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Mary West: A mover and shaker

Starting in the late 1800s, after the railroad opened the area for settlement Norwegian families found their way to Whonnock First the Andersons and some Nelsons, followed by the Lees and later the Knudsons.

Martha Marie Lee married Ole Nelson in Norway. In 1891, she and her husband and baby son came to Whonnock, where Ole Nelson's brother lived. Two of her own brothers were in B.C. already and her other four brothers and two sisters and parents came from Norway the next year and settled in Whonnock.

In 1895 the Norwegians established a Lutheran congregation—perhaps the first one in B.C.—and a couple of years later the women formed the Lutheran Women's Association.

Mary Nelson —by then the mother of two sons—was a driving force and became the association's first president. Her first stay in Whonnock and her active participation in the association ended in 1902, when her husband Ole Nelson, died in New Westminster in April of that year.

The young widow remarried later that year with George West, a son of Henry West—a well known builder of paddlewheelers—and Louisa Fallerdeau. Since 1898, Yukon gold had lured the Lee sons north and two of them decided to stay in Alaska.

The Wests, with Mary's young sons Aksel and Hoken Nelson went to Nome, Alaska, where Mary worked as a cook for her brothers and assisted the doctor in the local hospital. Her third son, Henry West, was born there in 1904.

In their absence the Norwegian congregation had acquired a cemetery and built their own Lutheran church, but when the Wests returned to live in Whonnock in 1910, Mary did not rejoin the Lutheran Women's Association.

Her energy went towards a movement, spearheaded by Mrs. Spilsbury, to establish a Ladies Club and construct a community hall in Whonnock Mary was obviously a key figure in the formative year of the Ladies Club. Almost all meetings of the ladies took place at Mrs. West's.

Her competence is shown by the tasks entrusted to her. For example Mrs. West interviewed "the men of Stave Falls" for contributions and went to town "to interview a lawyer re: incorporation."

It was Mary who approached "the different hardware stores" for estimates. She discussed the wiring of the new hall including the connection for "moving pictures." She must have been very much involved with the construction of the hall, where her brother, Olaus, was the carpenter.

Those were banner years for Whonnock, and Mary was right in the centre of it. The hall was constructed on land, purchased from her and she got "a standing vote of thanks ... for her donation of the extra land given"

The ladies Club "adjourned to Lutheran Church in order to inspect a beautiful drop scene" for the stage at the hall, "painted by Mrs. West and donated by her to the club."

Mary and her sister Georgina Fletcher—who gave many years of tireless and faithful support to both associations—arranged a dance to celebrate that year's independence of Norway from Sweden.

The Lutheran pastor prodded the members of the Norwegian Women's Association to ask Mary to do an altar painting for their church. It was not to be a donation. In the end, when no agreement on the amount could be reached, Mary simply removed the painting from its frame and returned the money paid for it.

Mary resigned in 1913 from the Ladies Club when some insulting remarks were made in a meeting and she did not want to reconsider her decision.

We know nothing yet about her life in Whonnock after that. We are not even certain when the Wests moved away from Whonnock. The impression one gets is that the life of this practical and strong willed pioneer woman was not free of conflict.

On the other hand, her willingness and ability to do things and move others into action were key factors for the creation of an organization or the construction of the community hall—a continuing feature of Whonnock.

Those who knew her in later life remember Mary, a member of the Norwegian Lees of Whonnock, as a caring, determined and loyal woman who moved in and skilfully took care where needed.

An author's note: These are the people who shape and shaped our community and their stories increase a sense of the value of our community to all of us.

*Fred Braches and Linda Mattis*