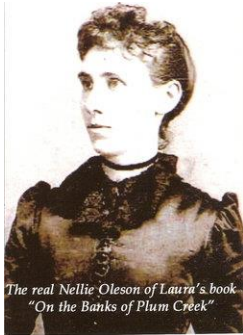




FRIENDS OF HISTORIC  
FOREST GROVE

## GRAVE MATTERS CEMETERY TOUR 2017

*Editor's note: FHFG presented Grave Matters Cemetery Tour on October 7, 2017. During this tour, actors – dressed in attire from the era – portray former Forest Grove area residents. FHFG and the author of this script retains all rights to this script. Written permission is required for using any parts of this script.*



### Nellie Winfield Owens Kirry, Teacher

August 2, 1869 – November 2, 1949

**Portrayed by** Chloe Lockett and Liza Schade

**Script written by:** Ginny Mapes

**Background:** Names are often changed by writers for obvious reasons. Laura Ingalls Wilder, in her later years, decided to write the story of her life and her family's pioneering experiences. She bought a supply of Fifty Fifty and Big Chief tablets along with Number 2 lead pencils. Then, she penciled the title "Pioneer Girl" across the cover of the first tablet and started writing, "Once upon a time . . ." Her manuscript eventually filled six tablets and spanned 16 years of Wilder's life. Oleson was the name she selected for the Owens family. Nellie Oleson, was the fictitious name for Nellie Owens.

When *On the Banks of Plum Creek* was published in 1937, Nellie Owens Kirry was 69 years old and within the next few years in a home for the aged. She never knew that her family's early years in Walnut Grove would provide material for the book and that she, herself, would be a leading character, Nellie Oleson.

In a television series, "Little House on the Prairie," created from the Wilder books, Nellie the character kids loved to hate.

Meet the true-life Nellie Owens.

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*Greetings everyone, I'm so happy to see you all at this gathering. I'm Nellie Owens Kirry. I've been resting here in Forest Grove for 68 years, next to by brother, Willy, and my father.*

*My parents, were Minnesota farmers who moved to a new town located close the the railroad. My brother Willy was born there.*

*The next year, my father gave up farming and we moved to Alba where he was postmaster. We lived in the back rooms of a general store.*

*The business world seemed more appealing and exciting to my father rather than farming. We moved to Walnut Grove where my parents started their own mercantile business. My mother ran the store and my father practiced veterinary medicine on the side. I was five years old and Willy was four.*

*That same year, the Ingalls family moved to Walnut Grove. The Ingalls were farmers and lived out of town. Laura and Mary had to walk several miles to the new two-story school house which had been constructed in Walnut Grove. Laura Ingalls was a year older than me.*

*She was a little different. Laura thought I had such wonderful toys and books. She really liked my copy of Mother Goose. After we looked at all the toys, Laura reached for my doll, but I quickly jerked her back, "Don't you touch her!" Then I carefully wrapped my doll in soft paper and put her back in the box.*

*Later, when all the kids went outside, Laura sat on the floor by the book cupboard looking over all the titles instead of going out to play.*

*Once Willy and I did go to visit Laura and Mary. It was a hot day and we all went wading in the creek. Laura led the way and crowded me over toward a rock. That's when I saw a huge crawfish, with its big claws sticking out from under the rock! We ran screaming, splashing into the lower pool and out onto the bank. Our feet and legs were covered with little, long, flat, bloodsuckers. We tried to brush them off, but couldn't. We were dancing around, kicking and screeching. I looked over to see Laura rolling, laughing in the grass. Mary made Laura help get the leeches off.*

*With crop failures and the loss of their baby boy, the Ingalls left Walnut Grove. Returning a few years later, at the first meeting of the Walnut Grove village council Mr. Ingalls was elected Justice of the Peace and my father was elected town treasurer.*

*A Scarlet Fever epidemic spread one spring, and Mary Ingalls was left blind.*

*The Fourth of July the following year, Willy was playing with some older boys, and he was injured in a firecracker accident. He lost the sight in one eye and the other had minor damage.*

*When I was 14, there was a unfortunate incident at the sawmill. Frank Bedal's father was killed. Mrs. Bedal had to work as a washer woman and could not support her large, young family. Her children were "farmed out" with settlement members who could help her. That's how I gained a new brother, Frank Bedal. My mother loved Frank and he became part of the family.*

*Dad decided to move west the next year. Frank wanted to go to California with our family. His mother said he was old enough to make his own decision in the matter. We all headed west. Frank Bedal became Frank Owens.*

*After seven years in California, my father sold the general store at an enormous profit, so we packed up our belongings and headed north to the wilderness of Tillamook in a covered wagon. Frank rode a pony bareback the most of the way helping guide the wagon along the trail.*

*We bought 80 acres in an area known as South Prairie. We built a house out of thick cedar planks. On the first floor level was the kitchen, dining room, parlor, and bedroom for my parents. Upstairs were bedrooms for Willy, Frank and me. We also built a barn, where father, Willy and Frank raised dairy cattle. Dad became the first veterinarian in the county. I taught in a very small school in Bay City.*

*News came that Henry Kirry was moving to Tillamook. We had known the family in California. Henry and his brother Walter wanted to buy some timberland and start a sawmill. On their way north, a storm came up and sank the boat and with all their equipment. Water returned to California, Henry continued alone. Henry found work, but was struck down with typhoid fever. My family and I visited Henry during his long recuperation.*

*Henry was a great storyteller, and it was exciting to hear of his hunting, fishing, marine expeditions, people he'd met, and funny experiences.*

*Henry loved to cook and enjoyed preparing fish and game dishes. I was also impressed that Henry knew how to make himself a good pair of trousers on a sewing machine.*

*I became engaged to Henry and we were married just before my 25 birthday. We moved to Bay City where Henry opened a blacksmith shop and in a year, we were able to purchase two parcels of land. One was close to my parents property just north of the Trask River.*

*Our first two children were Zola and Lloyd. I did the daily chores, cooking, cleaning, laundry, and caring for my family. I also liked to sew and crochet for my family.*

*In 1899, we moved north from Bay City to the town of Rainer, Oregon on the Columbia River. Henry had a new job working for a door manufacturer and was also a diesel engineer for a local boat company. Zola was 4, Lloyd, 3, and I was pregnant. In Rainer, Leslie was born on April 1, 1900. By June we moved back to Bay City.*

*The following year Willy married Philadelphia Brammwell in an elegant wedding. Their new home was with my parents on the farm. Willy and Delphia had three daughters: Lela, Georgia, and La Velle. One day while going out to cut some wood, Willy's double bladed axe got cut in some trees. Turning to free it, a twig pierced his remaining good eye. This accident reduced his eyesight to ten per cent, rendering him blind at age thirty-eight. Willy now looked forward to the home teacher's visits, where he could learn to read braille, and use his hands, body and mind rather than his eyes.*

*Frank had a job hauling cheese from a nearby farm into Tillamook with a four-mule team. While working here he met and then married Eva Nelson.*

*Frank purchased his own land and the young couple went into dairy farming.*

*After my mother died, Henry wanted to move closer to Tillamook. I urged Henry to move the family to the lovely village of Forest Grove, about halfway between Tillamook and Portland. Here was a stable environment for our growing children, schools were excellent, Pacific University was nearby, and the property was located on almost 3 acres in the middle of town. We found a house nearby at 410 Union Ave. Now 22nd Place. I loved Forest Grove. Henry was away, working as a steam and stationary engineer on a boat that traveled between Tillamook and Astoria. During this period my father came to live with us. My life was full.*

*Zola went on to college and became a teacher in Portland. Lloyd first worked on boats and later he became a lubrication engineer at Standard Oil. Leslie was a star player for football and basketball teams at Forest Grove High School. He later moved to Seattle where he was a butcher.*

*It was difficult for father in his later years, I could not care for him. He was moved to the Oregon State Hospital in Salem, where he died. I had his remains brought back to Forest Grove.*

*In Portland, the Oregon Blind Trades School opened in 1921. Willy sold off part of the farm and moved to Portland, eager to learn new skills. Willy and Delphia had separated, and now in his 50s, running the farm was too difficult. Willy learned new skills in carpentry and caning.*

*I often think back to my childhood in Walnut Grove, I wonder how time has flown by so quickly . . .*

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*When Zola died, she wanted her ashes scattered at sea. Before she died, Zola mentioned in a letter to her great nephew Bruce, that she heard Nellie was in a book written by Laura Ingalls Wilder — when Nellie was youngster in Walnut Grove.*