

The Disappearance of Jake Fast

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Jake Fast was the son of an immigrant family. Born in 1902, he grew up on a farm near Laird, Saskatchewan. His parents, Jacob Fast (1874-1939) and Helena Epp (1878-1962), had emigrated to Canada in the 1890s along with many other Russian Mennonites leaving the Mennonite settlements of Eastern Ukraine in those years. Jake was the fourth of their fifteen children.

Jake married Hazel Dobson (1911-1997) in March 1931. A few months later, in September, their daughter Maxine (1931-2007) was born.

From the start Jake's marriage to Hazel was rocky. Their overspending caused severe financial strains, and the couple went into significant debt. At first their financial situation was manageable. Jake had a good job, and he did well as a "block man" for Massey-Harris Limited, occupied as the regional representative for Saskatchewan. Then came the Great Depression. Farms failed and business slowed. Jake lost his job in 1935. It became impossible for the couple to manage the payments demanded by lenders. With no prospect of income, Hazel gave up on the marriage, leaving Jake and abandoning their daughter. Jake, unable to care for his young child, entrusted Maxine to the care of an orphanage.

Jake moved briefly to Aberdeen to live with his brother, Henry Fast (1900-1961), doing his best to maintain a low profile and evade lenders. Out of work, unable to repay his debts and desperate, Jake concluded that his only option was to leave town before the authorities caught up with him. At this time, probably in the latter half of 1935, he heard about a mine in northern Saskatchewan that was looking for laborers. He let Henry know he intended to head north immediately to find work.

The only major mining development in northern Saskatchewan in the period of 1935-1936 was the Nicholson Mine project at Fish Hook Bay on the shore of Lake Athabasca. Whether Jake worked at the Nicholson Mine is completely speculative but if he did go there his employment was brief. The costs of construction and transportation in the north made the site uneconomic and the development soon was shut down.

Before leaving Aberdeen, Jake discussed the welfare of his daughter. It seems likely that he asked Henry to remove Maxine from the orphanage and deliver her to their sister Margarete (Fast) Friesen (1912-2001), living in Rosthern.

On the day of his disappearance, Jake borrowed a pair of boots from Henry and headed out on foot. His young nephew, Eldred, aged about three or four, accompanied him for a short distance. They hiked to the top of a hill near the house, where they stopped for a rest. Jake gave Eldred a hug and sent him back home. Eldred watched as Jake walked over the top and out of sight. Jake was never seen again by the family.

Henry honored his brother's request, taking Maxine from the orphanage. Maxine stayed with Henry's family for several weeks before Henry's wife, Mary (Kitzel) Fast (1906-1994), took her by train from Aberdeen to Rosthern. Maxine was in Rosthern for a very brief period. Dora Fast (1921-2011), the youngest of the Fast siblings, had been staying with her older sister, Margarete, and was still there when Maxine arrived. A day or two after Maxine was dropped off Dora left for her parent's house on the farm near Laird, bringing with her the youngster.

Thereafter Maxine was raised by various relatives. When Maxine reached school age, she spent weekdays living with her uncle and aunt, John Fast (1898-1985) and Susanna (Hooch) Fast (1906-1945) on their farm in the Eigenheim area, attending school with her cousins. On weekends she returned to Dora and Grandmother Helena in Laird. When she was older, she lived with another aunt and uncle, Helena (Fast) Ens (1901-1971) and Jacob Ens (1897-1973) on their farm in the Danzig area, attending school with their children.

In Jake's absence his financial problems became much more official. Officers of the RCMP paid periodic visits to Helena and Dora in Laird, looking for Jake. My mother, Marjorie (Fast) Teichroeb, was at her grandmother Helena's house one day when the police visited. She overheard them asking about Jake and where he might have gone. They gave no reason for their search.

Of course, there were many rumors about Jake's fate. Perhaps he was involved in a serious crime or had witnessed one and had to hide. Perhaps he died in a mine collapse. There were several mentioned in the papers in the years after his disappearance. Possibly he had enlisted in the military in 1939 and become a casualty overseas. No one knew.

Around 1961 a chance encounter in Waldheim gave the family hope that Jake was still alive. Henry was operating a store in Waldheim. His son Eldred was working there on a day when Henry's brother Albert Fast (1907-1977) was visiting the store. Peter Unrau, a young man who had grown up in the Waldheim area was home from Calgary where he worked. He bumped into Albert and Eldred in the store and told them about an acquaintance in Calgary named Jake Fast. Jake had said he had family in the Waldheim area. It seemed certain that Jake had finally emerged from hiding. Peter promised that when he returned to Calgary, he would let the family know if Jake was still in the area. To their disappointment that was the last news they had of Jake.

Years later Maxine told Marjorie that when she was living in Calgary, she was certain she saw Jake in a crowded street. Before she could catch up to him, he once again vanished.

Jake's disappearance remains a mystery.

Coda

While writing this article I made a request under the Access to Information Act, asking the RCMP to perform a search of their case files for information about Jake. Months later they responded.

Any records about Jake that may have been created were no longer in existence. Likely his case file had been destroyed in accordance with record retention regulations that govern RCMP files.

Acknowledgements

I reconstructed the events in this story based on recollections shared by several Fast cousins, Les Friesen, son of Margaret (Fast) Friesen, Eldred Fast, son of Henry Fast, Amy (Ens) Loewen, daughter of Helena (Fast) Ens, and Marjorie (Fast) Teichroeb, daughter of Albert Fast. Margarete, Henry, Helena and Albert were siblings, children of Jacob Fast and Helena Epp.