

# Highlands Gal

By Pattie Whitehouse

## My grandma taught me to whistle

I remember standing by the window near the stairs, pursing my lips as she'd shown me and blowing — and wonder of wonders, a little sound came out! Grandma encouraged and coached me as that little sound became a bigger one, took on different pitches and finally became a tune.



*community*

It wasn't until decades later, when I was helping her last remaining child, my 84-year-old uncle, with his personal history that I learned Grandma was such an accomplished whistler that she could charm the birds out of the bushes by imitating their calls.

Unfortunately, there wasn't a lot more Uncle could tell me about his mother. He had no idea what it was like for her to come from Birmingham, a modern industrial city in England, to Port Renfrew on the west coast of Vancouver Island in 1913. Did she miss the electric lights and indoor plumbing? Or was she excited about taking up a pioneer life in the very wild west?

When Grandma and her family moved to the Saanich Peninsula, her doctor husband cared for the people of the WSÁNÉC First Nation as well as the local farmers. Did Grandma embrace the opportunity to learn about a culture that was ancient when Birmingham was a farming hamlet? Or did she stick with "her own kind" — the English and Scottish settlers of the Mount Newton Valley?

Grandma helped shape the history of the Peninsula, but I know nothing of what she did or what impact she had. I wish I did.

My dad was dedicated to his mother and he was a strong influence on me, so I am sure I reflect her in some ways, but I don't know what they are. Do you think that my love of music came from the grandma who taught me to whistle?

Personal history is about saving our stories before it's too late, so that generations to come will know who we were and where they came from, and to give them a personal, meaningful understanding of history.

What will your children's grandchildren know about you?

Last issue I mentioned the public washroom made of cob that can be found at Eagles Lake Park in the Highlands. It is the creation of Ann Baird, who joins *Island Gals* as a new contributor this issue, and her husband Gord. They also constructed and live in the most sustainable house in North America.

Highlands used to rent a portable toilet to serve the park in summer. Last year, with materials paid for by the District and their own volunteer labour, the Bairds built a permanent park toilet out of cob, the ancient mixture of clay, sand and straw they used for their home.



It's the most beautiful public toilet you've ever seen. It has natural light, an earth floor, a living roof and even a built-in bench on the outside so you can enjoy the view while waiting to use it. Great ventilation and a good composting system make it odour-free, unlike those stinky, environmentally-unfriendly Porta-Potties; and it's built to last 500 years.

Highlanders are justly proud of the public facility at Eagles Lake!

*Pattie Whitehouse, a personal historian since 1992, helps people save their lives in book form so their children's grandchildren will know them. She is coordinator of the Western Canada Region of the Association of Personal Historians. Contact Pattie at 250-478-3319 or [pattie@pacificcoast.net](mailto:pattie@pacificcoast.net)*

*discover*