

Women of the South Peace

- 1. Rose Patterson (26-64)**
- 2. Evelyn McBryan (01-19)**
- 3. Ramona Cooke (01-02)**
- 4. Edith Hibbs (02-29)**
- 5. Florence Pratt (25-76)**
- 6. Francine DeGroot (25-37)**
- 7. Flying Shot Lake Monument**
- 8. Agnes Forbes / Grace Wishart (old-10/old-22)**
- 9. Nora Shields (20-75)**
- 10. Helen Erskine (20-06)**
- 11. Victoria Plante (37-38)**
- 12. Margaret James (40-63)**
- 13. Rose Pitts (31-64)**

Welcome to the Grande Prairie Cemetery!

Western history has often ignored the contributions of women in our society. Previously, history was largely written by men about male dominated activities. Even within our own local history, many factors — women's limited opportunities to enter the workforce, financial reliance on their husbands, and even the social normality of being addressed by their husband's first and last name— have contributed to minimizing women's voices and contributions.

This tour celebrates such contributions of women in the South Peace. In Grande Prairie, and beyond, wonderful women have built our community: as nurses and military veterans; as house and farm wives; as business women and community organizers; and as hard-working partners to hard working men.

All of the stories shared during this tour come from the South Peace Regional Archives, a non-profit society dedicated to gathering, preserving, and sharing the historical records of our area. They originate from a variety of sources including archival collections, reference files, community history books, and interviews.

Stop One: Rose Patterson (26-64)

Rose Patterson was born Rose Devlin, 1893 in Nanaimo, British Columbia, she attended school in Vancouver to become a teacher and spent a few years teaching in British Columbia. In 1919 she took a trip to Beaverlodge with a friend, and fell in love with the area, so when a teaching job opened up for the fall, she readily took it. Rose taught at the Montrose School in Grande Prairie until the summer of 1921. Rose was called to return home in the summer to take over her family's business and care for her mother who had fallen ill.

In December 1922, a local man she met while teaching, by the name of DW Patterson, sent a telegram and asked for her hand in marriage, so she quickly returned and was married in the same year. Rose was an active member in the Ladies Aid, Women's Missionary Society, a leader of Canadian Girls in Training, Charter Member of GP Women's Institute. The Patterson's were also involved in the Canadian Club, entertaining and hosting many visitors, as well as being great travelers themselves. Contributed to the Monkman pass and Womens Institute talk shows over CFGP (what is now 97.7 Rock FM).

The women's institute talk shows ran for 25 years, and was one of the reasons we have so many amazing accounts of the experiences of women (especially those on this tour) as she often invited them to speak and be interviewed on radio talk shows. The Pattersons had three children, Rhoda, Dorothy, and Donald Edward, who became a lawyer like his father and eventually the Assistant Chief Judge for Northern Alberta. He is buried here, beside his parents. Rose Patterson passed away in 1988 at the age of 94.

Stop Two: Evelyn McBryan (01-19)

Evy McBryan was born Evelyn Beatrice Hook in Somerset, England in 1911. Evelyn married Harry Newton and the couple had one son, Stanley “Val” Newton. In the latter 1940s, Harry and Evy ran the Alberta 5¢ to \$1.00 Store on Richmond Avenue. Harry died on June 22, 1946 following a long illness and is buried with the Newton family. Evy continued to run the store in partnership with her family, who had a series of jewelry and gift shops in Grande Prairie, Dawson Creek, and Ft. St. John. On March 6, 1948, Evelyn married William Clemens McBryan of Clairmont, who is buried beside her. Sadly, A few years later, Evy’s son Stanley passed on April 12, 1953 at age 15. He is buried here next to Evy. Evy and Bill had one daughter, Marilee.

Evelyn studied under well-known artist Euphemia McNaught as one of her earliest pupils, as well as at the Vancouver School of Art and even travelled to study abroad in Europe. Together the two artists traveled the Alaska Highway during its construction in 1942 and recorded that monumental task and the beauty of the environment. Evy played an important role in promoting and fostering visual arts, not only in the Peace Country but across the province. She organized the Grande Prairie Art Club out of her own home, and was in charge of the arts division for the City of Grande Prairie Recreation Department. She also worked tirelessly to establish the Prairie Art Gallery, which is now the Art Gallery of Grande Prairie. Several of her works form part of the permanent collection and a gallery is named in her honour.

Evy held her last exhibition at the Beaverlodge Cultural Centre in 1983. She passed away in Grande Prairie in 1985 at the age of 74.

Stop Three: Ramona Cooke (01-02)

Ramona Cooke was born 1907 in Arundel, Quebec. Her father, Thomas Edmund Cooke was a sawmill operator, and had heard about the homesteading possibilities in the Peace country, so in 1911 journeyed to Grande Prairie with brother-in-law Bill Boyd and filed on a homestead. The rest of the Cooke family, Thomas' wife Emma Boyd and daughters Ramona and Eunice, followed in 1912. By 1914, the Cooke and Boyd sawmill was running at the Smoky crossing. They supplied the lumber for building the Bezanson town site and when they were not paid, they took over the hamlet on a mortgage.

In the 1930s the river flooded often and in 1935 the river undermined the bank and sent their steam engine and thousands of feet of lumber into the river. Thomas was not easily swayed, quickly starting over and continued his mill operation until the mid-60s. He also ran 5 threshing outfits at one time. Three more children were born to the Cookes while living in the Grande Prairie district: Boyd, Donald, and Lois.

While she was still a very young girl, Ramona lost her eyesight as a result of an illness. Major Harry Watts, a musician in Grande Prairie, was impressed with the girl's love of music and devoted much time to teaching her to play the piano. In 1926, Ramona was the winner in the pianoforte class at the Peace River Music Festival, admired and well-liked by her audience and competitors. Although her health was failing, she continued to play for church services, weddings, funerals and social functions. Ramona passed away June 14th, 1934 at the age of 26 and Christ Anglican Church was filled to capacity for her funeral (many who attended sat outside). In 1936, a "Mona Cooke Memorial Cup" was donated to the Grande Prairie Music Festival to be presented to the most outstanding musical performance of the festival.

Stop Four: Edith Hibbs (Fredette) (02-29)

Edith Hibbs was born 1890 in Montreal, Quebec. She moved to London and began nursing at a young age until she signed up to serve in WWI. Edith served with the Canadian Army Medical Corps and was soon sent to Malta, where the conditions, coupled with the climate, took a toll on soldiers and medical staff alike. Edith was no exception. She contracted Malaria in November of 1916 and is noted as being sick with it at least four more times. She was discharged from service in 1917 after her last bout. Edith was then invalided back to England where she continued to work in the Hospitals for the duration of the war.

In April of 1919 Edith was awarded the Royal Red Cross – an honour that was awarded for exceptional services in military nursing. Edith came to the Peace Country at the request of Dr. Lewis J. O'Brien, who she met during her war service. Dr. O'Brien offered Edith the job of matron of the Katherine Prittie Hospital in Grande Prairie. Edith agreed and left her job at Summerland, B.C. for the frontiers of the Peace Country. Conditions were primitive at the log pioneer hospital. It had no running water or power and a telephone that shut off at midnight.

In 1929 a new hospital was built with a larger capacity, improved facilities, and modern equipment, named the Grande Prairie City Hospital. Edith continued in her position becoming the first matron of the new hospital. Edith married Mr. Fredette, a local veterinarian in 1929, and gave up her position to work the farm with her family. She passed away in 1964 at the age of 74.

Stop Five: Florence Pratt (25-76)

Florence Pratt was born Florence Patterson in Kemptville, Ontario, May 30th 1884. She travelled West with her family before the turn of the century where she met and married her husband, William (Bill) Pratt in the year 1908. Florence and William spent years following the gold rush throughout Canada, before settling in Edmonton for a short time, where they had their first son, Garnet. In 1906, Florence held the distinction of being named Alberta's first beauty queen, and was also well-known for being a "crack-shot with her rifle, and could shoot a bird directly out of the sky'.

In 1912, the Pratt's decided to travel along the Edson trail with a printing press in tow, as they dreamed of starting up the first ever newspaper in the Grande Prairie area. (That very printing press is in the Grande Prairie Heritage museum, and is about this 5-7 ft long, about 7 feet tall and extremely heavy). Naming the paper 'The Herald', they began printing in 1913. William did the writing and editing for the newspaper, while Florence was in charge of the bookkeeping, banking, corrections, and prepared/folded the papers for sale.

They decided to sell the business in 1915 to settle down in the area. William Pratt passed away in 1943, and in the years following Florence was known to be very active in the church, singing in the choir, and was a lifetime member of the women's auxiliary. She was also noted to be very fond of golf and curling, often travelling and placing in numerous bonspiels around Alberta. Florence Pratt passed away December 8th, 1982 at the age of 98.

Stop Six: Francine De Groot (25-37)

Francine was born in the Netherlands in 1903, living in the town of Groningen where her husband ran a butcher shop, she would tend to their home and teach their daughter. Francine and her husband had wishes to immigrate to Canada, although when WWII began and German occupancy in the Netherlands increased, the couple instead joined the underground resistance where Mr. De Groot became the leader. Their focus turning to aid in the War efforts and decrease the German occupation.

Just weeks before the Canadian army of liberation would arrive to provide aid, Mr. De Groot was arrested and tortured by the Gestapo. During this time Florence and their 14 year old daughter Jennie were driven from their home at gunpoint by the Gestapo. With no outer clothing in the unforgiving winter and their food coupons stolen, the two were left to die. Florence and Jennie ultimately found shelter with friends within the city.

Florence used her time in hiding to secretly warn friends, family, and members of the resistance of the current situation and provide information how to avoid the Gestapo to keep from any more arrests or captures. Though all of their friends and family remained headstrong in the face of the current danger and continued to aid the family and those in need. Once the Canadian army arrived and liberated the people/Mr. De Groot, the family returned home to find it stripped by the German officers, and decided to move to Canada in 1947, to begin a new life.

Stop Seven: Flying Shot Lake Cemetery (Monument)

This is the oldest and original part of the cemetery. It is also known as the Flying Shot Lake Cemetery, as it is considered to be in the Flying Shot Lake district. Before this cemetery existed, all burials, Catholic and Protestant, were done in the Catholic mission cemetery.

A memorial stone has since been erected to mark this old section of the cemetery. It is on an angle to line up with the orientation of the graves. There is a diagram of the Old Cemetery on the back of the monument.

Stop Eight: Agnes Sorrel Forbes (Old-10)

Agnes Sorrel was born September 17th, 1850 in Montrose, Scotland. One of eight children, she became interested in mission work early in life (following the passing of two of her siblings) and by 1891 she was given the title of matron at the Home for Girls in Aberdeen. She met Alexander Forbes, the Presbyterian Minister of the home, during her work there, and they were engaged soon after. Agnes and Alexander came to Canada, were married in Edmonton, and did missionary work in Fort Saskatchewan for fifteen years.

They came to the Peace country in 1909 to survey the feasibility of sending a missionary and in 1910, in the absence of any other volunteers, decided to serve the area themselves. (She was 60 years old that year and her husband turning 50.) The Forbes first lived in shack provided by the Clifford's on their homestead. Agnes was instrumental in conducting Sunday School and establishing the Women's Missionary Society, as well as working with Maude Clifford and Nurse Baird in establishing a small pioneer hospital. In the fall of 1910, Alexander filed on a homestead bordered by 100th Avenue, 100th Street, 108th Avenue, and 96th Street today. The first building on the homestead was the pioneer hospital, built in 1911. The Forbes later built an adjoining home.

Agnes was known to be very sociable and accommodated many visitors for tea (many referred to her as always being a shoulder to cry on and an ear to listen). In 1914 she helped lay the cornerstone of the Kathryn Prittie Hospital which was built on the Forbes homestead near the railroad tracks, approximately the same location where every hospital since that time has been built. Agnes passed peacefully in her sleep in 1917.

Stop Nine: Grace Wishart (Old-22)

Grace Sifton was born 1881 in Manitoba, where she studied to become a teacher and met her husband Alexander Wishart, they were married in 1904. Her husband had been convinced of the prosperity in the Peace country and traveled there to determine for himself in 1912. By 1913 her and their 4 year old daughter Jessie decided to join him. Their first home in Grande Prairie was a stopping place east of Bear Creek (102 ave, next to Main Street). Grace and Jessie arrived there after their long journey and found that the house had little insulation so it got so cold that everything in the kitchen froze during the night, they also discovered the barn full of horses and the home full of men stretched out on their bedrolls. Grace explained that while she was annoyed, she soon discovered that the home was no longer a stopping place but a private residence, and they quickly gathered their belongings and raced out of the building.

Grace and Alexander had two more children after arriving in Grande Prairie, a daughter named Grace and a son named Douglas. Grace had decided to join the Home Missionary Society or better known as the Ladies Aid, nearly as soon as she arrived. Grace described her work with the Ladies Aid as including providing aid for hospitals and the needy, along the missionary society often organizing community events and planning local gatherings and holidays. She was an ardent bridge player, and loved sports such as golf and curling, being one of the matrons that worked to establish a Ladies Curling Club.

She was well known within the community for her local work as well as for her career in teaching. Grace joined the CFGP talk shows speaking at length on her experience teaching overseas in Germany, and encouraging other local teachers to experience teaching overseas. In 1967 St. Pauls United Church presented Mrs. Wishart with a corsage in token of her service in women's work and the church for 55 years. Only ten days after her 90th birthday, Grace passed away in 1970.

Stop Ten: Nora Shields (20-75)

Nora Dionne was born 1907 in Pincher Creek, Alberta to parents Baptiste and Edith Dionne. She graduated from nursing school in Edmonton, and began working in Grande Prairie at the Kathryn Prittie Hospital in 1928. Nora met Clarence Shields in Grande Prairie and they were married by 1929, with her continuing her work as a nurse, and Clarence working as a sales broker. They had four children together that all grew up in Grande Prairie, Clarence passed away in 1956 at the age of 48 years.

Nora Shields spent a majority of her life dedicated to nursing the sick in Grande Prairie (quoted as a busy housewife/mother, she was always on call at the hospital. She was never off staff in her years living in the area). Spent a few years working part-time as an office nurse for Doctor Carlyle (still helped in the hospital whenever it was needed) until 1954, when she returned to full-time work within the hospital.

She was hired as assistant matron at the newly built Grande Prairie City Hospital, and later promoted to matron. She was well known in the community for her lovely singing voice, winning many awards for her performances in local music festivals. Nora was also an active member of many local organizations such as the Catholic Women's League, Alberta Registered Nurses Association, and the United Commercial Travelers Auxiliary.

Nora passed away in 1966 at the age of 59 years, the following year, the Hospital Ladies Auxiliary dedicated a memorial garden in her honor at the Grande Prairie Municipal Hospital.

Stop Eleven: Helen Erskine or Helen Bain or Helen Shand or Helen Stephenson (20-06)

Helen Shand was born Helen Leena Ashmead 1887 in Alliance, Kansas and travelled across the border in 1906 at the age of 20 into Southern Alberta. She then moved to Grovedale, where her brother Peter Ashmead lived, to open up a general store and the first post office. Helen was married 4 times, and widowed 4 times due to war, losing one of her sons in WWII. When asked about her marriages in an interview, she explained she “lost one of her husbands in Vimy Ridge, though I won’t tell you which one, nor how many I had.” Helen raised 5 children to adulthood nearly on her own, all while tending to their farm and aiding the community day to day.

She was the First Post Mistress in Grovedale, as she owned the post office, and her family owned the general store that was also in town. Helen helped to start up a genuine school in the town as well, she stated that anytime a teacher could not come in to work, she would be called to sub in. Before moving to Grande Prairie, Helen was most well known as the “Strawberry Lady” throughout Grovedale, as she tended to 3 acres of strawberries that she graciously shared with the community.

Helen was interviewed later in life, about her experiences, and she was asked if she could live life over again, would she change anything, and she stated “I regret marrying so many times...I was sick of it, it’s too much work.” She passed away November 4th 1991 at the age of 104.

Stop Twelve: Victoria Plante (37-38)

Victoria Plante was born Victoria Calliou in 1897 to Adam and Veronique Calliou, in an indigenous family. Her parents settled in Flying shot Lake but travelled to Grouard, where Victoria was born, as there were no doctors in the Flying Shot Lake area. Victoria had three brothers and two sisters. Victoria worked for the hotelier Frank Donald for a few years when she was young.

George Plante and Victoria met in 1919 and married the next spring. After George and Victoria were married, they lived with the Calliou's for a while. The couple bought land in Bear Creek/Muskoseepi Park in 1923. They first lived in a log cabin but moved into a house he built on the lot in 1942. Mrs. Plante made moosehide gloves, moccasins, and coats to pay for the lumber. They had three daughters, Rachel, Marie, and Lena.

The couple were strong community members. During the depression, Mr. and Mrs. Plante welcomed many less fortunate people into their home for food and shelter with the only expectation being that they lend a hand when needed, many that stayed described Mrs. Plantes' home as being so clean you could eat off the floor. The sight of their home is a protected area in Muskoseepi Park as it is the oldest remaining foundation in Grande Prairie (Right beside the river and the mini golf course).

Stop Thirteen: Margaret James (40-63)

Margaret was born 1882 in Iroquois, Ontario. She met and soon married her husband Griffith Arthur James Sr. by 1913, and they moved to Grande Prairie together in the year 1916. Margaret and Griffith were prominent members of the community during the first few years following their arrival, and by 1919 Grande Prairie was promoted from a village to a town, and Mr. James was appointed the first mayor.

While her husband worked each day as the major of their town, Margaret worked tirelessly herself. She ran boarding homes (hotels?) throughout Grande Prairie, one of them residing right where the cemetery now sits, land once owned by Margaret James (James Manor?), as both individuals carried out business in their own right, and they owned separate business accounts. Margaret, alongside many other matrons of the town, agreed that the establishment of a hobby similar to that which their husbands took part in was necessary. Thus, the GP Ladies Curling Club was formed in 1921, with Mrs. James as the President.

Throughout the years of work for the community, Margaret was often a judge for numerous fairs within the town and neighboring communities. She was known to have many interests and hobbies, and by 1934 she was seen as a beekeeping expert, proposing to establish a local beekeepers association that ultimately formed by 1935. A continued member of the Grande Prairie Women's Association, she pushed alongside many other community women for a council room to be turned into a public library in 1939.

Stop Fourteen: Rose Pitts (31-64)

Was born Rose Kelly 1878 in Ontario, the youngest of seven siblings, her parents passed before she reached the age of ten, being mainly raised by her older siblings. By the age of 17, Rose was married to Mr. Pitts in 1895, though by 1910 she was on her own as she trained to become a registered nurse in Vernon, British Columbia. She was known as a beautiful young girl with a flair for stylish and colorful clothes (that many deemed outlandish) Once registered, Rose loved to travel extensively and provide her services in hospitals all over, including hospitals in Pittsburg and Seattle.

In 1915, the town of Pouce Coupe requested for a registered nurse or doctor to be sent to the region as they were too far from adequate medical attention, they received \$500 and Rose Pitts was sent to the area as the first registered nurse to reside there. Rose had a dream to open a hospital in a rural community that needed it, though after voicing her hopes she found that the bachelors did not see the need for a hospital, and the married men did not want their wives leaving home for maternity care.

By 1916 Rose was tired of the refusal by the community, and moved to Grande Prairie, where she was hired as the third matron of the Katherine Prittie Hospital for a period of 6-7 months. She decided she still wished to pursue her dream, and moved to Beaverlodge where a man named Doss Johnson helped her build a homestead on the outskirts of the town. Rose again attempted to convince the townsfolk of her hopes for a hospital, and was met with the same ignorance, ultimately her only patient was Doss Johnson himself in her own home. Rose lived by herself and tended to her farm with the aid of her neighbors, suffering from deafness may have played a part in the difficulty she found in opening a hospital.

Rose Pitts passed away in 1958, and family found numerous medical supplies stored within her home, likely stored for over 40+ years, as if she never gave up on her dream and continued hoping there would be use for them one day. Her eldest daughter Eunice wrote to the Herald Tribune after her mother's passing, she wrote "To me, my mother was a very colorful figure and I don't think she should die without recognition. She was twice the women that I will ever be." Rose wished to be buried on her farm, though since she lived alone and her children were unable to travel after her passing, she was buried here in the Grande Prairie Cemetery.

84 AVENUE

