Pioneer Spirit

I recently attended the 100-year anniversary of my Grandparents' coming to Canada and settling in Elora. It was great to meet new people and reconnect with others I hadn't seen in decades. Approximately 250 people were in attendance, and I touched base with as many as time permitted, but my mind kept wandering to thoughts about the journey my grandparents must have gone through.

It's been a couple of weeks now, but I keep coming back to the same thoughts: the sacrifices, motivations, fears, dreams, and hopes they must have had to drive them towards such an adventurous decision to leave England. When the Reunion Committee contacted me to write a story for the local newspaper, I felt honored and a little intimidated, but eager to put some of my lingering thoughts to paper. This is my version of Joseph and Florence Chamberlain's story as researched from family documents and conversations over the years with family members. It's their story, but I am sure it mirrors many other families' heritage.

Times were tough for a coal miner working at the Chilton Colliery, England, in 1925. After returning from the great war (They didn't know it would be necessary to add numbers back then) January 1919 the mood was different at the mine. Wages had been cut, labor disputes with management were common, and countless safety concerns weighed heavily on Joseph's mind. The future of his growing family of 7 boys and 4 girls had looked very gloomy if they remained in the one-industry town of Chilton. Today was different, though, as it was his last day of work at the coal mine before embarking on a new and exciting adventure to a new country.

For the last 5 years he and wife Florence had been saving every quid (£), ($) they possibly could to put together the 3rd class ship passage to Canada. Children over 12 were considered adults so 6 adults, 6 half price children and baby Albert was free came to £72. (Roughly equivalent to C$10,160 today, and nearly a year's wages for a coal miner.) The task had seemed daunting at the start but as the savings grew so had their enthusiasm.

The steamship advertisements about Canada made it look like such a magical place, showing beautiful farms, well-kept houses, nice red barns, and fields populated with fat market-ready cattle. However, these idyllic images didn't show the challenges of wild snowstorms, blocked roads, long distances to towns, or farms without modern conveniences.

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Florence knew Joseph would be late home from work today. His mates were for sure going to drag him to the Boars Head pub for a couple of send-off pints. Over the last four years, their frugality for the most part had kept Joseph from his favourite pub, but today he deserved a little celebration. The trunks and bags sat in the front room that previously housed her modest income-generating grocery store, ready for transport to the train station and then on to Liverpool, where the steam ship RMS Doric was docked. Two third-class 6-person cabins awaited their arrival.

Saying goodbye to family and friends over the last couple of weeks had been hard on everyone, knowing there was a very good chance they would never see them again. (Many letters would arrive over the next year telling of the passing of parents and elderly friends, so much so that Florence will become fearful of going to the mailbox.)

Her oldest son, Henry, 16, and daughter, Flossie, 17, could be heard talking to each other in the next room. They both were lamenting leaving their friends behind, but their conversation soon moved to excitement and the promise of a new adventure awaiting them. Baby Albert alerted her to his need for another bottle.

As she sat feeding 3-month-old Albert in the rocking chair that was not going to make the journey like so many other possessions, she gazed up at their simple handwritten poster on the wall that had so many times motivated them through the last few tough years. The gentle creaking of the chair and the soft cooing of Albert provided a soothing backdrop as she read our dream once more:

Our Dream

1. A place where our children and future grandchildren can pursue meaningful goals, finding success and fulfillment in whatever careers they choose.
2. A nation of boundless opportunities and unbridled freedom, where we can forge our own path without being confined by tradition or limited by local boundaries.
3. A small piece of land, where we can grow crops and raise animals, providing for our needs with a market surplus to support our children's requirements.

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Joseph and Florence stood in the long 3rd class passenger line, tickets in hand, trailed by their eleven children, some not so patient, waiting to check into the massive 600-foot vessel in front of them. The ship's name, RMS Doric, glistened wet on the hull as the sun broke through the clouds of the April 10, 1925, morning. A smile came to Joseph's face as he stared at the magnificent ship tied to the dock with enormous ropes. The two-year-old vessel was the latest in the fleet of While Star Line's ships, specifically designed for immigrant transport with a capacity of 1688 third-class passengers and 583 cabin-class passengers. Two smokestacks lightly billowed black smoke straight up into the windless atmosphere. Joseph continued reading through the ship information pamphlet he had picked up in the big hall of the terminal. The vessel consumed 300 tons of coal per day, employing 30 firemen to stoke the boilers. Quick math in his head: 10 tons per man per day, no thanks. Joseph felt a mix of hope and worry as he thought about their journey. He had worked so hard to leave the coal mines behind, yet here they were about to board a ship that might be powered by the very coal he helped mine. It felt strange to him, like the past was following them even as they sailed towards a new

future. He couldn't help but wonder: had he made the right choice for his family? The line suddenly started to move faster, jolting him from his thoughts. They thankfully had opened up two new check-in counters. I guess all the first-class passengers are checked in, he muttered aloud. Florence gave him a displeased look.

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The North Atlantic was not in a good mood on Day 5 of their voyage. Florence, seasick herself, was busy trying to comfort 11 sick children. Joseph, the only one not affected by the rough seas, shuttled himself between the two cabins, providing support wherever he could. Florence, not normally a superstitious person, couldn't get thoughts of the Titanic tragedy some 13 years earlier on this very date, April 15. Their position was not likely far off the location of the maritime disaster. Every April 15, the newspapers would put the anniversary front and center in their stories of the day, keeping the memory fresh in everyone's minds. The night and the next day passed without incident, and most of the family thankfully was entering recovery mode. Two more days at sea.

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Joseph could see the site of the Halifax harbour from his vantage point on the 3rd-class passenger open deck. The site of the harbour filled him with a sense of joy, but also some concern. All their papers and proof that they could support themselves were in order, but there was always the fear that the final decision of their admittance into Canada was up to the entry customs officer. He pushed the doubt to the back of his mind. After all, Canada was part of the British Empire, and he had fought alongside many Canadians during the Great War, some six years earlier. How could they not welcome him?

After all the first-class passengers were off the boat, Joseph marshalled his tired and recovering 13-member family through the long disembarking customs line. The customs officer found his documentation all in order and directed them to the health clearance line. The process took several hours to clear all of the family members as fit for entry. The doctor's assistant directed them to the luggage receiving area, pointing and stating with a hint of sarcasm, “The train station is within walking distance, assuming that your large family can manage the luggage transport.” Their luggage was all together in a pile, and the area was mostly void of other passengers, likely due to their long clearance process. The two older boys, Henry and Joe, grabbed the heavy sea trunk, and the others shared the load of the remaining bags amongst the older ones.

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Florence woke from a deep sleep to the train brake squeal and the jolt of their passenger train car coming to a halt. She looked out the window and saw the Elora train station sign, a welcome sight after the slow 2-day, 2-night multi-stop train ride from Halifax. She could see that the train platform was crowded with people. She commented to Joseph that this train station appeared very busy for a small town. He shrugged his shoulders wearily and started the process of getting their things together and organizing the family for exiting the train. Florence led the way, carrying baby Albert in her arms, followed by the other 10 children, with Joseph following behind to make sure everyone stayed together. As Joseph stepped off the train onto the platform, he was met by some enthusiastic men reaching out to shake his hand and welcome him. Florence looked back in wonder as the crowd encircled their family with smiles and greetings. A woman reached out and offered to hold baby Albert, while several other women handed candies to the younger children. A man with a press badge, Elora Express, pushed past the tightening welcomers to get to Joseph, where he pulled him aside. The scene was so much different from what she envisioned. She had no expectation of anyone greeting them at the station, after all, they had no family or relatives in the area. After the initial shock wore off, the smiling introductions to her new neighbors soon began to fill her heart with joy, and all the apprehension about their decision to come to this new place evaporated from her mind. This was going to be their new home.

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Joseph returned to their new home after a long day at his neighbour, Mr. Moody's, farm, working the fields and milking cows. On arrival, he had been initially shocked to find that his farmland was rented out for the year, but sure enough, his neighbors had been right there to offer him and his oldest son, Henry, gainful employment at their farms.

Flossie, Ivy, Joe, Daisy, Annie, and Cliff broke up their game of baseball to run over and greet him. On entering the house, two of the younger children, Gordon and Bob, grabbed his legs in a game of can we stop daddy from getting to the kitchen table. Edmund grasped his hand in an effort to help his dad to his favourite chair.

After everyone had settled down, he noticed a scrapbook on the table open to a newspaper article. The headline read Settlement of British Families In Canada. Joseph chuckled as he read the section:

" *The family consists of Mr. Joseph B. Chamberlain, his wife and eleven children ranging in age from 17 years to the eleven week old baby, and they are a healthy, hardy sturdy lot indeed."*

He took a long draw from his bent stem pipe while Florence poured strong tea into his cup, baby Albert balanced in her other arm. He smiled at her, "That was some greeting at the station, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was. Can you light the stove? This cold October air is giving me a chill." Florence sat across from Joseph, repositioning Albert on her knee. "Joseph, I have some current news for you." Joseph noticed the serious look on her face.

"Alright, what is it?" he asked, a hint of apprehension in his voice.

She paused, then said, looking directly into his eyes, "I am quite certain I am pregnant. I'm hoping for a girl to even things out around here, and I want to name her Mabel."

Joseph sat in silence, processing the new information. The bowl of his pipe burned hot in his hand, forcing him to set it down in the ashtray. He managed a strained, "That's wonderful."

As Florence looked out the window, she spotted her neighbor's horse and buggy coming up the driveway. "Dorothy from two farms up the road is taking me to town to buy groceries. Try to keep the peace around here, Joseph," she said, calling out to Flossie to take Albert as she kissed Joseph on the cheek before leaving through the back kitchen door.

The apprehension of the news dissipated into a new feeling of great joy just as Henry arrived from his day's work at the Chalmers farm. "Hi Dad, how was your day?"

Joseph smiled back without answering, as he recalled their handwritten poster on the kitchen wall back in Chilton, noting only the last part of item three remained to be fulfilled.

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By George Chamberlain

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