

Historical Thinking Mentorship Project: George Sears, Home Child

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CURR 336, History Teaching Theory and Practice

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April 24, 2026

Section 1. Historical Thinking Concept

Chosen Concept

Ethical dimension is a historical thinking concept that helps us explore what was right, what was wrong and overall, what responsibilities people had both in the past and today. It is important to understand that it does not mean that we are judging people from long ago by today's standards. Instead, ethical dimensions ask us to think carefully about the choices people had at the time, who held power and who didn't, who was harmed and who benefited, and what responsibilities we have now when remembering these events.

Student Explanation for Learners

Historian Sam Wineburg said the past is like an alien world, where people lived in a time with different beliefs, pressures, and expectations. Understanding this helps us avoid simple judgment. He argued that studying history should make us more empathetic and more aware of human suffering and human courage (Wineburg, 1999).

Peter Seixas developed the Big Six historical thinking concepts contained in the history curriculum. He explains that ethical dimension is about responsibility, and when evaluating past injustices he encourages historians to consider what happened, such as the role that individuals and institutions like governments play in the event, the consequences for people who had little or no power, and how these events should be remembered today (Seixas & Morton, 2013).

When we read a historical piece like George Sears' testimony, who was a British home child who was taken from London and sent to Canada at age 12, where he was forced to work on farms without pay, ethical dimensions help us to consider his personal testimony more deeply. It makes us consider how children at the time were treated as labourers rather than human beings,

how institutions such as churches and government charities failed to protect them, and how power imbalances shaped their lives. We contemplate what a just apology or remembrance might look like today.

Ethical dimensions teach us that history is not just about dates and events; it teaches us that humanity plays an important role in studying history. It is about real people, harm, and responsibility. It helps us to understand the past in a way that is thoughtful, fair, and deeply human.

Section 2. Curricular Alignment

Grade Level: Grade 8

Ontario Curriculum Overall Expectation: B3.3

Ontario Grade 8 History – Overall Expectation B3.3 *“Identify factors contributing to some key events and/or developments that occurred in and/or affected Canada between 1890 and 1914 (e.g., ... the immigration of British Home Children to Canada ...), and explain the historical significance of some of these events and/or developments for various non-Indigenous individuals, groups, and/or communities.”*

Ethical dimensions deepen students' ability to meet specific expectation B3.3 because it helps them move from the task of simply identifying cause and consequence; it encourages them to interpret the human meaning behind the events and the weight of the events that occurred between 1890 and 1914. This concept encourages students to examine power relationships

within historical systems, such as child migration, farm labour schemes, and religious institutions. It highlights the responsibilities that were held by government charities and individuals, and showcases the lived experience of people with little agency, with a key focus on British Home Children.

Teacher Facing Curricular Note

The learning activity helps students to understand the long-term impacts these developments had on families and communities, and on Canada's identity as a whole. Stéphane Lévesque is a key scholar who argues that robust history teaching requires the integration of concept thinking within curricular content (Stéphane Lévesque, 2010). I think the ethical dimension supports this by prompting students to ask questions about the events that they are studying. It is not only about studying the events themselves, but also understanding what it meant for real people at the time and who was responsible. When analyzing George Sears' testimony as a case study, students can explore factors contributing to the immigration of British Home Children, such as poverty in Britain, labour shortages in rural Canada, and the rhetoric that children could be rescued through farm work in Canada, where they would be safe. The students can also consider consequences for individuals, which could include expectations, cultural dislocation, and emotional trauma. They can also consider institutional failures, such as inadequate oversight, the broken promise of education, and wage withholding. Historical significance is also an important concept for learning and includes how these experiences shaped Canada's labour history, race, and communities. They can also learn about the present-day efforts to recognize and honour British Home Children because it is a bit of a forgotten chapter within Canadian history. Ethical dimensions will help students meet B3.3 in a more meaningful way by helping them identify causes and consequences and understand their moral and human

significance. Lévesque's view and ethical dimensions are similar in that they both aim to connect past injustice to contemporary conversations about responsibility, memory, and reconciliation.

Section 3. Primary Source and Worked Example

Primary Source Selection

Home Children: Their Personal Stories is a compilation of personal accounts of Home Children throughout the years in Canada. An inquiry was placed in 40 Canadian newspapers, indicating Phyllis Harrison's interest in Home Children. The overwhelming number of letters arriving in 1969 and 1970 indicated that it was the first time anyone had asked about being a Home Child in Canada (Harrison, 1979). The chosen source details the life of George Sears, who came to Canada as a Come Child at the age of 12 in 1904. George wrote his account of time as a Home Child at the age of 78 (Sears, 1970). George Sears' letter is found on page 64 and is titled *I made a dive out the back door and hid in the turkey hut*.

Context for Learners

Context for Home Children: As the Industrial Revolution began to take hold, technology increasingly began to replace human skill and effort. Nonetheless, the industrial revolution caused a migration from the country to the city for the desire to work in factories, creating slums in the cities. Children were rescued from these harsh conditions of the streets and placed in philanthropic Homes in the United Kingdom. These children were frequently orphaned or had parents relinquished them due to their inability to parent. The 1860s started the philanthropic movement to improve these children's lives. The British Child Emigration Movement began on October 28 1869, when Maria Susan Rye brought 68 children from the streets, workhouses, and homes on a ship to Canada. In return for the help children could provide, Canadian farmers

promised to treat them like members of the family. Children 10 and older were indentured to the ages of 16, 18, or 21 years old, depending on provincial laws. Children 9 and under were considered placed for adoption, but there were no laws governing these contracts until the 1920s. Rye established a distribution centre in Canada for the children's reception and minimum supervision of their placement. Rye triggered the creation of more than 50 agencies dedicated to bringing children to Canada for labour. It was not until the Great Depression that demand for child labourers ended in Canada, at which point, nearly 100,000 children had immigrated to Canada as Home Children. Despite the expectation that Home Children would attend school, most were denied the chance and stayed home to work. However, it's noted that farmers were unable or saw little necessity in sending their own children to school, making Home Children's education even more uncertain. Two-thirds of the immigrant children were boys who were more inclined to run away from bad situations. In contrast, immigrant girls were expected to be obedient and uncomplaining until they would marry a 'nice farm boy' at the end of their indentured period. When farmers reneged on wage payments, the Homes instituted a system of payments to the Homes directly, but the Homes occasionally lost track of children before wages could be given. Boys were vulnerable to physical abuse, with girls being more at risk of sexual abuse. Some people developed the mindset that Home Children were unlike other children, with different needs for affection, love and understanding, because they came from poverty in England. These views began to change as society learned more about children's needs. As the system of Home Children has long ended, the descendants living in North America are over one million, creating a lasting legacy in our country (Harrison, 1979).

Set-Up: Each student will be given a slip of paper with instructions before beginning the exercise. Students may receive one of three slips.

Option 1: You will hear a story detailing the life of George Sears. **When the teacher provides two options for what path you may take, you can choose whichever side you like best.** The left side of the class will be for the first option, and the right side of the room for the second. You will need to defend your choice if prompted by the teacher. Return to the middle of the class so the next choice can be presented to you.

Option 2: You will hear a story detailing the life of George Sears. **When the teacher provides two options for what path you may take, you can only choose the first option.** The left side of the class will be for the first option, and the right side of the room for the second. You will need to defend your choice if prompted by the teacher. Return to the middle of the class so the next choice can be presented to you. **You are not allowed to tell anyone that you must choose the first option, so you must build a rationale for your choice.**

Option 3: You will hear a story detailing the life of George Sears. **When the teacher provides two options for what path you may take, you can only choose the first option. However, you may sneak around to choose the second option once, but if caught by the teacher, you will lose your wages for the year.** The left side of the class will be for the first option, and the right side of the room for the second. You will need to defend your choice if prompted by the teacher. Return to the middle of the class so the next choice can be presented to you. **You are not allowed to tell anyone why you need to choose the first option, so you must build a rationale for your choice.**

Story: My name is George, and I was one of Canada's many Home Children. While I arrived in Canada at the age of 12 in 1904, my journey started earlier. When my mother passed away, my sister and I needed to be moved to a home. We got to choose between Father Bann's Home or London's Home for Children. My sister and I are not Catholic, so we must convert if we go to Father Bann's Home, but I've heard that London's Home for Children is very welcoming to Protestants. **Choice.** We went to Father Bann's Home and converted to the Roman Catholic faith. My sister came to Canada six months before me. I missed her dearly during our time apart. I had the choice to work on farms in Aubrey or work with her in a French-Canadian household. Coming from London, I've never seen any of these farm animals or worked on any of these farms, but they seemed like hard work. **Choice.** I went to work for a family on their farm, but they spoke very little English. I was not used to the cold weather of Canada, and I found myself getting very cold while working. I figured I could tough it out and do my job, but a neighbour offered to knit me something to keep my hands warm. **Choice.** I ended up toughing it out and making do. I worked on a few other farms after this family. In the winter, I would be up at 4 am to start my work in the cold. I had the option to get cast-offs or new clothes. **Choice.** I chose to get the castoffs. When I turned 18, I was paid \$70 for my hard work over the years. I no longer work on farms and have a wife and four children.

Activity: The teacher will describe the life of George Sears, a Home Child who came to Canada in the early 1900s. At each step of the shortened story, the teacher will give the class two options; the first always being what happened, and the second being a more desirable situation. Students will then move to the left side for the first option and the right side of the class for the second option. The teacher will then ask the students to defend their choice to the class. Once a

few students have defended their choice, students will reassemble in the middle of the classroom to hear the next prompt. After George's story is completed, the teacher will announce to the class that not all students had free will in choosing which situation they preferred. The teacher will then foster a discussion with students by asking the following questions:

For students who did not have the freedom to choose:

1. How did you justify your answers when you didn't want to make the choice you made?
2. How did you feel knowing other students in the class got away with choosing differently from you?

For students who did have the freedom to choose:

1. How did you feel about the other students in the class who you thought voluntarily chose differently from you?
2. Did you ever feel guilty for choosing the way you did?

For students who could attempt to sneak into making another decision:

1. How did you decide which choice was worth the risk to sneak into making another decision?
2. Did you think it was worth choosing differently at any point?

Students will then be guided in reading the real life of George Sears.

Modelled Historical Thinking

After the reveal that not all students could choose freely in the activity, the teacher will explain how it replicated the life of Home Children. The experiences Home Children had were by luck of the draw, or in this case, the slip of paper received. Introduce the concept of ethical dimensions in regard to Home Children. Make it clear to students that lived experiences could

and would have been worse or better than George's. The teacher may then guide students in thinking about the following questions in regard to ethical dimensions.

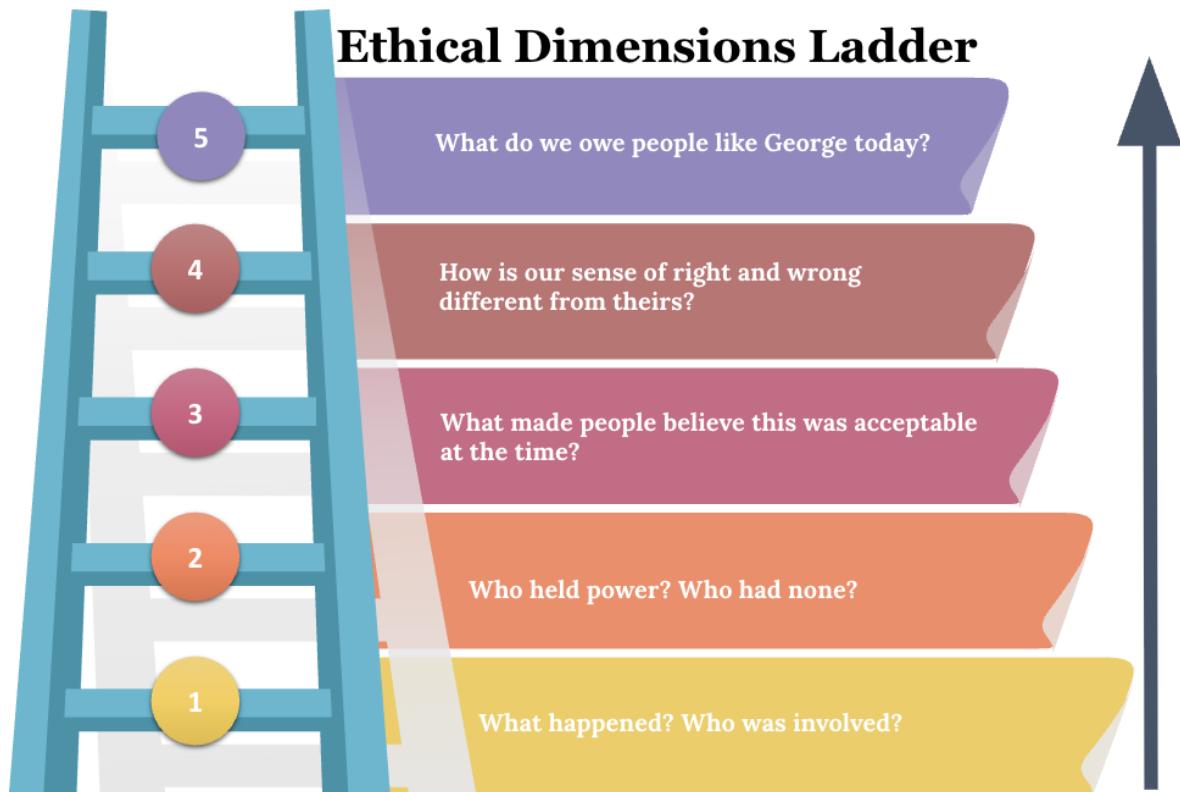
Guiding questions:

1. Is it unfair to judge the families who took in Home Children by today's standards?
2. What are our ethical obligations to remember Home Children?
3. What are the ethical implications of reading these primary sources?
4. Is there a duty to provide reparations to these survivors?
5. Were Home Children truly a humanitarian effort?

Teacher Note

This example can be used in the classroom to emphasize to the class about choice and the lives of Home Children being heterogeneous. By having students defend their choices, whether they wanted to make it or not, allows students to better understand children being a vulnerable group, where their lives were for the most part out of their control. There is an illusion of choice in this activity to make students critically evaluate how history took place. This activity will be run in this fashion to avoid students questioning why a Home Child would simply choose a better situation. After reviewing the primary source, students may question why such a system lasted for such a long period. However, at this point the teacher will need to re-emphasize the goal of the system and how it contributed to the country while acknowledging its misdoings.

Section 4. Visual Accompaniment to the Primary Source



Graphic Organizer

1. What is the event? When did it happen? Who was involved?

Use George's testimony and background information to answer in your own words.

Event	People Involved

2. What was going on at the time that helped make this possible?

💡 Think about what Canadian society believed about British children and immigrant workers at the time.

3. What different perspectives existed at the time?

Use evidence from the historical context **and** George's story.

People who supported the events	People who were harmed by it
People who questioned it at the time	

4. How do ideas about right and wrong differ from those of today?

What people believed then	What we believe now

5. How does George take a position in telling his own story?

Think about why George wrote the letter and the book in which it was included. Underline parts (i.e. specific wording) in the text that support your thinking.

6. What does this history mean for us today?

What do you think our responsibility is for the Home Children today? Remembrance, education, creating memorials, taking action? Why?

Description of the Tool

The visual accompaniments to the primary source consist of two components that work in tandem: the ethical dimensions ladder, and a graphic organizer with six guiding questions. With the ethical dimensions ladder, students are provided a visual framework to help scaffold their thinking. Each rung on the ladder leads to the next, and the upward structure communicates that ethical judgment is a destination that can only be reached by carefully considering the context and the questions below it. The ethical dimensions ladder serves to facilitate students' movement from simply repeating information (What happened and who was involved?) to engaging in higher-order thinking about ethics and making reasoned ethical judgments by critically situating an event in its context (How is our sense of right and wrong different from theirs?) through a student-friendly graphic. The graphic organizer then helps guide students in the understanding of the primary source. After the 'choose your own adventure activity', in which students discovered that all of them did not have meaningful opportunities for choice, the students will read George Sears' primary source account of being a Home Child, primed to understand constrained agency. Students will use the graphic organizer to guide their thinking/support reading through guiding questions that help students parse through information as they read the text. As Grade 8 students' historical literacy skills are still being developed, the organizer helps prompt students towards specific observations in the primary source and its context before leading them to form their own interpretations. The source also supports questioning through placing past and present ideas of 'right and wrong' beside each other, understanding of how the historical context of Canadian society's attitudes of British children and immigrant labour framed the scheme as charitable, as well as through prompting students to think about how George takes a position in his own story. The graphic organizer is grounded in Seixas' five guideposts for understanding the historical thinking concept ethical dimensions: examining sources in their historical context (guidepost 2),

invoking the idea of avoiding presentism (guidepost 3), and recognizing the meaning-making that exists in creating a historical account/testimony (guidepost 1) (Seixas and Morton, 2013 p. 184). Altogether, the two organizers work towards supporting reading and observation, and then moving students towards questioning and interpretation, helping them understand the ethical dimensions of historical accounts in ways that are grounded in evidence and humanity.

Pedagogical Purpose

These visual structures support historical thinking by organizing ideas in a way that helps students notice details in George Sears' account to form grounded ethical interpretations of the text. Before the reading, the ladder makes the sequence visible, illustrating how making ethical judgements requires working through the text, context, and subtext of a historical account. The graphic organizer then helps students work through the sequence as it relates to the text, encouraging students not to read the text passively, but to slow down and increase their comprehension of the text through deeper engagement (Wineburg 1991, p.503). This is done by questions like "What was going on at the time that helped make [these events] possible?" and "What different perspectives existed at the time?", paired with asking students to find evidence from the historical context and the story to support their answers. Historical thinking is encouraged by having students think about the subtexts within a text -- to think of historical documents not as infallible truths, but as works situated within a person, place, and time, requiring students to engage in the process of situating texts in their social world (Wineburg 1991, p.510). Students are asked to contemplate who has power, looking at the different institutional players that affected the conditions of Sears' daily life, and engage with the complex tension of the charitable intent in which schemas like the emigration of Home Children were set

up, with the reality that children were often placed in ill-equipped homes with little adequate follow-up from the organizations responsible for their welfare. This helps students consider intent and impact, that the two are not always aligned, and how reasoned ethical judgements require weighing that complexity before forming interpretations of their own.

Section 5. Scholarly Rationale for Pedagogical Design

We decided as a group that our main source would focus on George Sears, a first-person account that connects to Wineburg's argument that historical thinking is "an unnatural act" (Cliopatria, 2005). This requires students to analyze a source that is rich with emotional and morally challenging information, which allows students to reflect on ethical dimensions. This activity will help students to learn that many points in history are morally grey, not everything is black and white. In designing this lesson, we ensured that our lesson activities helped students slow down and take the time to think critically about the first-hand account of the lived experience of the British Home Children. Our section connects Wineburg's modelling that a cognitive apprenticeship is the most important, and historical thinking develops when students learn to interrogate everything that they're being given and don't simply take things at face value.

The sequence of events, starting with a roleplay choose-your-own-adventure activity in which it was revealed that certain students were unable to make their own choices, and only then using a visual and graphic organizer to closely read George Sears' account of his childhood, was intentionally designed to scaffold students into meaningfully engaging with historical inquiry and ethical responsibility. Zaccaria posits that historical cognitive development can be fostered in younger students by framing "adult actions in the past" in ways that are grounded for the student -- "the gap of time has to be bridged by utilizing whatever is available for the pupil's

comprehension.” (1978, p. 334). This activity helps span the gap as the students are oriented to learn about the Home Children by simulating their lived experiences, specifically the dimension of lack of power and choice they were afforded in their childhoods. The activity also helps prime students to engage in historical inquiry -- by making feelings of unfairness and power real and tangible, students will be naturally guided to question why certain people were allowed choice, and others were not, thereby engaging in active learning through inquiry (Grove 2016, 24).

When the students start reading the source, accompanied by the visuals that help organize and orient students to situate the text in its context, as well as the experience of feeling the situation's unfairness, the questioning of the power structures and different institutions that allowed for George's mistreatment to continue will be their own.

George Santayana is credited with saying, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,” which most people will cite to explain why history is so important. (Peace, 2017). It is so crucial that as active Canadian citizens, we are properly informed of our past to avoid complicity and denial of our country's wrongdoings. While as historians we want to avoid falling into the trap of presentism, Peace argues that values are intricately woven into the past, making it the teacher's choice in what values we teach (Peace, 2017). Peace further delves into the risks of national bias where we may ignore certain pasts to protect a morally just national identity (Peace, 2017). As a result, we decided to explicitly enhance student understanding of the context relating to the lived experiences of Home Children.

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Primary Source

From *The Home Children: Their Personal Stories* - Phyllis Harrison

I made a dive out the back door and hid in the turkey hut.

I think I have weathered the storm fairly well to date. I am now 78 years old, and I have been in Canada for 66 years.

I was one of those unfortunate children who came from a drunken father's home. My mother, as I remember faintly, was a handsome woman. She went to an early grave at the age of 32 — worn out by drudgery. She left five children behind to fend for themselves. I and my younger sister were placed in Father Banns' Home. We were not Roman Catholic but we were quickly converted to that faith. We were shipped out to this land of rocks and Christmas trees without the knowledge of my father - not that he would have cared.

We landed at Halifax early in May 1904, and came to the St George's Home in Ottawa. From there we were shipped all over Canada to be manhandled by every Tom, Dick and Harry going. My sister came six months before me, at the age of eight. She was placed with a French-Canadian family who ill-treated her. She was then sent to Sussex, New Brunswick, and there she remained until she was of age.

I was 12 when I came, and I was sent on to four farms over the next six years. I was to work until I was 18 for my clothes. Well, talk about the clothes that were given to me to wear. Being an immigrant I was looked down upon as scum. What a transplant — from the slums of London to the misery and loneliness of the backwoods. I had never seen a cow - much less a tomato or potato plant.

I stayed in St George's Home in Ottawa for a few days. Then I was shipped off to the farm by train. I had to change at Coteau for the train to Aubrey. The conductor who was

supposed to see me off at Aubrey forgot about me and I landed in Lacolle. The conductor let me pass the night at his dear old mother's home. She wanted to keep me, but in the morning I was on the train again and this time was put off at the right place. I was met by a man from Aubrey. My boss had to work for part of the day and could not meet me, so this man took me to his mother's place for lunch. She gave me my first taste of maple syrup with bread and butter.

At about one o'clock I was driven out to my new place about two miles away from the village. It was a small whitewashed log house. They had one baby boy of ten months. The man and his wife spoke some English but not much. Being a polite little boy, I kept asking for the water closet. By the time they caught on to what I wanted you can guess I had a few bad minutes. This man was poor. Their food was mostly salted fat pork, potatoes, bread and molasses.

For some reason or another the mistress took a dislike to me. Perhaps I was full of mischief. I do not recall. However I was not an ugly duckling, being fair of skin, curly fair hair, and blue eyes. The farmer worked part time until 11.30 every morning at the milk and cheese factory. It seemed to me that every day when he got home, there was always a tale to be told about me. Although I did not understand the lingo at the time, I sensed the talk was about me at the dinner table.

One fine day I'd had enough and I pointed a finger at her and said 'You, cochon', and I made a dive out the back door and hid in the turkey hut. I don't know if you ever saw one of these. It is triangular so that the hen turkey can go in with her brood to rest out of the rain and wind.

A short time after the boss came out looking for me. He was not able to find me and brought his wife out. Then the neighbours came. They looked all over — in the well, the barn, stables and pigstye. In the meantime I could see all these pairs of legs going by — everyone

chattering away. They were getting worried I think, for they were responsible for my welfare. However, I remained on my platform until it started to get dark. The farmer had frightened me with tales of the wild animals in the bush, so I had to come in and face the music. The hut was only about fifteen feet from the kitchen door, so in I came. Nothing was said except 'Where were you?' I saw they were relieved when I told them.

No supper that night and off to bed I went. But at 3.30 that morning I was awakened to fetch the horses from pasture, as the farmer left at four o'clock for the factory. You bet I was glad to get back to my raggedy bed after running through the cold dew in my bare feet.

His dear old mother lived some four farms away. She saw that their treatment of me was none too good and she knitted me some black woollen wristlets and gave me a nice soft fur cap for winter. I was told to take them back because they did not want her to dress me. Yet these people were too poor to buy me these articles themselves. In fact they were too poor to buy mortar to fill the cracks between the wooden logs of their house! They had to use cow dung.

The rules of the Home in Ottawa were that I was to attend school until 14. After that I was to get \$1.00 a month pay, and they were to feed and clothe me. I did not attend school until fall. I learned nothing, for the teaching was all in French. I was not allowed to visit any neighbours. I never had a ball, sled, skates, or books to read. Not a cent in my pocket until the age of 18. Christmas, New Year's and birthdays meant nothing to them when it came to me. Today, my children ask me why I'm not interested in sports. How could I be?

The first two or three years a man used to come to ask about my welfare. In later years it was the Sisters of St Vincent de Paul who did this job. I remained at the farm for about a year and a half. By then the farmer saw he could not make a living off the land which was mostly rocks. So he went back to Montreal. I should have returned to Ottawa then, but a farmer had

been in touch with the pastor here and wanted me to work for him. The nuns gave permission for me to go.

The food here was somewhat better but not for long enough. The old man, married three times by then, told his wife to get out. The case went to court in Valleyfield, and I was glad when the old lady won. In the meantime I had to be the housekeeper, doing his washing, ironing and cleaning — besides working on a big farm. The son on this farm was about 35 and he was a rotter. I had to go to a neighbour to beg for a stamped form to write home to my folks. If any letters came for me they were opened by this son in the village and read by all before they were given to me. The nuns came to see me and asked that I be given \$3.00 per month. The son said I was not worth \$3.00. So back I went to Ottawa. I was lucky that I had learned to speak French by then. Don't ask me how much I got from this farmer for the time I slaved for him.

From Ottawa I was sent back to a French farmer who had two big farms at St Clet, and also a forest at St Lazare about eight miles away. I worked there for nearly two years - no doubt for nothing. When the nuns saw the money was not coming I was taken away to Ottawa again. The food was very good, but as elsewhere I was considered an outsider - an immigré d'Angleterre.

In the winter we were up at four o'clock and did the chores before moving off with the team of horses to this bush at St Lazare. Two loads a day — that is what we had to cut and load. Here again I was supposed to be clothed but I got cast-offs from others. In winter the farmer had rubber boots with two pairs of socks. I had leather boots with one pair of socks. I suffered from the cold and I always hated the damn snow.

From Ottawa I was sent to Ontario to an Irish farmer. I think he paid the Home \$6.00 a month for me. I was near 18, so I came to Ottawa to claim my fortune. I had written to Father

Banns about the nuns having left me to work on some farms without pay. To my surprise the good man thought it his duty to send my letter to the Mother Superior in Ottawa. She wanted me to contradict what I had said but I wouldn't. I told her she could keep my fortune made in six years of labour, but she gave it to me. If I recall correctly it was \$70.

I was then on my own. You bet I got away from the farm. I thank the Good Lord for my blessings. I married a girl from here — half Irish and half French - and we have four children. I worked at the Windsor Hotel in Montreal for 47 years. I was laid off in April 1959. I am quite hard of hearing and this, no doubt, was the reason for my dismissal. I was given no pension so it was best to come to this small country hamlet. Not that the cost of living or rents are lower, but it is quiet here and the fresh country air is good to enjoy.

I am not one to believe in the spirit world but in all my tribulations I have always felt my mother by my side.

George Sears

St Chrysostome, P.Q. George Sears

St Chrysostome, P.Q.