

# SISTER LABORE SHEAHAN—MY SISTER NELLIE

By David Sheahan

**T**he captivating story that follows, appeared in Issue Number Five of *The Dawn* in December 1980. It was written by Sister Labore Sheahan, who hailed from Holycross. She was my sister, Nellie. Sister Labore spent seven years teaching and working with the Indian people in British Columbia, Canada. It is abundantly clear from her account and the poem with which she identified, that working with the Indian people was selfless and a labour of love.

In 1963, at age 17, Nellie entered the novitiate in Callan, County Kilkenny and was professed three years later in 1966. In 1973, she volunteered to work on the mission field, with three other Callan Sisters, in British Colombia, Canada. She entered wholeheartedly into her new life of mission work among the native Indian population in very remote British Columbia. I travelled to Canada in 1978, and I spent six wonderful weeks with Nellie as she went about her daily life as a missionary. Through music, song and drama she reached out to the people there – young and old. Her buoyancy, boundless energy and vitality and her engaging charm won many hearts, and it was with the deepest regret that the people she loved and ministered to saw her go when ill health, at the age of 42, forced her to return to Callan.

Determined to live life to the full, she sought and found new avenues of ministry. Nellie passed away on 3rd September 2000.

There is a very interesting story that involved Nellie, my parents, Betty and Tom and Fr John Sheahan, my uncle. My parents and Nellie made a gift of a lady's bourdaloue to Fr John (c 30th December 1946). A greeting card enclosed in an envelope that accompanied the gift carried the following words – *From Betty, Tom*



Sr Labore outside bush plane after a stormy flight in British Columbia.



David Sheahan with Indian children at Nechako River Bird Sanctuary in British Columbia

and Nellie to Fr John Sheahan, Holycross, County Limerick.

It is not known within our family as to how the item was acquired, but after the death of Fr John, my father donated the piece to the Hunt Museum in Limerick, where it is now on display. The following is the text of the object description posted at the museum and on its website.

“A bourdaloue or ladies travelling chamber pot, which is an eighteenth-century slipper-shaped portable urinal for a lady, sometimes known as a coach-pot. It is an oblong

shaped pot with a handle on one end. The interior, rim, base and handle are all in gilt. The body of the pot is green with gilt decoration in the French Empire style using Egyptian motifs. It took its more general name from a Jesuit Father, one Louis Bourdaloue, whose long sermons, preached at Versailles, were extremely popular, especially with the ladies of the court who, in order to secure a seat, used to arrive hours before the scheduled time of the sermon.

Enclosed in the envelope that held the greeting card was also an index card that lists the title of a publication. It reads: *North Munster Antiquarian Journal Vol. 3 Earrach 1942 Spring No 1. Limerick: The Thomond Archaeological Society (1942-1943)*. Also present is booklet by Louis Bourdaloue, Society of Jesus, entitled ‘*Jesus Crucified*’ (Dublin: Catholic Truth Society, 1962).”

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*My Life among the North American Indians – by Sister Labore Sheahan*

The world of which I am about to write may be alien to many of you, so perhaps after reading this you will have a little appreciation of the Indian Culture.

We – the white man have a very stereotyped idea of the Indian, there are mental pictures of feathers and men equipped with bow and arrow. Well, on the other hand, the Indian is a very real and very authentic person.

I have spent seven wonderful years in the lonely, yet magnificent country, teaching and working among the Indian people.

Much of British Columbia is a wilderness untouched by road or railway lines. Miles and miles of trees, broken here and there by lakes, which look the same as other lakes, rivers twisting between the hills and little Indian wood houses and cabins nestled among the Rocky Mountains.

Our mode of transport to the outer missions is a bush plane as these Indian communities are cut off from civilisation. Piloting the plane is usually one of the priests. The arrival of the aircraft at Tackla, Fort Ware or any other one of the missions is a big event in the village and everyone, dogs included, turnout at the wharf to welcome the “Super Club” and its pilot.

The Diocese where I work is five times the size of Ireland, yet there are only 26 priests to Minister this large area. Our bishop, Dr Fergus O’Grady, OMI, comes to Ireland every two years to recruit new priests, nuns and laity, for Lay Apostolate or in other words, Missionary work.

In 1958, Bishop O’Grady visited our community here at the Mercy Convent in Callan, Co Kilkenny and as a result, five nuns were sent to open our first house in Fort St James, British Columbia. Conditions were very poor and trying for the Sisters in this land as they had no electricity, no running water, in fact, water was brought from the nearby lake and boiled and during the long winter months, buckets of snow were put on the stoves to melt for water.

In Tackla, where I spent some of my time, this also was the case. I could never identify with the saying “You will never miss the water until the well runs dry” until I went there. You may wonder when our summer begins. Well, it starts in May when our temperatures soar to 70 – 80 degrees [*Fahrenheit*] and ends in September. Then, from September to May is winter, when the temperature drops very low, very often to 60 degrees below zero and sometimes lower. This year our temperature dropped to 62 degrees below zero for three days and it was then, I longed for those balmy Shannon breezes.

Of course, village life is village life all over the world. One finds the same feuds, jealousies, misunderstandings and forgiveness, people are very close to each other. If there is a fight in a particular home everyone knows about it, then, of course, on the other hand if a family runs short of meat or fish, – which is their main diet, the whole village comes to the rescue. Whenever a moose or bear or beaver are shot, the Sisters are given the choicest part of the animal to eat. Many times I was given a beaver tail, which to the Indian is regarded as a real delicacy and after a struggle, the first couple of times eating it, I developed a taste for it, and in fact I miss my delicacy since my return to Ireland.

I can see many up-turned noses as you read this, but please try eating it, if you are ever ‘deep in Canadian Woods’. As the Indians say, “it sure is nice”.

I will end with the following poem by a Canadian poet, George Clark. It is called *Looking Backwards* and speaks for me.

*Looking Backwards* by George Clark

*It was in the dead of winter when I left the haunts  
of men, to make a trek into the northern land,  
I loved that lonely country, every mountain peak and glen  
I'd do any work that chanced to be at hand.*

*At first I had no knowledge of the weary days ahead,  
of the torture that was then in store for me  
to freeze and then to thaw and freeze again, till I was nearly dead.  
And any joy of living hard to see.*

*As I travelled slowly onward toward my northern goal,  
farther from friends and loved ones every day.  
The fight became much harder as the cold took bitter toll  
and gladly I'd make camp at close of day.*

*One night the wolves were singing their anthem of the free,  
each voice a ringing echo in the air,  
the mingling of their voices was sweet music then to me,  
I blessed a hand of fate that led me there.*

*The Northern lights came out in all their glorious display,  
to cast their eerie beams o'er hill and vale.  
I sat spellbound by my campfire and  
I watched the grand array  
as they danced that night along the northern trail.*

*I sensed the wolves stop singing as the dawn drew near  
at hand, I saw the dancers slowly fade away.  
The pre-dawn hush descended all across the frozen land,  
as we waited for the breaking of the day.*

*I feel that I was repaid for hardships I went through,  
and gladly would I make the trek again,  
just to watch the Northern lights come out to dance across  
the blue, and listen to the timber wolves' refrain.*