

HERSTORY PROJECT

Mrs. Kamstra interviewed by Georgina Garrett

- Q. I'd like to talk about the relationship between women out in the country - were women close to each other, was there a lot of co-operation? They were all very independant...
- A. Yes. You had to be close enough to feed a threshing gang.
- Q. What do you mean, feed a threshing gang?
- A. The threshing gang would come in and the man with the machinery - there would be a man who had a threshing machine, and he made it pay by going around to farmers and threshing for them. The usual thing was the waiting for the thresher to come around. When the threshing gang came with the thresher, which was as many neighbors as possible, so the farmer's wife has to cook a whole bunch of pies, because no farmer's wife would think of having a threshing dinner without scads of pies. So the pies had to be made and the roast had to go in and you couldn't do it alone - that is when you had to be close to somebody. I used to be jealous of the men because they had a great deal going for them, they seemed to have a lot of fun, what with the dirty jokes going around, and the only person who had a hard part was the owner of the farm. He had to do the dirty work, he had to stay in the maw? that is where all the junk and chaff goes and that is the job for the family whose grain is being threshed. So they would go in with kerchiefs and red handkerchiefs and they would come out of it with bloodshot eyes, and it was very hot weather and that job was the hard part, but only when it was on your place. I saw that this was fun for the men and a sweat for the women, but then what I noticed about the old-timers was that they got such a big high - the women - out of producing enough and with quality, then everybody would say, whether they meant it or not, what a wonderful dinner that was. The closeness that had happened in the early days, I used to wonder about it because they lived so far apart and they had to walk to visit, so that a visit meant a whole day, and they would spend a whole day with their neighbor. Then they would have it to talk about when they got home, but they weren't in each other's hair a whole lot, they would really put all their effort into going to that place for a whole day. When I came to the country, that was all over. Those

people were reminiscing about the good old days and what they had had and how close they were. But in reality I used to wonder how this was because it didn't happen very often that they got together.

Q. Maybe it was more of the quality than the quantity.

A. I think so. I think the deep issues had to be dealt with on those days.

Q. In what year were you born?

A. '20.

Q. How long have you lived in South Gilles?

A. I went there first in '38, I went to Scobol which is in the S. Gilles area, three miles away from Gilles. That was my school, down there. I was there for two years.

Q. Can you talk about how you became a teacher? Did you say you were British?

A. Yes, I was born in England and I was a baby when we came to Canada. My parents came from Surrey in 1921 and my father's family had to come here in 1913. My grandfather was brought here to be the city roads supervisor and all his life he seemed to gripe a lot because when he got over here, assuming that this job was waiting for him, they had given the job to somebody else.

Q. What was it like for your grandmother coming from England to Thunder Bay?

A. She was another very determined little lady. She was five feet tall and my grandfather was six feet three inches, she was so short that she had no lap. She had quite a strong temper and she was uneducated, she couldn't write and she had to sign her name with an 'X' I think. My grandfather had been taught by his sister so he knew how to write. She just fought her way. When my mother came in 1921 we were afraid of Gran Adie.

Q. Did your mother come over as a child?

A. My mother married Gran Adie's oldest son. She came to Canada in '13, then there was the war and my father, her son, was in the war so afterwards he and his bride....

Q. So your mother was a warbride?

A. No, not exactly. They had been married in England and had my older sister, so there was a four year old and a one year old come to Canada. My grandmother had this fight to survive, so much so, that my mother could hardly survive. Have you seen the show "Upstairs, Downstairs", well my mother wasaa downstairs. She was a housemaid, she would be very angry if I didn't get her proper position. She was a parlour maid which was a little further up the rung. She had learned from the aristocracy some of the social graces and some of the finer things. She had access to music and art and she wanted her children

to have some of the finer things in life. My grandmother was right down to earth you know, By God. The thing to do was to make money, and making money was what my grandmother was about doing.

Q. How did she go about that? She was just a woman.

A. She pushed my grandfather, and he never measured up. He did the best he could. She came to Canada thinking she was going to be the wife of the city engineer and it didn't work out that way. My grandfather got the supervisor of the incinerator job down at the end of town where nobody who was a nice person was supposed to go. That was a whole part of my life, that I used to go down and visit my grandfather at the incinerator and found such lovely, warm people down there. My poor mother was afraid that if we went down to that end that we would be raped. It was really such an education and right away I could see the pulls as a little one.

Q. Very class conscious.

A. Our street in Westfort - Brooks St. - there were Roman Catholic and Protestant fights. We were Anglicans and most of the people down that end were United Church and Methodists and Presbyterians and they were having their little thing. Besides that there were the Italian immigrants up the road that everybody called waps and we were not allowed to call waps. Then there were the Poles and the Ukrainians and there was a really strange thing that you couldn't figure out. We were not allowed to go out of our gate, other kids were allowed to play on the Francis St. playground and there was a mix-up of the races there, but from my mother's background, she had to keep us English, but my grandmother was going to stay English but she was going to fight her way out there. She was rough, very class conscious, but she was going to be up because she had been down in England. As I got older I discovered that this was an ingredient of the immigrants of all of the races, and the ones who came here were the fighters and that's why we had so many fights. They had to survive and the only way they knew how was to push the other down. My maternal grandmother was the same and I didn't know her but I heard and I've gotten to know some of my cousins in England and her daughters, half of her family said that she was a "proper bitch" but my mother adored her, so the other said that mother would favor a daughter - there was a lot of sibling rivalry going on. But that old girl brought all her daughters - she had a family of ten and eight survived, four girls and four boys and she brought the daughters through the terror of the war, by her strange strength and by

her ability to do midwife things. People were afraid of her but she was also in charge when there were crisis situations. She was an amazing woman that none of the cousins or second cousins knew. She wouldn't hesitate to leave the old man - she did the terrible thing of separating from the old man.

Q. Was there very much separation? How common was that in the country?

A. Mrs. Turk saw for herself a role that was more than being a mother.

Q. Was that because she had been a teacher?

A. I think so. She had experienced being put up on a pedestal and she liked it. She had a way of talking, she didn't talk like the rest of them, she talked with a bit of an accent, I don't know quite what it was. Could have been a little American since her mother was American. There was a lady who was able to have change take place in people. She was able to do it with kindness and warmth and strength and she was no underdog. She was quite beautiful. She kept her Anglicanism and when I first moved out into the country I was an Anglican and she used to come, she was about 80 yrs. old, to our house. Our new little house, the bride in the community and we would have the priest come to our house for Communion and there was just this quality about her. I thought she was a lady because her behavior met with my ideals of what a woman should be. Her husband was a very amusing man, she used to do the right and proper thing and she didn't believe in booze. But old Bill Mitchell, who was the dearest, sweetest, funniest man - going through rough days but being able to see the funny side. He used to say that he unscrewed his wife's blueberries in order to get a little bit of fermented juice down. He got away with that - I don't know whether she knew it or not. From what I know of her, she probably knew it and let him get away with it.

Q. How do you think they raised their daughter so that she had the gumption to leave her husband?

A. I don't know. All I ever knew of Annie was that I felt sorry for her. In getting into the education thing like me, you start to feel yourself being pulled away from the people that you love. Being put on some kind of a level that you're not prepared for and don't want. Because you have the name schoolteacher.

Q. Can you talk about that level? The women teachers I have talked to didn't talk about that, I know they were respected - but what kind of respect?

A. It was respect for a person who could lift themselves up to such a status as a teacher - they really had a high expectation of a teacher.

You couldn't live up to that because you had a certain area of expertise and it was very, very, narrow. You went into a culture that was foreign to you and you had to learn about the culture in order to function. Sometimes you had to get in there and ask questions that were embarrassing. I know that I asked too many why questions. They became threatening to people - usually the wives or mothers of the families I taught. They would be people that you knew and immediately they would start play acting in some strange way that I couldn't understand. It would be a kind of "put the teacher down" game. "Put her in her place", I felt, but I couldn't understand what place. I didn't understand their jokes, because it is a cultural thing. I didn't understand why I had to be called Peaches, why couldn't I have been called Freida? You have to have a nickname here, so I tried to understand it but it didn't fit right with me. Then there were the husbands who flirted with me and who came on fast at the dances. I had to keep that to myself - I didn't understand it - I was only 18, and I was the teacher, this almighty teacher. I needed somewhere to go to talk about these funny things that were going on between the mothers of the children and the fathers. I could see that some of the fathers were doing mean things to their wives, and the wives didn't know. The wives were providing - they went out to the blueberry patch - although there is a side issue here since the wives got freedom in the blueberry patch. That was also a status thing, how many better berries you can put on the table. The women had to provide the food, and I noticed that in one or two families that I boarded with, that the big thing for the father to do was to go out and hunt in the fall to make sure there was enough meat and yet the wife had to stay home and do all the cutting of the wood to keep them warm, and harness her kids to that.

- Q. You were a teacher in the time of male supremacy, and yet most of the teachers were women, and were highly respected.
- A. It's not quite respect. It was respect in the way that they were being looked at "respicio" - the latin word. And they were really being looked at and they were being tested. Tested against the former teacher. I had a Danish woman who used to come in and she had come to Canada with her husband and she was having this male-female fight. It was a fight - he used to chase her down the road in the night and he had some kind of a drum... it was really weird. Eventually I got to thinking that these people were crazy. She had been the former janitress and when I came, I was a new

teacher and they also had a new janitor and so she was going to see what she wanted in the building because it had been hers before. She used to come around and peer through the windows and ask me questions about my program. I was scared of her and she was an example of the way the teachers were being tested. When the mothers would get together the teacher was always the topic of conversation.

Q. Do you think it was because the teacher was so important in their childrens life, and the mothers hoped that they would rise above their station, so the teacher was responsible?

A. Yes, I'm sure, but the teacher wouldn't dare let on...for example, I remember one of the fathers giving me the third degree on Shakespeare. And I had to teach after Grade 10 and what I knew about Shakespeare was what I got in high school and it was Macbeth and Hamlet, and if he got me out of that I was sunk. But I didn't dare tell him because he was a member of the school board.

Q. It doesn't sound like you enjoyed being a teacher that much - some of the other women say it was a great part of their lives.

A. Maybe they say so but at that time, there were many of us who had great doubts and breakdowns. When we could get into town we had a Saturday where we would just talk shop all the time and we'd exchange seat work to keep the kids busy next week. Our real community on the education line had to be the teachers getting together on Saturday - had to keep that connection in order to develop our teaching skills. If you talk to me about the Christmas concerts-never have I reached that peak of power and creativity. That was mighty powerful stuff - you used your whole being and every scrap of paper and every crayon you could get a hold of and you had nothing, not even toilet paper to work with. You had to produce a Christmas concert and by God if you didn't you were fired, because the Christmas concert came right before the annual school board meeting, when you weren't there, and many teachers, if their concert didn't measure up were fired.

Q. What things made the conditions of the concert so significant?

A. It was the one thing that everybody went to and brought them all together with shared purpose. It took care of all the aches and pains of the year. There were tears and there was laughter and hugging, and bottles passed around. Santa Claus was usually drunk and you had to have a few under your belt to play the part. I don't think I'm exaggerrating, everyone was there, so the

struggle for survival was forgotten, it was a ritual which mended the hurt feelings. If the teacher had a creative bent at all, then she collected a big high from the Christmas Concert, and a sense of power. I got the sense that this was what I was created for., I can do this and do it well. The sad part was that like all things it got out of balance and some teachers thought that the focal point was the concert, started practising for it in September. The academic part of it was lost therefore, the inspectors dictated that the concert had to go. There doesn't seem to be a place where the community can get together now.

Q. Why didn't many women have anything to do with the Women's Institute?

A. That sounds as if not many did but a lot of women did and it did serve an educational meet, and a social meet. Oh God how they needed that meet at least once a month. The Women's Institute as you'll notice is not a big organization, numbers-wise,...

Q. The number of women in the countryside are shrinking.

A. That's not so, maybe it is. In my community the young women there now is overpowering. I am so surrounded by young wives now, more than I've ever been. It's not true that the population of women are shrinking in my community.

Q. Women, one in particular, attributed the decline of the Women's Institute' in her community with the introduction of automobiles. You are now able to drive into the city and have much more leisure time, so that rural values and comraderie were no longer necessary.

A. There is truth in that. I suppose it is hard for any organization to be flexible enough to meet the changing needs. That's what happened in my estimation - they didn't have either the knowledge? or the understanding? - who had any understanding of what was happening in the sixties? How could the Women's Institute understand it? There was no room in their format for input from the people. You did the 4-H program, and I also remember when I got into the Indian communities how badly those people asked. They wanted to know recipes, they wanted to know how to live in the present when they had to deal with food out of cans and different food. They were asking for the very program that the Institute was offering. The 4-H clubs were marvellous and they taught how to sew, and cook and also a lot of creative craft and they had experts in the field brought into the community so that you weren't getting old hat information - you were getting top notch infor-

mation on budgeting and so on. The Department of Agriculture had that program, Indians were wanting it but the Department which is behind the Women's Institute - I talked to the top people in the Department personally - they couldn't do it, they couldn't change the program. That was an example of why the Institute failed.

Q. It couldn't change the program to adapt to Indians?

A. Yes, for instance, these people couldn't write so they had to keep notes.

Q. It sounds like you were rather ostracized from the S. Gilles community because of your privileged position in your husbands' household compared to other farm women. Were you ever able to establish a feeling of closeness with neighboring farm women?

A. I found that happened now, only now.

Q. Did midwives ever help you?

A. No, I had my children in a hospital. The only emotional experience I had with that was when I first came to the country in '38 and one of the little boys who I was teaching in Grade One, his mother had died in childbirth. Aunt Cassie had been there and the doctor from Hymers had been called but they couldn't with their expertise, save her. After that I didn't hear anything about midwifery. Only the very poor people took advantage of that. I remember a Mrs. Barret - she used to deliver some of her neighbor's babies. That was in the '40's.

Q. How did the climate and environment of N.W.O. specifically affect your life? How was it different being a woman in N.W.O. as opposed to the Praries?

A. Elsie Couch's father was the pioneer of Hymers. They came in and they got into the surveying and the men in those days seemed to get access to the outside world and the women got "bushed". This was the word that was used.

Q. What did "bushed" mean?

A. I don't really know, except that the women who used it to me said that "I'm getting bushed", and she hungered to be in the town where things were going on, to talk to people. It was used by other people in a sort of way the people took for meaning that someone was going crazy. I have known of several women who went that way. I'm thinking of several whose burdens were so great and there was no place to go. If they went to any of these strong women, their message was that "you have to be strong", and they couldn't. So they just left the world of reality, and that is how I assessed being "bushed". Mr. Hymers was a beautiful, intelligent, wise man but his wife

was said to be crazy, you couldn't communicate with her. She died at 60. Mrs. George Hymers. With the Mitchells and with the Couchs, with the Hymers - these were people from affluent parts. The Couchs came from Absley Ontario and they had already raised their kids and they brought the last half of their family up here to start fresh because of _____ killing the old man Moses. The Hymers were adventurers, and wanted to see it all. The next generation something happened, since they didn't have access to education. In comes a green little school teacher and they are surprised at the lack of better education. One of that man's daughters told me a story of her uncle who had been caught, stuck down by a thunderbolt and she had the thunderbolt on the fireplace to prove it. Now that is just the next generation you see. She didn't know where China was, their world was there and that was all.

Q/ It was an urban platter of goodies that they resented.

A. Partly that, but there was something else. It had to do with the male-female thing because the teacher was a threat, she was someone who could, and felt it necessary, and the measure of her was how she could stand up to a man, and to the school board. The school board boys were caught in this attraction and making a man out of her too.

Q. How did you deal with that personally?

A. I was very naïve and the only thing I knew was that I was a woman and a woman gets married. It is very good that I have my teacher's certificate and I'm glad I had that training because at least I could give my kids something that the others didn't have. That whole thing was in my heart but then I saw how it separated - just with being with me - the mothers in the country refused to realize that they were also teachers. I couldn't do anything really worthwhile unless I took all the kids, so I got myself involved with the children. I had to go through about ten years of undoing and unlearning and to turn myself in some direction. I could function with the children because they were honest- there was no way I ought to have discussed anything with the parents - there was no way I could. I probably leave you with the impression that I hated all people who believed and belonged in the Women's Institute and that is not so. But Vi for instance, she couldn't tolerate the Women's Institute - Vi Woodbeck, your aunt - now there was a woman who was strong in her opinions about what is worthwhile

She couldn't stand all this bloody gossip - she couldn't take it - she hadn't the time for it. There was too much to be done, she had to raise all her kids and Orbie was so beautiful and sexy and women all just loved Orbie. He just had it with the women. Attractive young wives and women, he made them feel great - but he didn't know how to earn money. She had to feed the kids so she had to work and she didn't have time to spend at a bloody meeting. Your grandmother didn't go to the Women's Institute.

Q. They were sort of solitary, they didn't open up much.

A. Mrs. Garrett opened up to me. I found her far from solitary. She looked after my kids when I decided to go back to teaching, because they couldn't get teachers when my kids needed teaching. This was in the fifties, '58.

Q. Well she was quite old then.

A. Yes, I guess so. She came and looked after my kids and did the housework while I went and taught school. She was very free. There was a closeness among the women but there was also a very destructive grapevine. When things were okay - if I need your friendship right now, I'll accept your inadequacies and I will accept you as a friend. But if a time comes that you might beat me out in a power struggle, then I'll use that information you gave me, against you. Mrs. Kamstra told me to stay out of the organization and if you go into it, be very careful of what you let out. I think that was a truism and it's a natural human thing.

Q. Is there an interesting story or anecdote about your life or another woman's life you would care to relate?

A. My favorite story - I'm 18 years old and Mrs. Nielson with the brown eyes and crazy look has been coming two or three times a week and harassing me. It is about quarter to nine and I'm at the school - I walked the mile to the school - some of the kids have to come three miles and some on bare feet. What they had for lunch was lard on stale bread. They also had lice in their hair and they had to have it cut off because they had so many scabs. I'm coping with this as a Westfort girl who had never been to the country. This woman is coming and telling me I don't know how to run a school. This day she came in again and I was frightened. She came up to me again and I broke down and I was so mad at myself for crying but I didn't break down when she was there. She had left and went to get her mail where she told all the stories of what was going on in the school. I had 33 children and up to grade nine that year. Colleen Haywood nee Lark was in that school and her brother

Bill and Art, Art was 13 years old, and he had a crush on me. We were in love with each other I think, he was a terribly attractive boy and he made my life almost impossible for me because he teased me and he wouldn't do his work and he goaded me into disciplining him. He was the first one to come into school after Mrs. Nielson left - he had just walked two miles. He caught me crying and asked me what was the matter and I told him what Mrs. Neilson had said about our school. He asked me where she went and I told him that she probably went to get the mail. I then decided I had better get the work on the board and then I went to ring the bell and there were no kids. All my kids with Art Lark in the lead paraded into Mrs. Nielson's yard. I thought that I had really done it now - there's going to be war for sure. Then the kids came back and they were angels that day and when they came in Art told me that she wouldn't bother me again. And she didn't. Somehow I guess that gave me the strength - I've always relied on the kids. I became a community with the kids rather than with the parents. That is a moment in my life that stands out.

Q. Do you remember Aunt Cassie at all?

A. No, I just remember her horse. People had a lot of respect for her. Those two women - Vi Woodbeck and your grandmother -.the way they went about being themselves, they wore the pants in the family. I don't remember your grandfather, I think he died soon after I came. They were considered strong women. Pinky is the next generation and Elsie is quite a bit younger than I am. They have been going all around, visiting those country people, all around the mail route, I don't know how many years. Maybe 15 or 20 years or longer. They had been at the pulse of the community. That is were you pick up the news of who is dying, who is pregnant and who is sleeping around, this kind of gossipy stuff and it's chewed over by the regular folks. You find out the values of the community right there, and those who were deviating from it. They seemed to be doing a very subservient job to people, they are waiting on their husbands a lot of them thought. I have heard over the last 3 or 4 years from someone of some of the unpaid, loving jobs that they have done because they wanted to. The lonely women who are out there get connected by that truck coming around, and the women who can't speak English or write it, depend on them. Pinky goes out on that truck and she is all sort of rattly sometimes, and she doesn't know the value of her work at all. Even if you told her, she wouldn't believe you. My salary was \$690 per year.

11

They kept it under \$700 because of some bookwork. Men doing the same would get a thousand dollars. It was always like that. There was something so priceless and precious about men at that time because so many had been killed. Killed in the war, so that when I went to normal school there were only 8 boys and one of them is the head of education here, in town. I was a better school teacher, I know I was, I rated much higher, marks-wise. But there was no way I would aspire to be the Director of Education.

Q. What were the war years like in South Gilles?

A. It didn't touch us too much. Except the people whose boys went over. Most of them did not go overseas. It was my high school chums and my brother's friends which affected me. My husband had to stay on the farm, they made him stay there. It says here about the positive change in the women's role in the community - I think there is a very strong change.