

'Wild Woman of the West'

By Dinah Clarkson

IN 1919, Helen Armstrong was known from coast to coast as the "Wild Woman of the West." Winnipeg was in the midst of an explosive labour strike — one of the biggest in North American history — and Mrs. Armstrong was out with the boys on the front lines.

Eighty-two years later, her name is virtually unknown. When local filmmaker Paula Kelly came across it three years ago, she was intrigued.

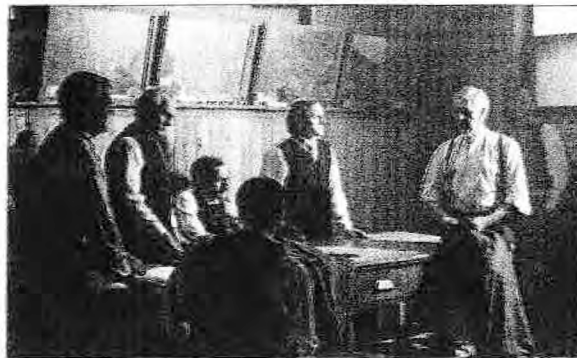
"She was a scrapper, she was a doer, she was this huge force in labour politics at a time when Winnipeg was the epicentre of these massive strike actions."

"I knew a fair bit about the Winnipeg General Strike but I hadn't heard a lot of references to the women or the fact they had a leader," explains Kelly. "So I stumbled across references to this name: Helen Armstrong. Since then, I've been on this journey of trying to uncover the story of a woman who provides a window onto the experiences of working-class women."

The result of Kelly's journey is *The Notorious Mrs. Armstrong*, a one-hour documentary that airs this Thursday night on WTN as part of its Canadian documentary series *Through Her Eyes*. What struck Kelly most about Armstrong was the idea that, despite the depth of her involvement

in the strike, she has more or less been left out of the history books.

Armstrong was best-known at the time for her tireless humanitarian efforts on behalf of working-class girls and women. She led them on the picket lines and fed them through her soup kitchen. She also had a major role in helping Manitoba become one of the first two provinces (the other was B.C.) to get minimum wage legislation. She was working



A young Helen Armstrong (actress Pauline Broderick) works in her father's tailor shop (above); a radical labour meeting takes place in the shop (left).



could keep in the documentary. I ended up with an embarrassment of riches."

Part of that may have been due to her luck in tracking down Armstrong's relatives in California, Arizona and Arkansas.

"Once I found the relatives, I found the family albums and a fair number of documents," she explains. "It's a working-class history and that's not the type of history that's all that well transcribed in official records. But I think that Helen and her husband George realized they were in the middle of a historic time. In their own fashion, they left traces of their passage through it."

Among the relatives Kelly talked to and included in her documentary are Armstrong's grandchildren. **Complexity**

"Her granddaughter in particular knew her very well," Kelly says. "She was an excellent testament to Helen's character and gave her a sense of complexity. On the one hand, she was this Bolshevik agitator, she was ferocious. On the other hand, the girls and women she was trying to help called her Ma Armstrong. To them, she was a hugely compassionate figure."

Kelly says she thinks the final product — a mix of interviews, photos and re-enactments that features actress Pauline Broderick as Armstrong — "is not a story for the few. We wanted to communicate this stuff to as many people as possible."

Nonetheless, she thinks Winnipeggers in particular will be intrigued.

"People here are really going to see their city faithfully represented the way it was then, in an exciting and turbulent time," she says. "I really think we've done a tremendous job of bringing back that dynamic sense of a time when things were important, things meant something."

With all the leftover material, Kelly said she has considered a book.

"It's been suggested to me several times. It's something I would consider as a co-writing effort, but not right away. I've been living with this for a long time and I'd like to take some time to reflect on it."

"Maybe in the not-too-distant future."

The Notorious Mrs. Armstrong airs Thursday at 8 p.m. on WTN.

class, Kelly says, not genteel.

"She was a scrapper, she was a doer, she was this huge force in labour politics at a time when Winnipeg was the epicentre of these massive strike actions," she says. "The Winnipeg General Strike was one of the most seminal events in Canadian history and here she was in the middle of it, leading the women on the lines, organizing them from her own office in a labour temple. She was one of the boys. And most people have never heard her name."

History uncovered

And so came the task of uncovering Armstrong's history. Kelly came across some of the writings and photos she left behind, many of which have never been seen before. But she was still doubtful as to whether she had enough information to tell the activist's story.

"The evidence that existed from the usual sources was so marginal and so limited. But by the end, I was overwhelmed with material. So much has surfaced that I had to be very selective about what I



Kelly (top) shot scenes of Helen Armstrong urging workers to join the Winnipeg General Strike.