



# Angel In Victoria

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# Angel In Victoria

**The Amazing Story  
of  
Nellie Cashman  
“The Miners Angel”**



*A photo of youthful Nellie Cashman taken in San Francisco  
in 1874; Before leaving for The Cassiar, BC.*

*Photo: Courtesy of the Sisters of St. Ann.*

**Dr. Patrick Perry Lydon  
Donna Chaytor**



*“She lies beside her Sisters,  
in Ross Bay Cemetery, Not  
far from Billy Barker, her  
lovely grave you see. She  
was the Miners Angel, the  
Maid from Middleton,  
From Tombstone to Alaska,  
she was loved by everyone”.*

*(The Miners Angel Song  
chorus – sung to tune of  
“Yellow Rose of Texas”)*



ur story begins in the medieval town of Middleton, halfway between Cork and the ancient port of Youghal on the southern coast of Ireland, and it ends at a beautiful grave, beside the Sisters of St. Ann, in Ross Bay Cemetery, Victoria, British Columbia, the grave of Nellie Cashman, “The Miners Angel”.

The story of Nellie Cashman is full of heroism, bravery and an unquenchable concern for the sick and the poor. The words on the polished granite gravestone give an indication of her incredible journey through life.

Given the time period of the discovery of Gold Fields in Western United States, and within British Columbia and the incredible feats that needed to be established and commitments made to be successful, Nellie Cashman was a trail blazer and is today an icon of the strength, endurance, and undauntable spirit of a young girl, so petite and yet so full of trust in herself, to accomplish feats men were incapable of doing.

In the period of Nellie Cashman, the dress of women was based in fashion and went from bloomers, crinolines, bustles and corsets to mold the body and for ornamentation and variety. Nellie Cashman, had no desire to be a fashionista; and contrary to what women were supposed to wear, Nellie made a point of wearing

what was appropriate to the situation. As she ran her boarding houses, she dressed appropriately to cook, handle the laundry and serve customers, and when it came time for Nellie to challenge the Chilkoot Pass, Nellie was not going to do so in bloomers, crinolines and high heeled boots. Being the trail blazer she was, the incredible icon of practicality, Nellie donned on whatever served her best while she ventured into terrain and country where many men, horses, and other women perished before reaching their destination.

Nellie Cashman was a selfless person, who believed every person down on their luck, deserved to have a hand up, not a hand out and she not only provided food, shelter and help she did so with grace and dignity. Nellie Cashman believed her life was God given and should be lived accordingly and she never expected anything back.

The grave-site of Nellie Cashman is a tribute from the Sisters of St. Ann to their beloved patron and benefactor, Miss Nellie Cashman. At the end of this story, you will read a record of their memorable expressions in tribute to a remarkable human being.

Nellie Cashman was born in Middleton, Co. Cork, Ireland in 1845; therefore she was British by birth. Her actual birth date is uncertain but is believed to be August the 5th as there is a record of her christening in St. John's Catholic Church, Middleton, on the 15th of October 1845.



NELLIE CASHMAN

1844 — 1925

FRIEND OF THE SICK AND THE HUNGRY  
AND TO ALL MEN

HEROIC APOSTOLATE OF SERVICE  
AMONG THE WESTERN AND NORTHERN  
FRONTIER MINERS

MINERS' ANGEL, 1872 — 1924  
IN NEVADA            IN THE CASSIAR  
IN ARIZONA        IN THE YUKON  
IN CALIFORNIA    IN ALASKA

BORN IN IRELAND  
DIED WITH THE SISTERS OF SAINT ANN, AT  
ST. JOSEPH'S HOSPITAL, VICTORIA, B. C.  
JANUARY 4, 1925

REQUIESCAT IN PACE

The city has many monuments to record its turbulent past:

There is a statue of an oversized pike-man, to commemorate the flogging to death of the local black-smith Joseph Welch, for his involvement in the 1798 rebellion.

The monument known as “The Nine Feathers” is a testament to the Choctaw First Nations Tribe of Oklahoma, who sent a small but very significant amount of money to the Middleton area in 1847, during the worst year of the Great Famine.



*Cork statue pays tribute to Choctaw tribe's generosity during Irish Famine.*



Midleton is the site of the Jameson whiskey distillery, and the Company has been very generous to the town. A visit to the distillery is a “must”, if ever you visit Midleton.



In June of 2015, a new monument was unveiled in the center of the City to honor one of the greatest ambassadors Ireland has sent to the New World. This is the monument in tribute to Nellie Cashman, known as “The Angel of the Cassiar Mountains”, “The Miner’s Angel, the “Angel of Tombstone” and many other places pay tribute to this incredible woman. It is on Riverside Road, near a busy intersection. Writer Patrick Lydon had been invited to participate in the unveiling, as he had written a short story about Nellie Cashman, called “Angel in our Midst”, in the “Stories in Stone” section of the Old Cemeteries Society publication, Volume XXVI (Spring 2015).



*Photo: P. Lydon*

Sir Walter Raleigh the favorite of Queen Elizabeth I; is said to have planted the first potatoes from Peru, in his estates near Middleton in 1588.

It is rather ironic the Great Famine of Ireland started a few months before Nellie was born in 1845. The potato plant had flourished in the moist temperate climate of Ireland, and after a short time, the population became dependent on this reliable source of nourishment. In many cases, the potato plant was the main food for the large numbers of poor people in the country. Early in 1845, the blight of the potato plant was first seen, and the fungus was to devastate the growth of potatoes, for the next seven years.

The population of Ireland would fall from 8 million to less than 4 million, due to death and emigration, due to the of famine and starvation, throughout the whole country.

The touching story of Pat and Mary Ann Broderick, in Ballinasloe in Co. Galway, is a tragic example of the dire-circumstances.

The Broderick's were a young couple who had saved money to lease a small potato farm near Cullagh on the east side of the town. When the potato blight destroyed their entire crop, they were ruined and penniless. Their relatives were in a similar situation, and soon the couple was reduced to begging to survive. As a last resort, they applied to the Ballinasloe workhouse, and were admitted to this prison-like environment separated

from each other and hard work was demanded of both, in order to receive two daily issues of gruel, a thick soup made from corn. The couple could not accept their separation from each other and after two months, they ran away from a work party. In February of 1847, the worst year of the famine and in one of the coldest months on record with heavy thick frost permeating the air and everything that stood; Pat and Mary-Ann were found dead in an abandoned cowshed near Ballinasloe. Their bodies emaciated from starvation, they appeared to have accepted their final fate together. The chilling yet endearing fact about their death was the way the bodies were placed. They were found facing each other and sitting on two raised shelves. Pat had opened his shirt to allow Mary Ann to put her two naked feet on his chest in an effort to keep them warm. This tragic and pathetic death scene will always remain in my mind. I believe this simple act of compassion, whereby a man, freezing to death, would have his wife place her cold feet next to his heart, in a futile effort to reduce her pain, stands to be a supreme gesture of love and deep affection. They froze to death in this posture on that cold night and later were buried in Bully's Acre, the local burial site for the victims of the famine. The discovery was reported in the papers and their story recounts the fate of millions of Irish people starting the emigration from Ireland that would continue to the present day. As a child my mother would tell us this story; and to

this day I still recall the tear in her eye and remember the slight tremble of her voice recounting oral history to us, her children.

Nellie Cashman was born Ellen Cashman, but she was always called Nellie. The name “Cashman” is an Anglicanization of a Celtic name, and to this date, many Cashman families live in the Midleton area. Nellie's father Thomas, emigrated to Boston USA, and a short time later, Nellie, her younger sister Frances and her mother left Ireland to join him. It is thought that the Cashmans' may have landed at Montreal, in Canada, before making their way to Boston. We have little information of Nellie's youth in the United States but she appears to have had a good basic education and her penmanship was excellent. We do know that she once worked as a lift operator at a large Boston Hotel. This was a man's job, but due to the Civil War, most of the young men were in the army. At one point she met General Ulysses Grant, the future President of the United States, who was attending a conference at the hotel. She found him easy to talk to and he in turn was very impressed with Nellie. Before he left the hotel he told Nellie “The West needs people like you”, and Nellie never forgot his words.

Nellie prided herself on her ability to cook and after the Civil War; Nellie together with her widowed Mother and sister Fanny headed west to San Francisco. Nellie worked as a cook in a large hotel and honed her

skills as a chef. Her sister Frances met and married another Irishman, Thomas Cunningham, a successful shoe and boot maker. All seemed well in San Francisco until Nellie shocked the Family with her latest plans for the future. She announced that she intended to go to the rough mining areas of the western United States, where she would open restaurants and hotels that would cater to the wealthy miners.

She was an accomplished cook, a thrifty business woman and she had courage and confidence that she could look after herself. Her family advised her to stay in San Francisco, but Nellie was determined to make something of her life. She gathered her savings and supplies and headed out for Pioche, Nevada, a rich silver mining area in the arid desert. Her first hotel and restaurant were a great success and Nellie gained a good reputation for offering clean lodging and wholesome food, and became known as a person willing to help miners down on their luck with free meals or a place to stay. Nellie having so many expert miners to listen to got interested in mining herself, and soon became an avid gold panner. Her Mother joined her in Nevada and the business continued to grow.

In 1874, the Cassiar Gold Rush in Northern British Columbia, Canada, caught the attention of many miners in Nevada, including Nellie, and many decided to join the venture. Nellie and her mother returned to San Francisco, where Nellie met and joined with some

200 miners, destined to head to Dease Lake in Northern British Columbia. When the miners reached Victoria to obtain their supplies for the journey, Nellie, a devout Catholic, introduced herself to the Sisters of St. Ann, who were busy trying to build St. Joseph's Hospital. She was very impressed by the Sisters, and she would prove to be a support for the Order for the rest of her life. After some time for preparation, the large number of miners sailed for Wrangell in Alaska and then up the Stikine River to Telegraph Creek.

The name "Telegraph Creek" came from the fact that the Collins Telegraph Line, an ambitious attempt to build a telegraph line from Seattle, Washington, through British Columbia, across Alaska and over the Bering Strait into Russia to be continued throughout Europe. The project reached Telegraph Creek the furthestmost station of the Collins Line. The project had to be abandoned as the transatlantic submarine cable began to function. One of the first messages on the Collins line was the announcement of the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln in 1865. In the same year, Peter Leech was employed as a surveyor on the Collins Telegraph Line. He and his fellow workers had to survive a winter blizzard; as they were trapped by a heavy snowfall.

Peter Leech was from Dublin Ireland, and he joined the British Army at the outbreak of the Crimean War in 1854. At the end of the Russian conflict, he came

to British Columbia with the Royal Engineers under the command of Colonel Clement Moody. Peter Leech served as an NCO with the Engineers until 1863 when the Regiment was disbanded and then in 1864 his name would be immortalized. Peter Leech was second in command of the Vancouver Island Exploring Expedition and was the Lieutenant in charge of the party who found gold on the confluence of the Sooke and Leech River on Vancouver Island in 1864.

The significance of Leechtown was it became the stepping stone in notably offering to the commerce of Southern Vancouver Island. This can best be described in part of the speech presented by Bruce Chaytor, President of Vancouver Island Placer Miners Association (VIPMA).

*“The Vancouver Island Placer Miners Association is a collection of miners that mine primarily in the Leech and Sooke River drainages and as such, they have a deep connection to the area and its history.*

*The original monument on the west side of the river has suffered from damage and neglect over the years and is located on private property. It was our desire to correct this, to mark the 150 years this area has been supplying wealth and well being to those that strived.*

*Why here? Geologically we are on a major fault line where the Metchosin Formation bonded with the*



*Leech Formation, connecting it to Vancouver Island creating a collection point for glacial eroded gold. This intersected with the Sooke River valley creating a corridor for the railway and transportation.*

*In the beginning there was Gold. This was located by the Vancouver Island Exploration Expedition under the Command of Robert Brown. The VIEE was created to find undiscovered values in the interior of Vancouver Island. This included farmland, timber, coal and minerals.*

*The VIEE was privately funded as Governor Kennedy matched funds raised 2-1, and a \$1000 reward for whoever found a mine that would put 1000 men to work. With Brown away in Victoria, Peter Leech was put in charge of exploring the Sooke River and at this time Peter Leech saw the river entering the Sooke River. His men decided to call it the Leech River as Peter Leech had seen it first and had allowed them to return. This is where the gold was found in significant quantities at the confluence of the two rivers.*

*There are 100 active Placer Gold claims in the area. While the buildings of a ghost town are gone the souls lives on. In the quest to find an appropriate monument to those that came before us, we chose something that would have been on their mind every hour of every day. Something that represented*

*what they had to climb over, burrow under or try to move out of the way, a boulder.*

*The wording on the plaque is a poem that was first written and read by Donald Fraser at the 1928 dedication of the original monument, and is as true today as it was then.”*

On July 19, 2014 The Honorable Judith Guichon, Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia and Bruce Chaytor, President of Vancouver Island Placer Miners Association, together unveiled a new monument for the 150 Year Commemoration of Leechtown, in memory of all who contributed to Leechtown, named after Mr. Peter Leech.



*Image Credit: Britt Santowski*

In the winter of 1865, Peter Leech was employed as a surveyor with The Collins Telegraph Line, when he and his surveyors were trapped by a sudden snowfall. Advance parties of two men were trapped by a heavy blizzard and they had no supplies at the time. After a few days without any food they killed and cooked their dog and were it not for friendly First Nation's scouts, they would not have survived.

Now, nine years later, Nellie Cashman and her American miners were in the same area, and all looking for gold. Nellie built her first Hotel at Glenora near Dease Lake, and she actively grubstaked or financed Miners to look for paying claims. Her supply store was a big success and Nellie had made a handsome profit by the end of the season. A rare reference to Nellie Cashman can be found in a wonderful book called "A century of Canadian Pioneer Life" by Judge Joseph B. Clearihue, the first Chancellor of the University of Victoria and the only copy available is in the archives of the library at the University. The book is about the Clearihue family history and it gives a great description of Judge Clearihue's father, who just like Nellie Cashman, had gone to Glenora, near Dease Lake, looking for gold.

*"The only white woman in Laketon, (Dease Lake) was Nellie Cashman, a twenty year old, petite Irish blonde from Limerick, who hauled her sleigh of grub up the Stikine River in February, to make*

*Dease Lake in 27 days. There she built a hotel and ran it for two seasons. Nellie owned claims all up and down the coast, from southern California to Cassiar”.*

In November of 1874, Nellie decided to return to Victoria to avoid the severe winter weather in the Cassiar. She had a very successful season and she deserved a rest. When she reached Victoria she visited the Sisters of St. Ann. It was at that location she received an urgent message that a large number of Miners, some say 200, were stranded in winter snows north of Dease Lake, and scurvy had broken out.

No time to lose, Nellie organized and self funded a rescue party as a private rescue attempt and therefore there was little public awareness of what transpired. She hired six strong men who were prepared to make the arduous journey and she bought fresh food and medicine to help the ailing miners. The rescue party headed for Alaska with plans to hike up the frozen Stikine River to reach the trapped Miners in the Cassiar Mountains. The American border guards in Wrangell would not allow the rescue party to enter the Northern B.C. coast as the winter conditions were the worst in recent history. She was warned that she and the rescue party would all die, and the Americans would not take responsibility for such a development. Nellie replied, *“Yes, there is a danger we may die, but those trapped miners will die for sure if we don’t rescue them”.*

John Fannin (1837 – 1904) was a colorful adventurer, explorer and a Government Naturalist. The Royal BC Museum was founded in 1886 with John Fannin, outdoors-man and taxidermist, as its first curator. He donated his extensive Taxidermy collection to the Museum and the Fannin Building which houses the entomological collection at the RBCM is named in his honor.

Despite his courage and ability, he was unable to reach the Dease Lake District in the spring of 1875. The story of his ordeal is printed in the *Daily British Colonist Newspaper* in Victoria, February 4th 1875 an excerpt as follows:

“Amid the frosts of Stikine”!  
Horrible sufferings of the Government Explorers  
“Cold, hunger and grim death on every side.”

This brief accounting of the above trip was taken from the Diary of John Fannin, and is printed in the British Times Colonist as stated above.

“Mr. Fannin during the month of November made two unsuccessful attempts to reach the head of the navigation on the Stikine with his supplies. The first time he reached a point fifteen miles above the Boundary Post, where he got caught in the ice floe and the Indians becoming frightened refused to work the canoes any further. He then returned to the post where he stored his supplies, thinking perhaps the cold snap

would pass. Anxious to join his party at Glenora he set back to Wrangell, procured another crew, composed partly of white men, and made this second attempt.

This time it became evident that no headway could be made against the ice, so he returned to Wrangell to await the ice closing the river.

December 5, 1874 Fannin received word the ice had formed and travel between the mouth of the river and the Boundary Post was safe. Hoping to get past that part of the journey before heavy snowfall with Geo. Florence a young French Canadian a hardy and experienced woodsman left Wrangell for that destination. They had 8 days of provisions for the distance of 60 miles expecting to make it in 4 days. 22 days later they returned to Wrangell in such a state their friends barely recognized them.

What happened? Shortly after leaving the mouth of the river a storm described by John Fannin as the fiercest he had ever felt fell upon them for 15 days with barely an hour relief scattered in between. Snow, wind and hail accompanied this fierce wind, at times unbearable to face it. With snow shoes sinking a foot with every step, one followed the other with head bent against that wind. On the twelve day, their food ran out, and there was also a temporary lull in the storm. With the ice mist and fog clearing they could tell they were still below the Ice Mountain, scarcely half way and all provisions were gone.

After a brief discussion of what they were to do in order to survive, they decided to abandon everything, and they travelled onward with only an axe. Without blankets the first night was spent walking around the campfire. They pushed on with new obstacles facing them, open water on the river, yawning sloughs that could only be crossed by pole bridges. Weak and exhausted they continued and found themselves on an open river with high banks and perpendicular bluffs on either side. They could go no further. Florence took Fannin by the arm and turned around and said, we shall go back to the blankets and be at least warm.

Faint and weak from hunger they retraced their steps. That night Fannin kept talking to his partner, so he would not fall asleep, he was so tired he fell into the fire, and was fortunate not to be injured.

The next day as they were travelling by the side of an open slough Florence stopped and quickly removed his snow shoes and plunged into the slough returning immediately with a salmon grasped so tight in his hands his fingers pierced the flesh of the fish. The salmon lasted five days, they reached their abandoned camp and each took a blanket and continued down the river. They finally reached the portion of the river that is broken up by tidal action; they were still five miles from Wrangell.

With the axe they constructed a raft hoping to cross the chasm, a very risky but desperate decision. Just

as they were ready to start out an Indian came upon them with a canoe and took them to Wrangell. Upon arrival Florence became delirious and had to be cared for by friends.

Fannin remained in Wrangell seven days and recruited supplies and men and after just surviving a horrendous ordeal which included 5 nights without blankets, days without food. On January 4, 1875 John Fannin started back fully equipped to have it out with the elements.

The tale of Fannin's hardship and misery and the severity of the winter weather conditions on the Stikine River was the talk of Wrangell. The American Border Commander, Col. Campbell, tried to impress on Nellie Cashman the danger that she faced. Nellie was steadfast the rescue would proceed. The authorities eventually allowed the party to cross the border into British Columbia and attempt their ascent up the frozen Stikine River.

When the weather deteriorated, Colonel Campbell became concerned that Nellie Cashman may have perished in the severe winter conditions. The two Canadian officials, who were responsible for the border crossings, had left to take a prisoner to New Westminster, near present day Vancouver, so Colonel Campbell decided to take some action himself. He sent a squad of troops into British Columbia to locate and recover the bodies of the search party. Some days later, the American



soldiers were delightfully surprised to find Nellie and her helpers doing quite well in the frozen north. Nellie was impressed with their bravery and the fact that they intended to bring their bodies back for proper Christian burial. "I made those boys in blue the best meal they ever had on the Trail".

*The Daily British Colonist* dated February 5th 1875, published this account:

*"Miss Cashman – Frequent allusion has been made in these columns, to this indomitable female, who has started up on the ice of the Stikine River in company with two men for Dease Creek. She is a native of Limerick, Ireland, aged about 22, is a light blonde, rather pretty and possesses all the vivacity as well as the push and energy inherent in her race. She was one of the few white women who reached Cassiar last year, where she opened a boarding house on Dease Creek and realized a comfortable "pile". Her extraordinary freak of attempting to reach the diggings in midwinter and in the face of dangers and obstacles which appalled even the stout- hearted Fannin and thrice drove him back to Wrangell for shelter is attributed by her friends to "insanity". So impressed with this idea was the Commander at Fort Wrangell in Alaska, that he sent out a guard of soldiers to bring her*

*back. The guard found her encamped on the ice of Stikine, cooking her evening meal by the heat of a wood fire and humming a lively air. So happy, contented and comfortable did she appear, that the "boys in blue", sat down and took tea at her invitation, and then returned without her.*

*It is feared that she has perished from the intense cold that prevailed during the latter part of January along the entire coast."*

Nellie, like Mark Twain, would be able to say, "Reports of my death were greatly exaggerated!"

The rescue party was obliged to travel on foot, as the snow was too deep for dog-sleds.

They all had to drag a sled each, and Nellie did just the same as the men. This was called "necking" with a sling over the head and on top of the shoulders.

Nellie did all the cooking and her ability in this capacity is legendary. On one occasion, Nellie's tent was some distance from the men, and when one of the men brought her coffee in the morning, her tent was nowhere to be found. Apparently, an avalanche had occurred that night and Nellie and her tent was swept a half mile down the mountain. She was able to dig herself out before the men arrived and as usual, she was able to tell a joke about the whole affair.



*Nellie Cashman Crossing The Cassiar Mountains. 1875.*

A Canadian Postal Official met the rescue party on the trail, and over a mid-day meal, Nellie confided that the party had got lost in a severe blizzard of freezing rain and relentless hail. For three days they searched for the proper pathway and were unable to rest or take nourishment because of the severity of the storm. They could not set up their tents and were unable to light a fire to warm or cook food. It was the worst three days of their journey. Nellie's only source of warmth at night was two heavy blankets.

The rescue party continued to find its way over the barren landscape and it was over 77 days before they found the trapped miners north of Dease Lake. "Most were half dead" said Nellie, but together with the new supplies and the improved weather, she was able to rescue those who were alive.

Nellie was hailed as “The Angel of the Cassiar Mountains”. She was recognized and remembered for this heroic deed for the rest of her life. 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. This generous contribution the Sisters would never forget.

When she went to Tucson and Tombstone in Arizona, her fame preceded her and men would stand in silence and respect when she entered a saloon. Tombstone became one of her favorite locations where she had many different restaurants and Hotels including “The Delmonico” and “Russ House Hotel”. Wyatt Earp, her good friend offered her use of his saloon for Sunday religious services, until Nellie built The Church of the Sacred Heart which is still there. The baptismal font, given to the church by Nellie, is proudly used to the present day.

Nellie touched the hearts of people wherever she travelled; around Tombstone and area; her exploits are legendary; yet far too complex to record here. “Nellie Cashman Day” in Tombstone is still celebrated at the Rose Tree Festival in Tombstone.

At the recent Annual 2015 “Frontier Days” celebrations in Tombstone, Mrs. Jay Rodriguez, (AKA Nellie Cashman), was resplendent dressed in white and wearing the white hat with Egret feathers. Mrs. Rodriguez gave a short account of Nellie’s activities in Tombstone.

*Photos of Mrs. Jay Rodriguez dressed as (Nellie Cashman)*



*Photos Credit: Patrick Lydon*



*Nellie Cashman in Tombstone*

Nellie would return to Canada in 1898, and though she was some fifty years of age, she would join the miners in her effort to get to the Klondike and Dawson City. She appears to have made the trip on her own and would have climbed the dreadful Chilkoot Pass some twenty times to bring the required ton of supplies that the Mounties insisted that every miner bring to Canada. It is said that half the miners that reached the Chilkoot Pass, turned back to Skagway when they saw what lay ahead.

Nellie was so highly thought of in her travel to the Chilkoot Pass she was accompanied with a letter written by the Prime Minister of British Columbia, the Honorable Theodore Davies:

*A copy of his words to her can be found through the **University of Victoria Libraries – Special Collection and University Archives** and is dated February 28, 1898:*

*Dear Miss Cashman:*

*I take great pleasure in saying that I first became acquainted with you some twenty- three or four years ago, when you, (a mere girl) braved the hardships of Northern travel and penetrated the newly discovered gold-bearing regions surrounding Dease Lake, Cassiar, where you engaged in the restaurant business.*

*During this time you earned and sustained an honored reputation for industry thrift and honesty, and left, I trust, with a little fortune.*

*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 DAVIES”*



Nellie climbed the pass, and then they built a raft, that swept down the Yukon River. In her writings she recalled later, the swift current through the Five Finger Pass near Dawson City was terrifying and she was heard to remark "I hope that I never have to travel that fast again in my life". Nellie spent some five years in Dawson City. She was an active miner but she was better known for her charity and care for the poor. She was a great help to Father Judge SJ (The Saint of Dawson City), the man who founded St. Mary's Hospital.

When the Sisters of St. Ann came to take over the Hospital, Nellie was there to greet them. Her years in Dawson City are well remembered in the City and her library or "Miners Haven" was recalled in an article in *The Victoria Daily Times* on January 10th 1925.

*"Started by the proprietress as a counter attraction to the saloon's and the dance halls, Nellie 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"*





Nellie would spend the last twenty years of her life, mining for gold in Alaska. Her last claim was north of the Arctic Circle where Nellie was devoted to helping all miners in that area. She was almost, if not eighty years old when she mushed from Koyukuk to Seward, Alaska over a snow trail of 750 miles. The Alaskan thoughts on this wonderful woman are best judged by what was written in a *Seward Newspaper* when they wrote about her trip they referred to:

*“Nellie as the original “Miss Alaska”  
speaking of her many exploits”;  
Nellie Cashman, prominently known and respected was  
inducted March 15, 2006 posthumously into  
the Alaska Mining Hall of Fame.*

This trip unfortunately was to be her last. Nellie became ill with double pneumonia and in the fall of 1924, she was brought down the Koyukuk River by members of the Episcopalian Church on route to where she wanted to be with her loving companions and friends, the Sisters of St. Ann in Victoria, British Columbia.

On October 10th, 1924, the frail Nellie Cashman bravely walked into St. Joseph's Hospital, where she was welcomed by Sister Mary Mark, then Superior and all the nuns of St. Ann, and her friend Dr. W.T. Barrett, first Medical Director of St. Mary's Hospital Dawson, and past President of the Victoria medical Society. Dr. Barrett was a stalwart friend of Father Judge SJ, "The Saint of Dawson". Dr. Barrett had performed life-saving abdominal surgery on Nellie in Dawson City in 1902.

Doctor Barrett and the Superior of the hospital knew intimately the pattern of life of Nellie Cashman, tremendous apostle of charity. Both esteemed it a privilege to receive her; both put her in the category of the great saints. They would testify to her sanctity!"

*A description of Nellie from the Sisters of St. Ann:*

*"Lovely, thirty year old Nellie Cashman, with merry, infectious laugh, doctor, nurse, and missionary to the men of the frontier, is delighted in Victoria, in 1874, to encounter peers in compassion, the Sisters of St. Ann.*

*“An admiring friendship ensues, in these Cas-siar years, 1874 – 1876, which will renew itself, through more than a quarter century, when miners, adventurers, and others in throngs, seek gold in the Yukon and Alaska. The Sisters far northern homes will be blessed havens to dedicated Nellie. Then, four-score years are suddenly upon her, and this uniquely compassionate pioneer, very ill, reaches St. Joseph’s Hospital, Victoria with the simple words; “I have come home to die”.*

*“Miss Cashman was both an enterprising and a dauntless woman; animating spirit of faith and love could not be lost upon her, as Miss Cashman led with her heart in all matters pertaining to the service of others.”*

*“One of Nellie’s less orthodox methods of raising funds for charitable causes was to slyly sneak into a large saloon, and check out the various poker tables. When she saw a sizable pot, and judged the participants to be agreeable, she would walk over to the table and put her arms around the money saying, “Now gentlemen, you don’t mind if this money goes to the good Christian women that’s taking care of the sick”. This particular “robbery” was to help St Matthews Lutheran Church in Fairbanks, Alaska, but it’s believed that she performed many such raids for other charities. With the respect*

*men had for her and her grace and dignity towards all miners, they never objected.”*

*“Serving Christ in the hard world of His frontier men was no chance choice of Miss Nellie Cashman; it was a call, in faith and love, to live the challenge of the Sermon on the Mount: Love God, and love neighbor for God. Or, in the words of St. Thomas Aquinas, Love God, and do what you will.”*

*“When the men were very ill, Nellie would go to their cabins and take care of them like a mother, even at the risk of her life; for she knew well some of them had a prison record. All this was through her faith in the power of the Blessed Virgin”.*

*“To me she was a diamond in the rough, a great and heroic saintly woman”. Sr. Mary Patrick, SSA.”*

NELLIE CASHMAN WAS ADMITTED TO  
THE GREAT GOLD MINE OF THE SKY ON  
JANUARY 4TH 1925

The sisters of St Ann arranged for Nellie to be buried beside their large plot in Ross Bay Cemetery, in Victoria, British Columbia.

*“January 7th 1925. Today is the funeral of a very remarkable woman. The Sisters who knew her deem it a favor to act as mourners at her Requiem Mass in St. Andrews Cathedral and at Ross Bay Cemetery. Her grave is alongside the Sisters plot. Her wishes were fulfilled. She had long known the Sisters of St. Ann; she wanted to die with them and to be buried with them. When this friend of ours was taken very ill in Fairbanks, Alaska, she made every effort to come to Victoria. Here she was visited by Alaskan Sisters who knew her sterling worth. Surrounded by them she breathed her last. But who is this woman, and what made her remarkable? Her name is Nellie Cashman. No doubt her life will be written, but her greatest praise is that those who know the ways of God say that someday Nellie Cashman will be canonized”*

*The Sisters of St. Ann embellished her grave-site after her death, and added the beautiful granite headstone featured at the beginning of this article. Darlene*

Southwell, in her moving book, *“Caring and Compassion”* (A history of the Sisters of St. Ann in health care in British Columbia), devotes a section to Nellie Cashman.

*“Of all the individuals who supported the Sisters, Nellie Cashman, an Irish born woman of extraordinary energy, was the most colorful. Known for her care and compassion, she nevertheless was tough enough to brave the harshest conditions to pursue her quest for gold in the North, travelling by dogsled and snowshoe and sleeping in the wild. She first learned of the Sisters proposed hospital in the early 1870’s, when she passed through Victoria on her initial excursion to Alaska. She took their cause to The Cassiar, BC, miners whom she had rescued from an early death from scurvy by bringing fresh limes to supply their vitamin C. During her years in the North she continued to be a benefactor, and sometimes a cart laden with pillows and comforters would be delivered to the Hospital in her name.”* The monument on her grave states she was *“a friend of the sick and the hungry and to all men”* and praises her heroic apostolate of service among the western and northern frontier miners; truly the *“Miners Angel”*.

Nellie Cashman’s gravesite is featured on the brochure of the *Old Cemeteries Society*.

Our local historian, **Mr. T.W. Paterson** 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: Nellie Cashman’s 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”.*

**Mr. Donald Chaput** wrote a beautiful book called, “**Nellie Cashman**”. This book is regarded as the definitive biography of our heroine. Many other books have been written about Nellie Cashman, including a lovely book, also called “**Nellie Cashman - Frontier Angel**”, by Ron Fischer from Arizona, who was married to Nellie’s relative at one point.

There are numerous articles and chapters in other books on Nellie and a recent article in a British Columbia Magazine, Winter, 2014, by Frances Backhouse, entitled “**Angel of the Cassiar**” giving a fine synopsis of the Miners Angel. In her book “**Women of the Klondike**”

Victorian Authoress, Frances Backhouse has a special section dedicated to Nellie Cashman. She gives the following quotation from the “*Klondike Nugget*” newspaper dated April 22,1900.

*“There is not a mining camp in the country where she is not known and loved as her many deeds of charity have endeared her to the heart of all who ever knew her. Nellie had grubstaked many a prospector and knows more about mining in all its branches than many a man who poses as an expert.”*

It is simply impossible to give a comprehensive list of the tributes to Nellie in this short article.





School children from Journey Middle School, Sooke, BC with Dr. Pat Lydon photographed at the grave of Nellie Cashman, Ross Bay Cemetery, May 27, 2016.

The Old Cemeteries Society has opened a special “Nellie Cashman Fund” to raise monies to preserve and enhance her grave in Ross Bay Cemetery in preparation for the centennial celebration of her death in 2025. Nellie Cashman, “The Miners Angel”, deserves our recognition.

Dr. Patrick Perry Lydon,  
Old Cemeteries Society, Victoria. BC. Canada.

Donna Chaytor,  
Treasurer, Vancouver Island Placer Miners Association  
(VIPMA)

