

# Obituaries

JOAN FINNIGAN, WRITER » 81

## Chronicler of the Ottawa Valley sought 'not from books but from life'

Weaned on the stories of her father, hockey-hero Frank Finnigan, she became 'an archival gumshoe' determined to pass on the oral histories of lumbermen, farmers and settlers

BY NOREEN SHANAHAN

Joan Finnigan was the unofficial historian, champion and poet laureate of Ontario's Ottawa Valley.

Over the years, she followed the Opeongo Line, an area of the valley settled in the 1850s by Irish, Scottish and German immigrants, to collect the stories of saints and sinners, heroes and giants, settlers and lumbermen. The result was enough material for 31 books, 14 collections of poetry, plus screenplays, radio scripts, newspaper and magazine articles, most of which are an informed sprinkling of anecdotes, tall tales, folklore, humour, legend and historical fact.

Among her titles are *Some of the Stories I Told You Were True*; *Laughing All the Way Home*; *Legacies, Legends and Lies*; *Tallying the Tales of the Old-Timers*; and *Life Along the Opeongo Line*.

Joan Helen Finnigan was the daughter of national hockey legend Frank Finnigan, captain of the Ottawa Senators when the club won the Stanley Cup in 1924 and again in 1927. Her mother Maye (Horner) was a teacher who also came from long-time Valley stock. While Ms. Finnigan's early fascination with heroes began during summers spent on her grandfather's farm in Pontiac County, Que., it only grew from knowing her father.

"And in the house on McLeod Street, my father came home from Toronto, Montreal, Detroit, New York, and talked of giants he had encountered, giants he had beaten, giants he had lost out to," she once wrote. "This thing 'not from books but from life' continues to pervade my whole life, my life decisions and my writing."

Ms. Finnigan attended Lisgar Collegiate in Ottawa and, in 1945, edited the 100th anniversary edition of the school's magazine, *Vox Lycei*. (Fifty years later, she returned to edit the 150th anniversary edition.) After graduation, she entered Carleton University's fledgling journalism program, but lasted just 18 months before deciding that the way to acquire skills and knowledge was not by sitting in the classroom, but to go out into the field. Interestingly, her decision to withdraw came soon after she had been elected to the student council. Although she polled the most votes, the five young men who were elected with her decided that a young woman could not be president. The sexist slight likely reinforced her resolve to quit Carleton and added to her



Joan Finnigan, 1988. 'She was a genuine Ottawa Valley character.'

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Sean Conway

fighting spirit, so evident later when she took on politicians and publishers in her crusade to tell the story of the Ottawa Valley.

Decades later, Ms. Finnigan told a reporter that one stirring and influential experience at Carleton was studying political science under Pauline Jewett, a teacher who later became an MP committed to social justice causes and a strong advocate for women's rights.

After working as a reporter at the Ottawa Journal for a few years, she studied English and history at Queen's University in Kingston, where her mentor was Canadian historian A. R. M. Lower. While at Queen's, she met her future husband, Grant MacKenzie. They married in 1949 and, in order to support his medical studies, she dropped out of

school and worked as a freelance journalist, publishing her stories in *The Globe and Mail*, the *Toronto Star*, the *Farmer's Advocate*, the *Journal*, and *Chatelaine* magazine, while it was under the editorship of Doris Anderson.

In 1965, her husband suddenly died and Ms. Finnigan faced the future as a single mother with three youngsters under 15. By all accounts, this was when her fighting spirit truly kicked in. In the late 1960s, she would pack her children in the car, pick up her notepad and, with a reel-to-reel tape recorder stashed in the trunk, go out into the Ottawa Valley to collect stories. In the early years, her interest lay in architecture.

First, she described the state of historic structures, and next she lobbied for their preservation. A couple of decades later, her son, Jonathan, joined her as the photographer — until one day he convinced her to take her own photographs. Still later, she made the same drive, counting different structures (or, more often, noting their absences) and interviewing different clusters of "old-timers," this time with granddaughter Caitlin.

"Not unexpectedly, the majority of the people interviewed are related to the lumbering saga in the valley," Ms. Finnigan wrote in an auto-

biographical sketch. "From a social history perspective [these tapes were] binding together two diametrically opposed social classes: the wives of the timber barons who made so much money they never could count it ... and the seamstresses in the sweatshops in Ottawa who sewed beads on the timber barons' wives ball gowns until their fingers bled."

One of the people she interviewed in 1978 was the 102-year-old grandfather of Sean Conway, former Liberal MPP and now a teacher at Queen's. Ms. Finnigan and Mr. Conway later became friends and he recalls her crusade to unearth lost relics of an earlier time.

"She was an archival gumshoe," he said. "Her car would be encrusted with mud and sand and rock chips, and then she'd tell me about some gem that she had found. 'Now, Conway,' she'd say, 'you and your friends in government have to do something about these log barns. They are disappearing far too rapidly.'"

For 40 years, Ms. Finnigan charmed her way into many Ottawa Valley kitchens and demonstrated skills as a keen listener. She was also sometimes known to be a prickly, opinionated contrarian.

"She was a genuine Ottawa Valley character," Mr. Conway said. "She liked powerful people, understood the world was made up of both saints and sinners, and that all saints have a past, all sinners have a future."

"We had pretty heated arguments ... [she believed that] great people often had not-so-great things in their past."

Mr. Conway said she identified with many of the people she had interviewed. Like her, they had spent a lifetime on story grounds and she found much to admire in their tenacity and persistence.

Ms. Finnigan was determined to pass on their stories. The roads in the Ottawa Valley were surveyed in the 1850s and settled by immigrants who were enticed to the area by government land agents, who described it as the last remaining corner of the garden of Eden. In reality, the soil was so thin that it could scarcely hold a surveyor's stake upright and the settlers' sacrifices were stupendous. The result was character in spades, she said. "The men who went into the bush to create Ottawa Valley lumbering mythology were largely illiterate, wonderfully oral, full of the language of poetry and wit."

Little by little, her stories

found a public and the National Film Board decided to produce her screenplay *The Best Damn Fiddler From Calabogie to Kaladar*. The film, featuring a young Margot Kidder, won a Genie award in 1969.

Over the years, Ms. Finnigan acquired a loyal following of readers, who appreciated the stories and the regional history woven into them. In 1984, *Laughing All the Way Home* was short-listed for the Stephen Leacock Award for Humour, and in 1989, *Tell Me Another Story* was on the short list for the Ottawa Citizen's Literacy Award. That same year, *The Watershed Collection* was short-listed for the Pat Lowther Memorial Award for poetry, and in 1992, she was short-listed for Ontario's Trillium Award for her poetry collection *Wintering Over*. Ms. Finnigan accepted her perennial status as a runner up with good humour. "I'm glad to be short and honoured to be listed," she once told an audience.

In 1987, her play *Songs from Both Sides of the River* was performed at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, and in 1992 she published *Old Scores, New Goals: The Story of the Ottawa Senators*.

Perhaps most significantly, Queen's University has acquired the bulk of her research. Over the years, the school has purchased and catalogued her literary papers so that much of the work has been preserved for future oral historians and scholars. The National Archives has also purchased 400 hours of interviews, considered a benchmark in Ottawa Valley history.

During her final years, Ms. Finnigan took her life's work on the road to story-telling festivals and schools and into the offices of politicians. In 2004, her final oral history, *Life Along the Opeongo Line*, was published, and on April 16, 2005, the mayor of Ottawa declared that day to be "Joan Finnigan Day."

Earlier this year, *Looking for a Turnout*, her 14th book of poetry, was published. Among the works she left in progress are a 600-page memoir and a collection of love poetry.

### JOAN FINNIGAN

Joan Finnigan MacKenzie was born Nov. 23, 1925, in Ottawa. She died of ovarian cancer in the Ottawa Valley on Aug. 12, 2007. She was 81. She is survived by her three children, Jonathon, Roderick and Martha. She also leaves seven grandchildren.

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