

The Mystery Writing Box

by Barb Prescott

In 2015, Laura Lang of Esquimalt was sorting through her sister's possessions after her death when she found an old wooden box. It appeared to be a writing box, lined with purple velvet, holding glass ink bottles, inkwells and a blotter.

The box included a number of old photographs and some hidden compartments. Behind one of the compartments was a hand-written letter, dated October 14, 1898, from the Turks Islands. It was addressed to Mrs. McCoubrey in St. John's from W. Stanley Jones. The letter thanked Mrs. McCoubrey for letting him know about the death of her husband, "Dick" (Richard Alexander) McCoubrey.

The pictures were not of any of Laura's family members so she put all the contents back in the box and put it on a shelf in her home, where it remained for four years. In the summer of 2019, Laura decided to see what she could find out about the box and its pictures.

With the letter as a starting point and noting that several of the photographs were taken by professional photographers in St. John's, Newfoundland, Laura contacted *The Telegram* in St. John's. Rosie Mullaley of *The Telegram* wrote an article about the box, which was published in June. Laura soon received e-mails from all over Canada.



The Mystery Writing Box
Photo credit: Saanich Archives



Clara [McCoubrey] Morry (on the right) with her sisters, Jessie Hay and Sarah Bradshaw
Photo submitted by John and Shannon Wheeler.

One of the people contacting Laura was Christopher Morry of Rockland, Ontario. Chris and I have been in contact about the Newfoundland connections of a number of people who are buried in St. Luke's Cemetery. Christopher's great-grandfather, Thomas Morry, is buried in St. Luke's Cemetery, along with his wife, Clara Windsor Morry. Christopher explained that Richard (Dick) Alexander McCoubrey had married Clara Isabelle Windsor in St. John's. After Richard died in 1898, Clara moved to Victoria with her son and, in 1930, she married Thomas Graham Morry in Victoria when he was 80 and she was 78. This was her third marriage and his second. They had been childhood sweethearts, but never married each other for various reasons. [Editors' Note: Chris Morry told the story of his great-grandfather and Clara Isabella Windsor McCoubrey Morry in the Fall 2017 issue of *St. Luke's Prescription*.]

News stories about the mystery box were also carried on the *Vancouver Island CTV News* by reporter Adam Sawatsky and in the *Saanich News and Oak Bay News* in July and August by Devon Bidal.



Members of the Saanich Archives staff watched the CTV news segment and immediately recognized one of the photographs as Ethel Bradshaw Lytton (and I did, too), whose collection of photo albums had been donated to the Archives by her descendants only a few months earlier. As you know, we have included excerpts from Ethel Bradshaw Lytton's diary in recent Prescriptions.

Saanich Archives staff recognized this photo of Ethel Bradshaw Lytton (Clara's niece) in the mystery box - and I recognized this photo, too!

Over several months in the summer of 2019 through e-mails with relatives in Saanich, Ontario, and Newfoundland (and other interested onlookers such as myself), we were able to identify many of the people in the photographs. Included were photographs of Clara's brothers, Henry Charles Windsor and Peter Ford Windsor; her sister, Emma Windsor's wedding to Charles Frederick Lester; the picture of Clara's niece, Ethel Bradshaw (later Lytton); a picture of her nephew, Douglas Windsor Morry, and as well as other more distant relatives.



Last summer, John and Shannon Wheeler of Vancouver visited Laura Lang (left) in Victoria to see the mystery writing box, which includes a photo of John's grandmother, Ethel May Bradshaw Lytton.

Photo submitted by John Wheeler.

In September of this year, Laura Lang and Suzanne Hervieux of the Saanich Archives were finally able to schedule the donation of the "Mystery Writing Box" to Saanich Archives. The writing box and its contents have now joined the rest of the Windsor/Bradshaw/Lytton family collection donated last year by members of the Wheeler and Wenman families (descendants of Ethel May Bradshaw Lytton). We are pleased that this beautiful and interesting artifact has found a permanent home in the Saanich Archives.

[Editors' Note: Links to stories about the mystery writing box can be found at St. Luke's website at: <https://www.stlukesvictoria.ca/pages/the-mystery-writing-box>. Clara Isabelle Windsor Morry, and her third husband, Thomas Graham Morry, are buried in St. Luke's Cemetery along with Clara's sister, Sarah Bradshaw. Sarah's daughter, Ethel, her husband Claude Lytton, several of Ethel's sisters, and her two daughters (Joyce Wheeler and Evelyn Wenman) are also buried in St. Luke's cemetery.]

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