

Highlights of Nellie McClung's Career

Who was Nellie McClung?

A few years ago, Nellie McClung was chosen the fifth most famous Manitoban.

We might wonder why? Nellie Mooney was born in 1873 in Ontario. Seven years later, she and her family moved west to the Wawanesa area to clear the land and start a homestead. At 16, she was teaching in a country school, (Hazel) near Manitou where she met and married a local druggist, Wesley McClung. While in Manitou, their first four children were born. In 1911, the McClung family moved to Winnipeg where their youngest child, Mark, was born. In 1914, they moved to Alberta and then, in 1932, to Victoria to retire. Her story sounds like so many other Manitobans' so why do we remember her as an important person?

Nellie McClung: The Best Selling Author.

Nellie's first book, *Sowing Seeds in Danny*, was published in 1908, becoming a Canadian best seller and earning \$25,000. Throughout her career and well into her retirement, Nellie continued to write books (16) as well as numerous newspaper columns and articles for magazines such as Maclean's, Canadian Home Journal, Country Guide, Chatelaine, and Onward Nellie McClung: The Outstanding Speaker. Nellie's fame as an author led to another aspect of her career. After the success of her first book, she began to speak about her writing and included other topics such as prohibition, the suffrage movement and the war. Soon, she was in demand as an entertainer-recitalist in Manitoba. As her reputation as a brilliant orator spread, she was asked to tour other provinces and many areas of the United States. She continued to be in demand as a speaker well into her late 60's.

Nellie McClung: The Advocate for the Vote for Women, 1911.

Nellie wrote about Winnipeg, "The big city gathered us in...I enjoyed my association with the Canadian Women's Press Club. There, great problems were discussed and the seed germ of the suffrage association was planted. We felt we should organize and create public sentiment in favour of women's suffrage." (The Stream Runs Fast, p. 101)

Nellie McClung: A Member of the Political Equality League (PEL), 1912.

Nellie recalled, "One night we organized the Political Equality League with a membership of about fifteen. We believed that fifteen good women who were not afraid to challenge public opinion could lay the foundation better than a thousand. We wanted to get first-hand information on the status of women in Manitoba, and of course, the whole Dominion." (The Stream Runs Fast, p.106-7) The purpose of the group was to change the law so women could vote and to bring about better living conditions for women and children. They tried to talk Premier Roblin into supporting the vote for women. He refused. They tried to show him the poor working conditions faced by women and children in factories. He ignored them.

Nellie McClung: The Political Campaigner, 1914 (Manitoba).

Nellie's ability to captivate an audience, her commitment to causes and her energetic enthusiasm made her the ideal political campaigner. The Political Equality League appeared before the Legislature in Manitoba on Jan.27th 1914 to request political rights for women. Their request was refused.

Nellie McClung: A Leader of the Women's Parliament, 1914.

The next day, at the Walker Theatre in Winnipeg, the members of the Political Equality League spoke back. On January 28th, 1914, they staged what has come to be known as the Women's Parliament (Mock Parliament). According to reports, it was a brilliant satire. Nellie McClung had listened to and watched carefully as Roblin dismissed the women the day before. In front of a full house, she portrayed the premier, mimicking him and showing how foolish his opposition to the suffrage movement was. An election was called and Premier got back into power. Soon another election was called and the Political Equality continued to work for the Liberals who promised women the vote, if elected.

Nellie McClung: Continuing the Campaigns in Manitoba and Alberta.

After the McClung family moved to Alberta (1914), Nellie returned to Manitoba to campaign during the last week of August, 1915 just before the election. The night before the election, at the Liberal rally at the Walker Theatre, she received a huge welcoming from the crowd. The Liberals won and Norris became Premier. The Political Equality League gathered thousands of names on petitions and women in Manitoba gained the vote in January, 1916. In Alberta, it did not take Nellie long to become involved with suffrage movement there and women gained the vote later in 1916.

Nellie McClung: A Member of the Alberta Legislature, 1921-1926.

Nellie ran for the Liberal Party in the 1921 election in Alberta. In 1923, the McClung family moved to Calgary. She left the Legislature after the 1926 election.

Nellie McClung: A Member of the Famous Five (The Person's Case) 1927 -1929.

In 1927, Emily Murphy invited Nellie McClung and three other well-known women to meet to discuss petitioning the Federal Government about the meaning of the word "person" in Section 24 of the BNA Act which stated that only "properly qualified persons might be called to the Senate." The ruling came back. Women were not included in the word person. Their petition to the Supreme Court of Canada failed. Next, they took the case to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in England (Canada's Highest Court of Appeal at the time). The ruling came back that the word "person" in the BNA Act did include women.

Nellie McClung: Working for Canadians - The "Trail Blazer."

- Woman's War Conference: Nellie attended the Woman's War Conference in Ottawa in February in 1918.
- Delegate to the Ecumenical Conference in Britain: Nellie was appointed the Canada's lone female delegate in 1921.
- Board of Governors of the CBC: From 1936-1942, she was the only woman appointed to the first Board of Governors of the CBC.
- League of Nations: She was a Canadian delegate to the 1938 session of the League of Nations in Geneva.

Nellie McClung: Helping Others Gain Rights: On-going advocacy: Examples -

- Japanese Rights: In BC in 1930's - 40's: Despite facing much opposition, Nellie supported the right of Japanese Canadians to vote.
- Jewish Refugees during WW11: She urged the government to open its doors to Jewish refugees who were being persecuted in Germany or at least to Jewish children.
- Women in the Workplace: She spoke and wrote about the need for equal pay for women in the workplace -1940's.
- Ordination of Women: She spoke and wrote in favour of the ordination of women in the Methodist Church and later in the United Church.

Who was Nellie McClung?

She was an orator and an entertainer; she was an author and an advocate; she was a teacher and a legislator. She was a prairie woman who used her talents, determination and energy to bring about change in society and she never stopped caring about and speaking for people who did not have a voice of their own.