

Irene Parlby's Loyalist Connections

Irene (Marryat) Parlby (1868-1965), is known for her participation in the "Persons Case" as one of the Famous Five who signed the petition to the Supreme Court asking, "Does the word 'person' in Section 24 of the British North America Act include female persons?" If so, it would mean that women could be appointed to the Senate. The movement was led by Emily Murphy, but five signatures were needed for the petition to be valid. Even though it was supported by the Canadian and Alberta governments, the Supreme Court ruled in the negative. Mrs. Murphy took the case to the Privy Council in London where it passed.

Mrs. Parlby's greater accomplishments were being a member of the Alberta Legislature from 1921 to 1935, and becoming the second woman in the British Empire appointed to a cabinet position. In this capacity she was a delegate to the International Council of Women in Washington DC, and investigated education and co-operatives in Scandinavia and Britain. She was one of three Canadian delegates to the League of Nations (forerunner of the United Nations) in Geneva in 1930. When she found time at home in Alix, she was known to be an excellent gardener, hostess and cook.

She had arrived in the Northwest Territories in 1897 at the invitation of her friend Alix Westhead who was living at Buffalo Lake, and for whom the future village of Alix was named. Two of the earliest settlers in this district were the Parlby brothers from Devonshire. Irene found much in common with Walter Parlby, an Oxford graduate who had also spent time in India. They were married the following year.

Two of Irene's brothers were Hugh Dennis Marryat, a Royal Navy Commander and John Rudolph Marryat, a Lt. Col. Royal Engineer manager of the Egyptian Delta Railway. A sister, Dorothy Sheila Marryat was the first female graduate in Agriculture from University of Alberta and the CKUA Edmonton radio station manager.

Born Mary Irene Marryat, she was the daughter of Ernest Lindsay Marryat. He joined the Royal Engineers of the British Army and his family spent several years in India. He returned to London when he was offered the chairmanship of the Bengal and North Western Railways, and later the building of the Delta Light Railway in Egypt. After retiring he took up farming in rural England for four years.

He supported the Philanthropic Farm School for Boys, which provided education for boys who had been convicted of crimes. He also believed in the emancipation of women, that they should be admitted to universities and have the franchise. Finally at the age of 65 he followed his daughter to Canada where he homesteaded and bought land near present day Alix, Alberta.

Brothers of Ernest were: Charles, Archdeacon of Adelaide, Australia; Joseph, Admiral in the Royal Navy; Albert, a plantation owner in Trinidad and a member of the Legislative Council there; and Arthur who spent some time in New Zealand before becoming a gentleman farmer in Virginia, U.S.A.

Ernest's sister Augusta married Henry Edward Fox Young, Knight Governor of South Australia, and son of Sir Aritas William Young, Knight Lieutenant Governor of Prince Edward Island. The City of Port Augusta in South Australia was founded in 1852 and named for Augusta.

Another sister, Ellen, married an Irishman, Charles Trench and they bought a farm in Virginia, U.S.A. After having several children she was widowed at a relatively young age. Her son Henry trained as an electrical engineer and she moved to Montreal with him and her younger children in 1897.

Ernest's sister Caroline married a West India merchant from Nova Scotia, but they lived in England; and his sister Gertrude was a Sister of Mercy in the Church of England, and matron of St. Andrews Convalescent Home in Folkstone, Kent.

Ernest's mother, Charlotte Geyer, the third daughter of Frederick William Geyer of Massachusetts, is said to have been smuggled out of a window to escape the rebels during the Revolutionary War. She married Joseph Marryat, a West India merchant from an aristocratic English family. Widowed for over thirty years, she lived at Wimbledon near London where she established acclaimed gardens at Wimbledon House, and was a member of the Royal Horticultural Society. Charlotte managed a household of at least eight servants, plus three other residences on the property that were allocated to gardeners and workers.

Charlotte was the mother of nine children, the youngest having just passed his sixth birthday and the eldest aged thirty-three at the time of their father's death.

Their Loyalist ancestor was Frederick William Geyer, a wealthy merchant of Boston who was loyal to King George III. His loyalty resulted in his property being confiscated and his banishment from Massachusetts. He relocated to London where he continued his business, but was permitted to return to Boston about five years later, where he remained until his death. Except for two daughters, Charlotte and Marianne, his children stayed in the United States.

Marianne Geyer married Andrew Belcher, grandson of Governor Belcher of Massachusetts, and son of a chief justice of Nova Scotia. Andrew made his fortune as a merchant in Nova Scotia and elbowed his way into the upper echelons of power, where he and his wife were both esteemed and vilified. Despite an acrimonious marriage, they had eleven children. Andrew and Marianne Belcher eventually went bankrupt, and retired to France where they died in obscurity.