

HERSTORY PROJECT

Mrs. Helen Atkinson interviewed by Georgina Garrett and Karen Dubinsky

G.G. You were going to tell a story about Mrs. Miller, the blacksmith in Dorion.

A. She wasn't really known as a blacksmith but she always had a lot of horses on her own farm, back in the valley, up in the Ouimet Canyon area. In the early '20's you had teams of horses, particularly heavy horses - this is what they used to haul pulp in the bush camps. Mrs. Miller and the hired man, Alec Boisie, they both hired on to the Provincial, I think that was in F.W. the Abitibi was a few years ago, was the Provincial Timber Co. - I don't think it was the Provincial Timber Co., I'm not sure what it was really called. Anyway, they went back into camp and of course she took one team and Alec took another team and the shacks they lived in in those days are a far cry from the type of things they live in today, in bush camps. It came time to go to bed and of course all the other men in that particular sleep shack were all a little wary about getting undressed because a woman was in the camp but she couldn't load her - I guess it would be sleighs because they did most of the hauling in the winter time on sleighs.

Q. Did she hire herself to haul lumber?

A. This wasn't lumber, this was pulp - there's a difference. She had to load it and it was 4 foot sticks and you would load it from the piles the cutters had cut and they were all cut with ordinary saws in those days, not power saws. She turned around to the men and she said, "Look fellows, you might as well go to sleep...." (she was already in bed) "....all I came for was to haul pulp like the rest of you." And she turned over and went to sleep. I always thought that was so apropos - women's lib. away back 58 years ago. She was quite the old girl, I just loved Mrs. Miller, she was really a darling person.

Q. Where was her husband at this point?

A. I don't know, I asked about this the other day because I thought of this story. I've got two or three of these, of these old stories, with these old time gals

with women's lib ideas. A lot of people nowadays figure that they went along with everything their husbands said. They did to a point but sometimes they could dig their toes in and make things pretty miserable, in a very subtle manner that a lot of girls nowadays don't do, can't do because once they had the training how to do it. But her husband, I don't know whether he died or she left him, I really don't know. Bill Holder might be able to tell you that. She stayed one winter with old Bill Holder down there, and she was an old lady when she died - she was way into her 90's. She was the most beautiful cook and it used to be cute to go and visit her and old Alec Boisie, he had been the hired man, but by this time you're both getting old and he had his - not his part of the house exactly, but he had a sort of sitting room bedroom and it was quite large because it was a fairly large house - and she had her end of the house. I remember the last time I was there. They had no power back there yet, there wasn't sufficient population for the expense and they each had their radio and we were there one Saturday afternoon. We had gone out - my husband had to get something from Mrs. Miller - however she turned on the radio, this wasn't that many years ago, I don't think T.V.'s had come up yet, we were johnny-come-lately's as far as T.V. reception was concerned, with Thunder Bay. So we had to listen to the radio and Alec, he comes to the door and he says, "If you think that is a good one, come and hear mine." Well, I wasn't going to say that this was better. It wasn't exactly a feud but it was a sort of one-upmanship all the time. It was really charming. I don't think a lot of people were aware of it but it used to really titillate me because my grandfather and grandmother were very much the same - always one up on each other, but that pulp story I thought was beautiful.

Q. How did she get a reputation as a blacksmith?

A. She did do her own blacksmithing so far as I know. Long after I came out to Dorion she would come out to the store, to Brotten's store, it used to be up on the side road, and then they built the big new place and they sold it 3 or 4 years ago. She came out with a buggy - she was still coming out with one of them.

Q. How did she survive financially?

A. She farmed back there and that was exactly why you go back in the bush with the horses in the winter time, because we used to have this cash, I don't know what they got, but it shouldn't be that hard to find out.

- Q. She'd cut her own wood?
- A. No, she wouldn't be cutting the pulpwood, she was just hauling from somewhere out to a landing which would usually be on a lake so they could raft it down in spring. You must be from the east.
- Q. No.
- A. If you've never seen them form a raft, they haven't been doing that for a long time.
- Q. I've seen it in Lake Nipigon.
- A. Yes, you see the big rafts there. Used to raft down here on the Black Sturgeon too.
- Q. Does she have descendants that are still living?
- A. Not that I know of.
- Q. She never had children then?
- A. I couldn't even tell you that. Never heard it mentioned but I'm not saying.... when I first met her she was a woman in her 60's and you don't.....When I first saw the house, and it was a log place that they had built, it was really nice, I always wished we had had it. It was a really beautiful place with a great big lot - they are the "in" thing now.
- Q. This is your husband's mother.
- A. Yes. But mousy places because mice could get in. Oh, boy, there were mice. They had come from England in 1910, Joe wasn't born until they got out here. They lived in F.W. for perhaps a year or two and then they got the place fixed, the farm. They bought the property down her, or homesteaded it. That's something I'm not sure about, there is a difference. I think it was bought. They were in it together - Grandpa Atkinson and Grandma Atkinson who has been dead for years and years and her brother, Foster, was his last name. Anyway, when they got off the train, when they came from F.W. and they had everything loaded into one box car - they landed out her out on _____ Station, so they had to walk up the track a mile from the station just beside the _____ to the _____ which is not too far from the track. It is right across the highway from where the track is and where the highway is now. The sister was about 4 when they got to this farm and the house was just rounded logs with the cracks because they don't fit smooth like timbers do. There were even the chips lying around - this is a family story told over the years although Joe was only a baby - about 3 months old - he wouldn't remember but he has heard it often enough. It was just a rough building and this

is what you're supposed to live in with a 3 or 4 month baby and a 4 year old daughter. Bessie, the 4 year old - Elisabeth - she looked around the place and said to her mother, "Do we have to live in this woodshed?" I found out anyway by asking members of the family - Bessie in particular - how you could get a place like that liveable. You can imagine walking into a rough log place, what would you do with it? She said they used mud and sawdust and anything you could get to chink it for the winter because it was about June when they came in. They got it all chinked up and then they used gunny sacks in which the animal feed came in and I think perhaps one cow ~~was~~ all they had, and you would tack that to make a smooth finish, as smooth as you could get it and then you would, later on if you could afford a few rolls of wallpaper, then you made home-made flour paste and glued it on. It took several years to get the place into something decent, when I first saw it in 1938, it was really a charming place but when you think of how it at first was.

Q. What did they do for furniture?

A. Theirs was with them, in fact there is a walnut rocking chair - it is really beautiful, I think it's called a Queen Anne style - I'm not saying it's a real Queen Anne, I don't even know where the thing came from. I just gave it to my daughter-in-law and my son because we used to use it in our summer cottage. There is quite a few things like that - the clock they brought with them was a wedding present from England. There was also china.

Q. Did they want to farm? Is that why they came here?

A. In those days in England, if you owned 160 acres of property, they were always relating it to what it was like in England. Where would you ever buy that property yourself? Anyone in a working class atmosphere, themselves would never be able to buy it in England - they can't yet I don't think.

Q. You're a large landowner if you own 100 acrs.

A. Right - Grandpa owned more than that - he owned 320 acres, 160 anyway, that would be safe to say, and a grandson has it now.

Q. We found that so many people when they came to the middle of the bush in Northern Ontario, would always bring something like china etc, to represent the good life.

A. That's right because, they were perhaps a little different then all the settlers. Joe has pictures of when they were just kids - all of the pictures of Joe and the younger brother, Ben, who owns a garage over here and is living in a fantastic house, shows them with their white shirts on on Sunday with the ties on and always the white linen tablecloths on the table. So you brought your culture with you, even though your environment was a little crude like it would be in the bush at that time, but you did have a certain amount

of culture, especially the people from Britain.

Q. Do you think they were disappointed?

A. I don't think so, Joe's mother died 45 years ago and Grandpa Atkinson went back to England - the first time he went back - Joe and I were already married and you used to hear these stories about England and you used to think you'd never want to see the place because everything was super. I asked him how he found things and asked him if everything was better than Canada because this was how we always used to rib him. He said "Oh, Blast. They are so blind over there, some of the places don't even have electricity!" That shut him up, I never heard anymore about England.

Q. We talked to a woman - Catherine Stephenson.

A. Oh, yes, she was a war bride.

Q. No, she wasn't because she came over here as a young girls anddstayed with her aunt and uncle. She has been here since 1924 and she would say "home" meaning England.

A. They do talk like that because my people are Scottish from Manitoba and it was "home" and when you get to see those old Scottish people together. I remember not too long before Dad and Mother died there were a few Scottish people and they would all go back to the brogue like they had only come over a year ago and they'd been out here since... Dad since he was 17 years old and that was 60 years and they could go back into that easily. In fact my brother and I used to be able to do it too because you hear it for so long.

Q. Do you know if there was any involvement here on the part of the Women's Institute in the suffrage movement?

A. That I have never heard of. Ontario were johnny-come-lately's women-wise, as far as separtism was concerned. Manitoba was the leader in that.

Q. It seems most of the rural communities were.....

A. Have you any idea how many women it doesn't mean a damn thing to as far as the vote is concerned now? You know what one woman told me at the last election? She said, "I'm not too sure who I'm going to vot for but....." I can remember one girl telling me, "There was a big dance and I wanted to go and I didn't have a decent dress" so she dug out some flour sacks, nq sugar bags, and "I dyed them and I made myself a dress. I cut buttons off old shirts that were in the rag bag until I had enough" and she had it buttoned all down the front with a belt to match. I was 16 and you had to have something new to wear.

- Q. _____ told me how her mother would make dresses out of flour sacks - they bleached them so that all the writing on them came off and then made dresses.
- A. And pants, underpants. I remember when I first came to Dorion - you were just getting out of the Depression in '39, I came that fall and the war started in September. I remember a friend that lived a mile from us, making kids' underwear - slips - but she put lace on them, little panties with lace, so there was this little bit of culture.
- Q. It's funny, now they sell flour sack tops in stores and leave the writing on.
- A. You're kidding.
- Q. Oh, yes - Robin Hood. I doubt if it is real flour sacks....
- A. That was 1904....but I do remember that because 74 years ago I was even surprised when I read this, that they actually elected a woman a treasurer, when there were all the men,....^Mrs. S. Holder....
- Q. I thought the prairies had long, severe winters.
- A. They do, but not as long as ours. You go out there in April and the grain is up all around, where you are not planting anything here at all. We just planted our tomatoes this morning, and I think that has a lot to do with it. Also you were greatly dependant on your gardens for a lot of your vegetables, because those old girls used to can stuff and you had root cellars and that. If you had early frosts and frosts during the summer which are very prevalent in this part of the country, in Eastern Ontario. So if your garden is damaged to any extent.....
- Q. I remember reading about a pioneer and the first year everything was wiped out.
- A. It was all wiped out with frost. Getting meals ready must have been a real problem. Take your potatoe crop, suppose you had an extremely wet fall and you couldn't get them picked up or harvested and you lost half of them. You were dependant upon your own potatoe crop because if yours was damaged with some of those diseases, 9 times out of 10 your neighbors would have the same problem. If you were lucky enough and you always had to save potatoes from last year's planting for next year's seed in this part of the country because shipping was pretty grim in those days too. Doctors - how would you get to one? A lot of children died with diseases.
- Q. Did you know any mid-wives in this area?
- A. Yes, Mrs. Watty was a midwife, and Joe's sister in the '30's. She was a graduate nurse in St. Joseph's and she used to work in with the Department

of Agriculture - you've heard of their extension services - and she would go around giving home nursing courses which is the "in" thing now. Keep the people home and go and take care of them there because the hospitals are running on shortened money and the more severe cases go to the hospital. In those days, suppose you had a very ill child and you were living way back in the _____ area where we lived for 30 years and the roads were blocked in the winter, how would you get out? You had to depend on yourself and whatever medicines you had or old fashioned remedies. That pulled a lot of them through but a great many died too.

Q. Do you think the women down here learned anything from the native women who had a lot of skills in living in this kind of environment?

A. Dorion? Perhaps no, because it wasn't a real big Indian area, not for a long time. In Hurkett there were a lot of Indian people. They interreacted in - the smoking of fish, now a lot of people did smoke fish, especially the suckers that ran heavily in spring and you could get loads of them. That was fish for the winter.

Q. People ate suckers? In Thunder Bay they don't eat suckers - they are wormy fish.

A. They are not aall wormy. I canned them too. You can make a beautiful fish cake out of them. And they learned a great many things about canning. The men were pretty fair hunters and even during the Depression in the off-season, there were loads of times that a moos or deer - that's where your meat came from.

Q. Do you think women developed the skills as they lived or did they come here with some kind of knowledge of medicine etc?

A. I think both of your suggestions are correct in some instances. Also a great many of the women did get their information from older women - learn things from neighbors like cooking - recipes go from first to last. In this area not too many ethnic groups came in from Europe until after the First World War so that a lot of those women wouldn't have too many of those skills unless they were rural women but rural women have always had a lot of these types because it is learnt from mother to daughter etc. I had an extremely good neighbor - Mrs. Reno - they were very early settlers in 1910 and she had slews of relatives left, sons and daughters and grandchildren. But mentioning the medical skills, in those days Mrs. Watty delivered several of Mrs. Reno's

family. My oldest son was very sick with diarrhea and I had him into see a specialist in town and he gave this prescription but nothing worked so Mrs. Reno came over one day - she said she could give me something for that. He was about 18 months and was he sick, he lost a lot of weight. She sent one of the daughters over with raspberry bushes - just the cane - and told me to cut them up and boil them and simmer for about 10 minutes. Strain it carefully through several layers of material so none of the thorns came through and give it to him in a bottle or anyway he's going to drink it. In two days he was all cleared up. She said her mother had told her that trick. I remember telling that to a child specialist and he said he wouldn't doubt it and that some of those old girls had marvellous treatments they think of.

Q. Have you ever heard of lemon juice being used widely as a birth control method?

A. You were talking to Bill, I've got sheets of stuff that he sent me long ago. How about mountain ash berries, have you ever tried them?

Q. I hear they're poisonous.

A. No, they aren't. You've heard of Pete _____ from the Ministry of Natural Resources, well his wife asked me if I had mad it and I said I had twice. Jello from mountain ash because I read it was good. I don't doubt that it's loaded with Vitamin C but, it's just like wild plums, can't get enough sugar in to cut the sharpness out of it.

Q. What about baking soda? Do you know if that was a good.....

A. Never.

Q. Fill capsules up with baking soda and lemon juice.

A. That sounds like a placebo. I can remember seeing that done as a placebo.

Q. Do you think there is a lot of co-operation between women in Dorion and the Hurkett area?

A. There is some interaction but not really.

Q. Why didn't they mix?

A. I don't know, I've often wondered. They were always friendly and if anyone got burned out, now I'm thinking of a long time ago, you'll find there are always more people in Dorion that settled as families than what there were down there. Old families as compared to what there is in Hurkett. Because a lot of people down there were originally, their families were from Dorion. There was an institute but with a little interaction.

Q. I don't mean between women of Hurkett and Dorion, I mean the women in Dorion itself.

- A. Yes, there still is, to a great extent but a great extent of the people in Dorion have gone to school together which gives you a sort of - a great many of the families are related through marriage. In fact it took me three years to get it all straightened out when I first came. You didn't say anything about anybody because it could be a sister-in-law, a cousin or an aunt or an uncle etc., so you said nothing because after you'd get caught they'd say, "Oh, yes, that's my brother's wife or she's my aunt on my father's side." Get pretty leery about saying anything.
- Q. What about in the older days?
- A. Just the same, there was just as much. When they were building the Baptist Church that doesn't stand anymore, the Anglican Church had an annual picnic and the Baptist Church had something also and then the Catholic Church too. The Anglicans perhaps would have a _____ on Friday night and you could depend on the same people being on that one as would be on the Catholic one because they intermixed a great deal, no nevermind as far as religion was concerned.
- Q. Do you think the relationships between women overcame ethnic and religious boundaries?
- A. You've heard of the International Day that the Institutes have? Well, we had one at the hall quite a few years ago and it made no never mind here. I was really surprised when I first came to Dorion. I had been brought up that way myself because when I went to school we had the League of Nations. One thing I remember the first year I started public school, I was going on 9 and I didn't even know what the poor teacher was talking about. She told us we shouldn't eat garlic before we came to school. Especially in the winter time when the rooms would be just sick, these were first generation Canadians like myself and they'd have strings around their neck. An old woman lived in Dorion and my sister-in-law, for the oldest boy, that was just what she told him to use - you couldn't get near the poor little guy. Garlic was a cure all for everything even then, they used to put turpentine on brown paper and put it on your chest for a cold or on the soles of your feet. What your feet had to do with your chest I don't know.
- Q. Was the Women's Institute the only organizational format?
- A. Yes and it did a tremendous amount of good.
- Q. Very true of a lot of places.
- A. Almost everywhere.

Q. Why do you think that was?

A. You're too young to realize there were not too many women's organizations. Actually it is the largest one in the world with the greatest number of members, at last count it was about 7 million. The Canadian Women's Club was an old club but it was strictly urban and the same with the Canadian Women's Press Club but it's called Median Club now. It is also old but strictly urban. There was nothing in the rural areas - maybe the farmer's Association and the women were invited especially a few times in Eastern Ontario.

Q. You mean the United Farmers Party that won the election?

A. No. Mrs. Hoodless - Irvine Lee is the man I was thinking of. He was responsible for getting it started. He invited her to go around with him and do the first speaking at this farmer's meeting and the woman had been invited. I can't remember what it was called, I've always heard vague things about it over the years and never could pin anybody down. There were the Junior Farmers and there was always the Woodlands Church groups. I don't think there was a Catholic Womens' League but I think there is now in Hurkett, Dorion and Pearl but that is very contemporary.

Q. Where do you think that it was the Women's Institute that took off? Why is it so extensive?

A. When it first started in Canada - and it is very big in a lot of other countries where a lot of what we have learned in the first 25 to 30 years of it's being organized in Canada - food production and preparations and preserving food etc., - they are just working on that in a lot of areas now. In the developing countries - and some develop but there is a very great difference between - because most of those countries don't have a middle class such as we do. They have the very rich or the very poor - there is a very thin line of in-between where the masses of Canada and the U.S. and even Britain are made up of the middle class. Education had never been too big in some of the countries. Our's was the one that said women should be educated and they did the best to educating the women - maybe more in the line of house-keeping skills, cleanliness and things people take for granted now. Pasteurizing milk, public health service, educating women - if you read any of those stories about the first woman doctor - she had terrible times getting through university because they didn't feel she would have the ability, the brains, etc.. You were always classed as a second-class citizen if not fourth-class

after the animals if they came off a farm. I think that's what it was and the women were aware of it.

Q. We looked at the League book from ^{in to minute} ~~your~~ ^{the} Hymer's area Women's Institute and it is really good. It gave outlines of some of the topics discussed at meetings.

A. Some of them are very interesting.

Q. Laws pertaining to Ontario women - and that is a contemporary issue - was in 1913 discussed.

A. It's like everything else you get - you outgrow things. But there have been a great many things that have been brought into law as far as women and children are concerned. One of the big deals here four years ago and still is, is the family laws. Some of the women had been cut off without a dime. The husband died and left half of it to the church or 3/4 of the women worked like dogs.

Q. Mrs. Hymers, my neighbor, considered herself to be a very independant, strong woman - do you think their husbands treated them as equals because they worked so hard on the farm and work in the bush etc., or do you think that even though they had these skills they weren't...

A. It depends entirely on the man-woman relationship. My mother was a very independant woman, she and dad got along very well. I think it depends on the people themselves. With all the talk etc., it takes two if you're going to be married - it takes a certain relationship but it depends on you as much as your husband.

Q. What was the attitude of the men here, to the Women's Institute?

A. I'm a fairly new member compared to others because it had been operating for years before I ever heard of it, although my grandmother belonged in Manitoba. I think they kind of made fun because you actually do get that attitude even yet with a lot of women's groups. Chatter and stitch type of thing but not so. I think women do a lot of talking but men do too, all you have to do is go to conferences these days - they talk and talk. Maybe not so much modern women - the use of the husband in your family came first even though you worked outside, and loads of them did, held down a full-time job. You were interested in your family first and then the job. First you have to be an individual yourself and an independant type of person. You can't do a good job on those two, I don't care who you are. If you can't carry on a good relationship with yourself. If you can't be happy with yourself you won't be

happy with anybody. I think a lot of pioneer women learned how to live with themselves first and then the rest comes easy. I'm thinking of all the women I knew who had been active all their lives, have done all those things, have been married and are still married to the same person. I'm not counting the friends who have been divorced two or three times because they could be married 49 times and they'd go and do the same thing everytime. First you learn about yourselves, I think that is something a lot of younger women aren't aware of. This finding yourself that you're always talking about is not a thing to talk about, it's a thing to do because no one can do it but you and it comes from inside not from all the blah blah. I don't care who you are. Invariably you take lunch with them, so they served coffee and sandwiches.

Q. But women never did the firefighting themselves.

A. No, but some of the younger women now, because women have been incorporating with some of the fire departments, especially the volunteer groups because of the men being away all day. I think Kaka beka - they had the first women who actually drove the truck, they are trying to do that now here. But there is always enough men around here that work right in within the community. we didn't get any grants or anything - they did the whole thing themselves.