

Kelowna's

Ursula Surtees

by Holly McNeil

celebration
of the inner
strength

On a bright spring day in Kelowna, Ursula Surtees sips a cup of coffee and muses about the changes wrought in society since her youth in England. There are teenagers now; then, they were just young people. We talk today about culture shock; she hasn't any idea what the parallel would have been in the war-ravaged era of her early adulthood.



"We find excuses for so many things," she says. "Whatever happened to inner strength?"

These are not just the idle musings of an older generation. They are the well-thought considerations of a woman who has done everything within her power to make our world a better place. She has designed hands-on school programs that are emulated across the country, written books, developed summer art programs, organized community events of great magnitude, and created a provincial museum from an old packing house.

Since moving to the Okanagan as a young war bride in the 1940s, and becoming the first curator of the Kelowna Centennial Museum in 1969, Ursula has become one of the community's brightest stars.

Ursula's father was an archaeologist who died when she was seven and her mother remarried to a kindly man, with whom she had three more children. Ursula was still in school when war broke out. As one of the Land Army girls, she worked in agriculture pursuits in the English countryside. She also volunteered to work in the 'N.A.F.F.I.' canteens which served light refreshments to the soldiers in a "homey, cheery" atmosphere.

When the Ministry of War did a promotional film of the N.A.F.F.I. service, they asked Ursula to try out for a Vivien Leigh stand-in contract. She laughs when she remembers how her mother quickly scuttled that plan. "Nice girls didn't go to Hollywood!"

Ursula was introduced to her Canadian husband, John Surtees, through a friend. Ursula and another young lady were fixed up with John and his friend, both Canadian soldiers, on something like a double date — except that the pairing originally began the other way around. "But we soon sorted it out!"

Surtees' father, Allen Villiers Surtees, also served in World War II. John's mother, Ishbel, passed away just prior to the war: she had been the only child of Coutts Marjoribanks, the brother of Lady Aberdeen who established Guisachan House in Kelowna. Marjoribanks managed the Coldstream and Guisachan properties for his sister for many years.

Ursula was 17 when they married. Her marriage meant much more than just a new husband — it also meant a new country.

"Canada was an eternal image of ice, snow and Mounties," she says — except for the pictures John painted of the Okanagan valley where peaches and cherries grew. But such stories were dubiously received; after all, many Canadian soldiers were known to tell tall tales, including stories about the huge gopher ranches out west!

She followed John to Canada soon after the

war, with their infant daughter Patricia in hand. The young family lived briefly in Kelowna, before moving to Penticton where John began work at the Three Gables Hotel, which had been built with his mother's money. A son, Alan, was born there. The young family wasn't ready to set down roots: they next set up business in Summerland and then lived in Vancouver, where John worked with as an airline mechanic.

The family worked and lived for some time in a forestry camp on Vancouver Island, called Jeune Landing. Ursula remembers those years fondly, "as the place where I learned to be self-sufficient." She ran a little post office, and learned to order provisions that had to last for weeks at a time. She also became the maker of "button bread." Ursula chuckles at her innovativeness: she'd be in the middle of baking when the other ladies would come for coffee, and the conversation would



Ursula as a new Canadian: also a Vivien Leigh look-alike.

divert her attention away from the breadmaking. After a few failed batches, she began setting out buttons, one for each cup of flour needed, taking them away as she poured the flour.

They left Jeune Landing to get a better education for Pat, moving to Kitimat in northern B.C. for a year, before finally returning home to Kelowna. The family did not have an easy time of it financially. Their youngest child, Fran, had been born in Kitimat and Ursula became a working mother upon the return to Kelowna. One of her first jobs was the registration desk at the Capri Hotel, but in the late 1960s, work was underway to build a Kelowna museum and Ursula was invited to apply for the job of curator.

It wasn't just an idle invitation from the Kelowna Museum Board of Directors; they, with the rest of the community, had watched an extraordinary development around the Surtees family home...

John Surtees had been born in a farmhouse at the corner of Lakeshore and Collett in the Mission district of Kelowna. When the young Surtees family was back on its feet, they succeeded in purchasing this home. The couple used a good deal of elbow grease to restore it, and eventually rented out the old Creamery building to a few local potters. The barn became home to local artists like Bob Kingsmill and Gwen Lamont. They also discovered some pits at the back of the property that were eventually recognized as original pithouses of the local First Nations people.

"I became quite engrossed in this, and realized there was a very rich archeological history right here in my own backyard," explains Ursula. She reconstructed a little walk-through pithouse and opened it to the community.

"My vision of museums was very different than what was generally the case in Canada. I thought of them as an educational tool, not just a collection of things." It was a philosophy grown in England, where teaching museums were common in many small schools.

"In Canada, we tend to put heritage in a little niche; tuck it away in a corner. In England, we walked on it, passed by it every day of our lives." History, says Ursula, "is one long continuum. How can we plan for the future without considering the past effects?...When people talk about culture shock, that was part of mine when I came to Canada."

She agreed to manage the new museum for a temporary term, until she and the board members could decide if their visions were compatible. At one point, she remembers a board member expressed concern about her messy desk. To which Ursula replied: "They had to decide if they wanted me for my filing skills or my ideas. If they wanted a filing clerk, they should let me go because I certainly knew my limitations, and that was one of them!"

Bill Knowles has been a Museum board member for 40 years, since the days when it was just a little glassed-in space open only in the summer. He recalls how "Ursula completely changed the picture. She was a master at handling the museum. I can remember Mr. Walrod, who was a rather elderly member of the Board at the time. He told me that he felt he would have to resign because it was just going too fast for him!"

Ursula began working at the Kelowna Museum in 1969, in charge of a staff of one! "I swept the floors, unplugged the toilets and developed the programs."

The B.C. Interior was "a cultural barren land" at the time, she says, but she delved right into the job of bringing heritage to the people. Her native studies program that was developed and packaged for local schools was a forerunner in the province,

and is now emulated across the country.

The Provincial Museum heard about the success, and offered Ursula the opportunity to participate in a federal grant program, whereby she hired Leslie (Harry) Hopton, who had worked in the Canadian national museum system, to undertake the school program. "He became a regular Pied Piper," she says. "The kids loved him."

When the grant ran out, she asked the school district to deliver some financial support. School administration suggested that she "pitch it to an elementary school principal's meeting." Not yet an assured public speaker, the setting of "wall-to-wall brains" unnerved Ursula a bit — or so she says! So she simply told the principals to assume they were in Grade Four, and she made her traditional classroom presentation.

"My phone never stopped ringing for a long time. They were suitably impressed."

Now there are many different programs prepared and ready to be presented to local elementary children. Included throughout the years have been the natural world, the creative world, the prehistoric world, native peoples, insects, bats, night hunters and predators, gold rush, walk in the woods and the five senses.

"It's important to have hands-on information for the children. Families have changed. They

don't go for picnics, they don't go for walks in the woods anymore. How else do children learn about flowers, and birds, and insects?"

One of the principals at that initial presentation was Don Wilson who has become a long-time member of the Kelowna Museum Board. Wilson points to the school programs as one of the most outstanding aspects of the Kelowna Museum that can be ascribed directly to Ursula.

"Another is the constantly changing and upgrading of displays. It gives life and vibrancy to the museum." When the exhibit of Ankwenaffer, the Egyptian mummy, came to the Kelowna Museum two years ago, the public response was overwhelming.

"Ursula is ingenuous, innovative and has a tremendous sense of humor," says Wilson. "Her total dedication to the community — not just to the museum — has brought much credibility to what otherwise might be looked at as just dusty historic displays."

Her involvement in the community includes, among many other events, serving as head of the special events committee for the 1994 B.C. Summer Games in Kelowna.

Greg Evans, executive director of the B.C. Museums Association, has known Ursula for 20 years. In 1978, as a newcomer to the B.C.

industry, he was given a list of key people in the province to contact.

"Ursula was at the top of the list...She is a barometer in our field, somebody who will know how things are going to fly, somebody we like to bounce ideas off of."

Evans credits Ursula with being one of the first to recognize that the success of the museum depends in large part on its integration with the community.

Another strength, says Evans, is that Ursula "has never backed away from leadership. She is an excellent leader" and has served as president of the B.C. Museums Association, as well as on a number of other bodies at both the provincial and national levels.

Ursula's career as author began in conjunction with teaching heritage to elementary school-aged children. In the 1970s, she authored a series called *Lak-la-hai-e*, meaning, in Shuswap Indian dialect, "to tell." The books were illustrated by well-known Kelowna artist and her early barn tenant, Gwen Lamont.

She later undertook *Sunshine and Butterflies*, a history of fruit ranching. *Kelowna, A Pictorial History* was a partnership with the city. It is presently in its fourth printing, with proceeds and costs split evenly between city hall and the museum. *Kelowna, the Orchard City*, was published in 1989. Research for *Orchard City* led to a personal fascination for the era of World War I and, in turn, to her first work of fiction entitled *The Shadow Passes*.

The future might hold another Surtees book about the light-hearted side of Kelowna history. For instance, the time the cow fell into the irrigation ditch. She couldn't roll off her back, and plugged up the irrigation system for some time until she was rescued. Or the important city document that read (with a typographical error, we expect) that such-and-such "was serviced by a sturdy wench."

The future also holds another fundraising campaign, this time for a third and final phase of the museum.

Built with Canada Centennial funds, the museum was designed for expansion. The first phase was the basement, irreverently referred to as "the Bomb Shelter," Ursula remembers. In 1976, the city built the second floor on a 20-year financing plan that cost every Kelowna household the princely sum of 74 cents on their annual tax bill.

"It was the decision of the Museum Association in 1976 to provide space for an art gallery, too," she explains. "It was designed to be a starting place for a local art gallery, to provide space for local exhibitions."

In 1995, when the second phase is paid in full and the art gallery prepares to move into its own

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Ursula and school children: the beginning of a strong education and heritage team.

building, the final phase is being planned.

"We know that taxes are going to be very much an important issue for any future municipal development," Ursula says. "We plan to build phase three with a huge fundraising effort and application to senior levels of government and to focus on creating operating costs independent of the grant system."

Board member Knowles says: "Ursula has a wonderful way of raising funds and working with city hall." He chuckles: "The folks at City Hall sure know who she is."

Knowles worked closely with her during renovation of the Laurel Packing House. It was a rescue and transformation project of which there is little equal.

"The city had \$10,000 budgetted to bulldoze the building," Knowles explains. "She said, 'Give us the money to use and we'll save it.' And yes, there was a certain amount of disbelief!"

It was called "Ursula's Folly" by some, says Ursula, "even, in my heart, by me on some days!" The Laurel is possibly the single most significant tribute to the B.C. orchard industry because it is both a renovated fruit packing house and home to the B.C. Orchard Industry Museum.

The long road began in 1982, when the huge building was slated for demolition. That was followed by six years of "begging and pleading...Work projects became a way of life."

Tenants moved into the main floor first, then the second floor was finished and began to develop its very "artsy" nature with such tenants as the Okanagan Symphony, Theatre Kelowna, Sunshine Theater and Kiwanis Music Festival. Finally, in May, 1989, the Orchard Industry

Museum was officially opened.

"I have a stubborn British streak," declares Ursula, only half in jest. "Don't tell me I *can't* do something, because then I will do it for sure!"

Sometimes she wonders about her penchant for jumping in where angels fear to tread. "You can either take the 'look before you leap' attitude, or 'He who hesitates is lost.'"

But she is content that she has always fought the good fight, so to speak. Ursula has been honored by the Canadian Museum Association with its Award of Merit. She has also been given the Queen's Jubilee Medal and Canada's 125th Anniversary Medal. She was Kelowna's Citizen of the Year in 1983 during the time of the Laurel development, before the award was split into two for Man of the Year and Woman of the Year.

However, one of the most appreciated honors came in early 1995 when the B.C. Fruit Growers' Association presented the Orchard Industry Museum with a plaque in recognition of "promoting and preserving the history of the industry."

"For all the hours and tearing out of hair, it was a very rewarding honor."

Wayne Wilson, manager of the Orchard Museum, collected the award. "I believe very firmly that when you have successes, you share it with everyone," Ursula insists. "When you get criticism, you take it alone."

An ever-so-slight tear is noticeable as she quietly ponders this latest accolade. It has moved her greatly — perhaps because it is a recognition of just what can be accomplished with a good helping of fortitude and a lifetime of developing inner strength!

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