

## An Interview with Nellie

*Thelma Fayle*

**Highlander:** I hear the famous 'Nellie from the Highlands' has been around for a long time and has plenty of stories.

**Nellie:** (after a great laugh) Well you will have to give me a few minutes to get my thinking cap on. When I look back on it, life's been good. I feel that had an explorer's road in some ways. I started out as a real tomboy early in the game.

**Highlander:** Where were you born Nellie?

**Nellie:** Well if you want to know the truth, I was born in England. Mother and Dad had come to Canada and landed at Jordan River with me and my sister when I was only a few months old. It was a construction camp with tents to live in by the river. Mum just had her tent with wooden floor boards and about three pieces of shiplap lumber for walls. After a time, Dad finally collected some extra lumber and we got a little house put together.

**Highlander:** Just the four of you? You were real pioneers.

**Nellie:** That's right. People today don't stop to think about simple things like 'electricity' and how we get it. But ever since Dad applied for and got the job to look after a reservoir, I've always been very aware of it. They built a flume back then for five miles—out of boards, that led into the reservoir; and Dad had to make sure that if they pulled a lot of power and brought water into the reservoir, he would make sure the water levels were kept right. So that's where I got my early grounding of being a country girl. We ran to the schoolhouse in the morning down the 1,400 foot elevation incline, but we slugged up the 2 1/4 mile climb to come home at the end of the day.

**Highlander:** How long did you do that?

**Nellie:** Oh I guess it was three or four years or more and then Mum got Correspondence for us kids. She would help us with our lessons. In the summertime a work gang would come in to do repairs on the flume. Where there was the bad leaks they would take planks out and replace them. We had an Airedale dog at the time, and if the work crew even so much as spoke to us kids, our dog bristled up and growled like crazy. People always told our dad that he didn't need to worry about his kids since we were well protected. The dog would sit on the school steps like a real guard, and wait

for us. Mother always added a little something in our lunch pack for the dog.

**Highlander:** It sounds idyllic.

**Nellie:** As kids, Mum and Dad saw to it that we got a lot of practice at different things. We each had a garden patch, and one night for supper we'd have carrots from my garden and the next night we'd choose something from my sister's garden. Kids today are missing out I figure, but then again we didn't have all the problems that there are now. In some ways, people have gone downhill to what they were. I don't know how long before the back door is going to open and straighten them up again. I think there's room for improvement.

**Highlander:** How did you come to live in the Highlands?

**Nellie:** After my husband's uncle came back from overseas, he picked up a strip of Highland property through the Soldier's Settlement Board. Long before we were married, we used to come here to visit him. It was like a park then, there was no underbrush; just the odd little blueberry bush or ferns growing under the trees. We used to hike and hike and hike. We would pick up a roast of meat and some potatoes and vegetables at the store and we would give it to his uncle in the cabin. We would say "here you go uncle, here's supper. We'll be back around five o'clock." And we would come back hours later and it would be all cooked for us. After dinner we would leave the leftovers and he would use them up over the week. We knew then for certain that we wanted to live in this beautiful area.

**Highlander:** Were you working at the time?

**Nellie:** When my sister Elsie got a job at Eaton's, which was called Spencer's in those days, she and I lived in a little apartment. A clothes cupboard was the pantry. I'll never forget that. It was fixed up with shelves in it. And we had a 2-ring gas thing to cook on. I got a job at Spencer's too. I worked there until they kicked me out when I got married. You weren't allowed to stay for more than so many days after you got married, they didn't keep married women on at all. I was booted out, but it wasn't my work you know; it was just the company policy.

**Highlander:** It was a different working world for women then.



photo by Don Penn

**Nellie:** Yes it was, and that's why some girls waited so long to get married. I waited till I was past my late 20's, and my hope chest was pretty full I don't mind telling you. We made sure our furniture was all paid for too, and nothing by credit. Never did have a credit card. That credit card stuff is the ruination of the country. In my time it was pay up—or else.

**Highlander:** What did you do at Spencer's?

**Nellie:** There was a machine called a comptometer—you could add, subtract, divide and multiply on them, and I learned how to use it. After I left, every time MacDonald's, the big grocery wholesale store on Government and Harold's Street, would take stock, they used to borrow the machines from Spencer's and they would hire three of us to work every night for a few hours. I slugged my share, I didn't have it easy. When my husband was heading off to work on a fishing boat all summer, I let Spencer's know that if they got stuck and needed

photo courtesy Nellie



Nellie as a young woman

someone to train a girl on the comptometer, I'd be happy to help out. They could always give me a buzz since I was sitting at home doing nothing. It was horrible. They finally called me and I went in for a week and then I ended up going in for another 15 years!

**Highlander:** They knew a good worker when they saw one.

**Nellie:** Oh, I always enjoyed my work. Especially dealing with customers over the phone. We'd have to jibber jabber a bit. I enjoyed it very much. And then I used to play basketball at night after work.

**Highlander:** Who did you play for?

**Nellie:** I played for Lakehill for 3 or 4 years. Sometimes we played up-island and we would all chip in and rent a bus to take us.

**Highlander:** Was your husband a basketball player too?

**Nellie:** No. Just me. I was in every sport that went. I tried to play ice hockey once. I've always been a tough old girl, but I've had a lot of fun in my life. When my husband and I decided to get married we didn't tell anyone. He was a longshoreman and we just went to Seattle for 3 days, got married and then we put a notice in the paper. Someone told my mother and I was in the dog house for a while, but that's o.k., it wasn't too long.

**Highlander:** How long have you been in this home that you and your husband built?

**Nellie:** Oh, it's well over 50 years now. When we first built, we bought a couple of 45 gallon vinegar barrels for our water supply and we had a hand pump. We pumped them up full of water and one of us would pump the barrel while the other one had a shower. Anyway, we started our place off with a cement slab for a double garage and we just kept on doing a little more and a little more and I'm still at it today. My husband died quite a few years ago in a car accident, so I'm the lone sheep at it.

**Highlander:** But it sounds like you have lots of friends close by in the Highlands.

**Nellie:** Well I've worked hard in the community all these years. For a long time I was treasurer of the Community Association, and so I knew lots of people through that. In the days when I was driving if there was anything to be done they called old Nellie—"....she'd have time"; and I didn't mind. Those were the days when neighbours looked after each other. There weren't any doctors close by and when someone got sick we all pooled our knowledge to help out.

**Highlander:** Are you still driving?

**Nellie:** No. I was off the road for quite a few months with eye surgery, and when I went back to drive I was out of practice and the first car that came towards me....I headed for the bush. They said I should have kept practicing even if it was just driving up and down my driveway. I've got to get my courage up to try again.

**Highlander:** Is there a bus service up here?

**Nellie:** No and that's one thing I think we need. Even if it is only a once a day service. I think it would keep a lot of people from getting that second car on the road.

**Highlander:** How do you manage?

**Nellie:** Well Thrifty's is very good. I make up a big order of groceries and they bring it right in and pack it on the table. I also go to daycare in Colwood once a week. They have their own bus, and they offer exercise classes, and hot meals and organized trips. It's usually a good outing and it's an opportunity to meet different people and talk freely.

**Highlander:** Do you get out hiking much these days?

**Nellie:** I walk the road for a mile or more everyday. In the summer time I'm usually too busy with my garden to do much walking.

**Highlander:** How did you do in the snowstorm last year? Did you get stuck in the house?

**Nellie:** No, no. I was warm as toast and I got out and shoveled a rut of the driveway all the way to the road... some 200 feet. When I called up to volunteer to help out, Nancy told me she had some volunteer folks who offered to come and help me with the shoveling. I appreciated the help.

**Highlander:** And you had lots of food?

*Nellie:* Oh yes. Mother used to order groceries twice a year, so at a young age we learned how to be well prepared when it came to food planning. And I've got a fireplace and coal oil lamps so I was just fine. Since my husband died I usually get a friend to help pile my wood; that's the one thing I can't do. Never could. It always tumbled down no matter how I tried.

*Highlander:* How do you like to pass your time these days? Are you a reader?

*Nellie:* No I'm not much of a reader. I mostly like to be outdoors or if I'm inside I like to crochet. I don't watch much t.v. either.

*Highlander:* Have you had any pets, Nellie?

*Nellie:* I've had fox-terriers—one of them Cookie, I had till she was 16. She just died after the big snow storm last year. I miss her but I'm not sure if I want to get another dog. We'll see. I get a lot of company out of the wild life and my friends around here. My tree out there is full of squirrels and I get lots of birds and quite a few hummingbirds.

*Highlander:* You really have a pretty view from your kitchen window. It must be nice on a sunny day.

*Nellie:* It's beautiful now, but nothing compared to

how it looked before it was logged the first time. I still remember it so clearly; it was like magic to walk through the woods. The moss was thicker than you can imagine. There was lots of wild mink then, and cougar and bear up around Finlayson Arm area. It was full of bush when we bought our land, and we worked hard to get it where it is today.

*Highlander:* You sound contented in general Nellie. Any complaints?

*Nellie:* A few, but I've learned that the less you complain, the better. It means there is that much less to get untangled later when there are misunderstandings.

*Highlander:* If you could turn the clock back would you come to the Highlands and do all of the hard work on your land again?

*Nellie:* Oh I think so. I'm happy and I take good care of myself and I love it here. And we have been repaid for our hard work. I still get my peas and beans and potatoes and wild berries from the earth. I feel lucky and I'm very thankful. ❀

Thelma Fayle & her husband, John Mackintosh recently celebrated their first year in the Highlands. Thelma works for the Ministry of Children & Families and is working towards a degree in Fine Arts, in writing.

## POETRY

### Neighbourhood Party — Dec. 21, 1997

*Elliott Gose*

The choral director tunes her internal pitch pipe  
to a plucked guitar string, then cajoles  
male and female voices into four-part harmony.  
smiles at the falling confetti and diminishing dominoes  
of high rolling tenors and sopranos

Potluckers play a game with their insides,  
palettes gratified by roasted brie and eggnog.  
cheesecake and raspberry almond torte;  
stomach sends gas up the tube, gut passes it down,  
but the spirit does not rest in homeostasis.

Oceanic sensors broadcast equatorial warmth  
of El Niño, already past its zenith,  
but the northern hemisphere remains windy  
and mild through the solstice  
and the ensuing birthday celebration.

The degrees keep rising up the road;  
land covenants draw climatologists  
who have projected an unknown whole  
from a local sample, comfortable to cast a sheet anchor  
amid the variable winds of fortune.

As the warmth from the fireplace grows,  
visiting toddlers discard their clothes,  
dance in white diapers, grab with one hand  
strangers' black pants mistaken for their mothers'  
in the sea of circulating legs.



Paul Freeman