

Pioneer women: Noveta Leavitt

By Sherry Stewart



We can't write a series on pioneer women of the Roe Lake area and not have an article on Noveta Leavitt, the quintessential pioneer woman.

Long beloved for her feisty spirit and her canny

approach to everything, she has been written of time and again through the years. Joanne Algar wrote of Noveta in The Interlaker in 1998. Most recently, we have all of Noveta's stories gathered together by Marianne Van Osch in her great new book, The Homesteader's Daughter.

There is probably little that I could add, so I will let these two writers tell you about Noveta.

Here are the words Joanne Algar wrote about Noveta Leavitt over eight years ago. This article was first published in the December 1998 Interlaker so some of the references are out-dated:

Noveta Leavitt seems to be the oldest pioneer who was actually born in the Roe Lake area. She arrived at Roe Lake in 1917, fifth child of seven born to Edward and Irene Higgins, pioneers from Oregon. That house is still lived in today, and local contractor Mel Higgins is the son of Noveta's oldest late brother, Marion. Early in the century, Higgins Lake was named after their father, who was working here with a government surveyor.

Noveta's early memories revolve around the school, which, at her father's insistence, was partly built by the many transient men in the area. Her oldest sister, the late Velma Malm, was one of the school's earliest pupils and their route to school was cross-country, through three properties, for nigh on a mile. When they turned thirteen, education was only available via correspondence course.

So the young Noveta started work,

baby-sitting the schoolteacher's child in the still standing "Nellie's cabin" on the Granberg property. In fact, she always had a job until she married—as a cook, nanny or waitress, whatever was needed. And she moved to get work: to Lone Butte, Clinton and even Vancouver.

Noveta remembers that the train to Vancouver only went as far as Squamish, so she and her youngest sister Beulah took a boat the rest of the way! (Beulah McMillan now lives in Salmon Arm.) It was during the Depression and Noveta



Noveta Leavitt in 1998

still marvels that she was recommended by that Cariboo employer to her sister at the coast.

Noveta was married in 1939, after a six-year courtship, to Franklin Leavitt, whose family had moved west from Saskatchewan in 1933 to homestead at Roe Lake. Franklin homesteaded himself at Lesser Fish Lake in 1935, where he built a log house on the lake.

"We couldn't afford to get married in those days, we had to wait," Noveta says. "And we had to wait again before having children."

The young marrieds had a team of

horses, and received a milk cow as a wedding gift!

But Frank had to go to where the work was, so they spent their first summer in Lone Butte where he worked on the tracks, then on to Wells and Canim Lake. In 1945 Franklin built the larger house that Noveta still lives in.

When families had so little, a garden was very essential and Noveta was a keen gardener. Long winter evenings were spent pursuing myriad handicrafts, and the family also owned two traplines, which stretched for "miles and miles" and kept them all busy.

After successfully working one quarter section, homesteaders were allowed "a pre-emption" on nearby property, so they pre-empted the acreage which is still home to Noveta's son, Gerry. Her daughter, Connie Greenall, also lives nearby.

Noveta was widowed in 1972 and, since then, has traveled extensively to Asia, the Caribbean, the Canary Islands and only last spring she toured Europe with her granddaughter. As her son Dennis lives in Venezuela, she has also made several trips to South America. Noveta's family now includes fifteen grandchildren and nine great-grand children—and all of them will be here for Christmas this year (1998)!

At 83, Noveta is still a keen gardener and still drives her car.

Our pioneers had to be a hardy bunch, and this bright lady is living proof of it.

In her just published book, The Homesteader's Daughter, Marianne Van Osch records a moment among many in this pioneer woman's life. She writes:

One day in July, when [Noveta's daughter] Connie was four months old, she was part of what could have been a deadly drama. Noveta planned to work outside that fine summer day... She fed Connie, tidied up her kitchen and headed up the hill to the hayfield, carrying the baby in her basket. She



Photo credit: B. Neff



Photo credit: SherryStewart

In 2000 Noveta's granddaughter, Donna, took her to the top of Windy Mt.

At the Bridge Lake Fair, 2006

spread a small blanket in a shaded spot, put the sleeping baby down, and began to pitch hay.

Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed something in the next field, above the one she was in. The grass swayed and flowed around something moving steadily downward. She caught a glimpse of a velvety, honey-coloured shape through the tall grass. "Darn," she thought, "there's Mrs. Larsen's calf. If it doesn't go home that cow will dry up, and they'll loose some milk. I'd better do something." She thought about how hard it would be to herd the calf all that way while toting the baby in the basket at the same time. And it was so darned hot!

She rammed the pitchfork into the ground, pushed the damp hair off of her forehead, and looked back up the hill. Straight into the face of a huge cougar! The cougar had slid silently up to the rail fence at the very edge of

the small field!

Noveta trembled at the memory. "I spun around and grabbed that baby and I never ran so fast in my life, back down the hill to the cabin and slammed that door shut! You can believe that I never

went out for the rest of that day! I don't remember when I got the basket home!"

Noveta Leavitt will be 90 years old on April 13th, so here's to a life well lived and a hardy pioneer spirit that we all can admire. Happy Birthday Noveta!

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Community mourns...

that anyone wishing to make a donation in Truda's memory, do so to the Multiple Sclerosis Society or the BC Cancer Agency.

Elizabeth Waite passed away at the coast on March 12, at the age of 80. A summer resident at Deka Lake since the mid 70's, and a permanent resident since 1986, Liz had health problems which had caused her to be in White Rock with family since just before Christmas.

Liz was particularly well-known for her astute brain and proficiency at duplicate bridge, which she never missed. With her amazingly strong and independent spirit, she had lived alone for at least five years. Her daughters, Samantha and Beverley, and their families including Liz' five grand-children, will celebrate Liz' life with an Open House on Easter Saturday, April 7. Friends are invited to Liz' home, 7579 Ludlom Road, Deka, at 2 p.m. Donations in Liz' memory may be made to Covenant House (a home, run by nuns, for street kids) at 570 Drake Street, Vancouver, V6B 4K8.

All three ladies will be sadly missed by the entire Interlakes community.

Deka Lake was shocked and saddened when **Eriks Kanders**, owner of "Tiny's Excavating" passed away suddenly March 15, at the age of 42. His wife, Donna, held an open house, March 24, at Deka Firehall. Tiny also leaves behind their son John, four, and daughter Danika, two. Tiny will be deeply missed and sincere sympathy is extended to his family and many friends.

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