

Stories from the Archives — “Heroic Devotion of an Indian Woman”

Source: Sunday Vindicator, December 28th, 1902.

In 1902 Millie Hennius [also known as Cecilia Ignace], a native woman from the Squamish mission on the north shore of Burrard Inlet, was awarded the medal of the *Royal Humane Society* by the mayor of Vancouver:

“Millie Hennius, with her husband, Chief Harry, their three children and another woman, Kathleen, was going from Squamish mission to the North Arm [Indian Arm] of Burrard Inlet on November 30th, 1901, in a sailing canoe. A sudden squall upset the craft. [They were south of Racoon Island at the time.] Millie’s husband, who had on a cartridge belt and heavy rubber boots, sank at once. The other woman soon followed.”



Millie Hennius c.1900

“On the first sign of danger Millie, the Indian mother, had grasped her four-month-old baby in her teeth by its clothing and, commanding the other children to cling each to one of her shoulders, she started to climb the mast as the canoe slowly sank. Soon the mast disappeared beneath the waters, which are at this point over 300 feet deep, and the woman was left absolutely unsupported in the water with a child on either shoulder and the garments of the baby firmly clenched in her strong teeth.”

“She had never learned to swim, having been born in the interior, nor could she then swim so much as a single stroke. Yet still, endowed by some superhuman power, she remained in those icy waters for nearly an hour, supporting her children and bravely struggling to reach the shore. [She was attempting to swim to the logging camp at Farrer Cove.] She kept the heads of all above the water line, and it was from exposure that they subsequently died, and not from drowning.”

“The tide, which was running in at the time, kept carrying her farther away from the shore, in spite of her struggles to reach it, and her fate, as well as the fate of the little ones, would have been sealed had not the little son of Mr. Philips, a rancher dwelling on the shore some little distance away, noticed the disappearance of the sailboat and the remaining speck on the water, and directed his father’s attention to the circumstance.”

“Some delay was caused in launching the boat to rescue the struggling woman by the state of the tide, which was then very low, so that it was fully an hour before the perishing, but heroic, woman was rescued, still clasping her three precious children, the youngest some minutes dead.”

Native Heroism — Near Farrer Cove On Indian Arm

Conversation with Chief August Jack Khahtsahlano and Otway Wilkie, former provincial constable, November 28th, 1935:

Wilkie: “I remember once an Indian woman swimming ashore from a capsized canoe with one of her children under each arm, and the third in her mouth. She was awarded the *Royal Humane Society* medal I think. She saved the two under her arms, but the baby in her mouth was drowned.”

Khahtsahlano: “Yes, that’s right; up the North Arm [Indian Arm] of Burrard Inlet.”

Matthews: “How did it happen?”

Khahtsahlano: “She was the wife of Aneaa [Squamish Chief Harry]. I forget her name, but I think it was Molly [Millie Hennius *aka* Cecilia Ignace]. She was coming down from up Indian River way with her two children and her baby; three of them in her canoe. It capsized. She was south of Racoon Island and she took one child under each arm, and the other, the baby, in her teeth, and swam a mile and a half to a logging camp in that deep bay [Farrer Cove] just east of Racoon Island. It was about 36 years ago (about 1898) [*sic* November 30th, 1901]. Yes; she got the medal. She saved two, but the baby was drowned when she reached shore.”

Wilkie: “I know she was recommended for it, but I never heard before if she got it.”

Source: J.S. Matthews, 1955, “*Conversations with Khahtsahlano, 1932-1954*”, Vancouver City Archives, page 202.