

Nellie Cashman: A Legend of the West

In 1994, the United States Post Office issued a set of stamps that honored "The Legends of the West." There were sixteen people selected to this elite group, including Buffalo Bill, Annie Oakley, Wyatt Earp and Kit Carson. Also named was Nellie Cashman, who came to this country as a refugee from Ireland's potato famine. She was born in Middleton, County Cork in 1845 and immigrated to the United States with her widowed mother and younger sister Fanny when she was five years old.



The family lived in Boston until, like so many others who were seeking a new life, this courageous mother and her daughters headed west in the late 1860's, settling in the growing and vibrant community of San Francisco. In 1872, Nellie and her mother traveled to Pioche, Nevada where they opened a boarding house in the silver mining district. During her two years in Pioche, Nellie became keenly interested in mining and set out on her own as a miner. It was her mining activities which led Nellie Cashman to be immortalized 122 years later by the Postal Service as a Legend of the West. Attracted to the Alaskan -Territory by a-gold strike, Nellie brought-her mother back to San Francisco to stay with Fanny, now married and starting a family. Nellie then traveled alone to British Columbia and joined a group of miners in an expedition to the remote Cassiar District, not far from what became Juneau, Alaska. The intrepid Nellie, the first woman of European background to reach Cassiar, following her mother's advice that a miner has to have something steady to fall back on, opened a boarding house to supplement her gold mining activities.

Barely five feet tall and weighing less than a hundred pounds, Nellie proved to the rough and tumble society of miners that being petite and being a woman were no handicaps when one possesses courage and spirit. Fred Dodge, a Wells Fargo undercover agent who knew Nellie, said about her: "She was very outspoken, and sometimes made enemies by her uncensored expressions of opinion." Nellie once said she "preferred being pals with men

to being a cook for one man." The men returned her affection by acting as her "big brother" when a large man's presence was to her advantage.

Nellie earned her reputation as an "angel of mercy" during the winter of 1874-75. While she was on a trip to Victoria to purchase supplies, a severe winter blizzard slammed into Cassiar, cutting off the stranded miners. Nellie purchased the supplies and sleds she needed to launch a rescue mission. She sailed to Fort Wrangell, Alaska with six men she had hired and headed inland through heavy snows. It took seventy-seven days for the rescuers to reach Cassiar and save the lives of two hundred miners. Her success in reaching the miners with the needed medicine and food became the talk of the West. The miners considered her their savior; she had earned the title "The Angel of Cassiar."

With all of her chasing of silver and gold, Nellie never struck it rich, although she hoped, like all of the miners, to hit the big vein that would yield the immense wealth of legends. Her goal in life was to make lots of money and help those who needed help the most. She achieved half of her goal, the part where she would help the needy.

In 1879, Nellie headed south to the warm climate of the Arizona Territory and opened a restaurant in Tucson. Within a year, she moved on to a new silver mining camp at Tombstone where she worked many gold and silver claims. Of course, she also opened six different businesses as backup to the vagaries of mining. Tombstone was the frontier town that has gone down in American popular culture as the epitome of the Wild West. It was the town where the legendary Gunfight at the OK Corral took place in 1881, featuring those almost mythic figures, Wyatt Earp, Doc Holiday, and the Clanton brothers. It was the town that was raided occasionally by Geronimo. While history was being made in Tombstone, Nellie Cashman was doing what she did best, operating a restaurant and helping people. She served many free meals to unlucky miners; she raised money for the Wolfe Tone Branch of the Land League to help the Irish; she helped to establish the first hospital in Tombstone; and she raised money to erect Sacred Heart Church, the first Catholic church in the town.

When in 1881, her brother-in-law Tom Cunningham died, Nellie took in her sister Fanny and her five children. She became the sole spiritual and financial support of her five nieces and nephews when Fanny died three years later. Recognizing the children's need for a good education and Tombstone's inability to provide it, Nellie sent the children to Catholic schools in California and remained always a part of their lives. Nellie was like a mother to her sister's children, but when asked why she had never married, she replied, "I haven't had time for marriage. Men are a nuisance

anyway, now aren't they? They're just boys grownup. I've nursed them, embalmed them, fed and scolded them, acted as mother confessor and fought my own with them and you have to treat them just like boys."

During the 1890's, Nellie tried her luck at mining camps in Sonora, Mexico, and Prescott and Yuma, Arizona, and several points in Montana. In 1897 while she was operating the Hotel Cashman in Yuma, Nellie heard about the gold strike in the Klondike. She hired a manager for the hotel, arranged for some financial backing, and headed north, making the difficult trek over the Chilkoot Pass to Dawson. With the assistance of her nephew Tom Cunningham, she worked her claims and, of course, operated a restaurant. Nellie and Tom made and spent a considerable amount of money in the Yukon. When a strike paid off, she would invest in further claims and, as usual, contribute to the local church and hospital. By this time, Nellie was a major donor to the Sisters of St. Ann, giving money to build their first hospital in Victoria, British Columbia. By 1904, mining in Dawson had peaked, and Nellie moved on to a site which is now a part of Fairbanks, opening a store and mining supply center. Once again Nellie raised money for the local hospital.

The next year, prospectors were bringing in great specimens of gold from the distant north. Nellie, then sixty years old, could not resist the lure of another strike, so she traveled by dog sled 750 miles over snow and ice to the Koyukuk River basin north of the Arctic Circle. One of the first to file claims there, she would eventually file twenty claims during the next two decades. Truly at home in Koyukuk country, she spent her remaining years in this remote and harsh area of the world. Nellie died in 1925 as she approached her eightieth birthday.

Tombstone, Arizona celebrates Nellie Cashman Day on August 23rd to remember its "Angel of Mercy," another Daughter of Ireland is honored in another land.

(written by Tom Lee)

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