



Angel In Our Midst

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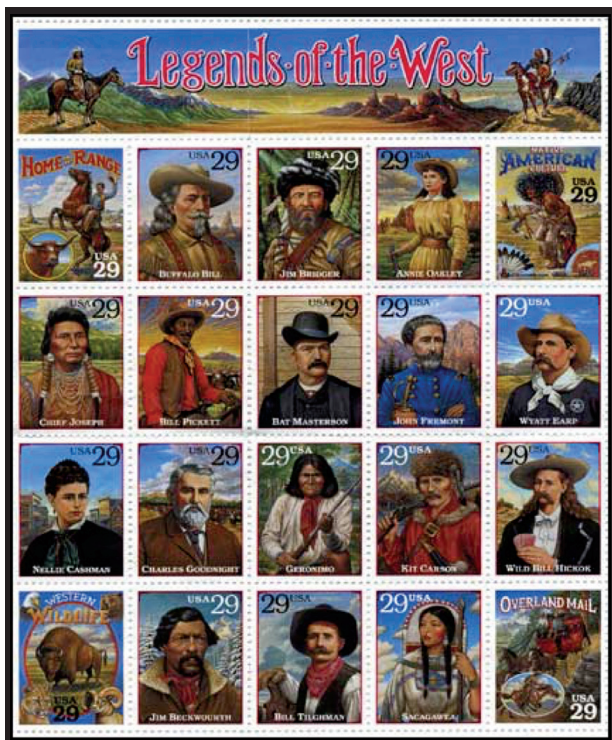
The Legend of Nellie Cashman
1844 - 1925



The beautiful and charismatic
Nellie Cashman, aged 29 years.

Photograph taken San Francisco in 1874.
(Archives, Sisters of St. Ann, Victoria, B.C.)

Dr. Patrick Perry Lydon





There are many “angels” in Ross Bay Cemetery, in Victoria, British Columbia, but one of the most noted angels, is “The Blue Angel” which stands on the Pooley Family plot. This Angel looks across at the Sisters of St. Ann burial site, where some 80 nuns are buried. It is easy to miss the special grave, below the stately Elm tree, just to the left of this large site. This is the grave of Nellie Cashman, otherwise known as “The Miners Angel”. This grave was paid for by the Sisters of St. Ann and is a token of the esteem and gratitude that the Sisters had for this remarkable lady. The polished granite bears noble words “Friend of the sick and the hungry, and to all men. Heroic apostolate of service among the western and northern frontier miners”. The gravestone also states the fact that Nellie was involved in mining all over North America, including the Cassiar, the Yukon and Alaska. You may well ask the question “how could a single young lady, barely five feet tall and weighing about a hundred pounds, become a successful and respected gold miner, a level headed business woman, and gain the sobriquet “The Miners Angel” as well”!

Her story is truly remarkable and despite the fact that she lived most of her life in mining towns known for their bars and brothels, there has never been any scandal about Nellie. She was respected by all individuals.

Nellie is the subject of some five books in the United States and she was given the great honor of being placed on one of the US stamps called “The Legends of the West”. The Old Cemeteries Society has included this lady in some of their Sunday Ross Bay Cemetery tours and most participants are astounded at Nellie’s accomplishments.



Let me start at the beginning. The early history of Nellie Cashman is uncertain. She was born in Middleton, a small town in Co. Cork, Ireland, not far from the ancient port of Cobh, (pronounced “Cove”), on August 5th in 1844. Cobh was renamed “Queenstown”

to honor the visit to Ireland by Queen Victoria in 1849. Many will remember that Queenstown was the last port of call for the ill-fated Titanic, on her maiden voyage in 1912. Nellie and her younger sister Fanny were the only children in the Family, and it appears that her Father immigrated to the United States shortly after her birth, and her Mother and the two girls followed a few years later. The “Great Famine of Ireland” had begun in 1845 and in 1847, known as “Black forty seven”, a quarter million people died in that year alone.

“A ticket to America” was the main escape for those who could afford it and Nellie’s Family ended up in Boston. Her Father died shortly after arriving in America but Nellie appears to have received a good basic education in Boston, possibly at the hands of the Nuns. We next hear of Nellie in 1864, during the American Civil War, when she is able to get a job as an elevator operator in a large hotel in Boston, a job normally reserved for men, but due to the Civil War, most men are in the army. She meets General Ulysses Grant, who one day will become President of the USA and she finds him easy to talk to. He in turn, is impressed with Nellie and encourages her to go out West saying “That Country needs people like you”! After the War, Nellie, her sister and Mother take the train to San Francisco, to start their new life in the western United States.

Nellie gets a job as a cook in a hotel and some-time later her sister Fanny meets and marries a fellow

Irishman, Thomas Cunningham. Fanny is alarmed when Nellie confides that she intends to go the mining boom towns in Nevada and Arizona to set up small hotels and restaurants. With her good head for business and her excellent abilities as a cook, she is convinced that she will thrive in these areas. Her family fear for her safety, but as they will discover later, “fear” was not a significant factor for Nellie Cashman. She first moved to Pioche in Nevada and then moved to California and Mexico but her favorite areas were Tucson, Bisbee and her beloved Tombstone in Arizona.



Tombstone in 1881 by C. S. Fly.

Tombstone is now famous for the gunfight known as the “Shootout at the OK Corral”, which took place on the 26th of October in 1881. This gunfight is as well known in Japan as it is in the United States, and it encapsulates the harsh level of law and order in the Wild West.



Nellie Cashman was one of the first female entrepreneurs of the Old West.



Nellie Cashman's house in 1937, photo by Frederick D. Nichols.

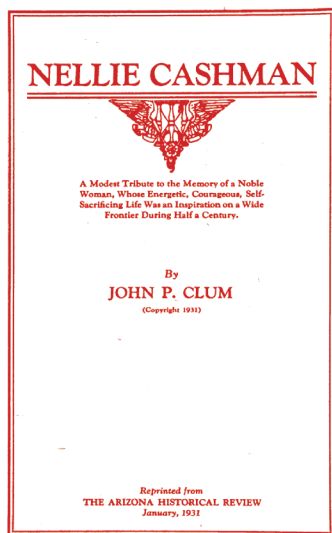


Tombstone in its boomtown days,
photo by Carleton E. Watkins.

The shootout is re-enacted three times a day in Tombstone and is a very entertaining tongue in cheek form of the real gun-battle. Nellie was very successful in her business ventures and it would take a full page to list all the places that she had been. She moved, depending on the prosperity of the area and was able

to avoid the places that went broke. It is at this time in her life, that the two main qualities of her personality become evident to those around her. A great degree of personal courage, and secondly, an admirable level of compassion for those down on their luck or in need of care. With her restaurants, there was always free meals for the hungry miners and as a prominent member of her community, she was involved in raising funds for hospitals or other charitable activities.

Nellie was friends with most people in Tombstone and the Mayor of the City, Mr. John Clum, was a great admirer of this young lady. In 1931 he wrote a short book called “Nellie Cashman”, and he expressed a wish that a monument would be raised to this remarkable woman. She was friends with Wyatt Earp and his brothers and Wyatt allowed Nellie to hold religious services in his saloon on Sunday mornings, at least until Nellie was able to arrange for the building of her own Church, which can still be seen in Tombstone today. There is an amusing story about Doc Holliday, who was having a meal in the Russ House



Hotel, when he overheard a cowboy make a derogatory remark about Nellie's cooking. Doc quietly strode over to the cowboy and produced his revolver and whispered something in the cowboy's ear. Nellie could hardly control her laughter as the cowboy made a high-pitched exclamation that he had never had such a good meal in his life! Nellie was not present for the famous shootout at the OK corral, but had she known about the shooting, she would have probably tried to stop it.

Nellie brought her Mother to Tombstone, Arizona, to help with her business, and after her sister's husband died, Fanny and her five children came to Arizona as well. Nellie had taken an interest in gold mining herself, and the lines of Robert Service, a man she would get to know in the Yukon, are very pertinent to Nellie -

“There's gold and it's haunting and haunting, and it's luring me on as old. Yet it isn't the gold that I'm wanting, so much as just finding the gold.”

Nellie became a committed and knowledgeable gold miner and she was recognized for her abilities. Gold mining would become her main business interest and she was often elected by experienced miners, as the best leader for special mining expeditions. Her most famous claim to fame came in 1874, some years before she came

to Tombstone, when she joined a large group of miners from Nevada, who ventured to the Cassiar district of Northern British Columbia, when gold was found in that area. Access to the area was through Victoria and then by sea to Fort Wrangell, Alaska, and then up the frozen Stikine River, to Telegraph Creek and then by land to Dease Lake. At one point, Nellie returned to Victoria for further supplies. She would always visit the Sisters of St. Ann, who ran a hospital and school in that area. On this occasion, a message came from the Cassiar district that some 200 miners were trapped by heavy snow and that scurvy had broken out.



Riverside Way, Middleton

No time to waste, Nellie hired six men to form a rescue party and bought appropriate supplies, fresh fruit and medicine, and headed back up to Alaska without delay. Initially, the American Army border forces would not allow her to go into the wilderness as it was mid-winter.

They believed that she and her party would die, but Nellie's response will never be forgotten. "Yes, there is a risk we may die, but those Miners will die for sure if they don't get these supplies". They were allowed to pass, but it is of interest that the Daily British Colonist of February 25th 1875, who reported her brave deed, also reported that she and her party had probably died from the severe winter conditions that existed at that time. After a trip of 77 days, all on foot, with snowshoes, Nellie dragging her own sleigh laden with provisions, the rescue party finally reached the sick and starving miners. Some of the men were "half-dead" but Nellie nursed the remaining men back to good health.

Now, the legend of Nellie Cashman, as "The Miners Angel", became a reality. The story of the rescue party, all funded by Nellie, and the danger that she and her companions endured, spread like wildfire throughout North America. All were amazed that such a petite young woman would have taken such risks for her fellow miners.

After the rescue, Nellie passed the hat amongst the miners in the Cassiar and she raised \$547 dollars to

help the Sisters of St. Ann in Victoria build St Joseph's Hospital. This sum would be equivalent to \$20,000 in 2015 terms. When Nellie arrived in Tombstone Arizona, the story of her daring rescue preceded her. If ever she entered a saloon, all the men would stand in silence and respect. Her brave and compassionate action in British Columbia would be remembered for the rest of her life. To this day, the name of "Scurvy Creek", a tributary of the Liard River, can be seen in Northern BC, just below the Yukon border.

Nellie bought the Russ House restaurant in Tombstone and continued her mining activities in that area. Her sister's husband had died leaving a widow and five children, and Nellie took them all to Tombstone. Her sister had tuberculosis and she would pass away a few years later and Nellie took on the responsibility to raise the children. Nellie became "the favorite Aunt". A story of Nellie's bravery is recorded here. Two of her young nephew's went for a ride on their ponies near Tombstone. They apparently got lost in Indian Territory and Geronimo, the Apache Chief, was active at the time. Nellie headed out with a horse and wagon at night and without arms or protection, and eventually, found the two boys scared to death and hiding in an abandoned shed. There are many other stories of her bravery and compassion when she lived in Tombstone and on one occasion she saved the life of a mine owner, who the workers were intending to lynch because of an ugly

strike. Her involvement with the five men who were executed in Tombstone for their participation in the “Bisbee Massacre”, shows her insistence on decency, even for condemned men. She helped the men make their peace with God before they went to their death on March 28th 1884.



Since 1879
NELLIE CASHMAN RESTAURANT

◀ TOMBSTONE, ARIZONA ▶

NAMED FOR NELLIE CASHMAN (1844-1925), "Angel of the mining camps."



In 1898, the news of a major gold strike at Dawson City in the Yukon Territory of Canada, lures Nellie to her next big gold mining adventure. She makes arrangements for her relatives and then heads up to the Yukon. She gets all her supplies at Victoria and due to her reputation, she is interviewed frequently by the papers. She talks very positively about Victoria merchants and how well they have treated the miners.

She visits and helps the Sisters of St. Ann and then takes ship to Skagway, Alaska and eventually she goes over the Chilcoot Pass, over twenty times, as some 900 kilograms of supplies were required by the Mounties, before the miner could enter Canada.





Dawson City, 1899

Nellie would spend the next eight years in Dawson City where she was a successful miner and ran a small hotel. She also ran a form of Library, called “The Miners Haven”, where she had newspapers, books and free cigars in an effort to offer alternatives to the saloons. She did well with her mining activities, and as usual she helped with community needs. She was very involved in St. Mary’s Hospital, which was run by nuns from the Sisters of St. Ann. “Mine-jumping” was a serious problem and Nellie had to defend her claims in court. She made over a \$100,000 from claim number 19 on Bonanza Creek, and spent all the money on other claims.

In 1910, Nellie follows the gold rush to Alaska and will eventually stake some major claims in the northern part of that State. If you look on a modern map, you will see “Coldfoot” on Nolans Creek, on the

Upper Koyukuk River, North of the Arctic Circle. It's not far from "Colleen Mountain" and a place called "Purgatory"! Despite the cold and isolation, Nellie was convinced that the claims would yield a fortune. She made many trips to the States, mainly to see relatives and to raise funds for more adventurous mining.



Nellie Cashman's cabin on the left limit of Nolan Creek, circa 1909. Photo Credit: Harry Leonard collection

Her mining company was called "The Midnight Sun Mining Company" and as her nephew was now a Bank Manager in Bisbee, Arizona, she was quiet successful in raising funds. Nellie was frequently interviewed by the newspapers, including the *British Colonist* and these reports are wonderful to read and display her courage, her positive attitude and her good humor. She was often asked if there was a man in her life. "Mind yer own business" was her standard reply to that question. (Before she went to the Klondike,

an announcement in one of the Arizona newspapers said that Nellie was engaged to Mr. Mike Sullivan, a wealthy mining business man, but this wedding never took place). Nellie was a very independent person who once made the remark “I would rather be a chef to many men, than a cook to one man”.

Despite her isolation, Nellie was very involved with the community at Coldfoot. One of her closest friends were the missionaries at the Episcopal Church in that area and in the book “Nellie Cashman” by Don Chaput, he gives a delightful account of a visit to the Deaconess by Nellie Cashman. It is all described by a young visitor who has never met Nellie before.

“An encounter in the Winter of 1907 provides us with a first-hand account of Nellie. Nineteen year old Clara Heintz was an assistant at the Episcopal Mission at Allakaket, some 400 miles up the Koyukuk River. One evening a sled pulled up, and a figure in mans clothing - pants, fur- parka, boots and heavy gloves- knocked on the door. Young Clara was mystified at what happened:

As Miss Carter opened the door, I heard her shout “Nellie”!, while Nellie cried “Deaconess”, and the two women embraced with the little Deaconess almost disappearing in the frosty bear hug of the visitor.

Miss Carter introduced me to the stocky middle-aged woman with graying red hair whose weather-beaten face was a battlefield of freckles and wrinkles. This strange visitor looked over the room, took in every object and would comment; “Well, I’ll be goldurned! If this ain’ the most...”. Tea and biscuits followed, with Clara hanging on Nellie’s tales of the desert and the glaciers. Clara’s reason for Nellie’s spinster status; “Seen too much of the worst side of men, I guess”. Clara remembers Nellie’s kindness, her toughness, her rough mushers language, and “There was never a breath of scandal connected with her.”

(Excerpt from the book “Nellie Cashman” by Don Chaput. Page 126.)

Transport in the Arctic was mainly by dog-sled and Nellie was a champion musher. At the age of 77 years, she was able to travel 750 miles from the Arctic Circle to Seward Alaska in 17 days. I believe that this is a record to the present day. Her relatives all wanted her to return to Arizona but Nellie was convinced that she would strike it rich at Coldfoot. Over the years, some famous quotations are attributed to Nellie. Regarding life, Nellie says “Never borrow trouble or draw interest on past mistakes.” “More people kill themselves from needless and senseless worries than because of any other reason.” “Don’t throw more weight upon a burdened brother or sister, but give them a little lift with their load.”

On Alaska and the North - "I can truthfully say that there was never a bigger hearted or more broad-minded class of men than the genuine sourdoughs of Alaska. God Bless them." Nellie's most famous comment might be - "we pass this way but once, and it's our responsibility to help our fellows if they need our assistance."

In 1924, Nellie developed serious problems with her breathing, and with the aid of the Episcopalian Ministers, she was taken down river to Fairbanks, Alaska. Following this, she was taken to Victoria, British Columbia, where she was admitted to St. Joseph's Hospital, the same hospital she had helped to build back in her days in the Cassiar goldfields. She was treated by Dr. W.R. Barrett, a Doctor who had saved her life with abdominal surgery in Dawson City at St. Mary's Hospital in 1902. Dr. Barrett, a past President of the Victoria Medical Society, knew that Nellie's condition was pneumonia and the prognosis was very guarded. Despite a great effort to rally, Nellie knew the end was at hand and finally told the Nuns, "I have come home to die"!

Nellie Cashman died on January the 4th, 1925. As her birthday is believed to be the 5th of August 1844, we can assume that Nellie Cashman was just over 80 years old when she died. Now the chickens come home to roost! Tributes and stories of Nellie's achievements appear in most of the main North American newspapers and she is the subject of a beautiful obituary in the Victoria newspaper.



On the 10th of January 1925, an article appears in the Victoria Daily Times, in the “In Woman’s Domain” section, entitled “Pioneer Woman Miner was in all “rushes” since 1874”. This article outlines Nellie’s accomplishments but also includes a copy of a letter

of commendation from none other than the previous Premier of British Columbia and the man that would succeed Judge Matthew Begbie, ("The Hanging Judge"), as Chief Justice of British Columbia, the Honorable Theodore Davie. The letter is dated February 22, 1898 and it reads "Dear Miss Cashman, I take pleasure in saying that I first became acquainted with you some twenty three years ago, when you, (a mere girl) braved the hardships of Northern Travel and penetrated the newly discovered gold-bearing regions surrounding Dease Lake.

During this time you earned and sustained an honored reputation for industry, thrift and honesty. I was much pleased to meet you again here in Victoria and have no doubt that the unflinching courage and determination which have been yours in past years, will likewise guide you to success and fortune in the perilous trip to the Yukon, which in midwinter you are about to take. Wishing you every success, I am, Faithfully Yours, Theodore Davie. The Honorable Theodore Davie died one Month later in March 1898.

Nellie Cashman is buried near his grave in Ross Bay Cemetery. I would like to take one further segment from the Victoria Daily Times review. Regarding Nellie Cashman's "Miners Haven" in Dawson City, the following comments were made, "Started by the proprietress as a counter-attraction to the Saloon's and the dance-halls, Nell Cashman's quarters became a popular rendezvous, and the hostess dispensed cigars and smokes

with lavish hospitality, earning the life-long admiration and respect of her rough and ready guests. They never forgot that she was a woman and treated her with the greatest respect and her entrance into a saloon or dance-hall, was the signal for every man in the place to stand. Such was their high opinion of her!" Our local historian, Mr. T.W. Patterson, later wrote "The name of Nellie Cashman was synonymous with warmth and generosity in every mining town from Mexico to Alaska.

When she died in the Victoria Hospital that she helped to establish, bearded men wept unashamedly". "Though records differ as to the date of her birth, her arrival in the New World, even to the color of her hair, on one fact all heartily concur: That her heart was as large as the great American and Canadian West she conquered with her ever-cheerful smile, her indomitable courage, her hand outstretched to any man down on his luck". John Clum, The Mayor of Tombstone, wrote the following words. "Her frank manner, her self-reliant spirit, and her emphatic and fascinating Celtic brogue impressed me very much, and indicated that she was a woman of strong character and marked individuality". He also said "Nellie Cashman led a humble life and her principle business was to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless". The Sisters of St. Ann arranged for Nellie to be buried beside the Sisters plot in Ross Bay Cemetery. It is a beautiful grave and I will include a photo of her headstone.

I like to visit the grave when possible and I am amazed at the number of people that leave fresh flowers and other tokens of affection. Darlene Southwell, in her heart-warming book, “Caring and Compassion”, a history of the Sisters of St. Ann in British Columbia, devotes a special segment to Nellie Cashman. It is well worth reading!

According to Councilor Joe McCarthy, in Midleton, Co Cork, in Ireland, a large expensive monument has been built to honor “The Miners Angel” and it shows Nellie, her hair flying in the wind, as she dog-sleds across the Northern snow. It is only fitting, that a young girl from such humble beginnings, who led a life of hard work and caring for the less fortunate, should be recognized for her admirable qualities.

Requiescat in Pace.

Patrick Lydon. OCS.



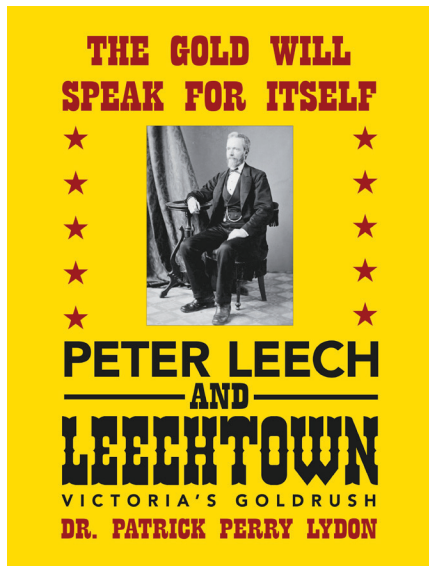
- Special thanks to Janice Hendricks, Tombstone Information, Arizona, who escorted me to all the pertinent sites in Tombstone in November 2014, including Russ House Hotel, and who gave me a copy of Mayor John Clum's book - "Nellie Cashman" (1931). (www.tombstoneweb.com)

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- "Nellie Cashman-Prospector and Trailblazer" Suzann Ledbetter. Texas Western Press.
- "The Miners Angel", Islander Newspaper, 1968. Mr. T.W. Paterson.
- Historical Records - "Victoria Daily Times".
- "King George" Lounsbury, Fairbanks, Alaska.
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- Mrs. Jessica Downie - Technical advisor.

Also by Dr. Patrick Perry Lydon:

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