Invisible Generations

Living between Indigenous and White in the Fraser Valley

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“There’s nobody to write about us; it will be the first time to tell the story.”

—Irene Kelleher

IRENE'S STORY

Invisible Generations tells Irene Kelleher's story.[2] Referring to herself and to her parents and grandparents, she admonished me time and again in our many conversations: "You have to tell what we told you."[3]

A much used maxim sums up attitudes within families like Irene's, of mixed Indigenous and white descent, who have lived in the Fraser Valley for generations. "You did not deny your heritage in your family, but you did not talk about it." In another version, "Grandmother always said don't deny your heritage, but don't give it freely." Within this frame of reference, today's Métis organizations targeting persons of mixed Indigenous and non-Indigenous descent are irrelevant. "I don't need an external source of identity—it's in my family."[4] Irene shared with me what she wanted to be told, and I do so here.

Origins

Irene's story has its origin in time Irene and I spent together in the 1990s, during which she talked at length about her life experiences, and those of her parents and grandparents, in the Fraser Valley and also elsewhere in British Columbia. Lying to the east of the province's principal city of Vancouver, the Fraser Valley has been from time immemorial, and is today, home to diverse Indigenous peoples. Extensive non-Indigenous settlement goes back in time to the gold rush that occurred there in the mid-nineteenth century, with some earlier contact ensuing from a trade in animal pelts. By virtue of combining "white," to use the language of

the day and still used to describe persons with pale skin, and Indigenous descent, Irene and her family were long deemed to be beyond the bounds of acceptability by the dominant white society. To be mixed was not to belong.

Attracted to the future British Columbia by the gold rush, Irene's white grandfathers partnered with Indigenous women. Mortimer Kelleher did so with Madeleine, whose father was from Nooksack in today's Washington State, her mother from Matsqui in the Fraser Valley; Irene's maternal grandfather, Joshua Wells, with Ki-ka-twa or Julia, born at Port Douglas, situated along an early route to the goldfields.

Irene's parents wed on January 11, 1898, at St. Mary's Catholic Mission, located on the north side of the Fraser River twelve kilometres from today's Abbotsford. Oblate priest E.C. Chirouse joined together Cornelius Kelleher, aged twenty-five years, with Julia Mathilda Wells, who was twenty-one.[5] According to Irene, as the story was passed down to her, "they had a wedding breakfast at the Wells home in Hatzic and took the CPR train to Seattle and had a room at Fry's Hotel where they saw prospectors readying to go to the Klondike gold rush."[6] Cornelius recalled this critical event in his life:

> Sure enough, we were fortunate to get the room in the hotel because men were sleeping in the hallways of that hotel that night, waiting for the boat that would take them to Alaska and the goldfields. Seattle was a sight; every gadget under the sun was advertised on the street, men training [sled] dogs, and dogs selling as high as $150 and $200 apiece… the Alaska boat was loaded down and refusing passengers.[7]

Cornie and Mattie, as they were known, returned home by boat via Bellingham, where they stopped off to go to the theatre.[8]

A century and a quarter later, the stories of families like Irene's living between Indigenous and white in the Fraser Valley, and across

British Columbia and Canada, still matter. The earliest newcomers to do so are remembered in the Fraser Valley by the impressive historic site that is Fort Langley, constructed in the 1820s by men in the employ of the fur-trading Hudson's Bay Company. There whites, part-Indigenous men, and some Indigenous Hawaiians formed families with local Indigenous women.[9] The gold rush of Irene's grandfathers in the mid-nineteenth century added a larger layer of newcomer men who partnered with Indigenous women. This aspect of our history has increasingly disappeared from view, due in part to Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous arrivals each understandably highlighting their own stories.[10] To the extent that families that originated with a white forefather and an Indigenous foremother are still visible, it can sometimes seem contradictory, with white forefathers' surnames attached to the outwardly Indigenous persons who are their descendants.[11]

Irene's Story

As are all our stories, Irene's story is not just any story. In the telling, Irene repeatedly referred to "my kind" and "our kind" to describe families like her own, living between Indigenous and white.[12] While not wholly Indigenous, their Indigenous descent set them apart from a white society that equated pale skin tones with moral superiority. The class of persons to which Irene and her family and their friends were relegated by whites was long known pejoratively as "half-breed," a term intentionally demeaning and stereotyping. For all that notions of "race," whereby physical features became social classifiers, have over time been discredited, the underlying assumptions long ruled supreme. To be white conferred an inherent right, so white people thought, not only to be in charge but also to set the boundaries of inclusion and thereby the exclusion of others. As recently summed up by a scholar of the subject, whiteness, "largely a social construction shaped, defined, and contested by those claiming whiteness and those arbitrating it," became "the standard by which others were to be judged" and found wanting.[13] Wholly

Indigenous persons were early on legislated out of existence in British Columbia and across North America, being relegated to reserves or reservations and only recently, through their own efforts, acquiring a modicum of respectability. Much the same inequitable treatment occurred in Canada respecting Indigenous women who dared to marry non-Indigenous men: along with their descendants, they were legally dispossessed as Indigenous persons.

Those who, like Irene and her family and friends, embodied both Indigenous and white descent counted for naught, their stories without meaning. "We were second-class citizens. There's nobody to write about us; it will be the first time to tell the story," Irene explained to me not long after we met at the suggestion of a mutual acquaintance.[14]

Irene not only wanted her family's story told, but also knew how she wanted it told, and I was a willing listener. From Irene's perspective I was, I suspect, the best possible intermediary to do so on her terms. I was aware from my first visit that Irene used the "we" in our conversations "always in reference to Native people." I noted to myself at the time how "she lives and has lived in a largely white world but inside is an Indian woman."[15] My teaching in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia, where Irene had studied and where I worked with Indigenous students, made me, I came to realize, a trustworthy conduit. I would respect her for her life course and her teaching career rather than looking down on her as lesser than myself.[16]

I liked Irene. I enjoyed her company. Not only was our time together a welcome respite from the everyday life of UBC, but each time we talked I learned a lot from a new perspective about the ways of the world, and of the Fraser Valley. At that point in time I sat on a provincial board, BC Heritage Trust, which took us around the province for meetings with local folk, but in an us-and-them fashion. We came, we saw, we listened, we took note of initiatives, and we left before most conversations had time to reach a satisfactory conclusion. I had recently published a history of British Columbia, which similarly made me realize how unfinished was my understanding of the province I called home.[17]

Living all her life between Indigenous and white by virtue of her descent, retired school-teacher Irene Kelleher was adamant that invisible generations like hers should no longer be hidden from view. *Wigwams to Windmills*, 117

Irene's project became a joint activity. "You have to tell what we told you," the plural "we" referring both to her parents and grandparents and to trusted others she told me about or took me to visit.[18] Irene shared copies of her own writing and transcripts of interviews by others of her or her parents, which we would have photocopied for me to take away to integrate into an emerging text. My confidence in the project grew on overhearing Irene tell a friend who phoned while I was visiting that "there's a teacher here from the UBC and she's interviewing me and… she's going to be on our side… *I know that* [Irene's emphases]."[19] During our conversations, Irene was very much in charge of the telling. "I've got to get the Kelleher story down" was her repeated refrain. I jotted a memo to myself following an early visit: "Irene moves quickly—she darts—and she thinks just as quickly—her mind darts."[20] I scrambled to keep up.

As Irene many times reminded me, it was not only herself but also her parents who wanted the family's story told, as indicated by their writing and interviews. They were the pivots to Irene's long life. She admired their characters and resourcefulness, and most of all their determination to make good lives in sometimes adverse circumstances. Her parents withstood, much as she did herself as a career schoolteacher, attitudes in the larger society that diminished persons like them, based solely on their genetic inheritance. It is the combination of these factors that gave Irene's story its resonance for me. Irene's story is about hard-working, everyday people, as most of us are, perforce leading extraordinary lives.

Whereas Irene's life crossed the twentieth century, her parents and grandparents linked her into the century before. Irene's white grandfathers were born in the 1820s, her Indigenous grandmothers about 1845 to 1850. Born in 1872 and 1876, Irene's father and mother died in 1969 and 1967 respectively. Her parents repeatedly shared their life experiences and those of their own parents with, among others, Imbert Orchard of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Irene recalled how "Imbert Orchard came up more than once. He'd meet me at the school [where she then taught] and drive me up to the homestead [where her parents lived] and would have supper with Mom and Dad."[21]

Our Time Together

Irene guided our time together. Following the Imbert Orchard model, but at a different time of the day, I would be invited for early morning coffee. After coffee, we talked, and then might drive to lunch, possibly at Irene's favourite restaurant, followed by several stops for errands on the way back to her Abbotsford condominium. Other times, at Irene's suggestion, we drove the Fraser Valley of her grandparents, parents, and herself, to locations she brought to life as she knew them so that I might do so as well.

Once our relationship fell into place, my scholarly self sounded an alert. I should tape-record our exchanges in the interest of reliability and authenticity. Transcribed professionally by a third party, the result of our first taped conversation annoyed Irene, whose own tape recorder she considered "such a nuisance."[22]

> Irene: Well, that's good.
>
> Jean: That's good coffee. It's hot.
>
> Irene: Well, I know something for sure. I've got to get the Kelleher story down.
>
> Jean: Yes. That's absolutely true.

Neither of us liked what we read. Given, almost inevitably, the transcribed social trivia and hesitations that were intertwined with what we were about, Irene insisted, and I agreed, that the best course was for me to take what I described to Irene as inconspicuous "off and on notes on our conversations," transcribe them as soon as I got home an hour's drive away, and pass them on to Irene the next time we met for her consideration and editing.[23]

Between our visits, there might be phone calls from Irene critiquing and elaborating on what I had written either in my notes or in a composite text that was slowly emerging. She sometimes lamented what she did not know and asked me to find out more from written or manuscript sources to which I had access to pass on to her the next time we met.

Insights from these sources might then find their way into and complement her story.

Gradually, a narrative emerged that went through various iterations, until one day half a dozen years after we first met, Irene was satisfied with the current version. I had taken to heart her self-reflection that "only she could write the intimate details," and been as honest as I could about what she shared during our conversations.[24] Irene phoned full of enthusiasm. "I burned the midnight oil. I read every word of it. I wouldn't change a word of it, except for when I was born, on the 16th [the result of a typo]. When I read it through, I had nothing to correct. Where did you get all that information?"[25]

I sent Irene a clean version, which I followed up with one of our usual visits. After morning coffee and a snack, at her suggestion we went to the Mission Museum. As we walked around, we chatted about this and that. Filling in some details, Irene explained that when Imbert Orchard interviewed her parents in 1963 they still used coal lamps. She mused: "Oh, Uncle Andrew could play the violin!" Talking about herself in the third person, she shared once again how "she wasn't accepted."[26]

While we continued to see each other from time to time and we remained friends, we had completed the essence of our task together. Irene died on March 16, 2004, having the previous December 16 celebrated her 102nd birthday with a large party at the care home where she was then living.[27]

Situating Irene's Story

For all of its particulars, Irene's story is not unique. The mixture of Indigenous and white descent that marked Irene, her family, and friends was not exclusively theirs, but was shared during those years and into the present day by many others across the Fraser Valley, British Columbia, Canada, and the world. Whatever the location, individuals and families similarly experienced differential treatment they had no capacity to fully remedy except to deny who they were in the interests of fitting into a prejudiced larger society. Only rarely, as with the Métis of Red River

in today's Manitoba and west into Saskatchewan and with Mestizos in Mexico and Peru, have persons of mixed Indigenous and white descent redefined themselves as counterpoints to the dominant society.

Irene and her family chose not to deny who they were, but rather stood tall and bore the consequences. Irene's references to "our kind" and to "second-class citizens" were not made lightly, but reflected a long life lived well, but not necessarily easily. For Irene, as for her parents, the burden of mixed descent, of being a "half-breed," was ever present. It was able to be put on hold in the moment by socializing with, and caring for, others of similar backgrounds, only to return unexpectedly and very possibly in double measure.

Irene's life crossed three generations of her family in British Columbia's Fraser Valley. While her grandfathers died before she was born, she met both her Indigenous grandmothers. Irene was taken to visit her maternal Wells grandmother when she was ill and dying, and she remembered her paternal Kelleher grandmother coming to see them but could not, to her regret, recall about either of them "what they talked like." Referencing one and then the other, "I hardly knew her." [28] With Irene's passing, these three generations of shared memories are no longer part of lived experience.

On Irene's death in 2004, I put her story aside. My concern not to intrude on her memory vied with her instructions to me that the story be told. Having over the years shared echoes of it with others, I became increasingly aware that Irene's story has meaning beyond particular individuals and locales. As well as speaking to all those who have lived, and still live, between Indigenous and white, Irene's story is part of our common history as British Columbians, Canadians, and human beings.

Dear Irene, this is your story as you wanted it told.