

Strathcona Lodge School by Lori Treloar

On Thursday May 5, 1927 Miss Wilhelmina (“Minna”) Gildea became the new owner of the lovely Strathcona Hotel at Shawnigan Lake. Miss Gildea, who dreamed of opening her own school, bought the hotel to establish a boarding school for girls. In September of 1927, Strathcona Lodge School opened its doors with approximately twenty five students from Grade eight to twelve. Miss Gildea spent the next twenty three years shaping the lives of the girls at her school.

Miss Gildea was born in the rectory of a tiny village on the south coast of England in 1875. In 1897, after completing teacher training, she took her first teaching post in Nova Scotia Canada. By 1912 she was back in England and her sense of duty made it clear that she must stay with her parents and care for them until their deaths. Minna was raised in the Victorian tradition of service and this guided her decisions and her philosophy over her lifetime. During the war she was very involved in the war effort for England, doing her bit, and later with the promotion of Women’s Institutes.

After the death of her parents, Minna returned to Canada, in 1926, with the help of a small inheritance. This time she moved to Victoria where she worked at two different private schools. This experience hastened her desire to have her own school and she started a search for potential school sites. An estate agent advised that The Strathcona Hotel was available. Minna’s belief that a boarding school needed to provide an immersion experience, combined with the spectacular rural setting, made the old hotel a perfect choice. Another distinct advantage of the site was the fact that there was already a successful boys’ school at Shawnigan and the headmaster was very keen on the idea of a complimentary girls’ school. At the age of 51, and with financial backing from a wealthy uncle, Minna bought her school.

Miss Gildea was a progressive educator and rather than following the conventions of the day, her school was unique in most ways. Her philosophy of education was well ahead of her time. She believed that her school would prepare the girls to go out into the world, take responsibility and contribute to their communities. She felt that most of the girls came from privileged homes and that they were destined to take on leadership roles. She



made it clear that at the end of their schooling they were not educated. Rather, they would know how much they had to learn. After some consideration, Miss Gildea chose the question mark as the symbol for the school and *Cherchons* (let us seek) as the motto suggesting that learning and education was ongoing.

Miss Gildea, beloved by her students, died in 1950 at the age of 74. Her school survived her by one year and then closed. In 1959, a new life was given to the school but that is, as they say, another story...