

# Amazing Young Women

## Early years of Ladysmith and the Hospital (now Health Care) Auxiliary by Pam Fraser, Recording Secretary, Ladysmith Health Care Auxiliary February/March 2023

### Introduction

Buried on the last page of the Ladysmith Chronicle for July 7, 1909, in small type, appeared the following short notice.

“There will be a meeting of all women interested in the building of the hospital at the city hall this evening at 8 o'clock. The object is to form a ladies auxiliary in connection with hospital work, and it is hoped that as many ladies as can make it convenient to be present will be at the city hall this evening. Matters in connection with the hospital are not progressing as favorably as they should, and much of the work may well be undertaken by the ladies.” Indeed it has, for over 100 years (my comment).

Finding this little notice was a “hallelujah” moment. I couldn't quite believe my eyes. It was a thrill to find a reliable, primary source proof of the year, month, day and time of the origin of the Ladysmith Health Care Auxiliary. As an amateur historian, this was winning the history “lottery”.

The Ladysmith Auxiliary had long claimed to have been founded in 1909, but when I looked through the Auxiliary's historical records I could not find supporting evidence. Researching the Auxiliary's origins through other primary and secondary sources was a long process with dead ends, false leads and unexpected findings. Crucial documents had gone missing and some information presented as fact turned out to be false. However all the searching was worthwhile. From it I got a fascinating glimpse into the lives of people who came before us. I also shared something with them, being a proud member the Ladysmith Health Care Auxiliary. As I researched, I found I developed a sense of connection with the women of early Ladysmith, reaching back to them through time. The more I found out about them the more my admiration for them grew. The founders of the Ladysmith Hospital Auxiliary truly were amazing young women.

### Ladysmith in 1909 - 1911

Ladysmith was an “instant town”, less than 10 years old in 1909. The town had dirt roads and wooden sidewalks with large stumps from land clearing scattered throughout. It was created by coal mine owner James Dunsmuir for the miners who worked at his Extension mine. There was a mining community at Extension but Dunsmuir forced the miners to move to Ladysmith, likely because Dunsmuir owned the townsite and could better control the miners than in Extension. Many of the older buildings in Ladysmith were moved from Extension to Ladysmith, some are marked with heritage signs. The miners travelled the 12 miles back and forth from Ladysmith to the Extension mine on a railway built by Dunsmuir. This railway also hauled coal to the docks at Transfer Beach, the remnants of which could still be seen in 2023 (Hinde, 2003, introduction).

Mining was a skilled and relatively well paid occupation for the time. In 1911, 889 men worked in the Extension mine, virtually all from Ladysmith. The 1911 Canada census recorded 3,295 people living in Ladysmith, so mining was by far the largest source of employment. There were about 200 men working in the logging industry and a smaller group of businessmen and professional men. Employment for women was poorly paid and limited to jobs such as telephone operators and teachers. Typically only single women and widows had paid employment, when a woman married she was expected to give up her job (Hinde, 1997, p. 36).



Walter Steele's government certificate of competency to be a Coal Miner.

The miners needed to be skilled to be aware for signs of danger, for injuries and deaths in the mines were commonplace. During the 32 years the Extension mines were in operation, 104 men were killed (Goldstone, 2020, p. 2). An indication of the frequency of such deaths was that an individual mining death did not get much notice in The Ladysmith Chronicle newspaper. On March 27, 1909 under the headline "Local and General News Notes" was a random collection of items. These included notices of people coming to and leaving Ladysmith, some civic news from Victoria (hiring a fire chief) and Portland, Oregon (all liquor licenses to be sold to one corporation), the Ladysmith entertainment options, both live acts and a list of the short motion pictures playing (examples, "The Water Cure", "Bothersome Husbands", "Cowboy and the Baby"), and news that the federal government had committed to "offer all needed support to the Motherland in maintaining the present supremacy of empire." Towards the end of this odd collection of items was this notice,

While working in the No. 3 mine last Wednesday afternoon, Oscar Macsat, a Belgian miner, was instantly killed by a cave-in. About fifteen tons of coal fell and Mr. Macsat was instantly killed. When recovered it was discovered that his neck had been dislocated, although there were very few marks on his body. A friend who was working with him at the time was bruised but not seriously injured. Deceased was 53 years of age, and leaves a family of five. The funeral will take place tomorrow afternoon from the family residence under the auspices of Harmony Lodge, I.O.O.F., Rev. J.M. Millar of Nanaimo officiating.

The death of Oscar Macsat did not rate a headline or commentary, his widow and children not even a name.

Medical treatment for those seriously injured in the mines was limited. One settler remembered, "In the early days we did not have a hospital. Injured men were brought home on a stretcher: the wives or mothers had to care for them, and if they died, they prepared them for burial. It was sad." Before the hospital was built in Ladysmith injured men were also transported to hospitals in Chemainus and Nanaimo but due to rough roads, many died while in transit (Goldstone, 2020, p.1).

Unlike many other instant resource towns, Ladysmith had a relatively large number of women and families. The 1911 census counted 672 families with 57% of the population of Ladysmith listed as married. Women made up 42% of Ladysmith's population, 5% higher than the provincial average (Hinde, 1997, p. 53). The women and children of Ladysmith had serious health concerns. "...chronic respiratory diseases and infant

(under 5 years) and maternal mortality rates, particularly among mining families, were extremely high, even for the time” (Goldstone, 2020, p.1). The need for better medical care was clear.

“Citizen of Ladysmith Decide to Build a Public Hospital” was the front page headline of the March 27, 1909 Ladysmith Chronicle. Prior to Medicare local people were largely responsible for building and operating hospitals. A meeting was held on March 25, 1909 to discuss building a hospital. It was very well attended with representatives of all the local service groups speaking in favour. The article repeatedly mentioned the number of women present, indicating that it was unusual to have so many at a public meeting. Some women also spoke at the meeting. At this time women had no voting rights and their participation in public policy making was restricted. A committee was struck investigate financing. First task to was to raise money to build a hospital.

### **An Auxiliary is formed**

In the July 7, 1909, issue of the Ladysmith Chronicle, on the last page, was a small notice of a meeting at 8 pm at city hall for women interested in forming a ladies auxiliary to support the building of a hospital in Ladysmith. The full notice was quoted in the introduction. It would appear that after the March 1909 meeting the initial enthusiasm for building a hospital had slowed when faced with the hard work of fund raising. Interesting that at that point the writer acknowledged that “the ladies” could play a major role in raising money for the hospital.

The July 10, 1909 issue of the Ladysmith Chronicle reported on the meeting to form a Hospital Auxiliary, again on the last page of the paper.

In answer to the call for a meeting of all ladies interested in the movement of procuring a hospital for Ladysmith, a goodly number met at the city hall Wednesday evening and organized a **Ladies’ Hospital Auxiliary** (bolding mine). Election of officers being the first order of business, Mrs. Frost was elected president, Mrs. Wilkinson vice-president, Miss Hutchison secretary, and Mrs. Irving treasurer. Amongst other business transacted, it was resolved that an effort should be made by the members to raise the sum necessary to add a maternity ward. To do that a large committee was appointed, to solicit from every woman in the town. The next meeting will be held Wednesday, July 14, at 8 p.m. in the city hall, and every lady interested in the cause is urged to attend.

The Ladies Hospital Auxiliary was unusual for the time in that unlike other Ladies Auxiliaries it was not a subsidiary of a men’s organization. It was founded by and for many years run entirely by women. It was also unusual for the time in that it cut across class lines. The wives of both miners and businessmen were its founding members. As well as supporting the building and running of the hospital the Auxiliary from its earliest days was a unifying force in the community. “While social divisions [in Ladysmith] were very real and confrontation a constant possibility, organizations such as the...Ladysmith Hospital Auxiliary helped to build a strong sense of community that mediated division” (Hinde, 2003, p.61).

Who were these first Auxiliary women? It is safe to say they were not lively retirees, as was largely the case in 2023. I found the names of eight of the founding members (four executive members and four pictured below) and was able to find more information on four of them. They were all in their twenties and had young children at home. Three of the four had what would now be considered very large families.

Mrs. Lila Maud Frost, the first Auxiliary president, was 26 years old in 1909. She was the daughter of Ladysmith’s first mayor, John Coburn, and had been a schoolteacher. She married a professional man, Dr. Anson Frost, in 1907 and children followed shortly. Anson was born in 1908, John in 1909, Hubert in 1912, William in 1918 and Jean, their only daughter, in 1923 (Johnson-Cull, 1980, p.139). So when Lila became Auxiliary president in 1909 she had a toddler at home and was also either pregnant or had a new born.

Below is a picture of four of the founding members of the Ladies Hospital Auxiliary. It was taken on April 6, 1957 at the opening of Ladysmith’s second hospital. Left to right are:

Susan Sanderson (President, 1927), Sarah Hulme, Mabel Pollock, Jane Steele



Sara Hulme was 25 in 1909. She and her husband John emigrated from England 1907 with their first child, Kathleen. Sara would have four more children, Jack, Marguerite, Clarence and Alfred. Her husband worked as a hard rock miner at the Extension mines (Johnson-Cull, 1980, p. 169).

Mabel Pollock was 29 in 1909. She had been married to a Mr. Stephens with whom she had a daughter Evelyn, nicknamed "Toots". We can assume that Mr. Stephens died as death was much more common than divorce in those times. Mabel then married Alexander Pollock. He was a miner, served in World War 1, and later worked for the Comox Logging Co. He died in 1948 of lung cancer. It is probable that his time in the mines contributed to his illness as "black lung" was common in miners. Mabel and Alexander did not have children together, but Mabel knew many babies. She worked as an informal midwife. According to a Pollack family memoir, p. 9, Mabel would "take the expectant Mother to her home and the baby would be born there. And then she looked after mother and babe for a week or more. Quite a few Ladysmith people were born in Mabel's home."

Jane Steele was the grandmother of Jane McKinley, an Auxiliary volunteer in 2023. I am grateful to Jane McKinley for information on her grandmother and family. Jane Steele was 27 in 1909, married to Walter, a miner. She also had five children. Annie was born in 1904, Henry in 1906, Alice in 1908, Lillian in 1910 and Laverne in 1923. Walter served in World War I and came back with tuberculosis. He had a very long recovery during which time he was unable to work. Jane McKinley and I speculated how the family survived during this time. Jane Steele played piano at the Opera House where there was live entertainment and silent motion pictures. Jane Steele's husband Walter made and sold decorative woven wooden baskets during his recovery. Jane's brother Bill Haworth lived with the family. He had been permanently disabled during the Boer War. It is likely that both Walter and Uncle Billy had some war injury benefits. That money combined what Jane, Walter and the older children could earn is likely what sustained the family during Walter's illness. Walter eventually became Ladysmith's Town Constable.



Walter, Henry, Annie and Jane Steele, 1907



Lillian, Annie, Alice and Henry Steele  
Henry was Jane McKinley's father c. 1914

It is humbling to think of the dedication of the women who founded the Ladysmith Hospital Auxiliary. After a day of caring for children, preparing meals and keeping a clean house, these women found the time and energy to attend evening Auxiliary meetings, and to hike back up Ladysmith's hills after! For miners' wives housekeeping was especially challenging. The mine had no facilities for a miner to clean himself after his shift, so a miner arrived home covered in greasy coal dust. It was the wife's job to have a bath ready for him and clean his clothing.





Henry, Annie and Jane Steele in their garden, c. 1908, with the family laundry. Notice the large quilt on the clothesline. The quilt would have been hand made. Note also the rug on the back fence. Likely it was airing out after being beaten to shake out the dust and dirt. Miners' wives had a reputation for keeping meticulously clean houses, perhaps to counter the prevailing upper class prejudice against their husbands as dirty, uncouth men (Hinde, 2003, p.121).

In addition to all of the above, miners' wives worked hard to stretch the family's resources. Miners were laid off when there were coal surpluses and work could also be interrupted due to labor disputes, both of which caused serious financial hardships to miners' families. A miner's death or a work ending injury could lead to their family's destitution. Due to these uncertainties many miners' wives grew large vegetable gardens and kept a few chickens, cows or pigs. Some supplemented the family income by selling vegetables, eggs and milk door to door or at the town market. There were many single miners and taking in lodgers was another way to generate income. However lodgers would increase the women's workload because they would also have to cook, clean and mend for the lodgers, as well as their own family (Hinde, 2003, p.56). All this plus volunteering with the Hospital Auxiliary, how did they do it?



The “Opera House” where Jane Steele worked as a pianist. It was located on Roberts Street between 1st Ave. and the Esplanade (the Island Highway in 2023). There was a parking lot in 2023 where this building was located. Silent motion pictures came to Ladysmith in 1909, hence the need for live music, which Jane Steele supplied. The posters are advertising movies, which were very short “features” and included “The Defective Detective” with Billy Armstrong, which looked to be a comedy, “The Forged Testament”, and “By Whose Hand?”

### **Early Auxiliary Achievements.**

From its beginning the Ladysmith Auxiliary has supported the community as well as the hospital. On October 5, 1909, thirty-two miners were killed in the Extension mine due to an explosion and carbon dioxide poisoning. Thirty of the miners were from Ladysmith. “The Hospital Auxiliary was very active in assisting the widows and orphans of miners killed in cave-ins and in the explosion of 1909” (Hinde, 1997, p. 57). The Auxiliary and other groups helped the survivors by “offering comfort, minding children, and looking after their immediate material needs.” (Hinde, 2002, p. 121)

As predicted by the Chronicle, the Ladies Hospital Auxiliary was a very vigorous fund raiser for the hospital. The July 17, 1909 newspaper noted,

The Ladies Auxiliary in connection with the hospital are having splendid success collecting subscriptions for the maternity ward. They have not met with any refusals and everyone seems inclined to contribute towards the ward (p. 1).

On February 5, 1910 the Ladysmith Chronicle reported that a ball held by the Ladies Hospital Auxiliary raised \$110.00. On April 9, 1910 the newspaper noted that the Ladies Hospital Auxiliary had raised a total of \$1500. On April 23 there was news of an Auxiliary Bazaar which netted \$380. This would be a total of about \$1880 or \$60,000 in 2023 dollars, a remarkable level of fund raising for a small community.

### **Ladysmith Hospital completed**

The Ladysmith hospital was built by Daniel Nicholson. His bid (the only one) of \$12,750 was accepted in August of 1910 (Ladysmith Chronicle, August 6, 1910). This contract did not include the plumbing and heating. At the time many buildings were without central heating and plumbing, so these would have been separate contracts for the hospital. According to Richard Goodacre, in *Ladysmith Heritage Inventory*, the final cost of the hospital was \$18,000. It is unclear if this was just the building cost, or if it included equipping the hospital.

Funding for the hospital came from a number of sources. On April 2, 1910, the Ladysmith Chronicle reported a meeting with the Provincial Government where a promise was made to provide at least \$6,000 for the Ladysmith Hospital. The provincial government more than made good on its promise and provided \$12,000 for the hospital (Goodacre, 1990, p.93).

The Wellington and Extension Medical, Accident and Burial Fund (known as the A&B), in operation from 1904 - 1925, was funded by miners to provide insurance at a time when government supports were limited. To support the hospital, "The A&B agreed to subscribe 50 cents a month from each member for six months toward the cost of building a hospital, and 25 cent a month thereafter for operating costs. In return the miners and their families would receive free medical care" (Goodacre, 1990, p.93). The miners gave their support very early as this resolution was passed on March 31, 1909, only 6 days after the March 25 public meeting in Ladysmith where it was agreed to build a hospital (A&B meeting minutes for March 31, 1909, Nanaimo archives). By 1909 all the miners contributing would be working at the Extension mines, as the Wellington mines were played out. In 1911 there were 889 miners working at Extension so an estimate of the amount provided by the A&B to build the hospital would be  $6 \times .50\text{cents} \times 889 = \$2667$ . This money was to be collected in the first 6 months, which be by September 30, 1909. Between October of 1909 and June of 1911, the money collected for the operating costs of the hospital, at 25 cents a month per miner, would have amounted to about another \$4000. In addition the February 1910 minutes of A&B fund approved \$1000 for an X-Ray machine for the Ladysmith Hospital. According to a 1994 Auxiliary timeline, the Ladysmith Hospital was one of the first in the province to have such equipment

The Ladysmith Chronicle frequently urged its readers to pay their subscriptions to the new hospital (eg. May 31, 1911 edition). This would suggest that non-miners also contributed to the building fund.

Among local groups, the Ladies Hospital Auxiliary's contribution to hospital funding was remarkable. The Auxiliary had raised \$1880 in the 10 months between July 1909 and April 1910. Assuming that money for the hospital was raised at a similar, if not increased, pace in the 13 months between May 1910 and June 1911, a reasonable estimate of the total funds raised by the Auxiliary would be at least \$4000. When we consider that the total cost of the hospital was \$18,000, \$4000 was a huge contribution.

It would appear that most of the money raised by the Auxiliary went towards furnishing and equipping the hospital. On May 27, 1911, the Chronicle reported that new furniture for the hospital was being delivered to Mrs. Frost, Auxiliary President. The newspaper also noted that fund raising efforts could be lessened as the Auxiliary had supplied virtually all the linen needed for the hospital. Given the Auxiliary's commitment to a maternity ward, it is likely it was funded by the Auxiliary. The newspaper went onto compliment the Auxiliary saying, "From all appearances Ladysmith will have one of the finest equipped hospitals in the Province and the ladies are entitled to a greater portion of the credit."

Ladysmith's first hospital



The Ladysmith

Hospital opened on June



1,1911 clearly requiring fewer permits than today. It took only two years from the March 25, 1909 meeting when building a hospital was discussed, to completing a two story hospital building with men's and women's wards, maternity ward, kitchen and operating room. However even at this fast building pace it would appear that the building may have been behind schedule. The May 31, 1911 minutes of the A&B Fund threatened to stop collecting the 25 cent per month from each miner to go towards the hospital's operating costs if the hospital did not open on June 1, 1911.

### **Ladysmith Auxiliary Supports the Hospital**

In the years after 1911 "The Ladysmith Hospital Auxiliary ... became one of the most important societies in Ladysmith. It provided essential services to the new hospital...and it held numerous charity events to raise money for supplies and equipment" (Hinde, 1997, p. 44). As well as supplying equipment the Auxiliary contributed to the operating costs of the hospital (Goldstone, 2020, p. 2). The Auxiliary hosted an annual linen shower and tea to supply the hospital with sheets and other fabric items (Johnson-Cull, 1980, p. 278). Whist and five hundred card parties were organized as fund raisers by the Auxiliary. An annual Easter Ball held by the Auxiliary was a major fund raiser and a social highlight of the year. One Ladysmith resident recalled,

Also I remember the Easter Hospital Ball in aid of the hospital. Miss Uren's dress shop had a large shipment of beautiful dresses for the occasion and the local dressmakers were hard pressed, for, it was a "must" to have a new dress for this formal dance. No girl told her friend what she was wearing and the evening displayed a rainbow of colour, velvets, crepe-de-chines, satins, silk, georgette; it was a fairyland. Then the sit-down supper of chicken sandwiches, jellies and cream cakes, and gallons of coffee with real cream (this was donated). Those were happy dances. (Johnson-Cull, 1980, p. 279).

One can only marvel at the number of sandwiches, jellies and cakes made, and all the other necessary details organized, all done by volunteers from the Hospital Auxiliary.

So began what has become over a century of commitment to community and health care by the Ladysmith Hospital (now Health Care) Auxiliary. Generations of women, and now men too, have volunteered their time and energy to this organization. Come see us in action at the Auxiliary Thrift Store, 910 First Avenue in Ladysmith. Better still, come volunteer with us. Share in the satisfaction of knowing that every time you volunteer you are making a positive difference.

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**Many Thanks** to Jane McKinley, granddaughter of founding Auxiliary member Jane Steele, for sharing her family history. Thanks also to John and Esther Sharp at the Ladysmith archives for their research and help with the microfilm. Finally thanks to Quentin Goodbody, president of the Ladysmith Historical Society, for sharing his research and reviewing this article.

