

New biography details the lives of adventurous pioneer singers

By Roger Newman

A Gimli educator and a prominent Ontario author have teamed up to produce a new biography about two Canadian women whose career accomplishments a century ago were rare for the time and enviable even today.

Gail Kreutzer, a teacher-consultant with the Evergreen School Division, did the research and Elspeth Cameron undertook the writing for “A Tale of Two Divas”, the story of soprano Jean Forsyth and contralto Edith Miller who made a major impact in music and the community in the late Victorian era long before the days of women’s liberation.

Cameron, a resident of St. Catharines, made her name by writing award-winning biographies of Canadian literary figures such as author Hugh MacLennan and poets Irving Layton and Earle Birney. Kreutzer teaches at Riverton Collegiate and is also Evergreen’s career development consultant based at the Gimli office.

The collaboration between researcher and writer started after Kreutzer read “Aunt Winnie”, Cameron’s reminiscence about her eccentric Toronto aunt. This book mentioned that Jean Forsyth had founded the Winnipeg Humane Society for animals and abused children after she moved from her home town of Chatham, Ont., to become a Winnipeg church soloist and music teacher in 1893. That piqued the interest of Kreutzer, an animal lover and long-time board member of both the former Gimli Animal Shelter and the Winnipeg Humane Society.

“I e-mailed Elspeth for more information about Jean Forsyth’s connection with the Winnipeg Humane Society,” recalls Kreutzer who has been an educator for 32 years. “We established an e-mail relationship and more research led us to the parallel career of another Manitoba church soloist Edith Miller who was a Winnipeg pupil of Jean Forsyth. Miller was born in 1876 and grew up in Portage la Prairie, making her 25 years younger than Forsyth whose birth was in 1851.”

Author Cameron, 74, was ini-



Evergreen School Division educator Gail Kreutzer did the research for “A Tale of Two Divas”, a biography detailing the adventures of two pioneering Western Canadian singers.

tially reluctant to write another book after typing numerous hard covers plus magazine articles about everybody from singer Anne Murray and ballet dancer Veronica Tennant to writer Peter Newman and publisher Jack McLelland. But the author’s resolve melted gradually as she and Kreutzer made more and more discoveries about the two Manitoba singers and their crossing-career paths. Ultimately, she and Kreutzer decided there was a definite need to proceed with a biography of two remarkable women.

“I sent her packages of research material for a full year spanning 2015 and 2016,” recalls Kreutzer who gleaned information about the two divas from libraries, telephone calls and online sources. “I didn’t meet Elspeth in person until she came to Gimli for a visit in the summer of 2015 when the book was about half-completed. Until then it was all e-mails — we hadn’t even exchanged phone calls.”

Now Cameron and Kreutzer have completed a tale about two women who did memorable things in the late-1800s when

Winnipeg was transitioning from a pioneer society to a significant city with a growing cultural scene. Jean Forsyth was in her orbit, attracting large crowds to her song recitals in theatres, halls and homes during a pre-radio era when all entertainment was live.

Both Forsyth and Edith Miller journeyed by train to New York in 1897 to study at separate times with renowned singing and opera teacher George Sweet. That was near the end of their close association because Forsyth developed a bit of a wanderlust that culminated with her departure from Winnipeg.

Her travels started in 1905 when Forsyth travelled to Dawson City, Yukon to produce and direct performances of Gilbert and Sullivan’s operetta “Patience”. She then taught music in Vancouver and the Okanagan Valley before settling in 1907 in Edmonton, an exciting new city that had recently been chosen as Alberta’s capital.

“Jean opened an Edmonton restaurant called the Blue Moon tea room that became the hub

of action in the entertainment district,” researcher Kreutzer said. “She also kept company with Nellie McClung and Emily Murphy, the Manitoba women’s rights leaders who had moved to Alberta.”

Forsyth cut a wide swath in the Edmonton community, making good use of the experience she acquired as a 10-year director of the Winnipeg Humane Society. She was elected to the executive of the Alberta Music Festival, taught vocal students at Alberta colleges and worked as social editor for two Edmonton newspapers.

Edith Miller’s song career was much more international in nature. After graduating as outstanding student in voice, organ and piano from the Toronto Conservatory of Music, her return to Manitoba was brief because of demand for her presence elsewhere. Her trip to New York landed her a three-year contract to be contralto soloist at New York’s St. Bartholomew’s Church. In that capacity, she sang solos at the huge 1899 funeral of financier and railway magnate Cornelius Vanderbilt.

England beckoned next and Miller performed for King Edward VII and was in demand for so many theatre engagements that she delayed her return to Canada for five years. After a cross-Canada tour in 1909, she performed across North America before being chosen in 1911 to represent Canada at the Imperial Festival Concert at the Crystal Palace in London, England.

This time, Miller settled in England and continued to perform both in concert and opera. She also married Kent aristocrat Max Colyer-Ferguson and bore a son before she died in 1936 and was buried in the community of Gravesend. Forsyth, meanwhile, never married and died in 1933 in Edmonton.

Both will now live on in the 250-page illustrated book produced by Cameron and Kreutzer. Published by the J. Gordon Shillingford Co., of Winnipeg, and edited by Gimli cottager Doug Whiteway, the book is available at McNally Robinson and Chapters in Winnipeg as well as online through Amazon.