

Butchart Family

Ralph Glenday Burns Butchart

- Ralph Glenday Burns Butchart was born on July 4th, 1906 at Arbroath, near Dundee, Scotland.
- As a young man, he worked as a cost accountant in his hometown, but yearned for adventure in the foreign lands about which he was a voracious reader.
- By chance, his mother noticed an ad in a newspaper which read, "Wanted: young men of good courage with the spirit of adventure for northern fur trade posts in Canada..." Butchart quickly decided this was the life for him.
- Once accepted, he and 32 others eagerly sailed for Canada in 1927 on a one-year-old Hudson's Bay Company ship. He was a few weeks away from his 21st birthday.
- Butchart had a wicked seven days of illness at sea and was glad to head toward his first posting, that of apprentice clerk at Cumberland House, Saskatchewan.
- He got as far as The Pas, Manitoba where he had to decide on a choice of conveyance – paddle steamer or canoe.
- "Being of 'good courage, etc.' (!), I and another clerk and two native men set off across Saskeram Lake then on to the Saskatchewan River. We were two nights on the trip and the mosquitoes were something new for us," Butchart reminisced.
- The eagerness with which he tackled his first posting was dampened by October when he became dangerously ill with typhoid fever! Fortunately, Butchart managed to make it to The Pas Hospital before freeze-up, on the very last boat of the season.
- He returned to the post after New Year's 1928 and that summer was transferred to Pukatawagan, Saskatchewan.
- He had a new adventure enroute – traversing rapids and using a tump line to carry about 200 pounds of freight over the portages.
- During the next two autumn periods, Butchart ran his first outpost at Pickerel Narrows on Granville Lake. He recalled, "I was given a native helper and was sent off with him along with 12 dogs and a flotilla of six or more canoes loaded with trade goods for the store. We took six dogs to a canoe plus whatever else it would take and found out that whenever we got to shore, the dogs all wanted to get out at the same time on the same side of the canoe. Incidentally, we had to paddle (all the way)."
- To further add to the situation, Butchart was instructed to fell trees and build his own store. Sleeping by night on a mattress he fashioned from hay and canvass and working feverishly with his helper during the day, the store was soon standing.
- Butchart had many memories of life in the remote north – rescuing trappers from scurvy and starvation, transporting other gravely ill people to 'outside' hospitals, the trips to the various scattered trappers' camps and sometimes living on boiled sturgeon during those treks.
- He next went to Norway House and later was promoted to post manager and told to assume charge of the operation at God's Lake, Manitoba.
- Butchart had not been home to Scotland for five years by the time he finally could leave work long enough to embark on an ocean voyage.
- Upon his return, he was post manager at Wabowden, Manitoba, Wabasca, Alberta and Camsell's Portage on Lake Athabasca.
- From there, Butchart opened the first Hudson's Bay Company store in the new gold mining camp of Goldfields, Saskatchewan.
- By that time he was engaged to Anne M. (Billi) Rettary, a teacher from Regina.
- Since business prevented him from leaving Goldfields, Butchart persuaded his future wife to come there for the ceremony.
- After seven years in Goldfields, and following a posting in Gogama, Ontario, Butchart was appointed manager of the HBC store in Red Lake in 1944, a time when a second gold rush was developing in the area. "Spring was protracted and cold and the area was looking forward to the first barges coming in with fresh supplies. Meat was scarce but the planes were asked to fly in and drop sacks of it on the ice which was too weak for landing. The dogs became aware of this as some of the packages split on impact. So when a plane was heard, they were first out on the ice," recalled Butchart.

- Butchart was by then already a seasoned fur trader and store manager; the HBC strategically transferred him in order to grow communities.
- It was the beginning of Butchart's long association with the district – one which continued well beyond the years spent in Red Lake.
- With the area in the throes of a second gold boom and over 40 companies selling stock, Butchart had a very interesting and busy seven years in Red Lake.
- That first summer, the HBC had him supervise extensive alterations to both the store and upstairs living quarters.
- The building, later the Municipal Office, was demolished in 1995.
- While in Red Lake, Butchart indulged in his love of curling, was secretary of the Red Lake Curling Club, and on the executive of the Red Lake Skating Rink Committee.
- He and his family left Red Lake in 1951 for a posting at Snow Lake, Manitoba.
- They moved to Lac du Bonnet, Manitoba eighteen months later. Butchart was manager there for 18 years until his retirement in 1971.
- Inimitably introspective by nature, Butchart wrote, "[northern] life was arduous and demanding but whether summer or winter, a person got a great deal of satisfaction in meeting the challenge and being equal to the rigors of portaging, running rapids, paddling and dog sledding. It seemed to be the accepted thing to live off the country and not be too dependent."
- Even into advanced age, Butchart golfed, corresponded, wrote his memoirs, and spent the winters with his beloved Billi in Mission, Texas.
- He died in hospital in Beausejour, Manitoba, on November 9th, 1995 in his 90th year.

Anne M. (Billi) Butchart (nee Rettary)

- Anne M. (Billi) Rettary, a teacher from Regina, married Ralph Butchart in 1938.
- That November, Billi Butchart had a harrowing experience when she was flying out to have their first child, Jacqueline. The pilot and the expectant mom left in fog and after going about 50 or 100 miles, the fog and ice forced them to land. "Billi started to have labour pains and they had to spend the night in the bush. Next morning the conditions were very poor but the baby was coming so the pilot took off, flew at tree top for awhile until he saw a river he recognized, followed it and got into Ile-a-la-Crosse. Half an hour after landing, our first child was born," Ralph Butchart reminisced.
- While living in Red Lake, Billi taught at the public school where their children attended.
- When the Butchart family left the area, Billi continued her teaching career at Lac du Bonnet Park Avenue School until retiring as vice-principal. However, she loved the classroom and her students so much that she worked as a substitute teacher until she was about 75.
- Billi lived to a remarkable age. Shortly before her 100th birthday, she died at the Whitemouth Personal Care Home in Whitemouth, Manitoba, on August 18th, 2008.

The Couple

- Ralph and Billi were married in Goldfields, Saskatchewan on February 28th, 1936. It was the first wedding to be held in the community.
- Surely the young bride would have preferred a more elegant surrounding in which to be married, but Billi took the modest circumstances in stride.
- As well as the surroundings being unusual, so were the circumstances, as Ralph Butchart remembered: "The only snag to the marriage was that there was no one who could perform the ceremony. However, my fiancée went to the Saskatchewan government and the only solution was a special order-in-council authorizing my friend, a justice of the peace, to act if he consented. He declined so I told him I would radio out his refusal but I did not tell him that the message was mistyped and was in the affirmative and so we were able to get married as a result."
- Their first child, Jacqueline, was born in Ile-a-la-Crosse, Saskatchewan in November 1938. The hours leading up to the delivery were harrowing for Billi as the plane she flew out on was forced to land due to fog and she and the pilot had to spend a night in the bush.
- They spent seven years at Goldfields, during which time they only had one holiday, to the 1939 world's fair at San Francisco.

- Together with their daughter and son Glenn Creighton, the Butcharts landed in Red Lake on the last plane of the winter in 1944.
- The Butcharts always felt lucky that they did not take the suggestion of moving into the Red Lake Hotel, as it was destroyed by fire a short time later.
- Ralph and Bill Butchart were involved in the Red Lake community. She taught at the public school – which their children attended – while he indulged in his love of curling, was secretary of the Red Lake Curling Club, and on the executive of the Red Lake Skating Rink Committee.
- As a boy, their son Glenn played hockey in Red Lake in the late 1940s.
- The Butchart family left Red Lake in 1951 for a posting at Snow Lake, Manitoba.
- Eighteen months later, they moved to Lac du Bonnet, Manitoba, where Butchart was manager for 18 years until his retirement in 1971.
- Ralph and Billi travelled extensively in Great Britain, Europe, Central and South America, Russia and Mexico (the latter being a favourite destination).
- Trips to visit friends and see the changes in the Red Lake area were made periodically, the last two being 1987 and 1992.
- They spent the winters in Mission, Texas and were Texas “snowbirds” for 28 winters.
- Billi and Ralph are buried together in Lac du Bonnet, Manitoba.