

When Lightning Strikes

The Kennedys of Mississauga fit in just write

By JOHN STEWART
Staff Reporter

The story of Evelyn Kennedy is the story of perseverance triumphing over pain.

Kennedy was the matriarch of a family of 10 children who faced more tribulation in her 95 years of life than anyone ought to face in a dozen lifetimes.

Her biography, *When Lightning Strikes*, tells her story through the memories and the words of her children, who commissioned the book and her acquaintances. The book is a celebration not only of Kennedy's own life, but of all those who settled the township of Toronto, sank their roots in deep, and made something out of nothing.

Written by Mississauga native Joyce Beaton, *When Lightning Strikes* is a tough read at times, but ultimately shines because of the marvellous spirit of its subject.

Kennedy lost three daughters in her life, one at the age of 1, another at 15, and a third at 40. The latter two, Dorothy and Muriel, were killed by lightning. The odds against that happening twice to the same mother are staggering. The odds of a mother rising above such adversity are probably even higher—except when that mother is Evelyn Kennedy.

In 1931, Kennedy's husband Jack died, leaving her with a farmhouse full of children at the height of the Depression. The loving re-creation of the family growing up on the 140-acre farm on the east side of what is now Tomken Rd., between Burnhamthorpe Rd. and Eglinton Ave. E., is one of the highlights of this volume.

The memories come alive through the nostalgic voices of Kennedy's children, remembering the carefree days of their youth. For instance,



Evelyn Kennedy (right) is the subject of a new book which outlines her tremendous courage in raising a family single-handedly during the depression. This picture was taken in Cobalt after an incident in which Kennedy and a Mrs. Beatty (left) were snowshoeing across a train trestle when a train came along. Kennedy showed a panicky Beatty how to grab onto the outer railway ties and drop down and hold on while the train passed.

here's the story of the children taking turns having baths in the big kitchen one winter evening while their father tries to revive newborn piglets in the wood stove. Suddenly, the squealing pigs spring to life and roar around the house, to the delight of the now squealing children.

After her husband died, Kennedy created "The Kennedy Kids," a radio drama she wrote and which starred her children. She ran a tab at all the local stores and paid off her bills a little at a time as cash dribbled in.

Later, a defiant Kennedy took a job during the Second World War at the Canadian Arsenal's munitions plant in Lakeriew and pedalled her bike to work down Dixie Rd. each day, despite the misgivings of her brother-in-law Tom who was an Ontario Cabinet Minister. Kennedy wasn't worried about appearances, but she did want to contribute to the war effort.

She also had careers as a teacher in two local one-room schoolhouses, running a nursery school, and serving on a missionary van each summer for a decade when she was 58 to 68 years of age. After that she took up world travelling.

Those who know Kennedy's son Doug as the respected former MPP for Mississauga South for 18 years may be surprised to read the description of his failed efforts to make apple cider at the age of 10, an experiment which ended in corks popping and bottles spraying their contents in the midst of a family supper.

Even more disquieting is hearing Harold Kennedy, Ward 1 city councillor for some 22 years, described as a "juvenile arsonist." It seems the venerable councillor had a childhood habit of lighting fires, though he laughingly passes off such references in his mother's biography as "fiction."

Harold Kennedy says a very odd thing happened to him when he read the book. After years and years as a councillor helping single parent families cope, Kennedy said it dawned on him as he read the story of his mother's life that he was the product of a single parent home himself.

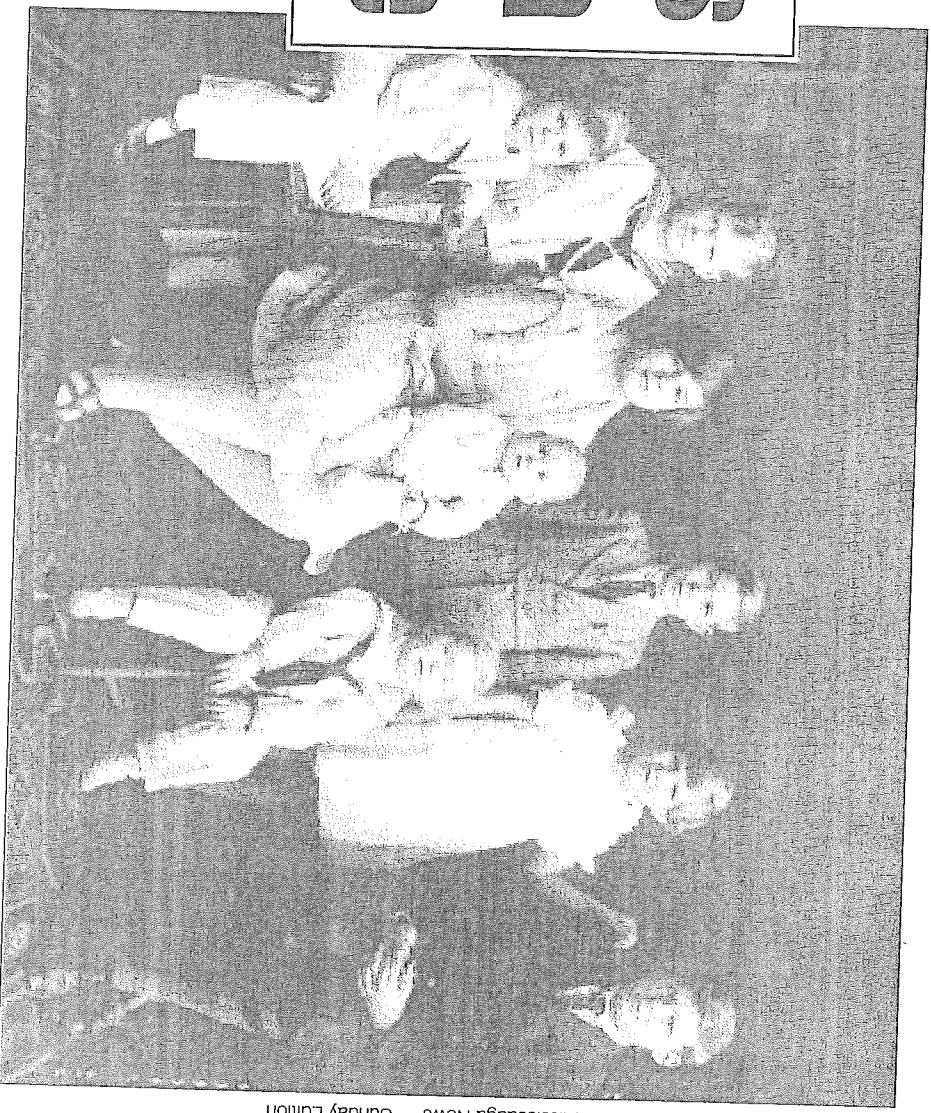
Doug Kennedy admits the book gave him a different perspective of his mother's life. "I don't know how in the devil she got through those early years," says Doug. "We were little devils."

When his father died, his mother "showed tremendous guts" to make a life for the family.

Her tremendous religious faith helped her throw those times. "We didn't know we were poor," says Kennedy.

As the book shows, the Kennedys may not have had much money but they had a family life which was rich indeed.

When *Lightning Strikes* is available for \$12 at the Facts and Fantasy bookstore in Clarkson (855-2051), or from the Mississauga South Historical Society's Margaret Naish at 278-2818.



Photos courtesy of the Kennedy family.

Evelyn Kennedy's family were the co-winners of a contest for the largest area family in 1926 at the Cooksville Fair. That prompted the taking of this photograph which appeared in *The Toronto Telegram*. Pictured left to right are: Ted, Arthur, Dorothy holding Hal (now ward 1 city councillor), Doug, Dick, Muriel, and Gordon.