman nodded and turned to the girls, "Joan, Maggie, tell the

children school is dismissed for the day. Then, take your siblings outdoors until I tell you to come back inside."

The girls nodded and scooted out the kitchen door. Mr. Sloman rolled up his sleeves and set to work boiling water and helping his wife.

"Ohhhh! It's not time! It's too early…" groaned Mrs. Pacelli, whose face contorted with pain.

"Babies don't read calendars. They have their own ideas of when it's time to come." Mr. Sloman handed Mama a cold cloth for Mrs. Pacelli's head and turned to add wood to the stove.

With the kind help of Mr. Sloman and Mama, a tiny baby boy was born on the kitchen floor of the school-car. Tiny and weak, he could hardly breathe. Mama wrapped the baby gently in a clean towel and handed him to his mother, who lay on the floor sobbing. She looked at Mr. Slocum with tears in her eyes. The baby was not well.

"Will you baptize him, Mr. Sloman?"

Mr. Sloman gathered the sick baby in his arms. "He's a handsome little man."

"What is his name?" asked Mama, brushing a tear from her cheek.

Mrs. Pacelli looked into Mama's eyes and whispered, "Emmanuele Alberto."

Mr. Sloman nodded and christened the tiny baby according to his mother's wishes. Shortly after the christening, little Emmanuele drew his last breath.

In one short day a tiny soul tasted life on both sides of heaven.

December, 1928

Sandy and Cricket barked in encouragement as Mr. Sloman and Billy dragged a little cedar tree through the snow towards the school-car. This was Billy's favourite time of the year. Most boys and girls celebrated Christmas once each year, but the Sloman family celebrated it for the entire month of December. As the school-car stopped in each wilderness area, their family celebrated the holiday with each community.

There were no churches in those remote areas. There were no stores or nativity scenes. The only kind of Christmas the children in the Canadian wilderness enjoyed was what the Sloman family provided.

All through the year, the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire collected clothing, toys, and household utensils as gifts and prizes for the school children of the remote areas of Canada. Each Christmas, every family received a gift box.

On the chalkboard Joan wrote "Merry Christmas" in all the languages of the school children: *Buone Feste Natalizie* (Italian); *Srozhdestvom Kristovym* (Ukrainian); *Wesolych Swiat Bozego Narodzenia* (Polish); *Feliz Navidad* (Spanish); *Gledelig Jul* (Norwegian); *Fröhliche Weihnachten* (German).

Families from these nations came to the wilderness to log, mine, trap, and maintain sections of the railroad. The only Native language Mr. Sloman knew how to write was Iroquois. Joan wrote in small

letters across the top of the chalk board: *Ojenyunyat Sungwiyadeson honungradon nagwutut.*

Billy and the girls helped Mr. Sloman pull the tree into the school-room, while Mama baked cookies and cinnamon rolls in the oven. Elizabeth stood on a desk and held the tree upright, while Mr. Sloman fastened a laundry line to the tip and secured it to the top of the window sill.

"Sandy, stop eating the popcorn!"

The golden retriever looked up at Joan with a string of popcorn hanging out of his mouth.

"He's going to choke, Papa! Get him!"

Maggie laughed and helped her father pin the playful dog, who rolled over onto his back asking for a belly rub and willingly giving up his prize. But as soon as they secured the popcorn, Cricket jumped on a desk and nosed into the tree.

"He thinks something is in there."

Billy put his head in the tree right beside Cricket's.

"There probably is. Animals live in trees. Can you name some?"

Mr. Sloman never ceased teaching.

"Birds live in trees," peeped Little Fredda from the floor where she sat making a gingerbread paper-chain.

"Yes they do. Can you think of anything else?"

Papa hung ornaments on the trees.

"Koalas live in trees," Billy giggled from inside the tree.

"They do, don't they, Billy. Why is that funny?"

"There aren't koalas in Canada, Papa." Billy backed out of the tree. "I don't see anything."

"You didn't, but Cricket did." Maggie pointed to the big shaggy dog holding a bird's nest in his mouth.

Mr. Sloman rescued the frail nest from the dog's jaws.

"Can you tell what kind of bird lived in this nest?"

The children peered at the nest cradled in their father's hands, a tiny grass and pine needle cup, lined with feathers like the ones on Mama's favourite hat. A rubber band, a piece of yarn and birch bark were also part of the little bird's home design.

"Well, it's quite small, and by the way it's shaped, I think it's probably a tree swallow, Papa."

Joan loved nature studies.

Mr. Sloman beamed, "You're right! This is a little tree swallow nest. Let's add it to our collection."

He put the nest on a shelf along with all the other treasures from nature studies of the past.

"Cricket's got a good nose, Papa!" Fredda patted the dog's head.

"Dogs have more olfactory receptors in their noses," shared Mr. Sloman, stepping back to admire the tree.

Mama stood in the door of the kitchen, holding it open with her foot.

"Well done, children. The tree looks very festive." Mama wiped her hands on her apron.

"Are the cookies done yet?" asked a hopeful Mr. Sloman, who loved Mama's cookies, especially with a hot cup of coffee.

Mama laughed, "I didn't think you'd last long. After we finish decorating the rest of the car, we'll enjoy cookies and warm milk. How does that sound?"

Everyone cheered and finished decorating the railcar with evergreen boughs and the popcorn and cranberries they had strung days before. It smelled altogether like Christmas.

"I don't know how we'll keep Cricket and Sandy from eating the popcorn," Joan groaned.

"What about Jack?" Bobby pointed to the crow preening outside the door of his cage.

Mama laughed, "He'll probably eat it too. Joan, when you were a little sprout, I'd find you hiding behind the tree, eating popcorn hand over fist."

Everyone laughed and Joan blushed.

"Can I help it if I have more taste buds than you?"

"And how do you know that?" Mama grinned.

"Because, when one's young, one has more taste buds than when one's older," Joan giggled. Like her father, she enjoyed surprising her family with random facts.

"I assure you, my taste buds are all in working order," teased Papa as he patted his flat tummy. He took pride in being fit, but liked to pretend that he looked fat. "Your mother's cooking is not to be missed. Now, let's get to those cookies!"

During the entire month of December, the little train-car, with its cheery Christmas decorations and Mama's cookies, travelled from site to site, spreading Christmas joy and cheer with each stop. Every class put on its own Christmas pageant and held its own parties. The children made paper chains and stars with glitter, and the time spent at each site culminated with a Christmas pageant, complete with live animals for the nativity.

At the Kakatush site, the families went an extra mile for their Christmas party: all the children wore homemade costumes. Gerald Buck dressed as a shepherd and brought a baby lamb with him, for an authentic Christmas scene in the stable. Little did anyone know how much the little lamb enjoyed Christmas carols.

All the inhabitants of the train-car sat in silent awe as the climax of the nativity ended with Sarah Brown, with a voice as clear as Mama's crystal, singing "O Holy Night." No one dared stir as she sang with a voice so pure. It brought tears to reverent eyes.

"Faaaaall on your kneeees…O heeeeear the angel voiiiiices…Oh niiiiiight diviiiiine…"

"BAAAAAAAA." The little lamb joined in the chorus.

The intense, sacred moment shattered as the inhabitants of the train-car stifled giggles.

With every strain, little Sarah sang louder.

And with every note, the little lamb turned up the volume of its bleating.

Before the end of the song, the entire train-car filled with laughter. Sarah finished the song, holding the musical lamb in her arms.

"Perhaps this also happened on the first Christmas," Mr. Sloman laughed.

After the program, Mr. Sloman took his gramophone to the river, and while some skated to the music, others picked teams and played a quick game of hockey.

At the end of each party, the Slomans gave gifts of clothing, food, and household items. In exchange, they received chickens, rabbits, home-baked goods, and fresh cream. During the gift exchange, Pasquale Deciccio walked down the aisle and planted a bottle of whisky on the teacher's desk.

"Why on earth did he do that?" Mama clucked after the party.

"Perhaps in his land it's a custom." smiled Papa as he scratched his head.

When Christmas Eve arrived, the Sloman family had spent an exhausting month celebrating Christmas, and that was the night when the pipes in the school-car froze and their cozy home had to be towed back to Caperol, to the roundhouse, to thaw out. The family spent Christmas day singing carols with the men of the roundhouse and celebrating Christ's birth with strangers.

Much the same as Mary and Joseph did the day baby Jesus was born.

Spring 1929

"Bring more water from the river, Maggie. Joan, bring me that other basket of clothes, then boil the water Maggie brings and check the bread in the oven."

"Yes, Mama."

Mama's oldest girls were an invaluable blessing. Life on the railroad-car was often hard. The chores never ended, but Mrs. Sloman kept a tidy car and neat children and never complained. Her cooking was unmatched by other women in the wilderness. By her example, women learned how to be good housewives and mothers.

Mama wiped her brow and looked at the murky water in the washtub.

"Getting this soot out of the curtains is an impossible job. The water turns black as soon as I put them in the tub, and it takes a lot of water to rinse it out."

The only running water on the train was cold water. Washing the soot out of curtains took hot water boiled on the stove. But Mrs. Sloman was thankful for spring time. She wanted to finish the washing so she could plant red geraniums, paperwhites, and begonias in the boxes on the school-car window ledges.

Inside, Mr. Sloman bent over a spreadsheet organizing a Coinuckle tournament for the monthly community game-night. Bingo was another favorite and, while it bored Mr. Sloman, the game allowed all ages and languages to play.

“Elizabeth, are the prizes organized?”

Mr. Sloman looked toward his daughter at the far end of the school room, organizing the prize table, brimming with baby bottles, nipples, talcum powder, and chocolate – rare finds in the Canadian wilderness.

“Yes, Papa. I’m almost done.”

Mr. Sloman stood, stretched, and poked his head outside the rail-car door.

“Billy! I’m ready to put the projector together! Do you want to help?”

Billy came running from behind the rail-car, out of breath, his face reddened and shining with tears.

“Papa! He’s gone! He’s gone!”

“Who’s gone, son?” Mr. Sloman ran down the stairs and knelt in front of his son.

“Rudy! Rudy’s gone! He ran off and I can’t find him,” Billy sobbed, his little shoulders heaving up and down.

Mr. Sloman tilted a sympathetic head and wrapped the boy in his arms.

“Aw, Billy, that’s what foxes do. We knew we’d only keep him long enough for his leg to heal. You did such a good job getting him well, he felt strong enough to go home to the woods again.”

“But he’s my good ol’ fox, Papa, and I’m gonna miss him.”

“I know. I’ll miss him too. He’s a pretty nice fox, indeed.”

Fredda ran towards the school-car with Petunia in her arms.

"What's wrong, Billy?"

"Rudy ran away. I can't find him," Billy sniffed.

"Petunia wanted to run away too, but I caught her." Fredda kissed the wiggly skunk.

"Petunia wants to go home, too, Fredda. Don't you think she probably misses her skunk friends and family?"

Papa, still kneeling down, reached over and scratched the little skunk on the head.

"But I will miss her."

"And she misses her friends the same way you will miss her. You need to think about it, okay?"

Fredda nodded, "Okay."

Mr. Sloman stood. "Now. Who wants to help me get the movie projector put together for tonight?"

"I do! I do!" sang the twins as they jumped up and down and ran to the school-car.

Inside, Mr. Sloman hooked the old film projector to a battery from a Model A Ford automobile. It gave power to the light bulb, but he had to turn the film by hand. Tonight, he would show a movie a friend sent him of his recent trip to Europe. He knew some of the families were homesick, and he was excited to surprise them with these pictures from their homeland.

Now that the snow had melted, some of the families arrived by canoe and others by hand-car. The hand-car was powered by a seesaw-

like arm that people pumped up and down to move it along the railroad tracks. The Sloman children enjoyed playing with the car, but, for the people who had to pump the car for miles, it was exhausting work.

The evening was a success, and Mr. Sloman grew to know his families better through the games. Families wept when they watched the movie of his friend's European vacation, recognizing some of their hometowns. They pointed things out to their children and were excited to share with them the lands of their birth. Mr. Sloman's arm grew tired from winding the film backwards and forwards until everyone had seen their fill.

The next day was the last day of school for the year. Some of the families camped out beside the train or stayed with other families closer to the school-car. No one was late, even though the festivities of the night before had lasted well beyond bedtime.

The day was spent with Mr. Sloman assigning summer homework and loaning out lots of books. He never worried about them being returned. The families took exceptionally good care of the books, and he'd never had one unreturned.

Mr. Sloman was proud of his students. They had come to him speaking many languages other than English, and now most of the older students could already read from the Third Reader. At the end of the day, he wanted them to read something they would remember.

"Students, turn to page 137." Mr. Sloman opened his book without lifting his gaze.

"Everybody?" Joan usually didn't read out of the Third Reader.

"Yes, everyone. Today, on our last day of school and before saying good-bye, I want us to read something together."

A soft hush came over the school-car. The last day of school was sad for the children of the wilderness. Each month the school-car was the highlight of their lives. They didn't want to say good-bye.

They turned to their books and read:

A Song of Canada

Sing me a song of the great Dominion,
Soul felt words for a patriot's ear!
Ring out boldly the well-turned measure,
Voicing your notes that the world may hear:
Here is no starvalling—Heaven forsaken—
Shrinking aside where the nations throng.
Proud as the proudest moves she among them.
Worthy is she of a noble song.

A tear glimmered on Mr. Sloman's weathered cheek as he looked into the eyes of the children of the wilderness. These were the children of the very souls who were the backbone of Canada. Their families had sacrificed all to build in unchartered lands. He would miss them.

"Caw!" Jack broke the serious tone, flapping his wings.

Mr. Sloman laughed, "I think Jack agrees: Canada is indeed a noble land."

Author's Notes:

Before school-cars came to the wilderness, hundreds of children in Canada's isolated areas went without any formal education. They lived in remote areas where roads were few, and lakes, rivers, and streams were the main routes of transportation.

Mr. Fred Sloman, known as the "Dean of School Car Teachers," spent forty years on a little school-car between the years 1926-1965. He and his wife, Cela, raised five children and "train-car schooled" them.

Between 1926-1967, seven different school-cars served the wilderness children of Ontario. The Sloman school-car is now a museum in Clinton, Ontario, Canada.