

## Looking Back: Early settlement re-discovered



Hannah Kirby.

— *image credit: Maple Ridge Museum*

Weathered stones at the Whonnock cemetery mark the graves of three siblings: Murdoch, Hannah and Agnes Kirby.

They were highly respected old-timers and loyal supporters of the Anglican Church.

Sixty years ago, Hannah was the last to be laid to rest. She was 98.

The three settled in Whonnock in 1911 on land across from the railway station on River Road, later Lougheed Highway.

In 1888, at the age of 23, Murdoch immigrated to British Columbia from England with his friend Charles Sprott. They homesteaded on land in south Langley near the U.S. border, each on a quarter section – 160 acres of land.

Hannah joined Murdoch as soon as he had finished building a log cabin, and Agnes arrived in 1903.

More than 30 surviving letters to Agnes, written by Hannah and Murdoch between 1888 and 1895, provide a unique window on their settling years.

It was not an easy life by any means.

“We have had a very wet week,” Murdoch wrote in October of 1888. “The rain came through the tent. If it had not been for my McIntosh, my bed would have been wet through.”

The two friends moved into a fixed-up shanty. The door had to be moved over the door opening until they had a chance to buy hinges.

They first built Murdoch’s house: “a very small one I am afraid as Charlie and I built it by ourselves.”

Having problems splitting cedar, they used fir logs to build the log cabin, where early in the summer of 1889 Murdoch welcomed his sister Hannah. Fortunately, a few weeks later Charlie's house was also finished and he could move out, as they were "rather cramped for room.

"The house is comfortable and the sitting room very pretty," Murdoch wrote.

Next, he turned his attention to clearing his rough land, converting over time what he cleared into pastureland, hay fields and an orchard. The land did not produce any sizable income for years, but the Kirbys, living frugally, were financially not dependent on revenue from the land.

Removing endless quantities of stones, Murdoch prepared first of all a garden where they could grow their own food. Hannah also grew flowers there, including some "good roses, the ones that have no centre to them."

The Kirbys had two horses, a couple of pigs and Hannah kept chickens. They raised some cattle and at one time invested in a half-share of a pair of wide-horned oxen, Tom and Jake, to work the land.

Hannah named the place "Mahonia Ranche," after the Oregon grape shrub. Ranching – not farming – was the term used in those days for their efforts.

Before the local Glenwood post office opened in 1892, the Kirbys picked up their mail and sent letters at the post office in Blaine, Wash. They walked and rode endless miles over muddy trails to get there and anywhere else. Occasionally, someone went to New Westminster, but Blaine was the main place to shop.

The letters reveal a lively community working and playing together. Many names of people coming and going appear in the letters, but there was a core of neighbours and friends. They frequently entertained, sharing meals or teas in the English fashion or they gathered at someone's home for dances. We often read about card games played in the evenings and on rainy days.

Soon after she arrives, Hannah wrote: "Men here very rarely see any ladies at all [and they] would not miss a chance of walking home with a lady." But that is as far as it went. She never married – neither did Murdoch or Agnes.

Contentedly they lived together, much valued by the communities they chose to call home.

– *By Fred Braches, a local historian who lives in Whonnock.*