

JEAN WELBANKS GEMMELL MINHINNICK

“Preserver of Ontario's Past”

Inducted 2012

Jean Welbanks Gemmell was born in Ottawa, Ontario on June 4, 1903. Because her mother, Jennie Gemmell, died at her birth, she was raised by her maternal grandparents in Picton and Toronto. As she explained in the foreword of her book “*At Home in Upper Canada*”

Both had been born well before 1850 and were the grandchildren of Loyalists who had left Poughkeepsie on the Hudson River and the city of Philadelphia about 1783 and made homes for themselves on the north and south shores of Prince Edward County. Each summer we went visiting in the County where my grandparents had been born and where they knew almost everyone. Both had taught school there, and in the 1870s my grandfather had owned and edited the Picton Times. . . We stayed in old houses and on farms where the furnishings, customs, speech and manners were those of the nineteenth century.

The exposure to the history of the Quinte area while growing up in Prince Edward County created a life-long interest in Ontario's past.

After finishing secondary school in Toronto, Jean became the assistant editor of the Women's section of the Canadian Farmer from 1921 to 1923. She also was the editor of the News and Markets sections of three trade papers for the Maclean Publishing Company from 1924 to 1925. She was married in 1924 to William Nelson Minhinnick, a veteran of the First World War, who held a position with Consolidated Press and was Vice-President of his family's business, Wright Lithographing Company Limited of London, Ontario. Their daughter, Alix, was born the next year. A few years later Jean worked at the Albert Britnell Book Shop in Toronto. Thus began a twenty-year association which allowed her interest in writing, and the past, to flourish. By 1940 she became chief assistant and buyer for Roy Britnell and was invited to lecture on the social history of Upper Canada. Her book reviews and feature articles on Canadian antiques appeared in Canadian magazines.



At the beginning of the Second World War, she was living in Toronto, but yearned for a retreat in Prince Edward County. They purchased the abandoned canning factory in Port Milford, South Marysburgh, and she began its restoration. Once restored, it was a favourite gathering place for family and friends.

When construction was started on the St. Lawrence Seaway which would flood land and historic homes along its banks, the Ontario St. Lawrence Development Commission decided to create Upper Canada Village, to preserve some of these buildings and Jean was invited to become an honorary adviser in 1957. In 1958 Jean joined the staff of Upper Canada Village as a Research Assistant, responsible for public relations and local history research. She selected and purchased furnishings for all the buildings, supervised their repair and refinishing and chose the paint colours, wallpapers and curtains, and assisted

in planning the landscape and flower gardens. When Upper Canada Village opened, Jean was appointed Curator of Furnishings and Supervisor of Period Gardens, a position which she held from 1961 to 1963. Her accomplishments at Upper Canada Village led her to other restoration projects at historic buildings across Ontario: McFarland House near Queenston; William Lyon Mackenzie King's boyhood home, Woodside, in Kitchener and his Toronto home on Bond Street; Chiefswood, home of Pauline Johnson near Brantford; Dundurn Castle in Hamilton; the Old Stone House in Sault Ste. Marie; Whitehern in Hamilton; The Grange in Toronto; Battlefield House in Stoney Creek; Macauley House in Picton. Well into her seventies, Jean continued her work. In 1978, she was a consultant for the furnishing of the historic rooms in the East Block of the Houses of Parliament in Ottawa.

Jean published several important books at this time: *Early Furniture in Upper Canada Village, A Study of Furniture in Room Use in Upper Canada During the Years 1784 to 1867*, *Bibliography for the Use of Students of Canadian Furnishings*, and *A Preliminary Study of Furniture Making in Upper Canada*, and wrote feature articles for many magazines and was a regular columnist for *Canadian Homes and Gardens* and *Chatelaine*. In addition to her writing she accepted speaking engagements at McMaster University, Colonial Williamsburg Antiques Forum, the Canadian Library Association and many other organizations. Her final book, published in 1970 was the popular "*At Home in Upper Canada*" which dealt with life in Pioneer Ontario, with much of the information coming from her early days in the Prince Edward County.

In her lifetime, Jean Mihinnick gained an international reputation for her work. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) invited her to help found an international organization and in 1968 she became Vice-President of the Association for Preservation Technology and lectured frequently at their seminars.

In tribute to her valuable contribution to Canada, Jean was appointed a member of the Order of Canada in 1978 at Rideau Hall in Ottawa. Madame Leger presented her with the Gabrielle Leger Medal in Victoria, B.C. in 1979. The County of Prince Edward held a surprise Testimonial Dinner for her at McFarland House in Picton in the same year. This tribute reinforced her lifelong love of Prince Edward County. Jean died in 1985 and left behind lasting memorials of our past in her restorations and her books, including a library she established in Milford, Ontario. Her fascination with the past has influenced the way Ontario values its history at a time when preoccupation with progress tends to dismiss the old.

Jean Welbanks Gemmill Minhinnick was inducted into the Bay of Quinte Branch's Loyalist Hall of Honour by William Morris on September 8, 2012

(source: *Quinte Women of Distinction*, published 2002, article on Jeanne Minhinnick)