

Betty Clair of Craigflower school

By Elizabeth Gordon

She was born in the Craigflower schoolhouse. Her mother was a Palliser, an early settler of the region, and Mrs. Betty Clair still loves living in the country. She has a picturesque home and colorful flower garden on Sooke Road. She tells of her grandfather, Hugh Palliser and other pioneers to whom she is related.

"Grandfather Palliser was janitor at the Craigflower School and he lived there" reminisces Mrs. Clair. I asked her about the ghost story linked with Craigflower school during her grandfather's tenure and she was, of course, familiar with the tale.

Hugh Palliser and his family came from Yorkshire, England, in 1911 and took up residence straightaway in the old schoolhouse. His daughter, Bertha, about 20 years old at the time, later became the mother of Betty Clair. However the story begins with the collapse of the Craigflower bridge, and the falling of a truck into the Gorge. The problem arose of salvaging the truck and it was decided to winch it to dry land. The winch was to be set up on Craigflower schoolgrounds. A workman dug a hole to anchor it.

He got a terrible shock when his shovel unearthed some bones, but he told himself they were just part of an animal skeleton. However, continuing to dig, he found more and more bones and eventually dug up a human skull. He realized, of course, that he had happened upon a grave and believed it to be that of an Indian of years gone by.

Mr. Palliser was informed and, gathering up the pieces of the skeleton, put them in a large box which he stored in the woodshed adjoining the kitchen of the schoolhouse. Apparently his daughter was interested in rebuilding objects which had come apart and he thought perhaps she would like to reconstruct the complete skeleton from the bones.

Suppertime came and went. The family remained in the kitchen, reading, and clustering around the warmth of the stove. All of a sudden the door to the woodshed opened with a click, and the kitchen was invaded by a draft of cold air. The family was amazed. Hugh Palliser checked the outside door. It was still locked.

It took a while for the family to settle down once more, but they finally did. Then at bedtime the door to the lean-to woodshed swung open again. Hugh Palliser jumped up, grabbed a light and explored the woodshed. Nothing out of the ordinary could be seen. He was just about to leave when the lantern lit upon the skull in its box. It seemed to leer at Palliser, its eye-sockets glowing with a malevolent light, its jaw curled back into a snarl.

Palliser's first emotions were shock and fear. Then he told himself that it was only his imagination and left, going up to bed.

However, he had to acknowledge that there was definitely something amiss. He had nightmares that night, and the following evening after his family had retired, he sat up late, near the stove's warmth, with the lantern beside him. He sat quietly for hours, waiting for the woodshed door to open. At last his patience was rewarded.

The latch lifted and the door swung open. Immediately Palliser snatched up the lantern and rushed to the woodshed. The beam of light, as he swung the lantern round, focused upon all that was in the shed: Mrs. Palliser's preserves; his own tools; and the firewood neatly chopped and stacked ready for the stove. Palliser checked the outside door. Locked as usual. At last his light lit up the contours of the grisly skull. It seemed to be alive and evil.

Palliser grabbed a shovel, his lantern and the bones. Rushing outside he found a good spot and began to dig. Soon he had reburied the bones but where, no one ever knew. He did not tell a soul. This then was the story of Hugh Palliser and the ghost of Craigflower School.

Mrs. Betty Clair has many other reminiscences of the early times. But she is not one to live in the past. At present she is consumer convener of the Craiflower Women's Institute and has held convener positions for about 10 years.



Betty Clair (Gibson), right, with Annabelle Grice.

"My mother was the first secretary of the W.I. here and they met in the old schoolhouse to start with. Now we meet at the View Royal Hall. However, we have our teas and bazaars at the All Saints' Church hall in View Royal. We would never get everyone in the other little hall. I think we are the second largest Women's Institute in B.C. and the largest one on Vancouver Island."

Mrs. Clair tells of the time when the old Craigflower Farm included the area where Craigflower Auto Court is situated. She remembers how everyone helped each other in the old times. She tells of her grandfather rowing everybody back and forth when the bridge collapsed. There were the school children to bring across the water, too. It kept Hugh Palliser very busy.

Bertha Palliser, Betty's mother, wed Charles Ignatius Clair, a Frenchman who had become a naturalized American. He died tragically when his little daughter was but one year old. Clair succumbed to exposure when he slipped through the ice while working up north.

When little Betty Clair grew up she wed "a wonderul sailor; his whole life was the sea." His name was Sidney Langley, but Betty Clair, (whose name of course, changed to Langley at her marriage), prefers to be known now by her maiden name. Women's Institute members know this pleasant lady as "Betty Gibson," as she remarried after her first husband's death.

Sidney Langley was "very British" and was born at Much Wenlock, Shropshire, England.

Langley had left home when just a lad and ran away to sea, but the marine life suited him. He was older than his wife, too, and remembered the sailing ships of long ago.

Betty Clair is not one to look back, though. She has always been an accomplished cook and especially likes baking. She always canned and bottled and preserved fruit, too. An avid gardener, she loves growing flowers, particularly rare alpine varieties. She considers horticulture her chief hobby.

This busy lady likes to read "all types of books." At present she is engrossed in one about early England. She particularly enjoys historical works.

Pets are another interest. Proud owner of two small poodle-cross dogs, she came to their rescue when they were ill and injured. Named Benjie II and Mikey, they sleep at her feet at night. She tells of how she came to have Mikey.

"When I got him he was really starved. He had been found in a ditch where he had been for a long

time. He was also a very noisy dog; barked all the time. The vet phoned me and said: 'I have a little dog here that needs looking after. He is in casts and has been badly injured.' So I took Mikey in. He recovered, put on weight and even ceased all the barking."

Birds, too, are always welcome visitors. Betty Clair feeds towhees, junkos, golden crown sparrows and "millions of robins."

Always active, she taught dancing for many years, at first giving lessons in her home. Later she and her group gave shows for the men at William Head and Albert Head. She played with a band, too. Laughingly she says that she played drums because she never learned to read music, though she has a well-developed musical "ear."

"It was fun," she says. Mrs. Clair had a lot of fun in her life because she enjoyed whatever she was doing.

"I trained all the children for *Showboat*. It was held in the Inner Harbor. There were seats all down the embankment and the show was free. It was held in the 1930s just before the war and every week we trained for a new show.

In fact of all Betty Clair's busy life she most enjoyed the time she was training people for *Showboat*. That time and the time she spends gardening she believes to be the most happy. She lived in the schoolhouse until the war was over and then built a house in Sooke.

Her hilltop home is a great source of pleasure to this country-loving lady, who is always helping others and lending a hand at the Women's Institute. It is obvious that she was always energetic, and her chief characteristic is her bubbling, vicacious manner. She is an open, friendly lady quick to laugh, with warm handshake that bespeaks a person who really likes people. Fond of company, she is very popular. Her philosophy can be summed up in her own words:

"I like to help people and make them happy."

Whether she is telling tales of the past or touching on present events, her conversation is always lively and stimulating.

Growing up under the wing of uncle Hugh Palliser, it is not surprising that Betty Clair developed many of the same traits as her indomitable uncle. The Palliser hospitality, courage and love of one's neighbor so clearly displayed in Hugh Palliser, custodian of Craigflower schoolhouse, is found today in Betty Clair a dear lady beloved by all who know her.