

Kathleen Ione Cooper

1929-2020

The Life and Times of Ms. Kathy Cooper

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Before retiring to become a full-time farmer, Kathy Cooper was a much-loved schoolteacher and respected principal in the Abbotsford region for 44 years. Kathy was only 20 when she arrived at Peardonville Elementary in 1949. Shortly thereafter, she became one of the first female principals in the school district.

As one of Kathy's students in the early 1950's, Jim Telford recalls one winter when a snowball ban was put into effect after a student suffered an injury. "Later, we started throwing snowballs again thinking there was no way Ms. Cooper would give us all the strap. But, she gave us ALL the strap and got our respect; she was tough but fair." Jim went on to visit Kathy often in later years.

Way back, Kathy coached many successful schoolboys' baseball teams. Dick Carlson was in Grade 6 at Clayburn Elementary when his team played Peardonville in the early 1950's, only to lose badly. Dick laughs, "It was a long time ago, but I remember that we were impressed that the other school had a female coach."

In the 1960's Kathy would organize an annual "Paper Chase," where a winding trail of shredded newspaper would lead the Grade 7 Peardonville students through the woods to a grove of cedar trees on the nearby Telford farm. After a wiener roast, the students would pile on to the back of Jim Telford's flatbed truck to be driven back to the school.

Another highlight for many former students was the legendary year end trip to Birch Bay, WA. The Grade 7 students would pile, without seatbelts or passports, into cars driven by parents, eager to explore the beach, swim, roller-skate and eat ice-cream. All year long, funds had been raised for this excursion without anyone realizing that Ms. Cooper was actually *teaching* by rewarding team effort.

By the time Ms. Cooper retired as teacher and principal in 1993 from Barrowtown Elementary, she had positively impacted countless students. Some had been young immigrants who remained grateful that Ms. Cooper had taught them to speak English. Others later wrote letters thanking her for making a difference in their lives and updating her on certain successes.

As it turned out, Kathy lived her entire life on the Cooper family farm. She grew up helping her father whenever she could. Her sister, Sheila Price, remembers that Kathy purchased the farm in 1977 and promised their ailing father to take good care of it. This Kathy did with equal parts of passion and determination for the next 43 years, including an overlap of 16 years where she both farmed and taught school.

With the help of employees, Kathy slowly expanded the size of the milking herd from 30 to 100 cows. One of her trusted

advisors, veterinarian Dr Rich Vanderwal reveals, "I spoke regularly with Kathy about quota management and the extra resources required to care for all her cows. We also discussed which cows needed a career change, but the reality was those targets were never fully achieved because it pained her to see animals leave and it gave her joy to retain the rest."

Another veterinarian, Dr. Lauren Lyzenga relates that Ms. Cooper knew all her cows and calves by name as well as their lineage. "She enjoyed naming calves after people who worked with her cows, many of us were graced with a namesake heifer of our own. Her farm had the feeling of stepping back in time to a different era of the dairy industry and in a way, it felt like *living history* to those of us from a younger generation."

For many years very little changed at Cooper Dairy Farm. The red hip-roof barn continued to stand close to the road and while some new loafing barns were built, the cows continued to graze the pastures even as they became surrounded by homes. Kathy became a familiar sight to her new neighbours as she rode her quad to fetch the cows or to take her German Shepherds for regular runs through the fields each day.

For a long time as well, Kathy's appearance and other habits seemed to change very little. Many former students and acquaintances around town remember Kathy being stylish and particular about her hair, nails and jewelry, and that she always drove a sports car such as a Mustang.

Kathy's nephew and niece Greg Price and Michele Price-Perry often stayed at the farm during summers, back in the 1970's. They remember her kindness and love for her cows, the cats (which all had names) and racing the small motorbikes that Auntie Kay had given them for Christmas, between rows of hay. She remained their favourite aunt even though they were made to do chores and pick rocks.

Friend Hank Kruyer used to milk cows for Kathy and visited her often in later years. He recalls that many young people who came looking for work ended up gardening, haying or picking rocks. "Kathy valued hard work and those who did a good job were paid well plus she took the time to teach them." As an example, Hank mentions loyal employee Dom Peña, who arrived without a background in dairying and was mentored by Ms. Cooper to become a much-appreciated herdsman.



Coach Kathy Cooper was proud of her 1966 District 34 Boys Softball Champions team.

Photo courtesy of The Reach Gallery Museum, Abbotsford - P20643



As a genetic advisor for WestGen, Camilo Ruiz visited the farm often and enjoyed working with Kathy on the improvement of the herd. He remembers how he would often find her sitting on a stool in the barn with her dogs at her side. From this vantage point she could monitor her cows and employees despite her declining mobility. "I think she was made of steel," Camilo says, marveling at her determination.

In 2005, Kathy gained national attention as she was featured in a Globe and Mail story due to her refusal to sell her extremely valuable property in the middle of residential Abbotsford. For decades, Kathy had flatly turned eager developers away, not enticed by money or its possibilities. Author Peg Fong quoted her then as saying, "**I'm doing what I want and I'm living where I want. I don't want to go anywhere else and I can't imagine doing anything else.**"

However, from several trustworthy sources, it appears Kathy eventually did finally strike a deal with developers in order to influence what would happen to the property after she passed, a park is believed to be included in future plans. The agreement apparently permitted Kathy to live on the property as long as she wished and allowed her to continue running the farm and go on caring for her cattle in the way she wanted.

Sadly, Kathy passed away unexpectedly on September 13, 2020 at the age of 91. Soon after, there was an outpouring online of memories and expressions of loss. A post from one of her care aides described her a beautiful soul, also revealing that Ms. Cooper had been out on her quad only a few days earlier. It seems Kathy was not only a life-long farmer but that she also taught until the end. Undoubtedly, Ms. Cooper would hope that her lessons of perseverance and contentment would not be lost on us.



Community friend Kathy Cooper delighted her neighbours with her annual Christmas barn lights tradition.

Photo courtesy of Dom Peña

Farmer Kathy Cooper loved her dogs, farm and cows right to the end.

Photo courtesy of Abbotsford Veterinary Clinic.

