

Jessie Renton Olding-Hunter

By: Diane Sterne

On May 30, 1892 in a letter to Catherine McQueen, Jessie McQueen wrote that Arthur Carrington described Jessie Hunter as:

“...one of the finest women I ever met.” Jessie McQueen continued, “I never heard him speak so highly of anyone before as I did of her, and I tell you I’m glad. She is a power of good among those rough miners, and I suppose that is one of the reasons why she was permitted to get married and go to bury herself in that out-of-the-way corner.”

Jessie Renton Olding-Hunter was the second child of farmer, Michael C. Olding (b. ca. 1827) and his wife Mary (b. ca. 1838). Born in Pictou, Nova Scotia on May 25, 1861, Jessie had six sisters and two brothers:

Emma Jane (b. ca. 1860)
Liza A. (b. ca. 1863)
Edwin E. (b. ca. 1865)
George A. (b. ca. 1868)
Mary Clara (b. ca. 1870)
Jennie H. (b. ca. 1876)
Harriet E. (b. ca. 1878)
Cattie L. (b. ca. 1878)

Jessie was described as a deeply religious, tall and dignified woman who never drank. She was a school teacher in Nova Scotia and by 1888 she had moved to British Columbia at the urging of her cousin, Jessie McQueen. She passed her teachers’ exams in June of that year and began work at Metchosin on Southern Vancouver Island. In 1889, Jessie Olding had moved to Nicola and taught eleven boys and fifteen girls in a schoolhouse, earning \$60 per month.

Jessie’s future husband, Hugh Hunter was born in Armagh, Ireland on May 29, 1858. When he arrived in Canada as a young man, he worked on the C.P.R. In Nicola, he heard whispers of a gold rush at Granite Creek where he headed in January, 1886. Hugh returned to Nicola the following summer. It was in Nicola, a few years later, that he met Jessie. By August of 1889, Hugh had landed a job as a police constable and mining recorder for Granite Creek. Later he would become Gold Commissioner for the area. In May, 1890 Hugh and Jessie were engaged. After their engagement, Jessie returned to Nova Scotia to put together a trousseau for her wedding which was to take place in October, 1891. Jessie was late in returning to British Columbia due to a boat collision which caused a back-log for other ships (hers included). Hugh Hunter waited anxiously for his bride. When he finally received a telegram explaining her delay, it was reported that he sat and read the “home cookbook” for an hour to pass the time and ease his impatience.

On her wedding day, Jessie wore cream cashmere. Arthur Carrington and cousin Jessie McQueen stood up for the happy couple. Jessie’s wedding and engagement rings were fashioned

from Nicola River gold. The ceremony was held at the home of Jessie's friends Mr. and Mrs. Clapperton. The table was decorated with flowers and autumn leaves and Jessie's bouquet was white with bachelors' buttons.

As a wedding gift, they received a saddle horse upon which Jessie rode to her new home at Granite Creek. In a letter dated October 29, 1891 to Catherine McQueen, Jessie McQueen said that after dinner at the Clapperton's, Hugh and Jessie went to "Harvey's":

"The boys made a great hullabaloo with guns and tin pans, etc. and even took the wheels off all the buggies, but when Mr. Hugh Hunter 'came down' with five dollars, they put them back and went off to serenade Mr. Dalley."



Photo of Jessie and Hugh Hunter courtesy Princeton and District Museum and Archives

As a gift to his bride, Hugh purchased a small pump organ. It was wrapped in blankets and slung on ropes by six Chinese over the Hope Trail to Granite Creek. The delivery took two weeks. Jessie's daughter reported that her mother had "musical training and a lovely contralto voice". There were no churches in Granite Creek, however services were occasionally held in saloons or private houses. Jessie would play her cherished organ and lead hymns and sing-songs for the

prospectors in the town. Her organ was last known to be in the possession of her daughter, Margaret.

Margaret Hunter-Mitchell reported the following story which her mother enjoyed telling about her time at Granite Creek:

“Two very unlikely Chinese partners had a moderately successful claim. One, almost six feet, an unusual height for a Chinese, the other, very small. In those days, as for hundreds of years, they wore their hair in a queue, a long, tight braid, which, if cut was considered a disgrace. One day, my mother, a tall and dignified lady was walking towards the large well which supplied water for part of the community. Hearing anguished shrieks and roars of anger uttered in Chinese she rushed to the scene to see the large man, holding (his) tiny partner by the queue down the well. Hauling the shivering, screaming one up, he yelled, ‘I ducky you once – you no die! I ducky you again, why you no die. You steelum gold, *now you die!!*’ plunging the half-drowned man again just as mother appeared. Horrified by the action, she promptly ordered him to stop, take his partner home to recover and let her husband settle the matter. As my father represented law and order in the area, somehow the matter was resolved and peace reigned again.”

In 1894 Jessie was the postmistress at Granite Creek. While she was never included in the official list of postmasters, she is listed as a postmistress in the Williams’ Official B.C. Directory for 1894.

Unfortunately, we don’t know exactly where in Granite Creek Jessie and Hugh lived, however, in a letter to her cousin she described the location of their field as:

“We came down the new piece of road and it is a very gradual slope down to the very point of the bench. It ends almost where we turn down to go to our field then the road crosses the flat to the street coming out to the street just below the Cariboo House.”

In 1900, Hugh Hunter was transferred to Princeton. While living there, Jessie and Hugh adopted two little girls, Victoria (b. 1897) and Margaret (b. 1906). Jessie was methodical in keeping complete weather records for Princeton from 1901 until shortly before her death. The records can be found in the Princeton and District Museum and Archives. Hugh acted as government agent, Gold Commissioner, mining recorder, and registered births, deaths and marriages in Princeton until his retirement on October 31, 1926. Jessie passed away on June 29, 1942 at the age of 81. Hugh died in 1944. Both are interred at the Princeton Cemetery.

Even though Jessie and Hugh Hunter only resided in Granite Creek until 1900, Jessie was very fond of the rough-and-tumble town. On August 17, 1897 while she was visiting in Tacoma, Jessie corresponded with Jessie McQueen about being homesick for Granite Creek. She wrote:

“Do you know Jessie, that in that little shack I spent some of the very pleasantest hours of my life. Ah me, so often I cry for the yesterdays. Goodby my dear, dear friend.”

Hugh and Jessie Hunter were prominent, respected citizens of the Similkameen Valley. They will be fondly remembered for the important roles they played bringing peace and order to the area.

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