

Long Journey Westward

by

Janet A. Nicolet

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Cover picture: Fraser Mills train station from the A.G. Parè collection provided by the Coquitlam Heritage Society, Coquitlam, British Columbia.

The Canadian flag pictured was not that country's official flag before 1965. However, it is used for this project by reason of familiarity to the reader.

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This is a work of fiction. With the exception of using the given names of the Mills and McGregor family members, all characters and events in this novel are purely fictional. All historical characters and facts are added for the reader's enjoyment and enlightenment.

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Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

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Other books by Janet A. Nicolet

Non-fiction

Vintage Years, *A Fulfilling Life After Divorce* 2007

Fiction

Kerri, *An Incredible Journey* 2008

Kerri, *Recaptured Love* 2009

Kerri, *A Sister's Love* 2010

Books may be ordered through any on-line bookstore or from the author's website: www.myvintageyears.com.

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Dedication

This historical novel is dedicated to the memory of my great-grandparents, James and Catherine Mills, who had the courage to leave their poverty-stricken homeland of Ireland in the late 1800s to seek a better life for their family. I did not know my great-grandparents, but I admire their resolve to make such a change in their life.

It is also dedicated to the memory of my beloved grandparents, Robert and Hazel Mills. They lived in the small but vibrant sawmill town of Fraser Mills, British Columbia, Canada as newlyweds. Growing up -- they were my anchor.

Acknowledgements

I am so very grateful to:

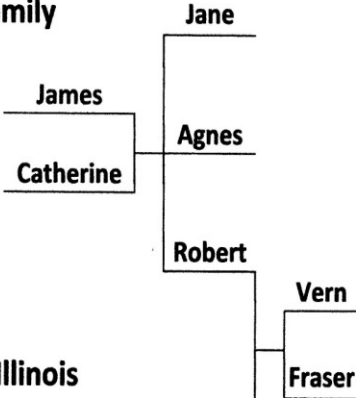
- ◇ My son, Richard Nicolet, for the many hours spent tracing the Mills family from Ireland to Picton, Ontario, Canada.
- ◇ My cousin, Dennis Mills and his wife Anne who joined me in my research venture in Canada, and also for sharing fond remembrances of our grandparents.
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- ◇ Dave Gormley, Vice President of the Beedie Group, in Burnaby, B.C., our tour guide to where the historical city of Fraser Mills once stood.
- ◇ Editors Carole Bailey, David Hanson, Ruth Ann MacFarland, Jean Mallory and Bernice Riley for their tireless work in transforming the original manuscript of typos and misused punctuation and phrases into a legible story.
- ◇ Last, but by no means least, to the Lord for His abundant grace, mercy and love extended to me during the creation of *Long Journey Westward*.

Without the aid of these countless individuals, this book would not have been published.

Main Characters

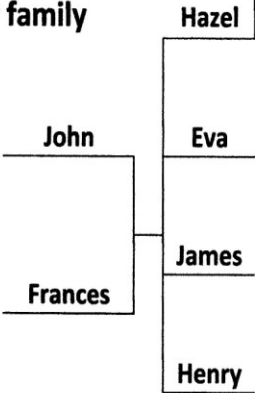
Picton, Ontario

Mills Family



Chicago, Illinois

McGregor family



Chapter 1

≈ 1886 ≈

James closed the front door with a slow yet deliberate motion – his hand continued to rest on the handle for a moment. A deep sigh rose from within him and then he turned and reluctantly walked down the steps. His family stood at the front gate, their faces strained by sadness. They stared at the house as though to affix a permanent picture of it in their minds.

Seven-year-old Robert turned and noticed his mother had tears in her eyes. He went to her, laying his head against her arm, “Mum, please don’t cry.”

Catherine wanted to speak, but couldn’t. She was overwhelmed and distraught at the fact that they were leaving their home and Ireland and would probably never return. She wanted to be brave in front of her children, but could not hold back the torrent of tears that erupted and flowed down her face.

Eight-year-old Agnes lowered her head staring at the ground – crushed by the decision to leave their home. Her ten-year old sister Jane went to her mother’s side and putting her arm around her mother’s waist, said, “Mum, we don’t want to go, but you said it was God’s will.”

She knew her young daughter was right and through the tears Catherine mustered enough breath to say, “I know. I know.”

James did not look back at the house, but came to his wife’s side, kissed her cheek and whispered, “Catherine, ‘tis a sad day for all of us. I can only believe that we heard God’s direction correctly. We must hurry now or we’ll miss the train.”

They began their walk to the train depot, and no one looked back. Their suitcases and two steamer trunks were stacked in an old wooden two-wheeled wagon which James and Robert pulled to the railroad station.

It had been a heart-wrenching decision that James Mills had to make in leaving their home since that property had been in his mother’s family for generations.

Only months earlier, James had sat in his office each day staring out the window; the bell over the door remained silent as no one came in for legal assistance. He couldn’t help but wonder what kind of existence his three children would have should Ireland’s economical state continue as poorly as it was.

Finally, he was forced to relinquish his law practice, but his wasn’t the only business to fail. An unbelievable economic downturn continued to prevail.

An uneasy hush seemed to permeate over all of Ireland as both of the famines in the mid-1800s had taken their toll on life and livelihood. The familiar sound of music was not heard in the small villages or large cities. It was the silence that spoke the loudest as people seemed lost without hope.

James had purchased steamer tickets for the family with money provided by his uncle, who already emigrated to Canada years earlier.

Today, the train would take the Mills family to Liverpool where they would board a ship headed for Canada and hopefully a better life.

They set sail later that day aboard the four-hundred-foot S.S. Sardinian. Aboard ship it became apparent that it was filled to capacity. Many were steerage passengers and a large percentage were Irish families that could only afford that lower fare.

The first day out, the huge ship made her way down the Irish Sea and out into the Atlantic Ocean, the water becoming progressively choppier from the cold winter wind. As she moved steadily forward, the ship bobbed up and down, up and down as the waves rose higher and slammed against the bow causing the ocean spray to reach the top deck.

In their stateroom the Mills family had settled in, but they were now feeling the effects of the ship rocking to and fro. The three children had crawled up on their bunks to rest for a while – hoping to feel better.

“Mum, my stomach feels awful,” complained Agnes as she rubbed her tummy.

“I’m sorry, Agnes.” Catherine sat down on the side of the bunk to comfort her. “Try to go to sleep, my child. You’ll see – when you wake up you’ll have become so used to the rocking you won’t even notice it.”

“I hope so,” said Agnes as she turned over on her side toward the wall.

In the eyes of some passengers, the vessel seemed like a tiny dot compared to the enormous expanse of ocean that surrounded them. No sight of land in any direction ... to the north, the south, to the east or the west.

A passenger vocalized her fears: “Oh, how I wish we could pass another ship. Just one. I’d feel so much better knowing we weren’t out here on this vast ocean by ourselves.” And another: “What’ll happen to us if the ship gets in trouble? It’s as if we’re the only ones in the whole world out here.”

During the first couple of days the seas became incredibly rough. For the most part, everyone on the main deck stayed indoors either in their cabin or in one of the lounges – the men playing cards and the women exchanging niceties. Periodically, a child sitting on the floor playing games, would invariably ask, “Are we there, yet?” They hated hearing the same old reply, “No, not yet.”

Emigrants usually brought all the prized possessions that they could carry which generally included a musical instrument. During those inclement weather days, music became a big part of the day.

Toes tapped and hands clapped as the resounding notes of lively Irish folk tunes filled the air. A man playing the fiddle made his instrument sing like a bird, and the accordionist’s fingers dashed over the ten keys while at the same time pushing and pulling his squeezebox.

Listeners smiled, enthralled with the familiar music of their homeland. Others

wiped away a tear from their eye, sad to be heading away from their beloved Ireland.

Only when the seas became much calmer did the children play hide-and-seek amongst the rigging and lifeboats and find other ways to amuse themselves as only children can do.

Even though the weather was not at its best, the captain held a Sunday church service on deck, and everyone on board was invited. Just before that service began, James and his family came out of their cabin and made their way onto the deck; Catherine made sure they all looked their best. They held onto each other as the ship swayed from side to side.

As most seven-year olds do, Robert had an adventurous spirit about him. After the Sunday service, he spotted a boy his age looking over the railing, with eyes fixed on the ocean below. Intrigued, Robert sauntered over to where the boy stood. "Hi."

The boy responded, taking his eyes off the water for only a moment to look at who was speaking to him.

"Whatcha lookin' at?" asked Robert.

"The water. Did ya ever wonder just how deep this ocean goes? I mean, does it go on and on and on? Is there really a bottom?"

"I don't know."

"Who are you?" asked the young lad.

"Robert. Who are you?"

"Matt. Actually Matthew, but my family calls me Matt."

The two seemed to hit it off right from the start, and Robert was pleased to have found a friend aboard ship. He had outgrown hanging around with his two older sisters, dreading the thought of someone calling him a sissy. He also couldn't stand that the girls bossed him around even if he were the baby of the family.

The next day during their stroll around the deck on fairly decent weather-wise afternoon looking for something exciting to do, Robert's new found-friend, Matt, told him that his family was making the crossing in steerage. Robert curious about the place called *steerage*.

That evening, Robert said to his dad, "Da."

Catherine put her finger to her lips and shook her head back and forth trying to stop Robert from bothering his father. She whispered "Robert, can't you see your father is reading?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Catherine, it's okay. Let the boy talk." James had been sitting on his bunk with his back against the wall, reading. Being a lawyer, he loved mystery novels that included a trial, intrigued by how the prosecution and defense teams handled their cases and, of course, anxious to check out the trial's verdict.

"Da, my friend and his family have to stay in steerage. What does that mean?"

Laying his book down he patted the area beside him. "Come up here, son."

Robert savored these moments when he could sit beside his father and talk about any and everything.

“Steerage is sometimes called ‘between deck’, meaning ‘tis the area between this deck where we are and the ballast area down below that is used for storage of the ships’ supplies and items being transported to Canada.”

“Why do they have to stay way down there?”

James held back from saying to him that those are poor families, instead said, “’Tis a matter of finances, son. Some families are so large that they don’t have enough money to pay for a cabin on this deck.”

“Oh.” Robert was satisfied with his father’s explanation, but also sparked a desire in him to see the steerage deck.

The next afternoon while on the upper deck, Robert asked Matt, “Can I see where you’re staying?”

“I guess so. Why?”

“Just ‘cuz.”

“Oh. Okay.” He led the way, curious as to his new friend’s desire to see the steerage area.

Robert followed his buddy and was completely surprised to see that there weren’t any stairs to that area, just ladders. Climbing down, he stood and looked around, seeing clean but very drab conditions. As young as he was, Robert was taken aback by the differences between his family’s stateroom and those of his friend. Not wanting to hurt his friend he didn’t relate his feelings, but said, “’Tis clean down here.”

“We have to do the sweeping and cleaning ourselves. Mum takes our bedding up on the top deck every couple of days to shake them out.”

Robert was mentally shaking his head in disbelief over how differently passengers were treated.

Later that evening, Robert shared with his father his dismay over the steerage deck. “Da, everyone seems to be packed in there,” he said with a furrowed forehead.

“I know, son. We should be grateful to the Lord for providing our family a nice place to live for these nine days at sea. But, let me also say that this ship we’re on and others like her that are newer have much better accommodations than older vessels. The people who left Ireland right after the Potato Famine had to live in utterly grotesque conditions in the steerage area aboard sailing ships that took weeks to cross the ocean. ’Tis a blessing that we are aboard a steamship that’s making the trip in a much shorter time. Right?”

“Aye, sir. Ah... did you know that they have to cook their own food?”

“Really?”

Robert nodded his head up and down rapidly several times. “They had to bring their own food aboard and cook it in a small galley up here on deck. And, Da, my friend said that because the galley ‘tis so small only two people at a time could cook. Others have to stand in a long line waiting for their turn.”

“Once again, Robert, we must be very grateful to the Lord for what He is providing us on this voyage. But remember, we don’t look down on people who have less than us.”

“I know. But, Da, ‘tis not fair.”

“Well, son, life ‘tis not always fair. But, to be fair to the steamship company, your friend’s parents knew when they booked passage on this ship where they would be sleeping and what they would be eating, and they still bought the tickets.”

“Aye.”

When the children were asleep, James said, “Catherine, for someone Robert’s young age, I’m pleased to see the compassion he has for others.”

She smiled. “Besides that, he has such an adventurous spirit. Only God knows what’s ahead for our young son.”

During the trip from Liverpool, many aboard ship became ill. The Mills family was not excluded, each becoming ill at some point during the voyage. Catherine spent most of her time comforting her children and husband, that is, whenever she herself was not throwing up. Amid the groans and whimpers of ‘Mum, I don’t feel good’ she soothed each fevered brow with cold wet cloths.

James experienced the worst case – it was either a bad case of seasickness or food poisoning, they didn’t know which. He took to his bed for three days, only rising to use the bathroom.

On the second day of his illness, Catherine sat on the side of his bunk and her touch to his forehead told her that his fever had risen. She became quite anxious, and knew he needed a doctor. She looked around at her ill children and decided that Jane was the least sick.

“Jane, I’m going out on deck to see if there’s a doctor on board. Please come over here and keep these cold cloths on your father’s forehead.”

“All right, mum.”

When Jane sat down beside her father, fear arose within her. *Dear Lord, please don’t let my father die.* She had never seen him in this condition before. He’d always been a healthy, strapping man that she looked up to.

Catherine returned without a doctor.

“Mum, where’s the doctor?”

“Oh ... umm ... there is one, but there are so many sick people on board that he won’t be able to get to our cabin for several hours ... how is your father?”

“I think he’s just the same, mum.”

“Okay, you go back and lie down.” Catherine sat down on the bunk beside her husband; her small hands began wringing her handkerchief into a twisted rope. *Dear Lord, please touch my husband’s fevered brow with your healing hand.*

The doctor never did arrive, and an exhausted Catherine spent most of that night again tending to her husband and children. At one point while sitting on the bunk beside her husband praying, she fell asleep, her head resting on his chest.

She awoke, finding herself falling off his bunk onto the floor as the ship’s bow plummeted downward and a monstrous wave crashed over the bow. Then it mounted the next wave like a spooked horse - sending a mass of water draining off the deck back into the ocean off its stern. The Atlantic seemed to be at its winter worst. There were more waves to be ridden before the night was over.

Picking herself up off the floor and holding on to the upper bunk to steady her, she prayed *Lord, is all of this because we missed Your will for us? The way it looks, it's as though we are to perish either by sickness or shipwreck!* She shook her head vigorously as a shiver ran through her body, trying to rid herself of such negative thoughts. *Stop it, Catherine. You must be strong. There's no time for fear.*

It was a long night for Catherine consoling the children when they woke from the tossing of the ship. The family noticed that the lunging of the ship lessened the next morning, making life a bit more comfortable. James lay on his back in his bunk, noticing the deep dark circles under Catherine's eyes from lack of sleep. She was only sick one day and had recovered quickly, so she thought. But now, her drawn face told a different story.

She was grateful that the children's fevers had finally broken, and they were now on the mend. She insisted they remain in bed for at least another day.

Catherine brought broth and slices of bread to her family from the dining room whenever possible, hoping to keep up their strength. She knew that after the ship landed they still had a long train trip ahead before reaching their final destination.

The evening of the third day of his illness, James finally sat up on the edge of his bunk, lowering his head into his hands.

"Da, are you all right," asked Agnes.

He didn't speak but shook his head up and down to signify 'yes.'

Catherine came into the cabin just then and was surprised to see her husband out of bed. "James, are you all right?"

"Catherine, I do believe I'm going to live." He smiled.

The three children clapped their hands, and Jane said, "I knew it. I just knew it. I asked God to heal you and He did."

"Thank you, Jane. T'was so sweet of you to pray for me." He smiled at her. She returned the smile.

Not having to attend to her family, Catherine was finally able to get some sleep that night.

The ocean was relatively quiet the next morning, but the fog that covered the ship was so thick that you couldn't see two feet in front of yourself while out on deck.

The Mills girls were anxious to go out on deck to encounter the dense fog as the ship plowed its way through it, but Catherine opposed their idea.

"But, Mum, we're only going to be out there for a few minutes. Please, Mum," said Jane.

Catherine looked over at James, with pleading eyes for his assistance, and he merely shrugged his shoulders. He laid down the book he was reading to Robert and said, "Catherine, 'tis something new for the girls to experience. I think it would be all right as long as they stay close to our cabin door."

"We will Mum, we will," chimed Agnes and Jane simultaneously.

Breathing a big sigh of dissatisfaction, Catherine said, "Oh, all right, girls. But you heard your father, stay close to our door."

The girls bundled up in their coats, scarves and woolen hats and eagerly stepped out the door onto the deck of the ship, now shrouded in a blanket of fog.

They held hands at first, frightened of losing their way and each other. But Agnes dropped Jane's hand, eager to see if the fog went all the way down to the water.

"Agnes, come back here," demanded Jane, as her sister faded out of sight.

Agnes had extended her arm in front of her expecting to come in contact with the ship's railing. Instead she came to an abrupt halt when her head ran smack into a metal post that extended vertically to the railing. Her scream brought Jane to her side, not knowing what she would find.

"Agnes, what happened?" asked Jane as she saw the blood trickling down her sister's face.

"I ran into that post," she said, pointing to the culprit.

"You're bleeding. We need to get you back to the cabin."

James and Catherine both heard their daughter's scream from within the cabin and immediately went to the door to see what was the matter. But saw nothing.

"Jane. Agnes. Are you all right?"

"Yes. I mean, no," said Jane, coming into view of her parents – Agnes trailing behind her.

Upon seeing the blood running down from Agnes' forehead, Catherine exclaimed, "Oh, my dear child. What happened?"

Everyone hurried inside. The girls expressed their disgust for the weather as Catherine cleansed the blood from Agnes' face and then applied a cold cloth to the large cut on her forehead.

James had a smile on his face as he thought *their curiosity has been satisfied. They probably won't do that again.*

Catherine saw his smile and he quickly exchanged it for a concerned expression. Inside he was still smiling as he recognized that familiar look on his wife's face that said, *I was right and you were wrong to let them go out there.*

The last day of the voyage had finally come. Although many passengers were still weak and nauseated from illness experienced from the extraordinarily high seas, they all anticipated the new chapter in their life that lay ahead.

The Sardinian glided along the St. Lawrence Seaway at that early morning hour, as the Mills children stood at the railing observing the scenery as it slowly slipped by. It was hard to see the land clearly because of the heavy snow that was falling. At times, blizzard-like winds blew the snow right into their faces. All three were shivering from the cold, but they were determined to stay at the railing.

Catherine stood in the doorway of their cabin and called to them, "Children, you look too cold. You need to come in now. After all, you've been sick and I don't want any of you to have a relapse."

Shivering, Jane said, "We're all right, Mum," as she drew her heavy wool scarf closer around her neck. "This is too exciting to miss. For seven days we didn't see anything but water, but now we're seeing land."

“Oh... all right, but only for just a few more minutes,” said Catherine, looking back at her husband with a slight frown on her face as if in deep thought.

James followed Catherine out of the cabin and onto the deck. He was bundled up in a blanket and found a deck chair to sit while Catherine strolled over to the railing.

In a few moments, James, still wrapped in a blanket, got up to join his wife. Catherine looked up at her husband, her face drawn from the long sleepless nights of tending her sick family and now tears began to slide down her cheeks.

“Are you all right, my dear?”

“Yes. I mean, no. Oh... I have such mixed feelings – happy to finally be here, yet frightened of the unknown that lies ahead.”

Patting her hand that held tightly to the railing, he looked down into her beautiful green eyes and said, “Catherine, it’s too late now, my darlin’, to be thinking those kinds of thoughts. We must hold on to our faith in God.”

He wasn’t about to let on that, during the previous night, doubt upon doubt had flooded his mind. Questions like: *Will I find a job? How long will we have to live with relatives? It’s been a long time since I’ve seen Aunt Patricia and Uncle Clancy. Will we get along?* With a sigh of uncertainty, he had turned over in his bunk and tried to sleep, but could not.

“Mum, what direction are we heading?” asked Robert.

“West, my dear son. We’re heading west.”

The Mills children were still too young to feel the uncertainty their parents were sensing as the ship headed towards their final destination – Canada.

As the family stood at the railing to watch as the Sardinian sailed down the Saint Lawrence Seaway toward the final destination, a loud horn blew – just one long blast.

“Oh, that scared me,” gasped Jane, pressing both hands against her chest as her breathing came short and fast.

Agnes ran toward her mother with her hands over her ears, and then reached out and grabbed her Mum around the waist.

“Agnes, ‘tis okay, sweetheart,” comforted her mother, holding her close.

As he leaned over the railing, James saw another ship approach on their left side. He turned and gently patted the back of Agnes’ head. “Agnes, ‘tis the captain of the ship signaling a ship that is about to pass by us that he will pass by it to their right.”

“Oh,” said Agnes.

“Da, how did ya know that?” asked Jane.

“I read it in a book.”

Robert piped up, “That was so loud! ‘Twas probably heard back in Ireland.”

His mother and father looked at each other and laughed with a tinge of nervous excitement.

It was time for their final breakfast aboard ship. Soon after breakfast that last morning, Catherine had the children change into their Sunday-go-to-meeting

clothes, storing away their everyday outfits in the big steamer trunk. She wanted them to look their best when meeting family at the Picton train station later that day.

While Catherine prepared the family for departing the ship, she realized that an excitement now stirred in her heart and hope began to arise within her. *My Lord, thank You for watching over us day and night. You saw us through this voyage, so I know You'll take care of us wherever You take us.* She couldn't help but smile.

Debarking became an extremely slow process, due to the huge number of emigrants aboard. Those in cabins on the main deck, which included James and his family, were allowed to leave first.

Only a certain number of passengers at a time were allowed to report to the dining hall where they had to wait before leaving down the gangplank. When that group had left the ship, another group reported there.

It seemed like an eternity that they had to sit in their cabin waiting to be called. James and Catherine used that time to play spelling and arithmetic games with the children.

After about an hour, a steward knocked on their door informing them to advance to the dining hall. By this time the three children's clothing had become wrinkled, and Catherine just shook her head in despair at how disheveled they looked.

The debarking process was very slow and finally Agnes said, "Mum, I'm tired of standing. May we sit on our suitcase like those kids over there are doing?"

Catherine looked at James and, with his slight nod of agreement, said, "Go ahead. But, please watch the person in front of you so that the line keeps moving forward."

When they finally reached the top of the gangplank, the three kids - suitcases in hand - would have run all the way down except that there were too many people in front of them. They were ecstatic to be leaving the ship at last.

Upon arriving at the immigration area, they again stood in a long line, and once more the children sat on their luggage waiting to reach an immigration officer.

"I'm tired," spoke up Agnes.

"I know, darling, we all are."

"How much longer?"

James spoke up, "Agnes, please be patient, dear. The other people are just as anxious as you are to be on their way, but the paperwork must all be in order before any of us can enter Canada."

"Oh," she sighed, lowering her head, staring down at the cement floor.

Finally arriving at the counter after about an hour's wait, Robert, in line ahead of his parents, handed his paperwork to the officer. The man began looking at the documents and then raised his head showing a frown on his face. "There's a problem here. Some liquid has been spilled on this page blotting out the information that I need."

James stepped forward, his brow furrowed, questioning this newest development. "He's my son. What's the problem?"

"I can't make out what's written here. It's blurred."

“May I see it?”

The officer turned the page around for James to get a better look. “Ah ... the place of his birth. Sir, if you’ll notice the place of birth on the documents for our other two children, it’s the same as his birth place.”

James gathered the paperwork from Jane and Agnes and turned to the page in question. In his deep Irish brogue he said, “Here, sir. Sure as you look at the birth place of these two children and compare it with my son’s, you’ll see they are all the same.”

The officer eyes were squinted as he scrutinized all three pages and finally, nodding his head up and down, said, “Yes. Yes. I believe it’s the same.”

James gave a sigh of relief, stepped back from the counter, and turned to Catherine to gently pat her shoulder as if to say, ‘it’s all right.’

The people behind them in line began grumbling, becoming quite agitated by the delay that the Mills family had caused. Catherine could feel the hostility building and her body began to tremble at the intensity of it. *Oh, Lord, help us to get out of here before someone takes action.*

Within a few minutes, the processing of the Mills family was completed. They could finally enter Canada legally. Catherine couldn’t wait to get away from the hostility directed at them, as she truly disliked confrontation.

The next item on their itinerary that day was to find the train depot to catch their ride to Picton, Ontario.

Still weak from his illness, James told the family that they should find a bench and rest a few minutes before their walk to the station. No one disputed his decision – they were all very tired.

At the Canadian Pacific Railway station, James purchased their tickets and also had the telegraph operator send a message to the Picton station relating the time of their arrival to his uncle. That was the plan the two men had made in an earlier letter.