

Extra Ordinary Women in History

Christine Wozney

*Participation apportée à l'histoire par les femmes ordinaires
dans leur rôle important d'épouses et de mères.*

I would like to address this essay to the neglected subject of the ordinary woman in history. Too often, we fall into the trap of believing that women have had to participate in their societies only as wives and mothers, with no other options open to them. We do occasionally find the exceptional woman who is then examined as someone who has broken away from the norms of society. I would like to challenge this assumption and state instead that throughout history women have been much more active in a greater variety of roles than we often believe. Furthermore, they have gone into these non-traditional roles as a matter of course and have been completely accepted by their societies in these roles.

I cannot cover all of history in one short essay, so I have concentrated on just the area where I live to prove my point. I also raise many more questions than I can answer. I feel sure, though, that the facts I have uncovered in my area can be duplicated by research elsewhere. I hope that my essay will inspire further research along the lines I am suggesting.

The town of Kitimat, lying 500 miles north of Vancouver on the British Columbia coast, exists in an area rich in history. My part-time job as archivist at the Kitimat Museum has given me a chance to examine this history. Although the town of Kitimat is less than 30 years old, the Haisla Indians have lived in the area for generations and missionaries and pioneers have lived here since the end of the last century. I was surprised to find that women have been so active in both the native and pioneering history of Kitimat and have occupied such a varied number of roles.

One of the first examples of women in non-traditional roles I came across was Susannah

Lawrence, the first white woman in Kitimat, or Kitamaat, as the name is still spelled in the Indian village across the harbour. Interestingly enough, Lawrence did not follow her husband, father or anyone else here. She came instead as the first white missionary to a native village, accompanied only by her interpreter and his wife — both natives. She had been teaching at the mission in Port Simpson, near the site of the present-day city of Prince Rupert, when some recently-converted Christian Indians requested a missionary be sent to them. Lawrence volunteered for the job and was enthusiastically accepted by the local minister, who felt she was very suitable. Apparently, the question of her sex made no difference to her ability to do the job. She left for Kitamaat in a native canoe, accompanied by six members of her new flock, her interpreter, his wife and small son. She has left this description of her trip:

'It took us 10 days going a journey of 160 miles, the first day we went 50 and stopped at Inverness where there was a large salmon cannery. There came on a terrible storm, rain, hail and snow. About the middle of the night I was called up and found our canoe had been driven under the wharf and filled with water, we had all our provisions for the winter, lumber to build a house, doors and windows, also goods for a little store. My trunk was on the wharf tipped on end, the water running out of it, all my books and little treasures were destroyed, it took all the next day to dry our things. The gentlemen at the cannery were determined I should go back and wait till Spring, but I did not think of it, feeling God had called me, and those people had been so kind in coming all that way for me. So the next morning we started off again, travelled all that day, in the evening went ashore and pitched

our tents. During the night there came a most terrific windstorm, we were obliged to remain for four days. Had pleasant weather the rest of the journey. Arrived at Kitamaat the third of November.'¹

That was in 1883.

Once in Kitamaat, Lawrence began teaching both adults and children Christianity and reading. Despite opposition and violence, she converted many and her efforts led to the establishment of a permanent mission in the village. She was forced by ill-health to leave after two years of work.

In 1894, a school for Indian girls was opened in Kitamaat, sponsored by the Women's Missionary Society of Brampton, Ont. The minister who was in the village, Reverend Raley, looked around for someone to head the school. He finally asked a relative of his, Elizabeth Long, to come and take charge. Although she had never before considered being a missionary, Long agreed immediately and was ready in two days. She stayed until 1902, when she went back east on furlough to have a major operation. She returned to Kitamaat in 1903 and stayed until 1906. She returned to the east and died in 1907. It is amazing, to me, what these women could accomplish even while they were ill.

Long supervised 30 pupils and a staff of three or four teachers, mostly female. The curriculum included Christianity, English, needlework, domestic arts and other subjects.

Another interesting woman was Dr. Dorothea Bower, a native of Relessey near Orangeville, Ont. She completed the M.D. course at Trinity Medical College in 1904 and came to Kitamaat the same year. Besides her medical duties here, she also taught school. Dr. Bower must have been one of the

very few women doctors when she graduated. Why did she choose to come to the isolated village of Kitamaat? Was she inspired to be a missionary or was she unable to practice medicine in a more populated place?

Whatever the feeling one has about the good or harm done by the missionaries and their activities, one must admire the courage shown by these women, coming alone to a strange land and risking their lives for their beliefs. The missionaries are owed much by the historians, for they have left many invaluable records. Here in Kitimat, for example, we are fortunate to have access to a magazine called '*NaNaKwa*' or '*Dawn on the Northwest Coast*'. It was published quarterly from 1898 to 1907 by Reverend Raley of the Kitamaat Mission and contains not only much news of missionary and Indian activity but also many fascinating glimpses into the lives of the settlers and miners who had moved into Kitimat Valley.

It was because of *NaNaKwa* that Elizabeth Long's school was able to include a rather odd subject on the curriculum — typesetting. Several of the girls were fascinated with the printing machinery and set the type for the magazine issues.

It was in the pages of *NaNaKwa* that I came across three small references to Indian women engaged in non-traditional activities. I had always assumed that sex roles divided Indian society rigidly and determined the tasks undertaken by each member of that society. It was with great interest, therefore, that I read of three women who were 'huntresses'. The first excerpt referring to a 'huntress' appears in the July, 1901 issue and is entitled 'The Annual Bear Hunt':

'The Kitamaat Hunt commences in May, as soon as the hibernates come out from their winter quarters. The past season lasting about three weeks has been successful; we are informed Joseph Wilson obtained the highest number, killing 12 bears. Sarah Legaeah the huntress killed six...'²

The July, 1902 issue reports:

'Moodseithlimie is a famous huntress. Her hunting grounds are at Kildalah, where she always goes quite alone to hunt bear, seal, mink, marten and wolverine with

most surprising valour.'³

And the May, 1907 issue states:

'The huntresses Sarah Legaic and Agnes Robinson on the morning of July 24th saw on the surface an unusual commotion. Taking a skiff 8 feet long, they paddled to the middle of the inlet and found two seals in deadly combat. They fought like goats, charging each other. A shot was fired but missed and the seals disappeared beneath the surface of the water. They were fighting for the possession of a baby seal.'

It is difficult to evaluate how widespread the custom of women as hunters was, but the three women mentioned by Reverend Raley appear to have been fully accepted by both the white and Indian communities. Their non-traditional jobs were respected and their work was taken seriously. While only three 'huntresses' are mentioned over the nine-year period the magazine was published, this is out of a total population of about 300. And, since more than one woman was involved, it was not a unique situation.

In addition to this written information, an oral tradition also exists that has been briefly explored by the Kitimat Museum. In August, 1975, the custodian, Mrs. Mendel, obtained information from Jeffrey Legaic about his aunt, Sarah, who had been mentioned in *NaNaKwa*.

Legaic says she was the sister of his father and had a son but never married, which was unusual for that time. Did Sarah turn to hunting to support herself and her child because she did not have a husband? Or did her hunting prowess make her so self-efficient that she did not need to bother with a husband? Whichever version is the truth, Sarah was obviously a strong-willed person.

Legaic remembers her as a very independent woman who did everything for herself and never asked anything from anyone. She hunted, fished and trapped alone on Kildala Arm, which was the Legaic family property. Because this area was so rich, she was able to find everything she needed.

Legaic says she once asked someone to build her a dugout canoe, the only request she ever made in her life. Apparently, the results were not very satisfactory, because she rejected it and made a

new one herself.

This indomitable woman died on Jan. 10, 1914 and was buried beside the ocean at Kitamaat. She was 60 and her tombstone recorded her prowess — 'In memory of Sarah Legaic ... the Great Hunter'.

After coming across these women, both Indian and white, who had obviously been involved in so much else besides home and family, I decided to look for other examples. It did not take much searching to come up with several more. These women also deserve to be studied more fully.

In 1908, a small steamer, the 'Craigflower' made one trip up the Skeena River. She is chiefly memorable for her crew, which consisted of an engineer; Roy Troupe, the man who had built the ship; and Roy's wife, who served as cook, steward and general Jane-of-all-trades. An old prospector who saw the ship commented:

'She had a woman handyman on board and by jingo that was the first woman I ever saw that wore pants.'⁵

From the prospector's comments, I would infer that Mrs. Troupe's duties took her out of the kitchen into more exotic chores.

The History of Terrace by Nadine Asante, mentions several interesting female figures. For instance, Annie Ross homesteaded, prospected and trapped to support herself and her children at the turn of the century. The small town of Rosswood, near Terrace, is named after her.⁶

Then there was Eliza Thornhill, an Indian woman who married one of the first white men in the Terrace area. Although Eliza was slightly crippled, she supported her family by hunting and trapping for their winter meat supply, while her fur catch provided cash. She died while out on her trapline in the winter of 1911.⁷

Mrs. Lanfear also fascinates me. She, her daughter Margaret and her friend, Ethelwyn French, emigrated from England to Terrace. They had travelled widely and wanted to live in every country that was part of the British Empire. Both women were teachers with music degrees, while Mrs. Lanfear also had a degree in art. While in Terrace, they

showed a high degree of self-sufficiency, building their own home, tending their livestock and planting a garden. In order to support themselves, they took in boarders, ran a convalescent home and taught music. During the 'flu epidemic of 1919', they turned the Terrace Hotel into a hospital and nursed the flu victims.⁸

Then there was Mrs. Pohle, who met her husband when he answered the door of his house. She was on her rounds as a salesperson for Rawleigh products around 1910.⁹ Mrs. Sparkes, born in Ontario in 1874, took up the ham radio as her hobby. She saved at least one life before Terrace had a resident doctor. She used her radio to summon medical help in emergencies.¹⁰

These are just a few women I was able to discover. I believe that it is time we re-examined our history more closely and tried to find out more about the lives of ordinary women like these. They are not famous or first at anything. They are merely women who lived their lives, did what they wanted or responded to circumstances — doing what was necessary to survive. By studying these women we can give a new meaning to the word 'feminine' and will also have a new picture of the past and a clearer view of what life was like for our ancestors.

Above all, further research will give us the answers to the questions raised in this essay. What drove these women? What

inspired them? And what gave them their courage? I would love to know the answers. I can only hope that historians will get busy and do the research so I can find out. ©

Footnotes

- 1) *NaNaKwa* — Printed and Published at Kitamaat B.C. By Rev. G.H. Raley.
- 2) *NaNaKwa* — Issue 15, page 5.
- 3) *NaNaKwa* — Issue 19, page 9.
- 4) *NaNaKwa* — Issue 31, page 6.
- 5) O'Neill, Wiggs — *Steamboat Days on the Skeena River, B.C.* - Northern Sentinel Press, 1960-p.15.
- 6) Asante, Nadine — *The History of Terrace* — Totem Press Ltd., 1972-p.69.
- 7) *Ibid* — p.65.
- 8) *Ibid* — p.130.
- 9) *Ibid* — p.149.
- 10) *Ibid* — p.150.



Public Archives of P.E.I.

HIDDEN VOICES

The Office of the Dean of Women, Queen's University, has published a catalogue of abstracts of Oral History recordings of the life experiences of women who have lived and worked at Queen's University. The publication, *Hidden Voices*, is the final phase of a student group project initiated and coordinated by Dean Evelyn Reid that has extended over four years and is representative of an extracurricular activity that has provided an exciting and enriching cross-generational educational experience for present and former Queen's students.

The catalogue (\$5) is available from: Office of the Dean of Women, Victoria Hall, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario K7L 3N6. Monies will be used to replenish the *Spirit of Ban Righ* Fund for student programming.