

## Children's book tells Mennonite immigration adventure

By Nicolien Klassen-Wiebe  
Manitoba Correspondent

**W**hen MaryLou Driedger uncovered a forgotten family story, she knew she had to write about it. What followed was *Lost on the Prairie*, her first novel for middle-school readers, published by Heritage House on May 28.

The story follows Peter, a 12-year-old boy who gets separated from his family on their journey to Canada in 1907 and goes on a big adventure to find his way back to them.

The book is inspired by Driedger's own grandfather, Peter Schmidt. Her great-grandparents, along with a large wave of Mennonites, emigrated from Kansas to Saskatchewan at the turn of the last century. Journeying by train, Driedger's grandfather and his brothers were each assigned to a boxcar in which to watch the livestock and belongings.

"When the train arrived in Humboldt, Sask., the car that had my grandfather in it and the family's horses had disappeared," Driedger says.

She read about this drama in her great-aunt's memoir, which she discovered in 2014 while helping a relative move. The two pages describe the parents' worry but don't reveal more information, although Peter did reunite with his family. With no living relatives able to fill in the blanks, most of the book is Driedger's imagination of what might have ensued.

But behind that imagination is extensive research. She dug into old train records to figure out the route of her grandfather's train. She travelled to the Lake Traverse Reservation in South Dakota, Peter's first train stop in the book, where she spoke with a Sisseton Wahpeton elder and a historian. She pored over local newspapers from 1907 and connected with a cultural reader to ensure her manuscript was culturally and historically accurate.

Driedger comes to the research and

writing process with a lot of experience. Originally from Steinbach, Man., and a member of Bethel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, she has written for children's curricula like Jubilee and Shine, and



THE CARILLON PHOTO BY JORDAN ROSS

*MaryLou Driedger's new novel is inspired by her grandfather's immigration from Kansas to Saskatchewan in 1907.*

contributed to *The Mennonite Mirror* magazine and the *Winnipeg Free Press*. She has been a columnist for 36 years at *The Carillon*, Steinbach's local paper. When she retired from teaching, she decided to start writing for children.

She hopes adults will read this novel, too. Post-pandemic, she plans to visit seniors homes with the book, which will bring back memories for many residents.

The novel demonstrates the value of documenting family stories. "This whole book came out of the fact that my great aunt took the time . . . to sit down and write these brief memories of her life," Driedger says. ■

A virtual book launch (<https://bit.ly/3wFQV3j>) will be held on June 16 through McNally Robinson Booksellers.

