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Joy in Christ
100 Jubilee
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Jubilee 100 Biography Project

Biography of Walter and Marion Houtain

Submitted by St. Joseph Parish, Three Hills, Alberta

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This is a love story of two people who devoted their lives to each other and to their family. It is also a story of their love of God, church, community and country.

Walter Houtain was born at Pembroke, New Brunswick, on March 27, 1899. His wife, Marion Montague, was born in the adjacent settlement of Newburg on October 7, 1898. They were schoolmates and best friends.

In 1907, Walter's father, Joseph Patrick, died at the age of 36 leaving his wife, Sarah, with a family of four, Walter, Nellie, Mary, and Josie. In 1916, the family had come to Alberta and settled on a farm near Three Hills where Mrs. Houtain had accepted a teaching assignment. Marion Montague was the second child in a family of seven born to Patrick Montague, a farmer, and Helena, a teacher. Marion completed Teacher's College and began her teaching career in 1916. On September 3, 1919, in St. Joseph's Church, Newburg, the childhood best friends were married.

Soon after their arrival in Alberta, Marion accepted a teaching assignment close to the Houtain home. Walter farmed two quarters of land and later was a grain buyer for over 10 years. Marie, the first of 11 children, was born on August 26, 1920, and brought much joy to the young couple. Sorrow entered their lives when the next two children died in infancy. Walter and Marion were sustained by prayer and the presence of a healthy, delightful little Marie. They looked forward to the births of the next eight children with great anticipation. As loving parents they maintained a joy-filled household despite the worries that came with the Great Depression. In 1939, the family experienced the first of three more devastating blows with the death of son, Pat, at age 12, followed by Frank, age 16, in 1940, and Joseph Paul, age 17, in 1953. While Walter and Marion grieved sorely over their losses, they were able to talk about the saving grace of God and their faith sustained them. Walter and Marion remained strong as their heartaches were lightened knowing they each had the support of a loving and loyal partner.

Coming from Irish Catholic families, Walter and Marion knew that God, Church and Prayer were the main priorities in establishing a home, raising a family, and serving their community. From the beginning they took an active role in the Church and social life of their parish community. Despite the hard times they donated money and provided labour to the building of the first St. Joseph's Church in Three Hills, which opened in 1928.

Over the years, Walter and Marion did much to make the lives of the priests more pleasant by taking them into their hearts as well as their home. Interesting discussions on the Church and on politics were always anticipated as well as the opportunity to share Walter's love of poetry and Marion's love of music.

Walter and Marion instilled in their children a love for the Catholic faith and the importance of regular attendance at Sunday Mass. Learning their catechism and saying their prayers were important family practices. Each day began by saying the Morning Offering and ended by gathering to recite the rosary. Although Walter and Marion held strong Catholic convictions, they had great respect for the religious faith of their neighbours and maintained life-long friendships with members of other denominations. They welcomed and appreciated Vatican II and were grateful for the opportunity to attend occasional weekday ecumenical services and the fellowship evenings hosted by the Knights of Columbus and the Masonic Order.

When the CWL was organized in Three Hills, Marion became one of its early Presidents and strived faithfully to fulfill the principles and projects of this national organization. She felt especially honoured when she received the Sixty Year and Maple Leaf Service pin in 1986. Walter was equally busy with the formation of the Trochu Council of the Knights of Columbus and served as its founding Grand Knight at the initial meeting in 1952. He was awarded the 25 Year Scroll and pin in 1977.

Walter served as a trustee for the local Manor School District for 18 years. He then helped organize the Boards of the Drumheller School Division in 1939 and the Three Hills School Division in 1954, often serving as the Board Chairman. During his 42 years as a School Trustee, he was a member of the Provincial Trustee Executive for two terms. Walter always maintained an immense admiration for teachers. He placed the welfare of students above anything else. As one principal stated, "He was a true champion of education."

As a result of his great admiration for Wilfred Laurier, Walter developed a life-long interest in politics and in the Liberal Party. He was a Liberal candidate in one provincial election and three federal elections. Walter had the friendship and confidence of a number of Prime Ministers during that time. Marion enjoyed discussing issues and policies with Walter and attending several Liberal leadership conventions provided many memorable experiences for them. Walter was awarded the Queen's Medal in 1953 for his outstanding service to the public in general and to education in particular.

Their 'honeymoon' in the West lasted 57 years. Walter passed away on January 15, 1977. His beloved Marion joined him on January 5, 1992. The Houtain family and their children are grateful indeed to this much loved and revered couple who were sharers of faith, exemplars of sacrifice, and mirrors of divine love. The families continue to thank God for the many inherited blessings of wisdom, fairness, a wholesome sense of humour, a welcoming hospitality to all, as well as their personal sense of responsibility for their neighbour, parish, community and country. The next generation has followed the example set by Walter and Marion. They continue to serve.