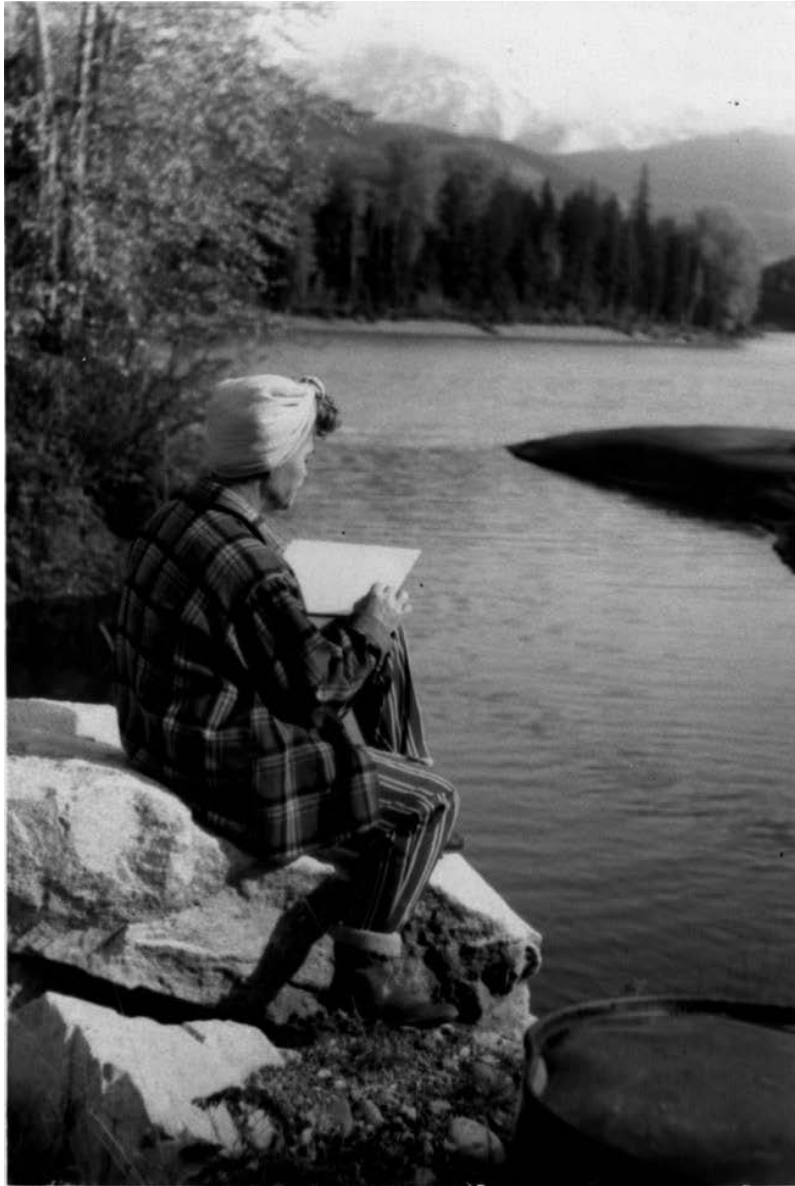


*From Usk to Dorreen and Everywhere In Between:
The Life of Artist Elizabeth Linda Lowrie
Along the Skeena River*



Elizabeth sketching the Skeena River and mountains
near the fishing hole in Dorreen, BC
Mid 1950s

Photo credit: Pauline (Lowrie) Wry

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ELIZABETH'S ANCESTRY

Elizabeth Linda Lowrie's maternal grandparents were Gitxsan, the last generation of her family to live the way of life of their Ancestors, relatively unaffected by the changing times that came with colonization. Elizabeth's grandmother was Hannah Brown, who was born in 1850 in Gitsegukla. Hannah was a matriarch of the Giskaast (Fireweed) Wilps Guxsan of Gitsegukla, who followed the chiefly tradition of intermarrying with the Lax Ganeda of Gitanyow by marrying Chief Gu'nuu of the house of Gu'nuu.

It was the next generation whose lives began to be influenced by the arrival of Europeans in their lands. The daughter of Hannah Brown and Chief Gu'nuu, Elizabeth's mother, was Ksim Hloks in the house of Guxsan. She was born in 1882 in Gitlaxt'aamiks. Her colonial name was Elizabeth Gonu, until her mother Hannah married for a second time to William Matthews, Alaayst, a Lax Ganeda Chief in Gitwangak, and then she became Elizabeth Gonu Matthews.

Ksim Hloks first married Chief George Ellis Kitselas, who was born in Lax Kw'alaams in 1842. She later married Richard Garibaldi Lowrie, who was born in 1868 in Tillsonburg, Ontario. Richard's mother was Ann Mulnyx, of Irish descent, who was born in 1842 in Ontario, and his father was William Lowrie of Scottish descent who was born in 1820 in Denny, Stirlingshire, Scotland.

Ksim Hloks had seven children, with George born in 1899 in Port Essington, BC, and the rest born in Usk, BC: Martha (1902), Ernest (1904), Elizabeth (1907), Margaret (1909), Mary (1911), and Pauline (1919). The lives of these children were to be very different from that of their parents and grandparents.



sister Martha (Lowrie) Morgan and brother George Kitselas, 1970s



brother Ernest Campbell with wife Pearl, 1941



Back (L-R): sister Mary Lowrie, brother George Kitselas, Elizabeth Lowrie and son Arthur Thompson, sister Margaret (Lowrie) Kelly and husband Charlie Kelly, father Richard Lowrie, mother Ksim Hloks. Front (L-R): sister Pauline (Lowrie) Wry, nephew Herbie Kelly. Usk, 1929.

ELIZABETH'S LIFE AND TIMES ALONG THE SKEENA

Elizabeth Linda Lowrie (1907-1986), the fourth child of the family, was a speaker of Gitxsanimaax. She lived most of her life along Xsi'yeen (river of mist), also known as the Skeena River. This life along a river she affectionately called her own began when she was born in Usk in 1907 and concluded in Dorreen in 1969, after which she moved to the Sunshine Coast. In between this stretch of time, she lived in or had connections with communities that were

linked by the river and the railway, such as Prince Rupert, Cassiar Cannery, Shirley Sawmill, Moore's Cove, VanArsdol, Two Mile Creek, Telkwa, Smithers, and Doughty. Elizabeth spent the last two decades of her life in Madeira Park, Irvings Landing, Ladysmith, and finally Vancouver (1986).

Through Elizabeth's life story, we learn about who she was through her Gitksan and settler Ancestors, her family, and her connections to place in what is colonially called British Columbia. Her life is an example of a wildly transitional period in history, defined by the invasion of settlers on her people's territory before she was born, and then by her own geographical movement, influenced by her spouses and their occupations, which shaped her art. Elizabeth's paintings inform much of her story, with photographs, stories from family, letters, and documents supporting that portal into her life.

Elizabeth's father, Richard Lowrie, was one of the earliest residents of Usk, often considered the pioneer of Usk. He was drawn to the area by the gold rush and then pre-empted land, just upriver from Kitselas and set to be along the new railway line. Elizabeth was born in 1907, the same year the railroad construction was started with the building of the bed where the railway track would be laid. In the first seven years of her life, transportation along the Skeena was by canoe and sternwheeler. She was seven in 1914, when the railway was completed. She grew up as the town of Usk also grew. By 1915 there was a train station, government telegraph office, store and small hotel, then a post office in 1916.

In 1917, her father and a business partner prospected and staked an area which they called the Lucky Luke Mine. It wasn't until 1918, when Elizabeth was almost 11, that a school opened. In 1921, the townsite was surveyed.



Father Richard Lowrie, far right
Lucky Luke Mine, Usk, ~1920

With the building of the railway, the economic focus on the Skeena River moved to the railway side of the river. People who had relied on sternwheelers for their way of life from 1864 to 1912 relocated to places where a train station was to be built, with Usk being one of those locations. Through the Canadian government's Dominion Land Act, Richard Lowrie obtained a 65-hectare (160-acre) pre-emption, which he later sold off, one-acre at a time, becoming the townsite.

Elizabeth was still living in Usk at the age of 19, when she had her first child, Carlton Alexander, born in 1926. Carlton's father, William Alexander Dillabaugh, wanted to take Elizabeth back home to his family in Kindersley, Saskatchewan, but she chose not to go, not wanting to leave her family behind.

In 1928, Elizabeth married Alvin Conrad Thompson in Smithers, BC. Born in 1902 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Alvin followed in his Norwegian grandfather's and father's footsteps by farming in both Saskatchewan and BC and continuing to farm once he married Elizabeth.

Through the Dominion Land Act, Alvin acquired 160-acres of farmland in a community called Doughty, near Moricetown, in the Telkwa District, where he built a homestead for his family.

Elizabeth and Alvin's first son, Arthur Lowrie, was born in 1929 in Two Mile Creek, near Telkwa, BC and their daughter Elizabeth Elmira was born in 1930 in Telkwa. By 1931, the family was listed as living in Usk, next door to Elizabeth's parents and youngest sister Pauline. Their third child, Wallace Irvine, was born in 1932 in VanArsdol, the location of a railway station, now known as Kitselas Station.



Usk School, mid to late 1930s

Back row, left: Carlton Lowrie

Second Row: Art Thompson (far left) Elizabeth (Thompson) Helgersen (far right)

Front row: Wallace Thompson (far right)

In 1939, as World War II began, Alvin went to work for the Canadian Army at the gunnery at Barrett Point in Prince Rupert. By the late 1930s, Elizabeth and Alvin's marriage had ended, and Elizabeth purchased a house in Smithers from one of Alvin's sisters-in-law. Elizabeth and their children began working at Cassiar Cannery, returning to Smithers when the salmon season was over. Elizabeth's fifth child, Richard Gordon, was born in 1940 in Smithers, BC. His father was John Renaerts.

During the summer of 1942, while working at Cassiar Cannery, Elizabeth met and began a life-long relationship with George Bruce Webb, who had been fishing for Cassiar Cannery for over a decade. Of Scottish and English descent, Bruce was born in 1902 in Dauphin, Manitoba, and was also a sailor, a boat builder and a prospector.

By the fall of 1942, Elizabeth had sold her Smithers home. Elizabeth and her children moved with Bruce to Moore's Cove on the mainland coast just south of Claxton Cannery. Bruce had purchased 160-acres of land at Moore's Cove from the original homesteader for one dollar, which included a house and a barn. The property was surrounded by dykes to avoid flooding during big tides. Elizabeth and Bruce's daughter Agnes Elaine was born in 1943 in Prince Rupert, BC.

In 1947, the family moved to Prince Rupert so that Richard could go to school. They lived on Pigott Avenue and Richard went to Conrad School. While in Prince Rupert, Bruce worked at a boat shop called Kaien Industries in Cow Bay.



Back: son Wallace Thompson, nephew Bobby Barnes

Middle: son Richard Webb

Front: daughter Elaine Webb, nephew Norman Viktil, niece Inger Viktil

In 1948, Bruce and a business partner purchased a property at Boneyard, across from Port Essington at the mouth of the Skeena River where there was a train station, and a small mill called Shirley Sawmill. Nearby was a cannery town at Haysport and a sawmill, cannery and a brick factory at Skeena City.

In 1954, Elizabeth and Bruce moved to Dorreen, another small community with a nearby mine and a train station, located between Kitselas and Gitwangak. Bruce still owned both Shirley Sawmill and the 160-acres at Moore's Cove. While living at Dorreen, he prospected for Gold and Molybdenum and developed a claim of Molybdenum near Terrace. Between 1963 and 1964, Elizabeth worked in the kitchen at Miller Bay Tuberculosis Indian Hospital. In 1969, Elizabeth and Bruce left Dorreen and moved to Madeira Park to be closer to Bruce's family and friends. Elizabeth's life along the Skeena River had come to an end.

After living on the Sunshine Coast for over a decade, Elizabeth and Bruce sold their home in Irvings Landing. Bruce had a medical issue that required surgery, so he went to Edmonton to be near daughter Elaine and Elizabeth moved to Ladysmith to stay with son Richard. Bruce passed away in 1982. Elizabeth moved from her son's home to an independent senior community in Ladysmith. In 1984, Elizabeth moved to a long-term care home in Vancouver where her sister Margaret was living. Elizabeth passed away in 1986.

ELIZABETH THE ARTIST

A self-taught artist, Elizabeth always wanted to go to art school, but she never got the opportunity. Demonstrating a passion for art at an early age, she used charcoal bits from wood ashes in the stove and paper wrappers from tin cans to draw, something she learned from her older sister Martha.

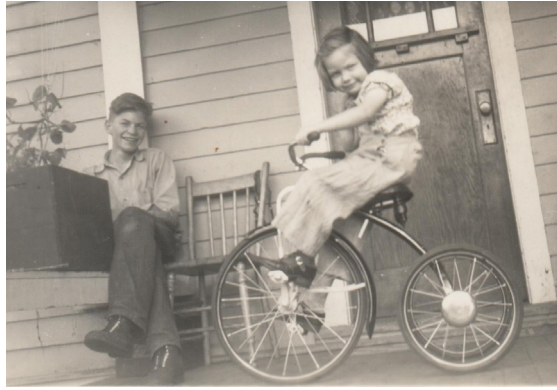
Ten-year-old Martha was five-year-old Elizabeth's first real teacher, teaching her to read and write. For the next six years, Martha mentored Elizabeth during the summer months when Martha came home from residential school. In 1918, a school finally opened in Usk.



Elizabeth with sister Martha and grandson Wallace Thompson Jr. Gitwangak, 1980

From the early beginnings of drawing with charcoal bits, Elizabeth moved on to sketching with pencil and charcoal, to painting with water colours and oil.

In 1947, Elizabeth's teenage son Wallace gave her an oil painting set for Christmas. Elizabeth's youngest daughter Elaine recalls her mother starting to oil paint when they moved to Shirley Sawmill in 1948.



Son Wallace Thompson & daughter Elaine Webb, Shirley Sawmill, 1949

Oil became Elizabeth's favourite painting medium, with paintings overwhelmingly being oil on canvas paper or canvas board. The subjects of Elizabeth's paintings were mainly landscape and nature paintings, but she also did portrait art and still life painting, with realism as her painting style.

Elizabeth used her passion for learning and for art to become a better artist. She did this by focusing on and learning from the creations of other artists and improving her artwork through practice. Elizabeth looked to other artists for inspiration, to be her mentors. At the age of 18, an artist who might have inspired young Elizabeth was a Quebec artist named Edwin Holgate, who visited the Skeena River area with anthropologist Marius Barbeau in 1926. While in Usk, he drew a crayon portrait of Elizabeth's mother, Ksim Hloks.



One artist who Elizabeth learned from was Canadian Landscaper Jessie H. Raycroft. Using oil on canvas board, Elizabeth reproduced "Les Chats Rapids" a painting in Raycroft's co-written book, *Progressive Art Guide (without a teacher): An entirely new method of self-instruction on modern arts, shown in their progressive stages of completion*, published in 1891.

Elizabeth showed great interest in a landscape painting by artist Paul Detlefsen called "Down in the Valley", which was in the first calendar he published in 1951. This painting must have really inspired Elizabeth as she made at least a dozen adaptations. With each interpretation, Elizabeth showed her love of learning by experimenting with different colours and brush strokes, as well as making changes to the foliage, mountains, and lake. Elizabeth also painted several versions of her hometown Usk, Tyee (a former train stop east of Prince Rupert, where the railway and highway meet the Skeena River), and Siwash Rock at Stanley Park.

In the 1950s and 1960s, when in Prince Rupert, she would enroll in art classes at the Civic Centre. Elizabeth recreated the painting, "Four Horses", which artist Lumen Martin Winter completed in 1968. She most likely painted her version once she moved to the Sunshine Coast with Elizabeth continuing to paint in the late 1970s and early 1980s. When Elizabeth was 70, she wrote to granddaughter Edōsdi-Judy Thompson about going to Sechelt to attend weekly art classes: "Art class starts on Monday 10 to 2."

Besides focusing on specific artists, Elizabeth would look to calendars, postcards, magazines, and photographs for inspiration. Elizabeth loved all animals, both wild and domesticated, and was a keen fisher and gardener, with her artwork highlighting that. Besides painting, Elizabeth expressed her artistic ways through crocheting, knitting, and baking. Elizabeth's art was an expression of who she was and illustrated her connection to place, as well as relationships with her family, the land, and all living beings.

ELIZABETH'S LEGACY

Elizabeth Linda Lowrie was a positive role model for her children and her children's children. When she passed away in 1986, she had touched the lives of her descendants through her creativity, kindness, even keeled demeanour, sense of humour, her love of learning and love for life.

At a young age, Elizabeth was mentored by her oldest sister Martha, with both being mentored by their Matriarchs. From her large extended family, she learned not only to foster her creativity, but to nurture and provide for loved ones, and to pass on the knowledge and wisdom of her Ancestors.

Elizabeth shared the teachings that had been given to her, as well as her love of the outdoors, to her children. She taught them to eat the young fireweed shoots that grew in the spring to provide nourishment after a long winter without fruits and vegetables. She taught them how and where to pick berries and where the best fishing holes were. She taught them how to make whistles from branches of willow in the spring when the sap was running. But most of all, she taught them to respect and enjoy nature. Many of these teachings were then passed down to her children's children.

A generous and giving person, Elizabeth would gift her paintings to family and friends, along with flowers and vegetables from her garden, her baking, and her crocheted and knitted creations.



Granddaughter Lorraine Helgersen with daughter Kirsty McRae and husband Ross McRae. Burnaby, 1982

At Christmas, Elizabeth sent homemade gifts to her children's families that arrived in the mail in big soft lumpy parcels. Her grandchildren have memories of the anticipation and excitement of opening their presents and learning the value of gifts made from the heart.



Granddaughters (L-R): Wanda (Thompson) Wiwcharuck, Patricia Thompson, Kathleen (Thompson) Cottrell, Julie Anne (Thompson) Morris, Judy Thompson. Prince Rupert, 1972

Another way she made her grandchildren feel special was by mailing birthday cards that always included well wishes and a monetary gift. Elizabeth also used Canada Post to keep in touch with family through letter writing. Being with family was important to Elizabeth, so she made sure that she went to them, or they came to her. For five decades, Elizabeth travelled via train next to her beloved river to visit family. Once Highway 16 between Prince Rupert and Prince George was reconstructed and paved in 1964, she travelled by bus as well.

When family came to her, visits often revolved around birthday parties or holiday celebrations. Visits also involved going fishing, picking berries, working in her garden, or playing with her cats and dogs. For relatives seeking guidance, she was a good listener and would provide sound advice when needed. Elizabeth also loved to play Bingo. She was always on the lookout for luck, often having grandchildren and great grandchildren searching for four-leaf clovers to put in her left shoe.

When Elizabeth passed away, she had 19 grandchildren. As of 2024, she has 34 great grandchildren and 18 great-great grandchildren. Elizabeth motivated many of these descendants to be creative in different ways. Several have taken inspiration from her art to new levels, taking what they have learned, and continue to learn, and adapting it to different mediums and styles.

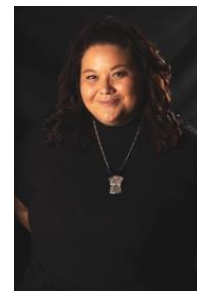
Artist Kāshā - Julie Anne
(Thompson) Morris
granddaughter



Artist Meaghan McRae
great granddaughter



Artist Łagas-Katrina Godfrey
great granddaughter



Samples of art inspired by Granny Elizabeth



Left: Granny Elizabeth Fireweed
earrings

Top right: Lizzie Fireweed earrings
Bottom right: Fireweed Button Blanket
Fringe earrings



“Lizzie”

Acrylic on canvas
board painting

Inspired by Elizabeth Lowrie’s
painting of Elizabeth Taylor



“Fox Searching for the Rabbit”

Acrylic on canvas board painting
Inspired by Elizabeth Lowrie’s painting of
Usk

THE LIGHT OF WIIGYAT

An example reflecting the connection between Elizabeth's Gitxsan and settler relations is a beautiful and touching story told by her youngest son, Richard Webb, about his maternal grandmother, Ksim Hloks. This story shows the coming together of the traditional stories and ways of life, and how they could be seen and expressed in the rapidly changing time of the 20th century.



Ksim Hloks
Usk, BC

When we lived in Shirley Sawmill (1948-1954), we had electricity but we had to start the generator which was water powered. If Mom wanted to wash clothes or iron, I would start the generator. Grandma would stay with us for a few weeks every year. She said Wiigyat made the sun come up and was very powerful. When she found out that I was turning the lights on she changed my name from 'small boy' in our language to Wiigyat. I was about ten years old then (Richard Webb, 2024).



Richard Webb, 10th birthday
Shirley Sawmill, 1950

The story of Raven as Trickster is a common oral tradition among Northwest Coast Indigenous peoples. The Gitxsan Raven Trickster Wiigyat translates from Gitxsanimaax as “big handsome man.” In this particular story, Raven disguises himself as a child to locate the sun, take possession of it, and then release it into the sky, bringing light to the previously dark world. Ksim Hloks saw her 10-year-old grandson taking on the characteristics of Wiigyat, that of a mischievous and creative trickster and transformer who had supernatural powers. By Ksim Hloks calling her grandson “Wiigyat”, she personalized this Gitxsan story, connecting Trickster to the lives she saw her children and their children leading in the 20th century, that she, too, was now a part of, and so different from the life she had lived up until that point. Ksim Hloks brought a story about the Gitxsan Trickster into the 20th century thus connecting Gitxsan worldview with the world of the settlers who have occupied her people's lands, and who are now family.

The story is about a grandmother telling her grandson the tale of Wiigyat, who brought the light. However, the grandmother didn't know that the boy himself was the true source of the light. Born from Fireweed and transformed into a Killerwhale, the boy used the water to create light for his family. He was Wiigyat, shifting from a boy to a man while carrying the light and the Trickster's orbs. When the grandmother discovered the light was coming from the boy, she realized he was no longer just a small boy. From then on, he was known as Wiigyat, the man who brought light, just like Wiigyat the Trickster (Łagas-Katrina Godfrey, 2024).



Łagas-Katrina Godfrey
“The Light of Wiigyat”

ABOUT THE CURATOR

I am the granddaughter of Elizabeth Linda Lowrie and daughter of Wallace and Cathryn Thompson. My Tahltan name is Edōsdi, and my colonial name is Judy Thompson. I am a member of the Tahltan Nation and an Associate Professor in Indigenous Education at the University of Victoria. I am a trained elementary school teacher teaching at the post-secondary level for over three decades, with the first 21 years in my hometown of Prince Rupert.



My current work focuses on sharing the teachings of my Ancestors through art and mentorship, part of a Canada Council for the Arts grant, and begins with the exhibit of my paternal grandmother, Elizabeth Linda Lowrie. Curating this exhibit has given me the chance to learn the stories of my father's Ancestors and bring me closer to his family. It has also given me the opportunity to know my grandmother at different stages of her life, visualizing her life along the Skeena River. The title is a playful way to describe chronologically the places she lived or had connections with that were linked by the river and the railway.

Granny Elizabeth shared both her appreciation and love of learning with her children and grandchildren. When I was in elementary school, Granny told me how she kept all her schoolbooks and notebooks. This showed me how much she appreciated her formal education and how she did not take it for granted. Besides inspiring me to excel in school, by the age of ten, my grandmother inspired me to start learning how to embroider, knit, crochet, and bake. When I was attending university in my early 20s, I would visit Granny at her long-term care home. Making sure to wear one of the Icelandic sweaters I had made, she would tell anyone who would listen, "This is my granddaughter, Judy. She's going to university AND she knitted that sweater!"

I curate this exhibit as a gift to my father and his siblings and to honour the life of their mother – my grandmother – Elizabeth Linda Lowrie, a life greatly affected by the times into which she was born, and by her passion for art.



Elizabeth Lowrie with granddaughters Edōsdi-Judy Thompson, Kathleen (Thompson) Cottrell on the left, Kāshā-Julie (Thompson) Morris on the right. Prince Rupert, October 1965.



Usk, BC
1930s



Elizabeth and Spike III
Fishing on Fiddler Creek near Dorreen, BC
Late 1950s