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# Isabel Kelly

## *Pioneer Literacy Worker*

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he following is an excerpt from an interview by Marjorie Zavitz [whose questions appear in italics] with Mrs. Isabel Kelly, formerly Miss Isabel Mackey, who worked for Frontier College during the summer of 1920 and 1921.

Originally from a farming background, at the time Isabel Mackey was a graduate student in Physics at the University of Toronto. Upon the completion of her Master's degree in 1922, Miss Mackey was offered a position at Yale. However, the offer was subsequently withdrawn, when her acceptance letter revealed her sex, so she pursued a Ph.D. in Education instead, and taught mathematics at Port Arthur Collegiate Institute until her retirement in 1963.

*Somehow or other you heard about Frontier College and felt you would like to work for them?*

I think it must have been an ad in the paper or something, I can't remember, but I remember I contacted Mr. Fitzpatrick and he was most anxious that I go out to the prairies...Mr. Fitzpatrick met me in Regina and we went up to his brother's, John, who lived five or six miles out of Stalwart on a farm...

*And what was your assignment?*

I think it was to work up more or less of a community spirit because...[people in the community came from many different cultures and] to encourage them in meeting together and probably in good reading as much as anything else but I didn't succeed too well.

*Well, you also mentioned that it was important to talk to the women?*

The women seemed to enjoy talking to me and we were happy together. I picked berries and anything I could do to help around...Then, one of the women... had a new baby the same time as they were thrashing the grain and [I filled in for her]. I managed to cook most anything but pies...They were completely beyond me.

*Did you set up any educational programs? Did you go around and try to teach English?*

No, there wasn't very much I could do in that line. It was in the summer holidays and the children in the neighbourhood went to school on horseback and I didn't know much about their school.

AN INTERVIEW BY MARJORIE ZAVITZ

*It sounds like you were sort of a cross between a social worker and a community developer, you were trying to get spirit into the community.*

Yes, I would say now looking back...that Mr. Fitzpatrick's ideas were far advanced for that day...He was trying to bring the pleasant things in life to the people, to the community, because they had their long winters and radios at that time were few and far between...

*Frontier College didn't send men into that type of job at the time.*

Oh no, most of the men were working in the camps and things and were paid and they did their teaching at night. Which, of course, was a little different. I do think I wrote a few letters for people and things like that.

*Would that mean that some of the women couldn't write?*

Well the English would be a little difficult.

*[Note: The next summer Isabel Mackey worked in Nova Scotia].*

I boarded at a house with a man and his wife... I worked in the canning factory whenever the fish were available. I worked with the women.

*Would any of the women [in the factory] have been supporting themselves?*

Well, there might have been some because if their husbands were gone, the welfare wasn't the same as it is today. People had to look after themselves pretty much.

*Were you also supposed to teach in this community?*

I think nowadays it would come under social welfare. No, I didn't do any teaching. There was attempts at games and things like that and Mr. MacLean [another Frontier College worker] did more than I did. I let him take the initiative in it and I did what I could to help out with the games and things of that nature, but no, I don't think there was anyone there that couldn't read and write.

*Did you get close to any of the ladies and did the ladies have any problems with the company or personal problems?*

We talked about cooking and home conditions and that sort of thing. Just general conversation, what they were interested in and their homes and everything.

*Was there a difference between these women and the women in Saskatchewan who were isolated more?*

Oh yes...The women of the West — they felt isolated. They didn't have anyone to talk to like these women in the villages.

*What about Mr. Fitzpatrick's attitude to women?*

...They were more or less on a pedestal. I think he had a great deal of respect for them.

*He thought that they would be a very good influence on the men of the community in the outlying communities, didn't he?*

Yes, he said if they went out to work he would think of their influence...they would have a gentling effect on where he sent them, on the canneries and places of that sort.

