

Edna Staebler

“Now I’m really shaken. I’ve let myself be abandoned in the bleakest little fishing village on the north coast of Cape Breton Island.”



It was August 1945 that Edna Staebler stood alone and frightened in Neil’s Harbour on Cape Breton Island. However, it was from this dark point that Staebler would soon discover her voice as a writer.

Three years after her Cape Breton vacation, *Maclean’s* magazine published her first article about the sword fisherman of Neil’s Harbour. The piece was so well received, she was asked to write another story, this time about the Waterloo County Mennonites. Her Old Order Mennonite story won the Women’s Press Club Award in 1950 and Staebler’s career as a writer was officially launched.

Staebler, a pioneer female journalist in Canada, went on to become the best-selling and beloved author of many books including: *Food That Really Schmecks* (1968); *More Food That Really Schmecks* (1979); *Desserts with Schmecks Appeal* (1991); *Cape Breton Harbour* (1972); *Places I’ve Been and People I’ve Known: Stories from Across Canada* (1990).

Throughout her life of writing she embraced adventure and uncertainty and suffered personal losses. But in the darkness, Staebler always held fast to an inner light. It’s a trait she often said came from a childhood growing up in a home without electricity on Scott Street in Berlin.

Without even gaslight upstairs, Edna and her two sisters had to make their way upstairs and dress for bed in total darkness. Staebler maintained that her early comfort with the dark gave her courage as an adult. “I was never afraid,” she said once. “I always took chances.”

Staebler was born Edna Cress on January 15, 1906 to an inventor father who sold springs to the prospering furniture industry in Berlin. Edna had a comfortable childhood, spending much of her time at the Berlin Public Library.

In 1929, Staebler graduated from the University of Toronto with a Bachelor of Arts degree and returned home to her family, working odd jobs before taking a teaching position.

She married Keith Staebler in 1933, a tumultuous marriage that finally ended in 1962. By this time, Staebler was on her way to becoming one of the most respected journalists in Canada. In her early career she published articles in *Chatelaine*, *Saturday Night* and *Reader’s Digest*.

“I know of no other writer in this country who can capture the flavour of speech and character as she can,” friend and writer Pierre Berton said once.

Her series of cookbooks were inspired by her reporting on the Mennonite way of life. She wrote 15 *Schmecks* books that touched cooks and story lovers alike, generating thousands of fan letters.

In 1996 she was awarded the Order of Canada. She also received an honorary doctorate from Wilfrid Laurier University and in 1991 she endowed the WLU Award for Creative Non-Fiction. She also helped establish the Edna Staebler Writer in Residence Program at the Kitchener Public Library.

She died in 2006 at the age of 100, leaving behind hundreds of fans and friends.

Later, after feeling so alone on that August day in 1945 on Cape Breton Island, Staebler took a long walk by the ocean to clear her head. On her return, darkness had fallen over the tiny fishing village.

There were only a few lights in the village, Staebler wrote, and she could just make out the house where she had been given a room for the night.

“ . . . through the windows of the . . . kitchen, a faint glow came from a lamp left half way up the stairs for me.”

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