

Women of Character **By Elizabeth Bond**

As women followed their husband's into the Upper Ottawa Valley beginning in the 1830's, they met extreme hardships that their upbringings in settled New England or New France never could have prepared them for. Survival alone proved to be quite a challenge, and raising a family was even more difficult.

Elizabeth Leroy (nee Baines) was the first female settler in Buchanan Township. She came with her husband Simon Leroy, a skilled square-timber hewer and a former United Empire Loyalist. Previously, Elizabeth was a schoolteacher in New England. She opened the upper floor of her house as the first school in Buchanan, and her own daughters were among the first students. This employ kept her busy during the cold months of the year when her husband was working in the lumber camps further back in the bush.

It is hard to imagine what difficulties the wives of the lumbermen had to face while their husbands were away. They were left alone to care for the children, tend to the animals, and keep a fire stoked. Their nearest neighbours were a difficult winter's walk away, and perhaps loneliness was as harsh as the cold. When one hears the anecdote about Mrs. Richard, wife of one of the earliest French settlers in Buchanan, out in the middle of the night chasing after a bear because it had grabbed the family swine, one can begin to imagine the courage and determination required by these early female settlers.

While all of the wives of lumbermen were virtually single parents from autumn to spring each year, they could take some solace in the fact that their husbands would return when the river ice broke up, and that they would bring household supplies and money (if they hadn't spent it all at the Stopping Places along the way). However, the lumber business was dangerous and the widows of the lumbermen killed on the job could count on no such support. The story of widow Emmy Chequen, who was left to raise her seven children on a miniscule monthly allowance, highlights how tragedy could strike down a family and only strength of character could pull the women through.

Women often had to seek ways to supplement their household income. During prohibition, Buchanan also was rich with headstrong women who made sought-after whiskey. Rosina Brunelle was one of the best-known brewers in the township. She was a tiny French Canadian lady who used to ride a bicycle on a high wire at the Quebec Midway before coming to the Valley. Another favorite whiskey maker was Mrs. Bob Chequen, Emmy's sister-in-law. Once, when caught by the authorities with a washtub full of peeled potatoes out behind the barns, she made the excuse that her ill sow's digestive system couldn't handle the peels and was let off the hook.

Perhaps the most impressive women to have graced Buchanan Township was Viola McCarthy (nee Blimkie). Viola was born on a farm in Buchanan, and as a young bride of 19 she took over the mail-delivery contract that her husband could no longer carry out. Viola delivered the mail to the 37 families in Buchanan throughout the year and in all weather. She used horse and cutter in the winter months, surmounting incredible drifts of

snow that made reaching each homestead a challenge. She helped uneducated residents to read their letters and write responses. She often gave residents lifts to the main road, and during the Second World War when gas and tires were rationed she acted as ambulance. Along with the mail, she delivered household items such as 100-pound bags of flour, hen feed, and even small livestock. On one occasion she even delivered a baby.

Perhaps one of the most important things that Viola brought the women of Buchanan Township was the Eaton's catalogue. They looked forward to its delivery and, for a few stolen minutes of the days that followed, would wistfully daydream about the fine things that would have no use in the harsh and unforgiving Buchanan wilderness.

Recommended Reading: *Roughing It In The Bush, Or, Forest Life In Canada* by Susanna Moodie.