

Women's History Month Exhibit Nomination

Ruth Black

Personal Information:

Born: 1914, Swift Current, SK

Arrival in NWO: circa 1920s

Died: April 22, 1995 Thunder Bay, ON

Accomplishments related to:

Sport, Health Care, Community Development & Service

Biography:

Ruth Black was a trailblazer and role model for women in a variety of aspects of her life. Whether it was in the sports arena, throughout her long and respected career in health care or through her contributions to her community, she has left her mark in many ways.

During the 1920s and 30s women began to participate in organized sports on a scale not previously seen and Ruth was one of the most prominent local athletes from this time period. She demonstrated her versatility by being active and competitive in a number of different sports. A stand out on the basketball court, Ruth played on many championship teams for both Fort William Collegiate and the Fort William Vocational School. After graduating she was a referee for the Girls Intercity High School League from 1934 to 1936 and played for the "Y" on many championship teams in the Senior Women's League. On the volleyball court Ruth and her "Y" teammates won the Women's Intercity League championship title for six consecutive years in the late 1930s and early '40s.

On the ice Ruth played senior women's hockey for the Fort William "Y" team and was reported in the newspapers of the day as being a fine goal scorer and a strong skater with a powerful shot, leading her team in scoring one year while playing defence.

While still a teenager she played in the Senior Women's Intercity League with a variety of teams including the "Y", Golden Sprays and the Port Arthur South Ends. As in her other sport endeavors, she claimed a number of championships, regularly contributing to her team's success at the plate and in the field playing practically all positions. In 1937 her talents saw her recruited by Schreiber to play in the Women's Ontario Softball playoffs. After little practice due to a stretch of cold fall weather and a long train ride, the Schreiber team successfully faced a number of challenges from teams from southern Ontario, posting their only loss of the tournament in a game against Toronto in the finals.

Along with her unparalleled athletic accomplishments, this exceptional athlete would also leave her mark as a local hero for events that unfolded at the Lakehead Exhibition Grounds. In 1947 a team of rampaging horses suddenly began to run amok, galloping with a large empty hay wagon in tow and heading straight for the food booths. The description of the event noted that it was

Ruth who ran from the YWCA booth, caught the running team, gained control and brought them to a stop. For her actions, Ruth was awarded a Lifetime Pass by the Canadian Lakehead Exhibition and in 1948 was presented with the National Dow Award for Bravery due to her selfless heroism, which saw her picture adorn the front page of the May 18, 1948 Toronto Daily Star. A pioneer in the field of women's sports in northwestern Ontario, she earned entry into the Northwestern Ontario Sports Hall of Fame in 1985 in the Athlete category.

She was also a trailblazer in her working career. which saw her give close to 40 years of service to health care at a time when women did not hold positions of power in that field. Starting as a secretary at the newly opened Ontario Hospital farm in 1936 on the old Scott Highway, she went on to become the assistant administrator of the Lakehead Psychiatric Hospital, retiring from that position in 1973 as the lone female assistant administrator amongst the Ministry of Health's twenty-six facilities which were operating at that time. Highlights of that career also included helping to coordinate the building plans for the LPH's new location on Algoma Street and organizing the hospital's Volunteer Services Group.

In addition to her contributions in sport, and her trailblazing career in healthcare, Ruth also contributed greatly to her community as a volunteer with many organizations. She served on such boards as the YMCA, Visitors and Convention Bureau and St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church One of her lasting legacies was her work on the development of Thunder Bay's Soroptimist International Friendship Gardens which she, along with Rose Frim, proposed as that groups Centennial Project in 1967.

As an individual who cared deeply for the well-being of her community, upon her passing in 1995 she left a number of financial bequests to a variety of organizations. She also left a large sum to the Thunder Bay Community Foundation which established the Ruth Black Fund which provides support to worthy groups each year, including a bursary at Confederation College and the Ruth W. Black Memorial Graduate Bursary at Lakehead University.

I had the good fortune to know Ruth as she was a member of the Selection Committee when I first began working at the Northwestern Ontario Sports Hall of Fame. She would always assist us when called upon to participate in our educational programs. I always enjoyed listening to her talk to the students about how sport had changed since her days of involvement. She would also make a point to remind the young girls in the class to never doubt their abilities or be afraid to follow their dreams in whatever they decided to do along their life's journey, regardless of what barriers might be put in their way.

Ruth Black truly was a woman ahead of her time and a trailblazer in so many ways, making her a very worthy Women's History Exhibit candidate.

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Ruth Black was a standout athlete from the 1920s to 40s, participating in a variety of different sports.



Ruth Black had a strong equestrian background which came in handy when she helped stop a team of runaway horses at the CLE in 1947 which earned her a national award for bravery.



Hospital Administrator Concludes Brilliant Career

Chronicle-Journal Dec 15/73

BACK IN 1936 Ruth Black, then a secretary at the newly-opened Ontario Hospital Farm, was far too busy absorbing myriad details of a new job to contemplate either future or career. Today, as she prepares to retire as Lakehead Psychiatric Hospital's assistant administrator, Miss Black remains too intent on her present workload to give serious consideration to the future. "I have a commitment not to become committed," is her standard reply to any query regarding the days following December 31.

Occasionally she will pause to speculate her almost 38 year career as an Ontario Civil servant. And it's when she recalls cattle drives and harvesting vegetable crops at the 1,252 acre Scott Highway farm, forerunner of today's North Algoma Street structure, that listeners realize Miss Black has seen more than a career unfold. She has seen history in the making.

She has seen the humble buildings on the Scott Highway, converted to accommodate 75 male patients, give way to the large present-day buildings, which at one time housed more than 1,000 mentally ill men and women. The original staff of 17 has mushroomed to include more than 700 persons performing a multitude of specialized services. She was present when revolutionary techniques and medication were introduced to replace once-common continuous warm bath and insulin injection treatment. And she has seen the public's former rejection of mentally ill or mentally retarded persons slowly change to one of acceptance and in some cases a willingness to become involved in the rehabilitative process.

As the daughter of a well-known local veterinarian, the late Dr. David C. Black, she was well versed in livestock care and had a good understanding of farming techniques. And she firmly believes this knowledge was the factor which led to her career as a business administrator. "In 1940, when I was offered the opportunity to be acting steward — as business administrators were then called — at the Scott Highway hospital farm, a good working knowledge of general farm operations and livestock was imperative," she says.

And as a life-long equestrian Miss Black frankly admits highlight of late 1930 and early 1940 years proved to be cattle drives along the Scott Highway when she would share duties as a 20th century trail boss. "Until 1958, when ministerial policy changed and the farm was phased out, the Scott Highway hospital supplied beef to many eastern Ontario households," she explained, "and the only way to get the beef on the hoof to a railway spur line was by cattle drive."

MANY RIBBONS

Her riding ability won her numerous ribbons and awards in open racing and jumping meets and played a big part in praise she received from the House of Commons for heroism above and beyond the call of duty. In 1947 she stopped a runaway team of horses at the Lakehead Exhibition and was credited with saving the lives of many spectators. The act earned her the Dow Award for Bravery and a front page picture in the May 13, 1948, issue of the Toronto Daily Star.

But newspaper pictures and stories were somewhat naive to



MISS RUTH BLACK
... doing a great job

the outgoing Miss Black. Her tried — not always succeeding active involvement in all manner of sports — hockey, baseball, tennis, volleyball and gymnastics — had led to many local newspaper accounts. A scrapbook filled with scores of yellowed newspaper clippings, testifies that Ruth Black, sportswoman, was a stiff competitor.

Ruth Black, career woman, proved to be an extremely competent and shrewd business administrator. Ask her to outline specific duties during the past years and she'll reply: "When I look back I realize my job has been so broad, so all encompassing, that most persons today will simply not believe it." She could be correct. It seems improbable in this age of specialization that one person could capably manage the multi-faceted business functions of a large institution — functions which at times included direct management of purchasing, personnel, business and purchasing and supervision of maintenance, housekeeping, engineering, laundry and food services. The amazing Miss Black successfully juggled the multitude of duties encompassed in providing hospital support services and still had time left over to listen to employees' problems and to help them find adequate solutions.

"From 1940 to job consisted of running all non-medical departments," she said, "and while the titles changed — from steward to bureau to business administrator and finally to assistant administrator — the responsibility remained essentially the same."

Miss Black's outspoken determination to utilize limited resources and complete any given task as quickly and economically as possible may have provoked some persons. But it also gained her a great deal of community respect. And at times her actions earned her the ultimate male accolade: "She thinks and acts just like a man." Miss Black, however, puts it another way: "I always

— to provide the best possible patient services with the resources available at that time. I was — and still am — conscious that we operate on taxpayers' money."

In the early 1950's construction of the North Algoma Street buildings began and Miss Black was called upon to coordinate and participate in long-term building plans. Job pressure increased accordingly, she remembers, her work hours lengthened and her home-bound briefcase bulged. "I must say I enjoyed it, though," she reflected, "it was an exciting period."

Despite an enormous workload Miss Black still found time to organize the hospital's Volunteer Services Group and to serve on the boards of the YM-YWCA, the Visitor's and Convention Bureau, the Soroptimist Club of Thunder Bay and more recently the financial committee of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church.

Miss Black and fellow Soroptimist, Rose Frim, proposed the club's Centennial project, The International Friendship Garden, and were instrumental in seeing that the Garden, now part of the Chaplains Recreation Park complex, moved from conjecture to concrete reality.

At a December 6 retirement dinner her friend and minister of many years, Dr. Agnew H. Johnston, moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Canada, referred to Miss Black as a pioneer of today's feminist movement. "She stands as a shining example of what a woman can achieve," he said, "and she did it by proving herself capable, not by shouting for equal rights."

Miss Black, who has had a career most female libbers would envy, feels she has been fortunate to have worked in an organization which allowed her to prove her abilities. "I think many women could become extremely fine executives if they were given the opportunity to prove themselves," she said.

Ruth Black spent close to 40 years working in the mental health care community of Thunder Bay, starting at the Ontario Hospital Farm in 1936 as a secretary and making her way up to Administrative Assistant with the Lakehead Psychiatric Hospital (LPH) retiring in 1973.

Additional information about her contributions to the LPH can be found in the excerpts from the publication *Lakehead Psychiatric Hospital 1934-2004 From Institution to Community — A Transformation of Psychiatric Services* which is included as an attachment to this submission.

Ruth Black was a role model for young women and enjoyed sharing her story with them whenever she could, always encouraging them to not let barriers stand in their way of pursuing their goals.

Her legacy of helping her community continues to this day through various educational bursaries and the Ruth Black Endowment Fund which is administered by the Thunder Bay Community Foundation.



JP FRASER/CHRONICLE-JOURNAL

Vaulting the age gap

Avonlea Martin, 12, left, and Lisa Boland, 13, both of Prospect Avenue school chat with 77-year-old Ruth Black Tuesday. Black was at the school — along with other seniors who have left a mark on the local sports scene — to speak about their experiences. Black was inducted into the Northwestern

Ontario Sports Hall of Fame in 1985 as a local all-round athlete in the 1930s and '40s, and was keen on in ladies softball, horse riding and motorcycles. The event was sponsored by the Thunder Bay Council on Positive Aging in co-operation with the Sports Hall of Fame and the Lakehead Board of Education.