

Her Story

By Arianh Pinto

It wasn't just an ordinary day. The car drove past the rolling hills of Manitoba. The air was filled with the scent of hay and cow manure. The cloudless blue sky hovered over the plain, empty fields. This family reunion was special. Everyone was going to be there.

To the south, in the hazy distance, stood the Tiger Hills and in the northwest stood the high shoulder of Brandon Hills. A running stream circled the ground where the house stood. My Aunt Nellie, standing out on the porch, greeted us with a warm smile. I looked at her in admiration.

I always liked Aunt Nellie more than my other Aunts, Hannah and Elizabeth, and Uncles George and Jack Mooney. She told amazing stories and had authored 16 novels.

It was early evening and the entire family had gathered near the fireplace. Sounds of laughter and lively chatter filled the room.

"Okay children," My Aunt Nellie called. "It's our family tradition of story time..." We all gathered around in excitement.

"Today's story is about a girl, who was born on the 20th of October, 1873, on a farm in Chatsworth, Ontario. She had two sisters and three brothers and was raised a devout Christian. They lived in a white house, that was old-fashioned. Smoked hams hung from the rafters in the kitchen. The walls of the house were whitewashed except for the big log beams that held up the ceiling-" Her eyes sweep around to make sure everybody was listening.

"The flooring was of pine boards and brown mats were hooked in circles and triangles. The windows had hand-knitted curtains with fern patterns and paper lace valentines hung along.

Her eldest brother, Will, had decided to go find land for them in the west, for a better living. A few years later, when she was six, they moved to a place near the Souris River."

"That's where we are!" Connor announces. My mother gave him a stern look at the interruption. Connor shyly apologized.

"Yes, Manitoba," Aunt Nellie continued. "That's where she started school when she was 10. She was a fast learner and earned her teacher's degree when she was 16. Less than a year later, she met an activist, Annie, her future mother-in-law and got into social reform. In 1896, while working as a teacher, she married Annie's son, Robert, a pharmacist. Together they had five children, one girl and four boys. Annie also encouraged her to write her first novel, 'Sowing Seeds in Danny'. Did you know, this novel was published in 1908 and was Canada's best-selling book?"

"No way!" I whispered.

"In 1911, the family moved to Winnipeg where she became more politically active by immersing herself in current issues such as working conditions in factories, prohibition and legal rights for women. During her lifetime she took on the role of a speaker, politician, activist, an advocate for the voting rights for women, a member of the Political Equality League, a Political Campaigner, the leader of the Women's Parliament and a member of the Alberta Legislature. She was well recognized for her involvement in the 'Persons' Case-"

“‘Persons’ Case!” Horace, her son exclaims, “That’s terrible grammar! What does it mean?”

“That’s what it was called, dear. You see, earlier, only men were recognized as ‘qualified persons’ and could be appointed to the Canadian Senate. In 1927, she was part of the group fighting for rights, called ‘The Famous Five’ who petitioned the Supreme Court to have women declared as ‘qualified persons’. Almost two years later, on October 18th, 1929, Canadian women were legally declared as ‘Persons’ under the British North America Act.”

“Dinner!” My grandmother called from the dining room.

“That can’t be the end!” I whined.

“We’ll be there in a moment, Mother!” Aunt Nellie called, then turning to me, she whispered, “Ok. I will tell you..after dinner, that is.”

We had a scrumptious dinner of roast ham, baked potatoes, bread, soup and pecan pie. My cousins and I made sure we ate quickly as we couldn’t wait to hear the rest of the story.

“Please continue” I plead impatiently.

“Sure darling,” she went on. “This girl campaigned for birth control, maternity allowances, free medical and dental treatment for school children, public health regulations, temperance, property rights for women and the rights of women in divorce. In 1914, they organized a mock Parliament to speculate what would happen if men were allowed to vote.”

“No voting for girls! That’s not very nice!” Florance, her daughter, pouted.

“Eventually they did vote. Manitoba was the first province to allow women the right to vote in the provincial elections and to participate in the provincial legislature in 1916. In the early 1920s, she advocated for the ordination of women in the Methodist Church and in the United Church of Canada. Later in 1936, in Victoria, B.C., she became the first female member of the CBC Board of Governors and in 1939, she became Canada’s sole woman representative to the League of Nations. She made frequent speaking tours throughout Canada and USA from 1908 until she was well into retirement in the 1940s. She was also one of Canada’s best known civil rights activists.”

“Wow! Who was she?” I couldn’t wait any longer.

“Nellie,” She smiles, “Nellie McClung.”

Epilogue

The Famous Five foundation, established in 1996, marks the anniversary of the ‘Persons’ Case. Its mission: ‘To build a society in which there are no boundaries for women’, inspired me to take up the role of a senator. I have vowed my continual support to honour the values of foundations such as these to promote equal rights, honouring legacy, skill development, social responsibility and democratic progress for women. Women all over Canada now have equal rights. I have a sense of pride and fulfillment to see it progress and know that our efforts are being recognized. But, one thing I know... we all wouldn’t have this privilege if it wasn’t for my Aunt, Nellie McClung.

Bibliography

Websites:

- <http://albertachampions.org/Champions/nellie-mcclung-1873-1951/>
- <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/nellie-letitia-mcclung/>
- <https://www.ournellie.com/learn/about-nellie/>
- <https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmce/exhibitions/hist/biography/biographi225e.shtml>

Books:

- “Clearing in the west” by Nellie McClung.