

NATURE SASKATCHEWAN MEMBER SPOTLIGHT: RUTH SMITH

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As we look back at Nature Saskatchewan and the *Blue Jay*, we are very fortunate to have been able to interview someone who has been around from the very beginning. Ms. Ruth Smith lives in Yorkton and is nearly an impressive 103 years old! Nature Saskatchewan Board Member Morley Maier sat down with Ruth to discuss the early days. Ruth was best friends with Isabel Priestly's daughter, Diana, and while Ruth admits to not being a hardcore naturalist, she was very involved with the Yorkton Natural History Society (YNHS). She was secretary-treasurer and was hands-on with the very first issue of *Blue Jay*. Ruth was 21 years old when the YNHS was formed.

As I began to write the member spotlight article for this issue, and while listening to the audio recording of the interview between Morley and Ruth, I realized that some magic would be lost if an article was developed from the recording. For this reason, you will read the interview as it was spoken below (note that edits have been made for clarity). In addition, we invite you to listen to the interview on our YouTube channel (find us @naresaskatchewan or you can search for Nature Saskatchewan in YouTube and navigate to the channel).

M: My name is Morley Meier. I'm with Ruth Smith and a mutual friend of ours, Brian Beck, and we're just going to chat about what Ruth remembers about her time and her connection with the Yorkton Natural History Society. I'm going to ask some questions, but as we go along, we'll just visit and see what we end up talking about.

My first question is, Ruth, how did you get involved? Why were you interested in the Yorkton Natural History Society?

R: I don't think I really was so much interested in the Natural History Society.



Ruth Smith

I was the best, best friend of Mrs. Priestly's daughter, Diana, who was the same age as me. They moved to Yorkton in about 1934, I think, and we were in public school, and we were friends all through high school. Mrs. Priestly, of course, was Di's mother, and I was at their house a lot. I think we were interested in school and so on more than nature, but Mrs. Priestly was always interested in nature. She used to go around with binoculars, looking at birds and, in fact, she often was up on the hill where Brian is living now, which at that time was just open prairie. And she would, in the wintertime, go out on snowshoes and up on the hill, which is the highest place in Yorkton, and look at the birds.

M: So the war was on at that time?

R: Well, not when they came, no. The war wasn't until 1939. By then, Diana and I were through high school and going to

business college, but I guess someone told me that Isabel — or maybe she told me — that she made a list of Saskatchewan birds, and quite a lot of people were interested in it, so maybe that's what made her decide to start the *Blue Jay*. Now, I don't know when the *Blue Jay* was first published.

M: Okay, I can remember the date. In fact, I have a copy of the very, very first *Blue Jay*, and it was in 1942.

R: 1942, yeah. That was the first one. Well, I know my brother, Harvey Beck, and Stuart Houston were great friends, and they were just high school students then. They used to go out walking with her, looking at birds, and my brother was interested in insects, and I think there was a Mr. and Mrs. Foreman that used to go with them. I'm not sure about the name. Mr. Foreman was the vice president of the Yorkton Natural

History Society. Well, they used to go out walking together, but Di and I didn't. At least, I don't remember Di going.

I know I didn't go and when Mrs. Priestly started the *Blue Jay*, she named it the *Blue Jay* because she used to read stories to the children when they were small that were quite well known in those days. Unfortunately, I forgot the name of the author, but he used to write stories for kids about animals and birds that talked, and the *Blue Jay* was the one that carried the news around the forest. That's a nice story.

So she named her paper the *Blue Jay* because it was going to carry the news around, and Harvey and Stuart used to colour it — colour the cover — and I don't know who typed it. Maybe Mrs. Priestly did the first few issues. But because my brother was interested, when they started the Natural History Society, I joined, and I was a friend of the Shaws, too — Cliff and Ruth Shaw — so you know, automatically in 1942, I would enjoy it. I think maybe I was working in the city office at that time.

I'm not sure whether I was there in '42 or '43, but I know we had regular meetings...

M: Were you ever formally involved with the production of the *Blue Jay*?

R: Yeah, later on. I wasn't on the executive for a while, but eventually I became the secretary-treasurer. I took over from Pauline Summers. By then I was getting more involved in it. You know, the war was on and lots of other things were on our mind. I don't know who was typing the paper, whether it was Stuart or who; but anyway, Mrs. Priestly needed someone to type the *Blue Jay*, and the city clerk said I could go back to the office at night and run it off on a Gestetner. So I used to type it on, they were sort of wax sheets. I remember those. Yeah, and then I'd go back at night.

I don't remember how many copies I ran off, but I ran them off and we stapled them together ... but I don't remember how many I typed.

M: You know what, I'm going to look here, because I was doing some reading and to be a member of the Yorkton Natural History Society when it started was 25 cents a year.

R: I don't know what the *Blue Jay* cost.

M: Yes, in 1946 — now this is after Isabel's passing — Cliff Shaw was the president, and according to what I read, there were 335 copies of the *Blue Jay* that were mailed. I wrote that down because I think that's incredible.

R: Do you know that I even got a letter from the British Museum saying ... where was the *Blue Jay*? The copy had been late, and I said to Mrs. Priestly "It goes to the British Museum," and she said "Oh yes."

M: Well that number to me was just startling.

R: Well I know, I used to turn that handle for an awful long time.

M: You would have to.

R: And I don't know how many of us stapled it, you know, did the stapling fast. I'm kind of vague on that, because there was a lot going on with the war.

M: Okay, so, what about Isabel?

R: Oh, she was an amazing person. She was very, very interested in the city. When she first came to Yorkton, you know, people were still on relief. It was right in the middle of the Depression, and she worked there ... a volunteer, I presume. I know she sent Di and I out knocking door to door to sell carnations for Mother's Day for 10 cents each. You wouldn't remember people wearing carnations for Mother's Day.

M: I sort of do, but ...

R: Yeah, they wore a pink one if the mother was alive, and a white one if they were dead. Well, we went knocking from door to door, and I guess a lot of other people did too, collecting 10 cents. And then I remember helping Mrs. Priestly roll the money up, you know, to go to the bank, and then they used it for relief for the hard-up people. So, she was interested in the city, and she was very well educated. She had a university degree in botany, I think.

M: I think you're right, yes.



Ruth Smith, pictured here, was best friends with Isabel Priestly's daughter, Diana.

R: And, I don't know what university she went to, but she was one of the first people — friends I had — that was a well-educated woman, because it was not common for women to go to university in those days. We had teachers that had degrees, but I wasn't close friends with them, and Mrs. Priestly meant a tremendous amount to me.

Her daughter joined the Wrens, I guess it was, and she wasn't home anymore. So when I used to see Mrs. Priestly a lot — go over and visit with her — I (would) always think of her more as a personal friend than somebody that was interested in nature. But I got interested in wildflowers, and she helped me; she showed me how to make posters, and how to properly mount them, and label them and everything, you know, the way you're supposed to. I had quite a collection at one time, and she worked. I don't know whether it was volunteer, or whether she was paid (by) Ducks Unlimited, doing a survey on what plants were coming back as the drought left, because the drought was beginning to go away, and the water was starting to come back.

York Lake was almost empty during the dry years, and she was doing surveys for them. I don't know whether it was a paid job or not.

M: I remember reading something about that, and so your memory is very accurate when you talk about some of the things that Mrs. Priestly did.

Okay, but there's a sad part to the Mrs. Priestly story, and that was her sudden passing. When Mrs. Priestly passed away, that was a sad day.

R: Oh, that was terrible. I think it was Easter, and I think the war was just over, and Diana and Frank were home, I'm pretty sure. Diana was anyway. I don't know what they were doing, whether they were still in the army, or whether they'd been demobbed.

I had gone up on the hill where Brian lives now, and I picked crocuses. We used to call it Crocus Hill, and I took her some crocuses, and she said she had this terrible headache she'd had for several days, and she'd been to the eye doctor, and he said there was nothing wrong with her ... he said take aspirin, and she was not feeling really well.

Anyway, the night that she died, she phoned me, and the kids had left, and she said, my headache has got better. It's suddenly gone, and I thought, well, maybe it was stress, you know, from having all the family home. And she said we'll meet tomorrow and start working on the new *Blue Jay*, and she died during the night. Nowadays, of course, if you had a bad headache like that, they'd suspect a stroke right away, but they didn't in those days. Then her son, the little one, Michael, lived with us after she died until the end of August, maybe the beginning of September, and then his dad arranged for him to go to a boarding school in Winnipeg.

M: So how old was ...

R: Michael? You know, I've been trying to think. I think he must have been about 12. But I'm not sure. He was still going to public school anyway. He wasn't in high school yet. He might have been 12 or 13. Can't remember how much younger he was than Diana, but there was quite a difference between them.

M: So Isabel was not very old.

R: I don't know how old she was.

M: I think she would have been in her 50s.

R: Yeah, yeah. She'd be about the same age as my mother. Yeah, and they were friends, too, and they were both English war brides. My mother married my dad during World War I, or just after World War I, and I guess Mrs. Priestly got married during the war because Frank was older than Diana.

M: Okay. Thanks for sharing that with us. That was very nice to hear. I mean, you read about these things, but having you be able to tell us when we know that you were there is much, much better.

R: I remember once, I didn't know much about birds. I remember she was going to be camping at Madge Lake, and we used to camp there, too. I said, well, there's no birds there except ducks and loons and crows, and I remember her laughing, and then I stayed with her.

She and Diana were camping there, and Michael, and I stayed with them for a week. I can remember Mrs. Priestly standing in the middle of a slough, surrounded by mosquitoes, looking at a bird through her binoculars, and Diana laughing. One of my favourite memories ever.

M: Okay, so what about some of the other people? Do you have memories of, you know, Stuart Houston, for example, or, I don't know where I read this, and I might be making it up, but did Farley Mowat ever come to Yorkton?

R: No, I can't tell you that. I honestly don't know.

M: For some reason, I have that in my head. I might have made that up.

R: Yeah, I don't remember, because he was overseas during the war, so unlikely he would have been. I don't know how long he was overseas, but I know he served overseas, and I remember somebody coming who raised bees and talking about raising bees. I don't know why that's stuck in my mind, but I remember that. I really don't remember too much about what we actually did at the meetings, but I know I went.

M: Well, maybe you were young and you weren't paying attention.

R: No, I had other things on my mind during the war.

M: Okay ... just a couple more things. Are there any other fond memories that you have of that time — things that you might want to share with us?

R: Well, you know, it was a friendship, and you don't think of it as any special thing. I was engaged to be married, and Mrs. Priestly gave me some dish towels for a gift, and I still have them. You know, it was more of a friendship than thinking about nature all the time, but she was always interested in nature, and I remember that she used to go out in snowshoes in the winter, and she was out looking at birds all the time in the summer. One memory I remember, I had never seen waxwings. I don't know whether they were just moving into this part of the country, but in front of the high school, there was a tree full of waxwings, and Diana and I were fascinated.

They're so pretty, and I remember asking Mrs. Priestly what they were. Of course, she knew right away, and that's the first time I remember seeing waxwings. I know that she told me the Mountain Bluebirds were appearing in Saskatchewan, and they hadn't been before, and she was interested in that. I don't know whether the Gunns were members of the Natural History Society or not. Joyce and her mother; she was Joyce Anaka later on.

M: I'm sure they were.

R: Yeah, I know they used to take part in the bird count, and I remember — I don't know what year it was — but there was an eclipse of the sun, and the best place in the world or in Canada to watch it was Bredenbury, I think. I remember us getting up about five o'clock in the morning and driving there and waiting for the eclipse of the sun. Everything got dark. The birds stopped singing. It was just for about five or ten seconds, it was dark.

M: I've never experienced that, but I've heard other people describe what you're telling me, and it's kind of almost a weird, eerie sort of a ...

R: You know, it was summer, and the birds were sort of singing, and then all of a sudden there wasn't a sound and it was dark. I suppose I was taking part in it because of Mrs. Priestly, probably. I don't know whether she was in the car with us, but I remember going out there.

M: Thank you for allowing us to come here and to talk to you.

R: Oh, I like to look back.

M: Yeah, and just to say one more time that Mrs. Priestly was a pretty interesting and amazing person.

R: She was. She was absolutely charming and kind and interested in Di and I — what we were doing in high school, you know, and we could go and talk to her about what we were reading or doing in high school. She was a wonderful friend. I missed her terribly when she died.

M: She started something that continues today, something that's still very, very ...

R: Yeah, she'd be amazed at the beautiful *Blue Jay* that comes out now.

M: What a wonderful thing she did, and what a wonderful thing you did in helping her with that. And so I thank you for letting us come and talk to you today, and I want to remind you one more time that there are not very many people — maybe nobody else — that would be able to tell us those life experiences that you had knowing Mrs. Priestly and at the very, very beginning of what now is the Saskatchewan Natural History Society. So, very fortunate to be able to come and see you. Thank you.

R: Oh, you're welcome. I just remembered I typed one of the *Blue Jays* (and) I didn't know anything about birds ... I typed something about a Ruffed Grouse, and it was supposed to be a Ruffed Grouse, and she had to put an apology in the next *Blue Jay*!

As part of our 75th anniversary celebrations, we are interviewing and writing articles that highlight active members who have had a significant impact on Nature Saskatchewan, as nominated by fellow members. 🐦

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