

The Famous Five

It is hard to believe that about 100 years ago, women could not vote and had few of the rights that men enjoyed. That situation changed thanks to the hard work of many brave women, including a group that became known as the Famous Five.

The Fight for Rights

Nellie McClung, Louise McKinney, Henrietta Muir Edwards, Emily Murphy, and Irene Parlby were the women who made up the Famous Five. They were well-educated women who worked in Alberta to improve the lives of women there and across the country. These strong, determined women felt it was important that everyone be treated fairly and equally. So they fought for a minimum wage for women, and battled to increase the rights of farm women.

Nellie McClung was already well known because she had fought for women in western Canada to gain the right to vote in provincial elections. “Never retract, never explain, never apologize—get things done and let them howl,” McClung once said.

Women Are Not Persons

The Famous Five were brought together by member Emily Murphy. Murphy had been hired as a magistrate, which is a kind of judge. But, on her first day of work in 1916, a lawyer told her she had no right to be there. The lawyer claimed that, according to the British North America (BNA) Act, a woman was not a person, and only a person could be a magistrate.

This same problem came up when women’s groups were pushing the Canadian government to make Murphy the country’s first female senator. People argued that a woman could not be appointed to the Senate because she was not a person.

The Famous Five Forms

Being told she was not a person annoyed and frustrated Murphy. She discovered that she needed a group of five to challenge the ruling. So, in 1927, the Famous Five was formed to send a petition to the Supreme Court of Canada—the top law court in the country—to find out if the word “person” in the BNA Act included women. After debating for five weeks, the court decided against the Famous Five.

The Persons Case

The women were shocked. But, as Murphy once said, “Whenever I don’t know whether to fight or not, I fight!” They took their case, which was now known as the Persons Case, to the Privy Council of England. At the time, it was Canada’s absolute highest court.

On October 18, 1929, the Council declared women were legally persons and could hold any appointed or elected office. Finally, the Famous Five had won! Their hard work still inspires women today.

"The Famous Five"—Think About It!

1. Read the text again, then suggest two other possible attention-grabbing titles for it.

2. List five facts about the Famous Five.

3. Why was Emily Murphy told she could not be a magistrate?

4. Why do you think Nellie McClung felt it was important for women to vote?

5. The Famous Five sent a petition to the Supreme Court of Canada. What does *supreme* mean?

6. In what way do you think life would be different for women today if they could not vote?
