

Catherine Fisher Alexander
1855 - 1934

" Proud, proud Lass, with head held high -
Challenges of Life were met -
and ended with a sigh" "

Catherine (Kate) Fisher was born April 16, 1855 in Kincardine, Ontario, Canada, and spent an enjoyable childhood with four sisters and two brothers. She was the daughter of John and Margaret Wynne Fisher, prominent and respected farmers in the area. Margaret Wynne claimed royal lineage from Welsh ancestors.

Kate became a young woman with positive convictions and the strength to accomplish them, a distinguishing feature of the Fisher family.

She was just seventeen when she married James Alexander on June, 17, 1872, and within the year Margaret was born. Then there followed three more girls, Ellena, Katherine and Mary, in the eight years before Jimmy decided to sell most of his acreage and try the States for a change of livelihood. Certainly, Kate must have suffered qualms of insecurity on being left with her small children, but there were loving relatives near who helped her over the next months of separation from Jimmy, and there was the Fisher tenacity. It was John, her father, who supported her most of all. Even though the children remembered stories about him, little was known about their ^{grandmother} mother Margaret, but certainly any traces of meekness and gentleness in them could be attributed to her.

How far back the obsession of warfare against germs and perpetual hand-washing goes in the Fisher family is unknown, but John exemplified any forebears who were stricken. One particular story was of him seeing, through a window, a dead cat in the yard. Immediately, he dashed to a basin of water and washed his hands. Then, since it remained there most of the day, each viewing required a separate scrubbing. Yes, even great grand-children were beset with a similar compulsion.

When Kate received word that Jimmy was settled and ready to house his family, she dressed her four little girls in their best clothes to join "Daddy" in the new country. Margaret was nine, Ellena was six, Katherine four and Mary just two.

Unlike Jimmy's, their admission to the new life was a disappointment and a little frightening. The new home was built on posts two feet above the ground to keep the waters of the Tahquamenon River from running in at the door. The furniture was hand-made and unpainted, and only having her children and husband made this place anything like a home. Kate quickly learned this would be a completely different life from the one she had spent surrounded by relatives and friends in Canada. Here there were no neighbors for miles, and the train, with its uncertain schedule, was the only interruption of the day. There was little time to dwell on her lot for the men working under Jimmy had to be fed and housed, and even the little girls helped regularly with meals and endless chores.

Kate and the children had arrived July first, 1881, and later that year the Tahquamenon River was dynamited to drain the river banks for lumbering operations, and the dredging formed the Tahquamenon Falls. All the men working on the project came and went through the Sage Station, together with supplies, horses and boats.

Kate held onto her indomitable Fisher spirit that carried her through many seemingly insurmountable problems. One time, receiving word that her mother was very ill, she left immediately for Lower Michigan. When she reached the Straits of Mackinac they were frozen solid and boats were unable to cross. Undaunted, she found a man who would drive her across in a dog sleigh, and she made the trip safely.

There was no school at, or near, Sage Station for the children to attend, so Kate arranged for a tutor, a bookkeeper at the lumber company, to teach them a few hours a day. She hadn't neglected their Christian education in Canada and the children held "Sunday School" weekly, usually led by Margaret.

Almost daily, Kate's copper-bottomed boiler bubbled like a witches caldron, with her home-made soap frothing into tiny geysers. Washing clothes was not difficult in the summer, if one had the stamina to bend over a washboard and rub knuckles raw on its corrugated surface, wringing each heavily soaked article by a flip of the wrists which sent streams of water up to the elbows. Drying clothes in the winter

was more difficult for, when they were brought in at nightfall stiff and frozen, they collapsed into a soggy heap beside the kitchen stove. The constant needs of the family and her duties to the "section men" comprised Kate's day. Yet, her responsibilities did not end there, for one day she and one of the girls discovered a trestle on fire, set by sparks from the locomotive engine falling into dry tree tops below. Jimmy and his crew were working in another area so Kate and the child valiantly beat out the blaze. Feeling it was "above and beyond the call of duty", Kate suggested it be reported to the railroad company, but Jimmy denied them the privilege of being recognized for their bravery.

Perhaps from necessity, or just a personal trait, Kate was an economical person often saying "keep a thing seven years and it will come handy". She knitted stockings and mittens for the children and made some of their clothing, seeing that there was always "room to grow". She was not a violent person, displaying her anger in one quick gesture of biting her clenched fist. She protected her skin from the sun's rays, wearing high-necked dresses, wide hats and gloves, even when hanging out her washing.

On October 28, 1884, Kate gave birth to a handsome son, named Walter for a brother she had lost.

When Jimmy was transferred to Au Train, there was some social life for her, but duties as a wife and mother came first. Then, as years past, their differences became more apparent, and, with the children away, there seemed little to keep them together. The parting was a quiet one but no divorce action was ever taken.

Kate purchased a little house in Munising on Jewel Street, where a narrow cement walk led to five almost vertical steps, ending on a five foot platform or stoop, railingless and bare. The house was unpainted and the nail marks, like rusty stripes, ran up and down. In the back the tar paper was held in place by strips of lath, and window frames were unpainted but set in sturdy enough to withstand the relentless winter storms.

Kate was not yet ready to just sit and rock so she became a practical nurse and midwife, enjoying her new-found independence.

It was after Jimmy passed away that she married an old family friend, James Mutch. In spite of being sixteen years older than Jim, they worked side by side on a farm near Sherwood, North Dakota, where they were often snowed in for weeks during the winters.

Kate and Jim returned to Michigan in the late nineteen twenties and lived in Princeton, Michigan, near Katie Rohrborn, Kate's third oldest daughter. They maintained their independence until she was hospitalized in March, 1934. She passed away the first of April of that year and rests beside the father of her children, James Alexander.

Five years later, James Mutch passed away in an Ishpeming hospital from pneumonia. He was born in Scotland in 1876 and died May 16, 1939, having come to this country in 1886. He left a sister in Scotland and a brother in Canada. He rests in an Ishpeming cemetery.

The material legacy of Catherine Fisher Alexander was a pair of blue glass candlesticks with tray to match, three butter patties, an oval glass salt dish, and, most precious of all to her, an oddly-shaped black teapot sprinkled with tiny pink flowers. But, her real heritage will always be her spirit of determination in her brave acceptance of life.

"The proud Lass, with head held high,
Lives on and on....."
