

**UNIVERSITY WOMEN'S CLUB OF VANCOUVER**  
**FOUR FAMOUS MEMBERS WHO INFLUENCED VANCOUVER AND CANADA**

*Adapted with thanks from "Women Lead the Way: A History of The University Women's Club of Vancouver, 1907 -2007" By Jean Mann, Beverley New and Cathy Barford, Wikipedia & websites of the Government of Canada*

On October 18<sup>th</sup> each year the University Women's Club of Vancouver celebrates Person's Day, to commemorate the day in 1929 when women in Canada were declared eligible to sit in the Canadian Senate as a result of the case *Edwards v. Canada (Attorney General)*, more commonly known as *The Persons Case*.

The Persons Case honors the five Alberta women, known as *The Famous Five*, that later lead to the victory of Canadian women's equality which gives women the right to be appointed to the Senate of Canada and paved the way for women's increased participation in public and political life. Those five women were Emily Murphy, Nellie McClung, Irene Parlby, Louise McKinney and Henrietta Muir Edward. In 1927 these five women went to the Supreme Court of Canada to get an answer as to why women were not included in the word *person* according to the *British North American Act*. The debate took over five weeks and the court ruled that women would not be included in the word *person*. Two years later, after the women took the case to London, to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council of Great Britain, Canada's highest court of appeal, the question was answered "*why should it not?*", a decision which not only helped women have a place in the senate but also gave women more rights and equality.

At the University Women's Club of Vancouver, we celebrate these four women who made a difference in Vancouver and in our Club.

**Evlyn Fenwick Farris**  
**1878 to 1971**



Evlyn Fenwick was born in Nova Scotia in 1878 and studied at Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia. In 1905 Evlyn and her family moved to Vancouver, BC.

In the spring of 1907, seven other women graduates from universities in Eastern Canada and the U.S.A. met with Evlyn in her Davie Street home and they established The University Women's Club of Vancouver (UWCV) on May 11. Evlyn became the first president of the Club and held that position until 1910.

Evlyn had a firm belief in the importance of University education for women. She wrote tirelessly about the role of women in society and as a result, had many influences on the rights of women and their ability to access education.

In the early days of The UWCV, the founders decided that the club members would be divided into seven sections, each of which was to be given a special subject to investigate. In 1911, these seven sections are listed as education, laws, social services, civics, economics, art, literature, and drama, each of which had a convenor.

The Objectives of the club were:

1. To stimulate intellectual activity and to promote social discourse among university women
2. To encourage the study of social and economic conditions and to promote cooperation in public service, particularly in the field of education.

In an article she wrote for the Halifax herald, Evlyn wrote, "It is imperative that women use their minds, especially their reasoning powers, so as to keep them from jumping to conclusions." The rational way of thinking was essential for women she continued, because "in the process of time woman will transmit these logical habits of mind to her children and all society will be benefited by this radical change in thought."

In addition to her numerous community contributions, Evlyn became the first woman in Canada to sit on the Board of Governors of a University when she was appointed to the UBC Board in 1917 where she held this position until 1942.

She was awarded two honorary doctorates one from her alma mater – Acadia and one from UBC (1942).

Evlyn Fenwick Farris died in 1971 at the age of 93 years. Sylvie McClean tells her full story in the book "A Woman of Influence" published in 1997.

### **Evelyn Story Lett 1896 to 1999**

Born in Wawanesa, Manitoba, Evelyn Story moved with her family to Vancouver, British Columbia in 1910. She was a brilliant student and received a scholarship to the University of British Columbia (UBC). She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1917 from UBC, as one of the first female graduates.

She was a founding member of the UBC Alma Mater Society and helped give the UBC women the right to vote in 1914 even before women could vote in Canada.

Evelyn received her Masters degree from UBC in 1926 in history and sociology. In 1926, she joined the University Women's Club of Vancouver and in 1928, she married Sherwood Lett, a Canadian soldier, lawyer, diplomat, and jurist.

Both Evelyn and her husband, Sherwood, played a major role in establishing the Alma Mater Society, AMS, Student Society at UBC, laying the foundations for much of what the AMS has today.

Evelyn joined the University Women's Club of Vancouver (UWCV) in 1926 and quickly became involved, taking on responsibility for various offices. She became the seventeenth President in 1936. At UWCV, the decades of the 40's and 50's were her time of greatest activity when she filled a number of roles and perhaps more significantly, kept reminding the members of their most important goals.

Throughout her long life, her enquiring mind, acceptance of all peoples regardless of race or gender or social background, positive attitudes, and activism, enabled her to initiate and bring to successful conclusion many projects of inestimable value to the community.

She received two honorary degrees, one from UBC and one from Simon Fraser. In 1997, her 101<sup>st</sup> year, she was made an Officer of the Order of Canada for her "immense impact on the Vancouver community by raising hundreds of thousands of dollars for a senior's facility and a much-needed daycare centre for the University".

Despite her busy life and demands made on her time, she was an active member of the Club, and retained her membership until the time of her death in 1999.

**Helen Gregory MacGill**  
**1864 to 1947**



Born in Hamilton, Ontario, Helen Emma Gregory MacGill received a B.A. and an M.A. degree in 1888 from Trinity College (now part of the University of Toronto), the only woman in her class and the first female graduate.

That same year, 1888, while travelling with her mother, Helen was introduced to the editor of *Cosmopolitan*, at that time a political magazine. He was so impressed with her quick mind, lively personality and writing style that was described as being “brisk, factual and entertaining, surprisingly free from the sentimentality and ponderousness of those Victorian days” that she was hired to cover political events in Japan for both *Cosmopolitan* and the *Atlantic Monthly*.

As a reporter, she travelled alone across the Canadian West to Japan, marrying her first husband en route. Although never a career woman, she wrote and published all her life.

When living with her husband in California, she bought two small weekly newspapers and for one of them, adapted the motto “The World Needs Women Who Do Their Own Thinking.”

They moved to Minnesota a few years later and after discovering the presence of corruption in the State’s Institutions, she wrote and lobbied indefatigably for change. She was asked to address the legislature and to draft legislation that was adopted in 1901.

After the death in 1900 of her first husband, Dr. F.C. Flescher, she married J.H. MacGill in 1902 and moved to Vancouver where she spent the remainder of her life.

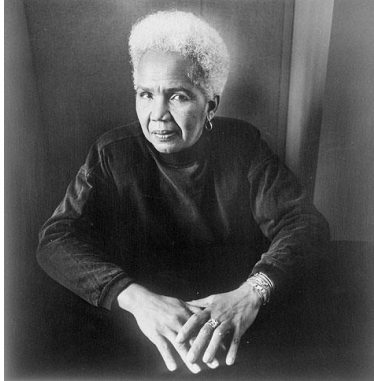
She joined the UWCV in 1908 and was on the executive of the Vancouver Council of Women. She was a noted women's rights advocate in Canada, where she fought for female suffrage.

Helen MacGill was one of Canada's first woman judges and for many years the only woman judge. She served for 23 years as judge of the Juvenile Court in Vancouver; she was the first woman appointed judge in the region (1917) and the third in Canada. The Court itself had been created because of the pressures for reform exerted by women's groups in which MacGill was active.

In 1925, Helen produced a revised version of the book containing “Laws for Women and Children in British Columbia.”

She continued on with her work as a political activist for her entire life even into her retirement.

**Rosemary Brown**  
**1930 to 2003**



Rosemary Brown was born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1930; in 1950 she moved to Canada to attend university to study at McGill University in Montreal.

Canada in the 1950s was not an open society, and she was shocked by the discrimination in housing and employment that she faced. In Jamaica, she had lived as a member of the majority; her experiences in Canada as a member of the marginalized Afro-Canadian minority had a profound and lasting effect on her. She determined to work toward eliminating the barriers that specific groups faced within Canadian society.

Rosemary Brown worked tirelessly for the causes she believed in: equality and rights for women, members of visible minorities and the disadvantaged. Her impressive public service record and widespread interests and influence are a testament to the remarkable person she was and the inspiration she provided to others.

After graduating from McGill University in 1955, Rosemary married and moved to British Columbia. She completed her Master of Social Work at the University of British Columbia (1965), and held jobs as a social worker and as a counsellor at Simon Fraser University. The 1960s was a time of significant political change in Canada, as both Blacks and women challenged their unequal status in society.

Already committed to the rights of Afro-Canadians, Rosemary became a dedicated feminist and an advocate of equality for women. She was influenced by Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, commenting in her autobiography that it "was one of the three 'jolts' that have hardened my commitment to feminism; the other two were Marilyn French's *The Women's Room*, a book about the sometimes brutal relationship between men and women, and a strange little TV drama called *The Stepford Wives* . . ." (*Being Brown*, p. 81). Rosemary was one of the founders of the Vancouver Status of Women Council and became its Ombudswoman.

The decision to run for elected office was a major undertaking for Rosemary, given contemporary attitudes toward race and gender. Nonetheless, she achieved a major breakthrough for people of colour by becoming the first woman of African descent elected to a Canadian provincial legislature.

She served in British Columbia's legislative assembly as the New Democratic Party (NDP) representative from 1972 until 1986, first as the Member of a Legislative Assembly (MLA) for Vancouver-Burrard and later as the member for Burnaby-Edmonds. In 1973, she was awarded the UN Human Rights Fellowship.

She reached another milestone when she sought the leadership of the Federal NDP in 1975. The party's website summarizes this event and her contribution as follows:

"In 1975, while raising three children, Brown ran for the leadership of the Federal NDP. She lost on the fourth ballot to Ed Broadbent, but achieved the distinction of being the first black woman to run for the leadership of a federal political party . . ."

As an important member of British Columbia's NDP government in the 1970s, she formed a committee to eliminate sexism in school textbooks and curricula, played a major role in establishing the Berger Commission on the Family, and was instrumental in introducing legislation to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex or marital status. Her efforts contributed directly to an increase in the number of women represented on boards, commissions and directorates.

After retiring from politics in 1986, Rosemary brought her talents to a variety of positions. She was a professor of Women's Studies at Simon Fraser University in 1987, and the executive director of Match International Centre from 1989 to 1993. She also served as Chief Commissioner of the Ontario Human Rights Commission from 1993 to 1996, and was a member of various boards, including the Canadian Security Intelligence Review Committee (1993-1998).

Rosemary was a popular speaker as well as a prolific writer. In addition to her autobiography *Being Brown . . .* (1989), she wrote regular columns for *The Vancouver Sun* from 1991 to 2002, and for the feminist periodical *Herizons* (1992).

In 1995, she was awarded the Order of British Columbia and in 1996 was named an Officer of the Order of Canada. Brown was sworn to the Queen's Privy Council for Canada as a member of the Canadian Security Intelligence Review Committee from 1993 to 1998. This board is the overseer for the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, or CSIS.

She was given the Order of Jamaica and awarded Honorary degrees from many Canadian universities, including the University of Toronto, the University of British Columbia and McGill University.

Rosemary Brown was a member of the UWCV for nine years and was the keynote speaker for the CFUW AGM 1997 in Kelowna. She also served on the Order of Canada Advisory Committee from 1999 until her death in 2003. She died on April 26, 2003 in Vancouver, British Columbia and members of the many communities whom she served mourned her death.

Canada Post featured Rosemary Brown on a Canadian postage stamp released on February 2, 2009.

Her daughter, Cleta Brown, is our current President of the University Women's Club of Vancouver at Hycroft.