

A Graham was behind the name and “Red Door” of cosmetics tycoon

Elizabeth Arden

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She is the woman who helped create the modern cosmetic and beauty salon industry and became the sole owner of a \$60 million business. At the peak of her career, she was one of the wealthiest women in the world. Elizabeth Arden made it acceptable for women to wear makeup and to pamper themselves in her salons.

She was born December 31, 1878, in Woodbridge, Ontario, Canada, and was named Florence Nightingale Graham, after the famous nurse. Depending on the article you read, she was either the fourth or fifth child in her family.

Florence's father, William Graham, was born in Scotland and was the son of a tenant

farmer. He did not want to become a tenant farmer, like his father, and wanted to become self-employed. He learned enough, on the farm, to become a trainer of horses, and he was passionate about the horses and developed a great talent for training them. He participated in races around Scotland and England, and developed a reputation as a good rider.

On one of his trips, he met Suzan Tadd, in Cornwall, where he was participating in the races. According to accounts, it was love at first sight for them, but her parents were not as enamored.... Suzan came from a wealthy English family who owned ships and land, and this union was not one they felt was appropriate to her social standing.

William and Suzan ignored her parents' objections and were married. From the sale of his horse, and his savings, he took his wife to

Canada. For an emigrant in the 1870s, Toronto was not a good place to become a new citizen. Jobs were scarce and it was an endless search to find work. William finally rented a small farm, north of Toronto, in the village of Woodbridge, where he hoped to provide a better life for his family, and to relieve their financial problems. William had not lost his love of horses and he bought second-class thoroughbreds, instead of buying the workhorses that were more suited to the hard work.

Suzan did not adapt well to the harsher climate and poor living conditions and her health declined as she gave birth to her children and ultimately contracted tuberculosis after Florence's birth. Because of her delicate condition, Suzan was forced to give her children some responsibilities around the home and the farm. When Florence was old enough, she was given the job of taking care of one of the horses, a job that she loved, and which stayed with her all her life. Suzan died when Florence was 6 years old and this was devastating for the little girl.

Florence was a very bright child and had dreams of going to university. Her aunt, from England, had been helping the family financially, but this stopped before Florence could finish high school. Unsure of her future



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and without financial help, Florence decided to follow in the footsteps of her namesake, and become a nurse. This necessitated a move to Toronto, to attend the nursing school, and it was not long before the profession depressed and frightened her.

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During her time at the nursing school, she made the acquaintance of a young man in the hospital lab. He was trying to develop a formula to eliminate skin blemishes. Florence saw this as an opportunity to develop a beauty cream, which she intended to sell by mail. She quit the nursing profession and went home to work on her beauty formula. Her father tolerated her smelly experiments for a short while, and then delivered an ultimatum, “get married or get a job”.

She held many jobs and worked hard, but she felt she was not succeeding. Her brother had a job in New York City, and Florence decided to move there, hoping that there would be more job opportunities for her. Her father told her that she could not go, but she defied his wishes and moved to the big city to find a career.

Florence was 30 when she arrived in New York, but looked much younger and used this to her advantage when applying for jobs. She acquired a job as bookkeeper for E.R. Squibb and Sons, the pharmaceutical company. The chemists she met there were not enthusiastic about beauty creams, so they did not help her. Florence decided to take a different route and became a cashier at the skin treatment parlor

of Mrs. Adair. She then moved on to form a partnership with Mrs. Elizabeth Hubbard, who already had her own line of beauty creams and tonics. They opened a salon on Fifth Avenue, but the union was dissolved over financial issues. Florence leased the salon in her own name.

Because she felt that “Florence Nightingale Graham” was an unsuitable name for the beauty business, she took the name of her former partner, Elizabeth, and added Arden, which was reportedly from Tennyson’s poem “Enoch Arden.” With a new name and a huge red door with a brass plate, the industry of cosmetics was born. Cosmetics were not acceptable for “nice” girls and she changed the world’s thinking on this issue. She expanded her business and was the first one to offer her products through department stores. She had competition and reportedly referred to Helena Rubenstein as ‘that woman,’ which infers that they were not the best of friends.

She had become very knowledgeable about cosmetics and employed chemists to develop products and to experiment with colors. Florence worked 18-hour days and was driven to be successful in her field. She married twice and both ended in divorce. She did not have any





Grave of Elizabeth Arden in Sleepy Hollow, New York.



Footstone of Elizabeth Arden (née Florence Nightingale Graham).

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children, but she inherited her father's love of horses and racing, and it became her passion. One of her horses won the Kentucky Derby.

Florence, who had become 'Elizabeth Arden,' was all business and held her place in the highly competitive cosmetic industry. She died on October 18, 1966, and apparently worked up to her last days.

This woman certainly displayed the tenacity of a Graham and proved that using this determination can make your dreams come true.

I have been in touch with the librarian in Woodbridge, Ontario, and she has located the

family in Vaughan Township. On a nice sunny day, I'll take a drive and see what else I can find out. I would like to know where her father was born in Scotland.

SOURCES

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