

Sigrun Sigurdson Martin

A Northern Business Woman

by Maureen Martin Osland

L'auteure raconte l'histoire de sa mère en tant que pionnière et entrepreneuse à Churchill au Manitoba après la première guerre mondiale.

Sigrun Sigurdson was 13 years old when she arrived in the small northern port town of Churchill, Manitoba. The light sweater and cotton dress she was wearing offered no protection against the bitter cold. Sigrun looked around at the desolate tundra and small shacks that made up the town of Churchill and wondered why her father would want to make a home here. She had travelled with her mother and sisters for two days from her lush, green, southern Manitoba home and all she wanted to do was get back on the train and go home again. How could she possibly live here?

The town of Churchill is built on a finger of land that is bordered by water on three sides. The Churchill River flows along the north side into Hudson's Bay. The Bay runs along the east and south shore of the community. The fresh river water hitting the icy cold salt water of the Bay creates thick fog from June to October. The winters are very cold and windy. The flat tundra and barren landscape do not provide protection from the gale force winds that blow in off the cold ice floes on the Hudson's Bay.

The area has been a trading, trapping, and meeting centre for hundreds of years. It has a long history of gatherings of the Inuit, Cree, Chipewyan, and European traders as well as many explorers including Henry Hudson and Samuel Hearne.

Sigrun's father, Sigurmunder Sigurdson, at the age of 62, had packed up his small grocery store in southern Manitoba and moved north to try to

recover some of the losses he sustained during the depression. In 1929 Churchill was booming with the construction of Canada's only inland port. In an attempt to slow down the overwhelming flow of labourers into the northern Port of Churchill, the Canadian Government made it necessary for people to have work permits before being permitted to ride the national railway into town.

When Sigurmunder realized they needed a permit and would not be able to ride the train to Churchill, he built a boat and entered Churchill through the river. Once established, he sent for his wife and children. Sigrun arrived in 1931.

Sigrun went to business school in Winnipeg and eventually married Frederick Martin, a Montreal man working in Churchill as a trapper.

Sigrun, Fred, and her brother Oscar set up a trading post at McGoose River, near Arviat in the Northwest Territories. They travelled with groceries and supplies to and from Churchill, by boat in the summer and by dog sled in the winter. Sigrun remembers this time as productive and challenging, living among the Inuit with no understanding of the language, but always being able to communicate. She recalls with appreciation that the Inuit women would take her young daughter Louise in their *amoutuks* (parkas with large hoods for carrying children) whenever she was fussy. Many of Louise's first words were in Inuktituk.

When Sigrun's father died in the 1930s, Sigrun, Fred, and Oscar took over the operation of the store in Churchill. When Fred died in 1963, Sigrun was left with six children between the ages of three and 18 and a business to run at a time when women were not easily accepted in the business world.

There were only two grocery and dry good stores in the community,

the Hudson's Bay Company and Sigurdson and Martin's Supermarket. Sigrun realized the store needed some renovations and expansion in order to keep up with demand but when she approached the bank for financial assistance she was refused. The bank refused to recognize her as a creditworthy customer because she was a woman. Eventually Sigrun was able to arrange for financing through her grocery wholesaler and she added a new section onto the store. She also purchased her brother's share of the business.

Sigrun ran the store similar to the way they had operated the trading post in Arviat. When times were good and furs were plentiful, the customers paid off their debt to the store and purchased more goods; when times were not so good the store carried the customer, allowing them to purchase goods on credit until things improved.

Throughout this time Sigrun was also active in community affairs. She was elected Deputy Mayor and was an active Board member on the Port Authority and on the Hudson Bay Route Association, a lobby group supporting use of the shipping port. She was also a founding member of the Churchill Ladies' Club in the 40s and is still active in the club today.

Sigrun is a pioneer who has supported the growth and development of the community that has been her home for more than 60 years. She still lives in Churchill surrounded by many of her six children, 17 grandchildren, and eight great-grandchildren.

Maureen Martin Osland was born and raised in Churchill, Manitoba. She moved to Whitehorse, Yukon in 1989. She is a student in criminology at the Yukon College with an interest in women in the justice system and the development of Aboriginal justice systems in Canada. Sigrun is the author's mother.



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