A Dangerous State of Being: A Woman in Colonial Kamloops, BC: 1800s

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 Although, Confederation for British Columbia happened in 1871, Kamloops remained a pioneer settlement well into the 1890s. This was a very hard time to be a women and we see that many women died young as evidenced by the graves at the Pioneer Cemetery in Kamloops, BC. The Kamloops Pioneer Cemetery is located at 750 Lorne Street and is the oldest burial grounds for settlers in the Thompson-Nicola area. One woman in particular, a Mrs. Annie Francis Peterson stands out. Her gravestone indicated that she was only thirty-one years old at the time of her death. She died on April 8th, 1892 and was the beloved wife of a Mr. John Peterson. Mr Peterson is also buried here having died on Nov. 17, 1908. He was eighty-three years old on his death.[[1]](#footnote-1) Gravestones typically are used to memorialize the deceased giving the name, age, year of death and a small epitaph. From this information, we will try and find the reason for Mrs. Annie Peterson's death and was it typical for the colonial women in the 1800s.

 Although, Mrs. Annie Peterson's death happened in 1892, the period of time in Kamloops was pretty indicative of what colonial hardships faced women at the beginning of the 1800s. The Province of British Columbia joined confederation on the condition that a railway would be built across Canada to connect with the Eastern Provinces.[[2]](#footnote-2) Kamloops was the recipient of this activity in that it brought new economic life to the community after the Gold Rush had crashed. The CPR became the major employer and on July 11, 1885 the first train reached Kamloops. [[3]](#footnote-3) Kamloops grew from a mere 60 buildings (many just tents) and a dozen tiny Chinese shacks to a distinct small village in 1886. [[4]](#footnote-4) A vague consensus taken of the population at this time reveal that there was 368 men in 1889 and 40 women. [[5]](#footnote-5)

 British Columbia was the sixth province to join Confederate Canada in 1871. The Province of British Columbia lagged behind the Eastern Provinces in terms of population and settlements, remaining in a founder state well into the later part of the 1800s. During the first half of the century, Kamloops BC was an outpost for the Hudson Bay Company trading in furs. Kamloops area had a stable population of approximately three to four thousand nomadic people of the Shuswap Tribe controlling the Thompson-Nicola Region.[[6]](#footnote-6) White people were welcomed during this period as they offered no threat and brought for trade metal goods.[[7]](#footnote-7) The Shuswap people were well versed in knowledge of indigenous plants both for food and medicine and their birth rate during this time did not suffer in terms of numbers. [[8]](#footnote-8) The discovery of gold in the Interior of British Columbia in the 1850s brought about many disastrous changes to the lives of Indigenous People and also for the White People. A large number of immigrants miners started to arrive causing a demand for general merchandise and in 1860, the first General Store was opened in Kamloops by Mr. Joseph William McKay. [[9]](#footnote-9) Mr. Joseph McKay was an important man of his time, because it was through his efforts that the Kamloops Tribe was inoculated against the smallpox disease.[[10]](#footnote-10) In 1862, British Columbia experienced one of the worst smallpox epidemics in history. Within a few short months, fifty percent of the Indigenous People would be dead. [[11]](#footnote-11) This was the Kamloops, that Mrs. Annie Francis Peterson came to as a young girl.

 The physical look of Kamloops was quite primitive. It was in 1887, that a rudimentary waterworks was built to supply water using wooden pipes. Water was taken from the Thompson River and held in a reservoir on West Battle. [[12]](#footnote-12) In 1888, Kamloops became one of the first places in Western Canada to have a telephone system and in January 1891, the Electric Light Company turned on its first light.[[13]](#footnote-13) All of this, of course was only available on main street, leaving the rest of Kamloops without utilities to well into the early 1900s.

 On April 5, 1892, Mrs. Annie Peterson went into labour. We know this because her death certificate states that she died on April 8, 1892. The cause of death is listed as Confinement three days.[[14]](#footnote-14) Confinement is a historical word meaning "the condition of being in childbirth". [[15]](#footnote-15) The three days indicates the time in which it took Mrs. Peterson to die from the birth. There was a small hospital in Kamloops built around 1885 which was run initially by male nurses.[[16]](#footnote-16) There was no woman's ward until 1902. [[17]](#footnote-17) Women relied upon midwifery for their births and had babies at home. A Mrs. Jane Roadly delivered most of the babies in 1890s.[[18]](#footnote-18)

 Women in the 1800s had a spike in Maternal Mortality unlike anything humans had seen before. One of the major causes of death for women giving birth was Puerperal Fever. "Puerperal Fever was a devastating disease. It affected women within the first three days after childbirth and progressed rapidly, causing acute symptoms of severe abdominal pain, fever and debility. Although it had been recognized from as early as the time of the Hippocratic corpus that women in childbed were prone to fevers, the distinct name, “puerperal fever” appears in the historical record only in the early eighteenth century."[[19]](#footnote-19) It is caused by an infection in the genital tract by contaminated medical equipment or unhygienic medical staff who contaminate the mother during delivery. [[20]](#footnote-20)

Other factors for Maternal deaths during this time were:

 1. Not having access to clean water: Kamloops at this time, had put in it's rough water system which only amounted to the Thompson River water taken up and stored in a reservoir. Because of limited knowledge concerning parasites and microbial bacteria, the water if stagnate for any amount of time, was sure to have some contamination.

 2. Birth spacing: Birth spacing means literally the time between each birth. Ideally, the safest time between each birth is three years. This gives the mother time to recover from health issues that might impact her giving birth again. In the 1800s, the most common practice of birth control was the rhythm method (periodic abstinence) of counting days from what was thought to be your most fertile period.[[21]](#footnote-21) Not a very effective method as many women did not have a great understanding of their own reproductive bodies. Many women ended up on average having six to eight children. A huge drain on a woman's body.

 3. Nutrition or lack thereof: Access to a proper nutrition base was sketchy at best. No electricity for food storage would limit what was available. The body would be more susceptible to infections.

 4. Hemorrhaging: Many colonial women died from hemorrhaging during childbirth. Midwives would not have the knowledge to stop an uncontrollable loss of blood and blood transfusion would not be available until future times.

 5. Age of Mother giving Birth: Adolescents or girls in their teens who give birth are more prone to postpartum hemorrhage. Also, their bone structure surrounding the birth channel has not matured enough to allow the baby to descend properly which results in prolonged labour.

 Although, Mrs. Annie Peterson's death occurred in 1892, her death was an all to common occurrence for colonial women in the first decades of the 1800s. The conditions in which Mrs. Peterson was giving birth were sadly repeated all over Canada. Most death certificates would be just as brief as Mrs. Peterson's. "Certified cause of death, and duration of illness. Confinement Three days."[[22]](#footnote-22) But, because her death was recorded in the newly formed newspaper, The Inland Sentinel, Kamloops, Saturday, Apr. 9, 1892.[[23]](#footnote-23) We have a further clue which might throw some light upon the cause that led to so many women's deaths attributed to Confinement. We know that a Mrs. Jane Roadly was the midwife who delivered most of the babies in the 1890s.[[24]](#footnote-24) We also know, that during this period of time, there was little understanding of microbial infections. Kamloops did not have a clean water supply. People did not have the knowledge of how important it was sanitize their hands and surroundings. So, if we are to look at what else was happening at the time Mrs. Peterson was in labour, we see from the death announcements, that two infants died at this time.[[25]](#footnote-25) On April 5 and April 6, 1892, when Mrs. Peterson was in labour attended by Mrs. Jane Roadly, the midwife, Mrs. Roadly in all probability had been dealing with the deaths of these two infants. According to the records, there was no resident Doctor in Kamloops, the nearest one being in Vernon.[[26]](#footnote-26) This is of course, speculation but Mrs. Jane Roadly could have cross contaminated Mrs. Peterson very easily. One of the major causes of Puerperal Fever was having your baby delivered by someone with dirty hands.

 Although women throughout history have being giving birth to the next generation since time immemorial, it was in the 1800s that this natural event became so dire. We have populations of people gathering, living in situations that are prone to harbouring germ diseases and absolutely no knowledge of how infections are caused. Antibiotics would not be discovered until the next century. It was risky business at this time, just being female.

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Pioneer Park Cemetery. October 18, 2016. Headstones, Pioneer Park, Kamloops.

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Risk Factors

Your risk for developing an infection after you deliver is different depending on the method used to deliver your baby. Your chance of contracting an infection is:

1 to 3 percent in normal vaginal deliveries

5 to 15 percent in scheduled cesarean deliveries performed before labor begins

15 to 20 percent in non-scheduled cesarean deliveries performed after labor begins

There are additional factors that may make a woman more at risk for developing an infection. These can include:

anemia

obesity

bacterial vaginosis, a sexually transmitted infection

multiple vaginal exams during labor

monitoring the fetus internally

prolonged labor

delay between amniotic sac rupture and delivery

colonization of the vaginal tract with Group B streptococcus bacteria

having remains of the placenta in the uterus after delivery

excessive bleeding after delivery

young age

low socioeconomic group

1. Pioneer Park Cemetery. October 18, 2016. Headstones, Pioneer Park, Kamloops.

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4. Ibid. p.34 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. p. 36 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. p. 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. p. 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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