



**Charlie Henry Workman (1897-1976) ~**  
*The Unspoken* is a memoir and two poems  
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Westminster, British Columbia, Canada.

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If people had kept asking me if I were “Charlie Workman’s daughter,” I would have kept the surname Workman. Dad was well-known through the countryside of south-western Ontario. I was proud to say “yes.” After moving to BC, I got caught up in poetry and low-key feminism, and edited my name. Louann had been my middle name, invented by my parents, honouring Aunt Lou and Gramma Ann. Perfect for the writer in the family? If I had it to do over, I would be “Fran Work.”

This is not about me. This is my father’s eulogy, the one I might have given. Even then, at the time of his death in 1976, this would have taken some research. I was three thousand miles away, and I didn’t go to the funeral. Christmas was coming, I was going to be moving soon, and I thought mom would need me more later.

Dad was one of the British home children. He came from England when he was about ten. A brother named Arthur was on the same ship, but he went on to Australia. A sister, Nellie, also ended up in Australia. Another, Auntie Flo, whom we knew best, was in Canada for a brief time, before settling as much as she ever did, in Arizona. Flo never married. We said that she “lived in a suitcase.”

Our Mom kept up correspondence with these siblings who had left England. Aunt Nellie’s son, Arthur Elliott, and his wife, Rene, travelled “around the world” to connect with us. I’ve been able to make a Facebook friendship with their daughter.

Dad’s first experiences as a home child may have been unpleasant. He never spoke about those early years. His last placement was excellent. It was on a large farm on Highway 23, on the way from Mitchell to London, Ontario. Our parents would often point out this house with its large circular driveway as we drove by. The next generation of that lovely Bell family, whom we sometimes visited in London, was our only connection with that farm and Dad’s past.

Dad didn’t marry till he was

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## *The Unspoken*

### By Franci Louann

about forty; Mom was twenty-six. They had two sons, Ross and Harold. About five years later, two daughters arrived—first I did, Frances, and then my sister, Mariann. Dad was about fifty when we girls were both babies. I think he must have been surprised to find himself a father with his own young family. We heard at the time that this was called “a gentleman’s family”—two boys and two girls.

In the thirty years that I knew him, Dad didn’t seem to age much. His conservatively-cut black hair was always a bit salted, usually under a hat when he was out. He was tall with a medium build, a bit wide at the waist. I remember long-sleeved shirts and long pants. One time his legs were exposed and his pale skin burned easily. I was the only child to have his brown eyes; we hadn’t heard of “hazel” eye colour then.

Charlie Workman called himself a “drover”, a word he brought from England. By that he meant “someone who takes animals to market”. Our farm of ten to twelve acres rotated through various types of crops and livestock. Our homestead was so small that our mixed farming was done in turns. Sometimes we had lots of cattle, sometimes pigs; sometimes we had hay crops in the big fields. Our cows were usually Jerseys, gentle fawn-coloured creatures with large eyes and rich milk. One spring I was responsible for three Jersey calves. When I cleaned out pens in the barn, I would even pat down any sharp edges in the fresh straw. My sister was more likely to help Mom in the house.

We lived on a highway about twelve miles from Stratford. Most of our fields separated our orange brick house from the little red schoolhouse. Mariann and I shared “the big bedroom” upstairs, with

windows on each end. We had two double beds; there was space enough for a third and still room for dancing.

When I was learning to write, Dad would say “Use your right hand.” He did have a good sense of humour and I thought he was joking. “But this is the right hand for me to use”, went through my mind, as I used my left, and started at the opposite edge of the page as right-handed people do. That last inclination had to be corrected.

For the following, I quickly forgave my father. When I was the first girl in the family to be of high school age, only thirteen, Dad wondered if it would be worthwhile for me to go, as I would likely “just get married.”

After high school, my parents thought of nursing or teaching as safe futures for me. I chose dental hygiene, which was unusual at the time.

Dad had dentures before I knew him; he had two small gold fillings in the lower front teeth. When he got new plates, he took them back and had that gold added. Whenever we had ice cream, he’d say, “Isn’t it funny how it goes for your teeth?” Was he teasing? Or did he have a phantom memory of tooth pain? Dad and his teeth were always entertaining.

I shared Dad’s passion for horses and loved to hear him “talk horse” with people. He would find the right horses for people with special requirements. For example, for the Carlsberg Championship Team and Wagon he found a matched team of eight Belgians. This is one of the largest and most impressive brewery wagons in the world. He found more such giants for the Stratford Museum’s steam calliope, and would often drive this team in parades.

Dad also helped the Amish and Mennonite people find horses. They had varying needs depending on their beliefs. Some could have only black horses. He’d find them buggies too. Some could have rubber on their wheels, some could not have that much comfort. Some could drive cars, probably black cars with the chrome painted black. These were plain folk.

We almost always had a horse or pony on the farm. Soon I learned I should not get attached to these. Dad was a horse trader, for sure.

In the early fifties, Dad had several cars for sale on our front lawn. I remember sitting in the rumble seat of an old black car, where the trunk would be today. I remember the smooth round fenders of a pretty Ford convertible, circa 1950. Was it really metallic gold?

In the mid-70s I found two of Dad’s brothers in England, Uncle Percy and Uncle Bert. These men’s lives had been extremely different and they did not keep in touch. The first one I met only thought that the other was still alive. The family’s mother (my grandmother) had died when Percy was born. Probably my grandfather could not manage to care for his six children—my dad, Arthur, Nellie, Florence, Bert and Percy—so the family was disbanded. They were not orphans. Later my grandfather remarried, purportedly to a woman that did not want children.

It’s a long story about how I finally found Uncles Percy and Bert and their families in Gloucestershire. They were so impressed, they called me

“Columbo,” after the detective on TV.

My research suggests that several of the siblings could have gone to one or more Barnardo homes, social housing for homeless children. Dr. John Thomas Barnardo—born in Dublin, Ireland—was five foot three and wore a silk top hat. He helped thousands of boys and girls in England, with 110 homes in the 1800s. His motto was, “No destitute child ever refused admission.” They learned trades and music, had daily exercise and play, food and clothing. Rules were liberal with no physical punishment. Thirty thousand came to Canada over sixty years—“only the flower of the flock”—healthy, with sharp eyesight and good teeth. Dr. Barnardo visited Canada several times, but could not have known how badly the children here were being treated.

Dad did not express an interest in meeting his brothers. They didn’t even talk on the phone. That seems strange. Perhaps remembering all that had happened since their parting, especially in the early years, was too painful.

Dad died about a year-and-a-half after I returned from that trip, in the fall of 1976, before Uncle Percy’s people started to come from England to visit. He was almost eighty and died of what was probably his first heart attack. How I wish I’d taken him to the doctor the previous summer, when he said he felt too dizzy to drive.

After Dad passed away, in 1979 Phyllis Harrison wrote the book, *The Home Children—Their Personal Stories*. I was pleased to purchase a copy. Mom did not want to read it. Perhaps she already knew more than she wanted to, about those times in Dad’s life. Though I have read two others, I haven’t kept any of these books.

Over the years, our knowledge changed. We thought Dad was born in 1898, but papers from England later showed that it was two years earlier. For a long time we thought that he was not one of the “Barnardo boys.” Now there is evidence that he was. *The Home Children* refers a lot to the Barnardo

Homes. Girls and boys came to Canada and were fostered, mostly by farm people, sometimes adopted. The home children came to work, and often didn’t attend school.

Dad had a wry sense of humour. He would shake things up, get people talking, even if only about how strange his behaviour was at the time. He would conspire with friends who owned a restaurant in Goderich, Ontario. When there was a new server on staff, he would (in the middle of summer) dress in a fur coat, sit at the counter and order corn flakes in the afternoon.

He’d perform hat tricks for us, apparently making wadded balls of newspaper go through the kitchen table. It was many years before I finally figured out how he did that. Dad would listen to the noon news on the radio, often lying on the couch. This was followed by marching music, to which I would strut smartly around the kitchen. These were some of our bonding times.

As a little girl, I remember sitting on Dad’s knee, kissing and stroking his stubbly cheeks. I used to enjoy horsey rides on his knee, but then my parents said I had become too heavy. Perhaps it was decided that this was inappropriate.

I don’t remember kissing Dad again until the morning that my sister and I were driving out to British Columbia. We were in our early twenties. He was leaving the farm even earlier than us that day for some reason, and he came upstairs to wake us and to give us hugs and kisses.

A year after Mariann and I came to BC, Mom and Dad flew out for Mariann’s summer wedding. They had not been on a plane before, and Dad drove down to the London airport with Mom at least once, to observe how it went. He decided that the people who came off the planes looked happy, so it seemed that they would be okay.

Dad almost always had a truck. It was part of the drover thing, I’m sure. For years, my sister and I were jammed into the cab, between him and Mom. Family suppers out

were typically fish and chips in Stratford. Dad often brought home pastries. He seldom had beer at home; when he was partying with friends it seemed to me that he was pretending to be drunk.

Despite some things that my Dad and I had in common, I’ve never felt British. (He didn’t have an English accent.) Even before we moved to BC, I questioned why it should be called “British” Columbia. Mom’s family came from what I believe was then called Prussia, circa 1850. They still spoke German at home when she was a girl, until it was discouraged during the first World War. Our township had been settled by Germans; our neighbourhood of small farms was informally called “Little Germany.” Of three languages I studied in high school, German was my favourite.

Dad was part of the transportation industry. Without knowing of each other, the following generations on both sides of the ocean shared a passion for automobile sales. When I found Dad’s brother, Uncle Percy, in Gloucestershire in the 70s, I learned that he too had been a horse trader. His son and grandson were car dealers. My oldest brother sold “classic autos” when he retired from his highways job. His youngest son grew up obsessed with cars. When he was about six, if you showed him a photo of people, he’d identify any car in the background. His studies and career have been in the automobile industry. You might call them all “transportation specialists.”

I say that I come from a long line of horse traders. When this became obvious, I decided that I too must be good at sales. This I applied to charitable projects, coining the word “FUNd-raising.” In my volunteer work I like to think that I facilitate the movement of goodwill—and trade, if you will, in joy.

Dad was extremely honest and made sure that all trades he facilitated were fair.

I’m proud to be “Charlie Workman’s daughter.”