

Irene Parlby
1868-1965



“Evolution cannot be brought about by the use of dynamite.”

Nellie McClung
1873-1951



“Never retreat, never explain, never apologize. Get the thing done and let them howl.”

Henrietta Edwards
1849-1931



“We sought to establish the personal individuality of women ... It has been an uphill fight.”

Emily Murphy
1868-1933



“Whenever I don’t know whether to fight or not, I always fight.”

Louise McKinney
1868-1931



“Develop honour, justice and everything that is big.”

Born in London, England, Mary Irene (Marryat) Parlby came to Alberta in 1896, married a rancher and settled in the Lacombe area. She was elected to the Alberta Legislature in 1921 under the United Farmers of Alberta banner and became the first female cabinet minister in the province.

Mrs. Parlby supported 18 bills passed to improve the plight of women and children, six of which she introduced herself. She was a mother, the first president of the United Farm Women of Alberta and a staunch advocate for rural Alberta women and distance education.

Irene Parlby represented Canada at the League of Nations in Geneva in 1930.

Novelist, legislator, prohibitionist, suffragist, Letitia Ellen ‘Nellie’ (Mooney) McClung’s influence was felt throughout Canada and the United States. Born in Chatsworth, Ontario, this schoolteacher and mother helped Manitoba women become the first women in Canada to win the right to vote. She continued the battle in Alberta after arriving in Edmonton in 1914. She was also a Sunday school teacher and the first woman on the CBC Board of Governors.

Nellie McClung was elected to the Alberta Legislature in 1921 as an opposition Liberal from Edmonton. She was also the only woman in the Canadian delegation to the League of Nations in Geneva in 1938.

Henrietta Louise Muir Edwards was active in prison reform, organized the forerunner to the YWCA in Montreal in 1875 to provide vocational training for impoverished working women, and published and financed the first Canadian magazine for working women.

Mrs. Edwards co-founded the Victorian Order of Nurses and helped establish the National Council of Women in 1893. Although she had no formal legal training, she had a strong interest in the law and wrote several books on the legal status of women and children, reflecting both provincial and federal laws.

Henrietta Muir Edwards was also a mother and a talented artist.

Born in Cookstown, Ontario, Emily (Ferguson) Murphy was an accomplished author by the time she arrived in Edmonton in 1907, writing under the pseudonym of Janey Canuck.

A mother with a strong interest in the protection of women and children, she spearheaded campaigns for suffrage and women’s property rights.

In 1916 she was the first woman in the British Empire to be appointed as a police magistrate. During this time a lawyer repeatedly challenged her rulings, claiming that she was not legally a “person.” In 1927 she led the legal challenge now known as the “Persons Case,” putting forward a petition to the Supreme Court of Canada with the support of the other four women. Her actions led to a 1929 ruling of major import to all Canadian women.

Louise (Crummy) McKinney played a leading role in bringing Alberta women the right to vote in 1916. In 1917 she was elected to the Alberta Legislature, along with Roberta MacAdams, the first two women to serve in any Legislature in the British Empire.

As an MLA representing Claresholm, she initiated social assistance measures for widows and immigrants and, along with Henrietta Muir Edwards, drafted a bill which led to the passage of the Dower Act, allowing women property rights in marriage.

Louise McKinney also played a leading role in the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union and was one of four women to sign the Basis of Union, which formed the United Church of Canada.



About the Artists

Portraits of the Famous Five (Front cover)

Local painter and sculptor Alice Tyler was so inspired by the achievements of the five Alberta women who championed the Persons Case that she created two complete sets of portraits. One is on loan to the Alberta Legislature; the other currently hangs on the fourth floor of the Alberta Law Courts Building.

Front signatures courtesy of Alberta Community Development.

Clay Maquette of the Famous Five (Above)

Edmonton artist Barbara Paterson holds both a diploma in fine arts with a major in painting and a bachelor of fine arts with a major in sculpture from the University of Alberta. She specializes in a variety of sculpture media, including wax, stone, bronze and welded steel. Casting for the maquette was done by Bronzart.

In 1996 she was selected by a national jury and commissioned by the Famous 5 Foundation to create a larger than life monument. Identical monuments are located in Olympic Plaza in Calgary, Alberta, and on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Ontario.

Photo of the maquette courtesy of the Famous 5 Foundation.

The Famous Five

Because of the efforts of Alberta's Famous Five – Emily Murphy, Nellie McClung, Henrietta Edwards, Irene Parlby and Louise McKinney – women are recognized as persons in Canadian law. Together they successfully challenged an interpretation of a clause in the British North America Act that barred women from being appointed to the Senate of Canada. The case hinged on the legal definition of the word “persons.” Led by Edmonton Police Court Magistrate Emily Murphy, on October 18, 1929, they won their case before the Judicial Committee of the British Privy Council, the highest court of appeal in Canada at that time. The ruling overturned an 1876 ruling that women were persons “in matters of pains and penalties” but not in “matters of rights and privileges.”

Since the days of the Famous Five, Canadian women continue to make their mark in the political arena. In 1930 Cairine Reay Wilson became the first woman appointed to the Senate of Canada. In 1979 Martha Bielish was appointed the first female Senator from Alberta, and over the years several other women from Alberta have become Senators.

The first five women to serve in Alberta's cabinet were Irene Parlby (1921-1935), Ethel Wilson (1962-1971), Helen Hunley (1971-1979), Mary LeMessurier (1979-1986) and Connie Osterman (1982-1989)*. Since then, numerous Alberta women have held senior positions in cabinet, both provincially and federally. In 1985 Helen Hunley was appointed to serve as the first female Lieutenant Governor in Alberta, and in 2000 Lois Hole was appointed to the position.

To this day October 18 is commemorated across Canada as Persons Day.

**Dates refer to years served in cabinet.*



Visitor Services

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
Pedway Mall
10820 – 98 Avenue
Edmonton, AB T5K 2N6

Phone: 780.427.7362

Fax: 780.427.0980

E-mail: visitorinfo@assembly.ab.ca

For further information on the Famous Five, please contact:

Famous 5 Foundation

Phone: 403.253.1927

www.famous5.ca



Printed under the authority of the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta.



www.assembly.ab.ca



Alberta's

The Famous Five: Emily Murphy, Nellie McClung, Henrietta Edwards, Irene Parlby, Louise McKinney