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To Sheri Regnier, Trail Daily Times

Press Release (1 page + 2 pages Background)
October is Women's History Month

On October 1 several *October is Women's History Month* displays will be set up in downtown Trail to encourage residents to learn about and celebrate the many contributions women have made to Canadian society over hundreds of years.

A display in Mills Stationery store's window on Bay Avenue is being created by members of the Lower Columbia Violence Against Women in Relationships (VAWIR) Interagency Committee with support from the Trail FAIR Centre Society. Through pictures and text, it will highlight the achievements of individual women from many backgrounds and cultures from the late 1600's to the present day. As well, the significance of October 11, the International Day of the Girl and October 18, Persons Day will be featured.

In addition, there are two interesting displays planned for Trail's Riverfront Centre. Trail Museum and Archives staff will create a window display of artifacts and tools that embody the evolution of women's contributions to the local community from the distant past to present day. Inside the Centre, the Trail & District Library will set up an exciting display of books by and about women in Canada.

The movement to establish a Women's History Month in Canada was led by women from Victoria, BC. Finally established in 1992, the goal of the month-long celebration was to encourage greater appreciation of the contributions of women to Canadian history. October was selected because it was on October 18th, 1929 that Canadian women were first declared to be legally considered as 'persons', and therefore eligible to join the Senate of Canada.

The United Nations' International Day of the Girl was initiated by the NGO Plan International Canada, during an extensive two-year campaign which engaged thousands of Canadians in a global initiative to end gender inequality and recognize girls' rights as human rights. The Day was initially approved by the government of Canada, which then brought the proposal to the United Nations for adoption in 2011, with October 11 designated for the Day's recognition on the UN Calendar.

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BACKGROUND

From Ontario Nurses Association: <https://www.ona.org/news-posts/womens-history-month/>

Women's right to vote and run for public office

All Canadian women 21 years of age or older became eligible to vote in federal elections on May 24, 1918 regardless of whether they were permitted to vote in their respective provinces and territories. A little over a year later, they won the right to be candidates in elections, meaning they could be Members of Parliament in the House of Commons.

The exclusion of women from the Senate

Emily Murphy, the first female appointed to Edmonton Hospital Board and later the first woman in the British Empire to be appointed a magistrate, was a prominent writer and leader of the women's suffrage movement in Canada. She helped to secure passage of legislation in Alberta that gave wives the right to share ownership in their husband's property. Her advocacy for women and children led to calls for her to be appointed to the Senate.

Canada did not yet have its own constitution and was governed by the British North America Act. It specified that only "qualified persons" were eligible to be appointed to the Canadian Senate, a provision that had historically been interpreted to mean men only.

The "Persons Case"

A provision in the Supreme Court of Canada Act that allowed any five persons acting as a unit to petition the Supreme Court for an interpretation of any part of the constitution was used by Murphy to fight this institutional sexism. On August 27, 1927 she invited Nellie McClung, Henrietta Muir Edwards, Louise McKinney and Irene Parlby to join her in petitioning the Supreme Court to review the government's decision that denied women from becoming senators.

In 1928, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that women were not considered "persons" under the law. Murphy and The Famous Five then appealed the court's judgment to the only higher legal authority that existed at the time. As a result, on October 18, 1929 the Privy Council in Great Britain ruled that women could become Senators because they are in fact persons: "The exclusion of women from all public offices is a relic of days more barbarous than ours." The ruling had wide-reaching implications, determining that women's rights could no longer be prejudiced traditions.

Remembering the achievements of The Famous Five

On October 18, 1999 a bronze statue called "Women Are Persons!" by Edmonton artist Barbara Paterson was unveiled in Calgary by Her Excellency, Adrienne Clarkson, Governor General of Canada. The following year, a similar statue in Ottawa became the first permanent monument on Parliament Hill that commemorates Canadian women.

From Status of Women Canada: <https://cfc-swc.gc.ca/commemoration/whm-mhf/persons-personne-en.html>

The History of the Persons Case

In Canada, the *British North America Act* (BNA Act) of 1867 set out the powers and responsibilities of the provinces and of the federal government. The Act used the word “persons” when referring to more than one person and “he” when referring to one person. Many argued the Act implicitly stated that only a man could be a person, which prevented women from participating fully in politics or affairs of state.

Governments also used the “persons” argument to keep women out of important positions. If the word “person” applied only to men, then the stipulation that only “qualified persons” could be appointed to the Senate of Canada meant that only men could be appointed.

In 1927, five women – who have since become known as the Famous Five – launched a legal challenge that would mark a turning point for equality rights in Canada. Emily Murphy, Nellie McClung, Louise McKinney, Irene Parlby and Henrietta Muir Edwards were journalists, politicians, reformers and activists from Alberta who asked the Supreme Court of Canada to answer the following question: does the word “person” in Section 24 of the *BNA Act* include female persons? After five weeks of debate, the Supreme Court decided that the word “person” did not include women.

Although shocked by the Court’s decision, the Famous Five did not give up the fight and took their case to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council of Great Britain in London, which was then Canada’s highest court of appeal.

On October 18, 1929, Lord Sankey, Lord Chancellor of Great Britain, announced the decision:

“The exclusion of women from all public offices is a relic of days more barbarous than ours. And to those who would ask why the word ‘person’ should include females, the obvious answer is, why should it not?”

With this milestone victory, the Famous Five not only won the right for women to serve in the Senate, but also helped pave the way for women to participate equally in all aspects of life in Canada.