

EDA THE WEATHERLADY

A book by Phyllis M. Patterson

The weather. Such an easy topic to bring up in idle conversation, to politely introduce yourself to a stranger and find common ground. Such a fantastic and frustrating phenomenon.

For Eda Owen, Highlands Weatherlady for 28 years, the weather stood in all its awesome power at the core of all she did.

Her granddaughter, Phyllis Patterson, weaves the tenacious, always changing, always unpredictable emotions of Alberta's weather around the flow of her grandmother's life.

Eda Owen was an immigrant to this country, a wife, a mother, a widow, a grandmother and a woman working at a time when women didn't do that type of thing.

From the tiny hub of the Highlands community, Eda Owen's life played itself out in the day-to-day routine of living during the first half of this century while her meteorological instruments tracked, plotted, clicked and whirled with the forces of nature.

Eda was strong willed, opinionated and absolute in all she did. She had to be. The Edmonton of 1908-1909 in which she found herself demanded it.

She and her husband's family, which included Amby Bury, alderman, mayor and later a federal Member of Parliament, quickly settled down.

A close-knit clan of peerage background and upbringing, they brought the values and way of life of Victorian England to their Highlands homes, and maintained many of those rituals throughout their lives in Canada.

Prior to the outbreak of the First World War, Eda's husband, Herbert Owen, had taken on the job of a weather observer. And the meteorological office with all its instruments was moved to the Owen home at 11227 - 63rd Street. When Herbert went off to the war in Europe, Eda filled in, "keeping Herbert's cushion warm."



Eda Owen checking instruments. Note the roof equipment for weather forecasting

Upon his death in a prisoner of war camp, Eda continued to fulfill Herbert's duties, and her permanent appointment to the position was finally confirmed in April 1921. That was also the year when women (outside Quebec) won the vote at the federal level.

Just as she held on during the war as part of the home effort, Eda held on throughout her tenure as a self-taught weather authority.

And she kept the job during the 1920s and 1930s despite public attitudes against women working.

She watched the development of air services and the opening of the north, and helped establish the importance of weather observation and forecasting that was crucial to these events.

Without scientific training, Eda Owen had something perhaps even more important at the time - natural intelligence and a life-long thirst for knowledge.

Yet, if Eda was unique for her time, her personal problems and battles didn't really differ from life today.

When her former son-in-law placed her two granddaughters in foster care in San Francisco, it was Eda herself who brought first one, then the other back to Edmonton. In the process, she bravely ignored some of the harsh and unfair laws on the books regarding control of children.

Her heartache at the loss of her beloved husband, the conflicts of her relationship with her headstrong daughter and other tragedies never brought her to her knees.

And, always in the supporting role, there was the

weather and Eda's undying love of her work.

In Eda Owen's life is the story of the growth of Edmonton, the establishment of the science of meteorology, and the growth of a generation of new Canadians.

And of a woman who came into her own and held on, regardless of the weather she ran into.

Debi Harris