

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE of the NORTH

JOHANNA'S MATERNITY HOSPITAL – Sexsmith, AB

Johanna (Aunt Jo) Rebecca Haakstad was born on June 12, 1885 in Bardu, Norway. In 1888, the family that consisted of parents, Sigurd & Simon along with Johanna and her brother, Hans and two sisters, Ann and Elisa, moved to a farm in Minnesota. Another son, Edward, was born soon thereafter. While visiting a new family in the neighborhood, the children were startled to find out that the young lady of the house was all alone while giving birth to twins. Johanna stayed to help while her siblings ran home for help. Sigurd and Johanna, who was only 16 at the time, delivered the twins without any complications. Johanna was a very versatile young lady and soon found employment in lumber camps and as a dressmaker as she loved to make costumes. Once Johanna gave birth to her own daughter, Thelma, she decided to become a midwife in an effort to assist young mothers.

As farming in Minnesota proved to be impractical, the family decided to move. Various advertising mediums promoting the viability of agriculture in Alberta were reviewed with a decision being made to relocate. The family settled in Bardo (named after the community of Bardu, Norway) in 1906. It was here that Johanna completed her training in midwifery under Dr. McPherson.

In 1918, the family decided to move once again – this time north and settled in the La Glace area; however, Johanna returned to Edmonton and worked as a dressmaker for the Gainers Meat Company. Returning to the Peace District in 1920, Johanna worked as a cook for the Kleskun Lake Ranch. In 1921, Johanna's life was about to change as she embarked upon a remarkable career that would span 37 years.



Johanna's medical bag

Johanna delivered the first baby in Sexsmith, "Graham Howard" to Leonard and Florence Howard on June 4, 1921. The Howard's, who were originally from Ontario, operated the hardware store in Sexsmith for many years. They also managed the post office that was located within the hardware store until the mid-1920's. Graham had a brother, Alfred, who had died in infancy in 1918. Following a move to Edmonton, Graham found employment as a bank clerk. He answered the call of "Duty to Country" in June 1941 and served with the Edmonton Fusiliers (NPAM,) 2nd Battalion as a Private before transferring to the RCAF on October 23, 1941. On a Halifax bomber flight over Kassel, Germany, Flight Sergeant Graham Howard lost his life along with the six other members of the flight crew on October 22, 1943. He was buried at the Schoonselhof Cemetery, Antwerp - he was 22 years old.

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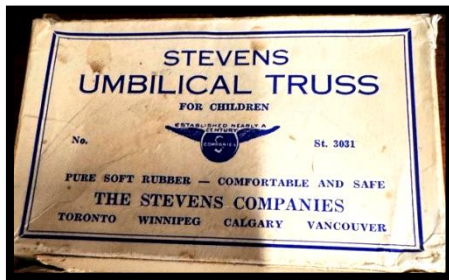
Flight Sergeant Graham Wilson Howard

Flight Sergeant
Graham Wilson Howard

Johanna's Maternity Hospital Sexsmith, AB

From that point forward, Johanna became a partner in Dr. Shaw's practice and became the most familiar figure in the area. On horseback, on foot, through blizzards and mud, across sloughs on stone boats, Midwife Haakstad served the growing farming community. She travelled as far as Eaglesham, Woking, Dawson Creek and various locations in between.

Once the delivery was concluded, with or without Dr. Robert Shaw's support, Johanna's efforts did not end with the birth. She would often stay with the family caring for the newborn and mother for 10-12 days or until the mom had regained her strength. During that time, Johanna would also look after the other children in the family plus the father. Johanna had made her home with the *Howard's* at that time and in between delivering babies, she worked at the Howard Hardware and Post Office.



Midwife Johanna then moved to the home of the *Beard* family (near the Anglican Rectory) where she and Mrs. Beard tended to patients. Dr. Shaw passed away in 1927, and a new physician, Dr. Gamey, arrived and soon

decided that it was essential to have a maternity home established in the area. Consequently, Johanna rented a three-room shack from Bill Shannon for \$5 a month and opened the doors to the Sexsmith Maternity Home.

When Johanna's daughter, Thelma, turned 19, she began to help with the babies and their mothers. She assisted in deliveries and would often have to run to summon the doctor should he be needed from 8 pm to 8 am as the phone service did not operate during those hours. Johanna moved several times before purchasing *Roy Roberts's* house on 97th street in 1941. It was named the **Sexsmith Maternity Home** but was colloquially known as the **Stork Hospital**. With a fee of only \$1.00 per day, the years



were difficult and often the Haakstad's did not know where their next meal would come from. Often people did not have money to pay, but they would bring something, be it wood, meat, vegetables – whatever they had. As well, the Anglican Women's' Association donated blankets and held baby showers to help secure supplies for the newborns.

In 1934, Thelma married a local grocer, Bob Smith, who was originally from Vancouver, BC. The young couple eventually lived upstairs at

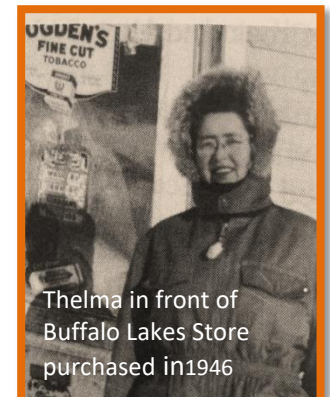


Birthing table

Stirrups would be affixed as needed



Bob and Thelma Smith, their 40th wedding anniversary.



Thelma in front of Buffalo Lakes Store purchased in 1946

Johanna's Maternity Hospital Sexsmith, AB

Johanna's. Bob was employed by *Bird's Grocery Cash & Carry* in Sexsmith – a branch of the mercantile firm in Grande Prairie. Thelma continued to assist her mother and Bob, if not working in the grocery store, would be tackling handyman jobs around the hospital. Even after Bob and Thelma purchased the Buffalo Lake Store in partnership with her uncle, Simon Haakstad, in 1946, Thelma continued to assist Johanna at the hospital two or three times a week.

Three mornings a week, the laundry was done on a wash-board followed by ironing. Everything was kept “Norwegian clean” as they say. Babies were bathed and changed and comforted if needed. Cooking and baking were always ongoing as snacks that consisted of cookies or cake accompanied by milk or tea, were also provided along with the regular meals. Johanna was famous for her pot roasts and gravy; however, the doctor requested that cabbage, turnips and beans not be served. Johanna had a gramophone on which she often played country music as those awaiting the birth of their babies and those who had already given birth, found the songs soothing and comforting. Members of the Women's Institute would often drop by to discuss the needs of the maternity home and ways to fund-raise. While there, they would often finish handiwork projects, deliver linens or layettes. New mothers would often stop by to show off their babies and enjoy a cup of tea. The maternity home was indeed, a “home-away-from-home” for the patients.

The maternity home had many patients with extenuating circumstances. One lady, the wife of a local businessman, was in such poor health that the first thought was that the baby may have to be taken to save the mother's life. She was one who was unable to consume much in the way of nourishment during her pregnancy; therefore, by the time she came into Johanna's care, she was basically skin and bones. Johanna had specially padded her bed and had taped cotton batting over her protruding bones. That care, along with alcohol rubs, made the patient as comfortable as possible. The baby boy was long and thin when he was born but otherwise perfectly healthy.

The largest baby that Johanna delivered was reported to have weighed 15 pounds – a typical size of a three-month old. Unfortunately, baby Julia Spacil only survived two days as she could not swallow. Born on August 29, Julia passed away on August 31, 1930.

Another monumental birth was that of Gilbert Balderston in 1937. Not only was Gil over ten pounds at birth but he also decided to arrive in the breach position! The family recalled Johanna saying “forget the baby – save the mother”. Luckily Gilbert was a strong baby but he did suffer a dislocated shoulder during the birthing process that wasn't set until a chiropractor moved to Buffalo Lakes when Gil was three months old.



Another daunting case was when a baby was born 11 weeks premature on March 31, 1939 and weighed only two pounds. The young mother, Eleanora (Foster) Graham just 19, passed away from an embolism shortly after giving birth. Under Johanna's care, the baby steadily gained weight and was released to her grandparent's care three months later weighing 8 pounds 14 ounces. In the interim, another nursing mother (Irene Balderston) volunteered to supply breast milk for the newborn. The baby, also named Eleanora eventually went to live with her grandmother Graham in Toronto. It was here that she grew up, was educated, met and married Bob Murdock and raised a family of her own.



RT - Bob & Eleanora (Graham) Murdock

Johanna's Maternity Hospital Sexsmith, AB

One of Nurse Johanna's greatest accomplishments was keeping tiny Gilda Mae (May) East alive once she arrived – all one pound fourteen ounces of her. Harold & Ethel East, from Dawson Creek, BC were visiting in the area when Mrs. East went into labour. She was taken to the nearest hospital which was Johanna's. The baby was placed in an incubator but continued to lose weight until she only weighted 1 ½ pounds. Johanna wrapped her in cotton batting and placed her in a blanket heated with hot water bottles. Once the little one was five days old, she was able to tolerate nourishment by means of an eyedropper. Soon thereafter, Gilda Mae gained regularly and was soon released to go home. Unfortunately, Gilda Mae (May) who was born on December 5, 1947 passed away on April 22, 1948 due to bronchopneumonia and nutritional anemia.



Johanna Haakstad, Mrs. Lapp (Guderyan), Mrs. East. Johanna is holding the tiny baby that weighed 1½ pounds at birth.

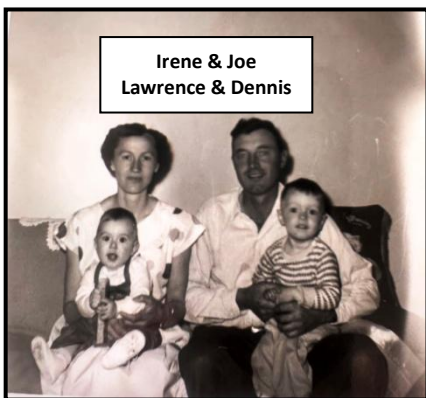
Midwife Johanna's reputation as the "Nightingale of the North" quickly spread and she even garnered the interest of HRH Princess Alice who, accompanied by her husband His Excellency the Earl of Athlone (who was sworn in as the Governor General of Canada for 1940-1945), made a trip to Grande Prairie where Princess Alice requested a meeting with Johanna. Princess Alice complimented Johanna on her success and expressed best wishes for the continuation of her invaluable work.

In 1948, the Peace River Country paid tribute to Johanna by means of an "Appreciation Day". All the mothers who had been cared for by Johanna contributed \$1 for each baby born in the hospital.

In 1958 at age 73, Midwife Johanna retired and the "Maternity Home" retired with her. The last scheduled baby born in the hospital was a girl who was named "Joanne" (October 1, 1958) to Rose (Smith/Delany) and John Fitzsimmons. She was named after the lady who had brought her into the world. Rose passed away in 2006 and John in 1990. Joanne married Leo Perry and currently resides in Grande Prairie.



Joanne Fitzsimmons



Irene & Joe
Lawrence & Dennis

The last baby; however, was born on October 2, 1958 to Irene and Joe Vavrek. Irene went into labour suddenly and as she did not think she could make it to Grande Prairie, Joe dropped her off at Johanna's. Joe quickly headed back home to complete harvesting. Once inside, Irene was asked to sit and wait as they needed to prepare the birthing room. Nevertheless, baby "Lawrence" was not in favor of waiting and everyone ended up scrambling to deliver him. Joe passed away in 2023 and Irene Vavrek currently lives in Grande Prairie. Lawrence and his wife also live in Grande Prairie.



Lawrence Vavrek

Midwife Johanna had worked alongside many doctors in the area: Dr. Shaw, Dr. McCrum, Dr. Nixon and Dr. Lyman Gamey. Moreover, Johanna had many hard-working individuals who willingly assisted her over the years. Once retired, Johanna eventually moved to Buffalo Lakes to live with Thelma and Bob until her death from malignant melanoma in 1964.



Northfield Cemetery, LaGlance, Alberta
"Nightingale of the North"
Johanna R. Haakstad 1885 – 1964
"Never will your memory fade"

Midwife Johanna's legacy will live on through the over 3100 children she brought into the world.

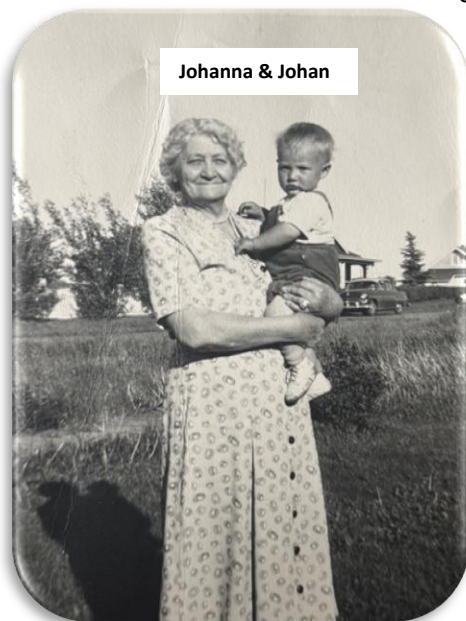
In 1937, the "Justamere Ladies' Club of LaGlance" gathered donations which were then presented to the Grande Prairie Municipal Hospital to be used in furnishing the pediatric ward. A large photo of Johanna holds a sacred location in the ward with a plaque that reads:

"Johanna Haakstad, the Florence Nightingale of the Peace"

Johanna Haakstad "Family Time"

Carmen Haakstad, nephew of Johanna, spoke glowingly of his aunt. He recalls that his mother told Johanna that she could name her fifth child. Carmen Miriam (named after Moses' sister) was the name of choice for the new baby boy. Carmen spoke of how he was teased at school as his name sounded rather feminine.

Carmen's sister, Gail Sherman, recalled that their family always spent Christmas Eve and Christmas day with Johanna, Thelma and Bob. The traditional Norwegian dish of lutefisk was always served and enjoyed. The Haakstad children eagerly awaited the arrival of Thelma and Bob as they always brought large amounts of candy from their Buffalo Lakes Store. As well, the Haakstads also celebrated everyone's birthday with big parties that included all the Haakstad family members.



All of the Haakstad children were born at Aunt Jo's Maternity Hospital and one of Carmen's brothers was named "Johan" after Johanna as he was born on Johanna's birthday and another brother was named Lyam after Dr. Lyam Gamey.

Johanna loved birds and was very particular about their care. You may even have found her in conversation with them!



Johanna's Maternity Hospital Sexsmith, AB

Gail went on to note that Johanna loved the carnival that was held in Sexsmith every year. Jo was very creative and adventurous with costumes and in fact she went one year dressed as a "man". Gail said her aunt was a very "prim and proper" dignified lady who would always be wearing her pearls on special occasions.

The "Hospital" moved several times over the years but the exemplary care Johanna provided never wavered. It grew from a small three room shack in 1928 to a six-bed hospital in the 1940's. The last location (rt) was on 97th street (Lot 25 & 26, Block 5, Plan 642 CL) and operated until Johanna retired in 1958. The Hospital was known variously as the Sexsmith Maternity Home, Stork Hospital, and Johanna Haakstad Maternity Home.

Over the years, it received support from local community organizations such as the Anglican Women's Association and the Sexsmith Women's Institute along with a grant of \$40.50 from the Alberta Treasury Department in 1934.



Sexsmith Maternity Hospital

Many times, Johanna tore up her own undergarments to make diapers for new babies. One baby almost arrived before Jo. In a hurry, she grabbed the closest garment off the wall to place under the mother only to find out it was the mother's fur coat.

On one occasion, Johanna & the hired girl were allowed very little food, but when Jo baked donuts she would put several in her pocket so when they went to the barn to sleep, they could have a snack.

Johanna was a great storyteller & could always inject humor into situations such as having to sleep on the sod floor in a homestead shack, sleeping on a bench by the wall and crawling into bed with the mom & new baby in an attempt to keep them warm when it was -50F.



PCHS Member Doug Spry was
born at
Johanna's Maternity Hospital
1942

A picture of Johanna Haakstad's
headstone can be found on
"Find-a-Grave". A copy of this
article can be found on:
<https://www.glenleslie.ca>
(news section)

In the midst of the economic hardship and social constraints of the 1930's, Johanna Haakstad stood as an example of resilience and leadership by opening a small maternity hospital in Sexsmith. At a time when women's professional ambitions were often dismissed, she used her midwifery background and unshakable determination to transform an old shack into a safe haven for expectant mothers. With limited resources but boundless resolve, Johanna's Hospital not only reduced the maternal and infant mortality rate in the area but proved that compassion, skill and courage could flourish under adverse circumstances.

Johanna's contribution to the development and progress of northern Alberta is immeasurable. **Miss Johanna Haakstad** was a true "**Pioneer Woman**" who stood as a beacon of compassion & resiliency at a time when both were desperately needed.

The Sexsmith Museum has accomplished an exemplary project where they have ensured Johanna Haakstad and her "Stork Hospital" will be remembered. The artifacts are interesting, engaging and tell a great story. If you have a chance, do not miss out on visiting this special section of the Museum.

*Written by Wanda Zenner Fall 2025
Photos by Lawrence Vavrek, Joanne
Perry, Susan Morrison, Carmen
Haakstad, Gail Sherman*

Reference:

- Sexsmith Museum
Wagon Trails Grown Over History Book
South Peace Regional Archives
BC Death Records
AB Birth & Death Records
Irene Vavrek Interview
Lawrence Vavrek Interview
Joanne (Fitzsimmons) Perry Interview
Doug Spry – Headstone Photos
Canadian War Graves Commission
Veterans Affairs Canada
Sharon Brown Annis
Susan Balderston Morrison
Darlene Houseman Arndt
Carmen Haakstad & Gail Haakstad Sherman Interview - Sept. 30, 2025
October 24, 1985 issue of Western People insert in the Western Producer (featured people, small town, rural areas of Western Canada)
Report by Grade 6 Student Deborah Moe who interviewed Thelma Haakstad Smith 1976*