

**The History of Women Educators in
Manitoba
Between the Years 1880 and 1940**

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Introduction

In the words of historians Prentice and Theobald, “ ‘Woman teacher’ is a phrase that still has evocative power. In the nineteenth century, the spotlight focused on the position of women in the workplace, giving us cause to ponder the following question. Who are the women that teach and what is their status in the teaching profession?”¹ Feminization of teaching was a common occurrence in Canada and all over the world during the nineteenth century. A number of women chose teaching as an occupation because it was one of the few career choices open to them at that time. Women were employed in a small range of occupations including maids, office workers, factory workers, or nurses. Many Canadian women joined the teaching occupation as a result of a huge growth in population in the late nineteenth century. In 1881, there was a massive influx of immigrants from Europe to Canada. The population grew from 62,260 to 461,394, which equated to a population increase of 640 percent.² Teachers were in great demand. By the 1920s, women dominated the teaching profession in the province of Manitoba.

By 1931, women in Winnipeg made up 80 percent of the total of 1795 teachers in the metropolitan area. This proportion was slightly higher than in the province of Manitoba, where 77 percent of the 5544 teachers were women.³ Women teachers experienced different treatment compared to their male

counterparts. Female teachers who taught in the rural school setting were presented with forced rules of conduct, challenging working conditions and at times, lives full of isolation and loneliness.

The 1920s and 1930s proved to be a formative period for women's struggle toward equality in education. With the support of the Manitoba Teachers' Society (MTS), a group of female activists created a local division based on the needs of women in education. Despite imposed regulations placed on women in the teaching profession, female teachers played a fundamental role in establishing positive changes in public education in Manitoba during the years of 1880 to 1940.

This paper describes the history of women teachers including the difficulties they faced because of imposed regulations. It discusses strategies used by key women activists to remove barriers of gender and, finally, touches briefly upon their current status in the profession.

Gender Differences in the Teaching Occupation

The works of many prominent Canadian historians in the area of education confirm that gender was a determining factor in the organization of policies and practices in education. Historically, salary schedules and appointments to administrative positions were based on the gender of the teacher.

In the province of Manitoba, formalized teacher training was established in the form of Normal Schools, which were open to both men and women in 1882. This formal teacher training was not mandated by the Board of Education but it

was beneficial to the teachers. A teacher's salary and status, especially if the teacher candidate was male, was higher after Normal School training. Sybil Shack reflected on the teaching career of (Carolyn) in her autobiography entitled The Making of a Teacher 1917-1935; Carolyn who began as a permit teacher at age 17 stated, "I went to Normaschool and earned my first class certificate, [and] taught in three different rural schools.. I realized my education and salary was not adequate to remain teaching."⁴

Women were paid less than their male counterparts; they were earning about 70 percent of what male teachers earned.⁵ Although many women held formal teacher training certificates, they continued to face inequalities in salary. Men holding a first-class certificate earned \$3000 per year whereas women earned \$2000 per year. Men holding a second-class certificate earned \$2000 per year while women earned \$1600 per year. Men holding a third class certificate earned \$1500 per year and women earned \$1200 per year.⁶ The MTF issued a bulletin confirming the salary schedule discussed and alluded to the fact that the above figures were agreed upon by representatives of teachers and the trustee board.⁷ As early as the 1920s, women educators began to question their role in the teaching occupation and began to disapprove of the wage differences between their male colleagues. In an article issued by the Winnipeg Free Press in 1932, the School Board Committee (SBC) stated "The preamble suggests an effort to sweep away inequalities in salary."⁸ However, women continued to face the inequalities in pay with their male colleagues. Typically, school board officials justified the pay

differentials by stating that “men are mostly married and have families and single women have no dependents.”⁹ On the other hand, many women had dependents such as elderly parents or children. The wage gap between men and women continued to remain an issue for female educators for decades.

Urban and rural school teachers also faced inequalities in salary. Statistics generated by the Department of Education Annual Report on June 30, 1913, stated that the average salary for female teachers in a rural school setting was \$544.68 per year and that the average for a teacher working in the urban school setting was \$852.00.¹⁰

World War I and the Depression had devastating effects on the women’s fight toward pay equality. A high proportion of female teachers were required during the war because the majority of males were involved in the war efforts.¹¹ Winnipeg’s Barrows and Brookdale school districts advertised in the Winnipeg Free Press for “male” or “male preferred” teachers in 1917.¹² The Depression also had lasting effects on the economy of Canada and its education system. During these years, women found it difficult to sustain existing salaries and teaching positions that had already been acquired. To understand the lasting effects that the Depression had on education, it should be noted that many school boards had to slash teachers’ salaries and/or had to fire many teachers.¹³ There was no doubt that with the shrinking income, Winnipeg could not afford the salary schedule that had prevailed. It was unfair to place practically the total burden of adjustment of salary to income upon the shoulders of the women teachers.”¹⁴ This challenging

period in history mired the thoughts of many female teachers in the right for equality in pay.

Certainly, women were frustrated and wanted equal status in the teaching profession. The salary of rural teachers in 1932 reached an all-time low. At the same time, there was economic instability in the province of Manitoba, and taxpayers were no longer paying the taxes that funded the schools. In a special article written for the Winnipeg Free Press on Dec. 8, 1932, the SBC members stated, "this city desires to treat its teachers as fairly as possible".¹⁵ Inspector Beecher of the Manitoba School Board (MSB) reported that teachers in the rural division were to receive an average salary of \$350.00 per year. The maximum salary had been \$750.00, per year while the prevailing salary was \$500.00 per year.¹⁶ Teachers were desperate for employment and even the tiny one-room schoolhouses were receiving a large number of applications. The autobiography by Sybil Shack, a dedicated female activist, stated in 1932 that, "I remember being driven to a little schoolhouse and about thirty of us applying for scrubby jobs which paid a minified salary of 450.00 per year."¹⁷ In the early 1940s, poor working conditions, low salaries and inequalities resulted in teacher shortages in rural school settings in the Prairie Provinces.

Meanwhile, men still dominated in administrative positions such as superintendents and principals. In a 1936 teaching diary, one teacher (Miss Barton) noted that, "In all schools it was standard protocol to have a male principal."¹⁸ Mary Kinnear, professor at the University of Manitoba stated, "only

one high school in the district, Thehere, has a lady principal.”¹⁹ On January 1, 1921, the Winnipeg School Board (WSB) reported the following earnings for male and female administrators, “Male Principals with schools 10-15 rooms earned a maximum of \$2400 per year whereas female counterparts earned a maximum of \$2000 per year regardless of size of school and number of rooms.”²⁰ Many historians have argued that women were not involved in administration for a variety of reasons. Shack identified two main reasons why women were reluctant to seek administrative positions. She noted in her autobiography that many women lacked the self-confidence that was needed to be successful in an administrative position. The additional responsibilities that went along with administrative positions often clashed with their family responsibilities.²¹ Sybil Shack reflected on the words of Professor Kinnear in her autobiography entitled The Making of a Teacher 1917-1935; Kinnear stated, “I know many good women who were discouraged from applying for administrative positions by male principals and superintendents.”²² Although many women wanted to be involved in school administrative positions, they were not encouraged to apply for these positions by their male administrators and school board officials.

Another limitation of this era was women were not represented on the Board of Education (BoE) as trustees. Perhaps the most convincing evidence of women not being represented on the board was reflected in an editorial written by trustee candidate M. Young who openly stated, “I firmly believe there should be women on the board. Over eighty percent of the employees are women, while

more than half the pupils enrolled are girls, yet they are not represented on the board.”²³ Women continued their struggle towards equality in the areas of salary and positions of responsibility.

Working Conditions and Restrictions on Women in Education

For many females, teaching careers started in one-room rural school settings. In most cases, teachers boarded in the community where they taught. Life was pleasant for them if the community was friendly and supportive. Female teachers who were working in rural schools faced obstacles such as loneliness, and isolation and living conditions, which were often undesirable and challenging. Women applying for rural school teaching positions were sometimes perceived as inexpensive labour and docile transients who could be easily dominated by their employers.²⁴ In a book written by Jean Cochrane entitled The One-Room School House; Cochrane reflects on one teacher’s rural school experience; (Miss McKenzie) who taught in a rural school in Manitoba shared her experience in an anecdote stating, “I usually walked about a mile to school. In winter I wore galoshes that buckled up at the knees, and a woolen snowsuit, occasionally I got a ride to school.”²⁵ Rural school teachers usually worked in poor and unhealthy settings: classrooms were typically poorly ventilated, ill equipped and insufficiently lit.²⁶ The classrooms were crowded. Students ranged in grades, academic abilities and classes were multi-leveled in nature. A teacher, in a Manitoba Bulletin in 1923, addressed the issue of over-crowded classes: “I had six grades and 42 to 48 pupils in the class.”²⁷

The BoE was responsible for outlining curriculum and providing resources for teachers. It was standard protocol that teachers had no involvement in the creation or delivery of curriculum. In fact, as outlined in the Manitoba Public Schools Act, “a teacher will pay a fine for the use of unauthorized textbooks.”²⁸ Teachers in rural schools had no job security or input into curriculum delivery. For example, a teacher could be fired from the school without just cause if someone in the community disagreed with their teaching style.²⁹ In addition to regulated curriculum expectations, teachers had to complete curriculum expectations in a timely fashion. In many cases, a ten-month program had to be delivered to students in eight months because parents kept children home periodically for seeding and harvesting season.”³⁰

In a school community, parents viewed teachers as more than just educators; they were seen as counsellors, coaches, accountants and clerks. Shack commented that “Teachers wore many hats: they were expected to conduct many calculations, [maintain] day books and questionnaires.”³¹ Many expectations were placed on the personal lives of rural schoolteachers. They were expected to be law-abiding citizens and positive role models for the children. In an 1885 educational record, a board official stated, “At noontime teachers should eat decorously and use a napkin when having lunch with pupils, after a short break they were encouraged to organize games for the children and keep them happy and occupied.”³² Teachers continued to work above and beyond the call of duty by getting involved in activities that were unrelated to their teaching duties.

The community and governing board officials continually evaluated the personal lives of female teachers. Boards of Education outlined stringent codes of conduct. In some community schools, women had to adhere to dress protocols while instructing their pupils. A teaching diary excerpt points out, "An inspector told her that she must be presentable and should portray a Gibson-girl, by wearing a pinched waist long skirt at least six inches below the knee and a floppy hat." ³³ Along with this dress code, there were a set of rules that outlined curfews and prescribed behavior regulations for teachers during non-teaching hours. Shack recalls in her memoirs, "Women were not permitted to smoke or have any alcoholic beverage in public, and were expected to conform to the mores and conservative elements of society." ³⁴ In 1880, a clear set of rules were issued to newly hired elementary school teachers by a township principal, which stated,

"Each teacher will bring a bucket of water and a scuttle of coal for the day's session, will fill lamps, clean chimneys and trim wicks. Male teachers may take one evening per week for courting purposes, or two evenings if they go to church regularly. After school, teachers should spend the remaining time reading the Bible or other good books. Women teachers who marry or engage in other unseemly conduct will be dismissed. Every teacher should lay aside a goodly sum so that he will not be a burden on society. Any teacher who smokes or uses liquor will give good reason to suspect his worth, intentions, integrity and honesty." ³⁵

In addition to imposed rules of conduct, women teachers were faced with unannounced visits from board inspectors. Shack, who taught in a one-room schoolhouse, recalls a time when her supervisor (Miss Maude Bradshaw) commented "on her penmanship ... and proceeded to spend an intensive hour teaching me the relationship of the cursive letters to one another, how they should

be spaced and join, and what alternative forms of capital letters were acceptable.”³⁶ Another female teacher who taught in two rural school districts in 1899 recalls in her diary “my supervisor Miss Williamson came to inspect the classroom and commented on the poor behaviour of the children and the lack of teacher control in the classroom.”³⁷ Teachers continued to feel thwarted by the imposed rules of conduct and sudden visit by inspectors.

A teacher’s personal religion and first language had an impact on the eligibility of women for certain teaching jobs. According to some advertisements issued by Boards of Education, Protestant applicants were favoured. In an issue of the *Manitoba Free Press* on June 30, 1917, some boards stated in their advertisements for teachers that they preferred to hire “Protestant lady teachers”. Other boards specifically stated that their teachers must be “Roman Catholic.”³⁸

In addition to the above working conditions for female teachers, women also had difficulties when faced with a choice between marriage and a career. Young women who taught for a short period of time before they were married were referred to as “Trousseau teachers”.³⁹ Most women who chose to get married had to leave the workforce permanently. But, in some extenuating circumstances, they were able to prove why they should remain employed as teachers. In 1930, all married women on staff in the Winnipeg school division had to provide concrete evidence to their School Boards as to why they should keep their jobs.⁴⁰ Shack in her autobiography reflected that, “The engagements were long, one of my friends went out with a young man until both were into middle age, since he was not

earning enough for them to get married and she would have lost her teaching job; no board would have employed a married woman in those days unless her husband was incapacitated.”⁴¹ The expectation was that women would retire from teaching when they got married. A ban on married women was enforced and policed in Winnipeg. A married woman had to prove that she was in need of employment by providing a detailed report of her personal and financial situation.⁴² Mindel Sheps and Aileen Garland, both female teachers, were against this practice. These dedicated activists had public opinion on their side and argued that “taking jobs away from married women was not good for the economy, married women will spend as much money as unmarried women.”⁴³ Garland argued that married women did not use their salaries to purchase extra luxuries.⁴⁴ The oral narratives conducted by Professor Kinnear with one teacher (Miss Bishop) confirmed, “only two acceptable excuses; a female teacher must have a very specific skill, for example teaching retarded children, or must prove that they have a very abnormal domestic situation.”⁴⁵ After 1930, only a few married women could show just cause for seeking employment by successfully proving that their family conditions failed to meet normal expectations and they should remain employed as teachers.⁴⁶

In 1941, the circumstances changed again as males were enlisting in the armed forces to support the World War II efforts .⁴⁷ This change in demographics resulted in a provincial teacher shortage once more, therefore providing more job opportunities for all women.

This unexpected demand for teachers eventually led to the disappearance of the regulation on prohibiting married women in the teaching profession. And by then, it was clear that women had endured challenging working conditions because of employer restrictions and policies that supported the prohibition of married women. Together women persevered in their fight to be recognized and sought reforms against injustice and immoral practices in the teaching profession.

Formation of Unions and Women's Contributions to the Women Teachers' Association

As early as 1918, a group of 17 teachers gathered together in the basement of a Normal School to discuss the formation of a teachers' organization. The group comprised male Department of Education officials, inspectors as well as clergymen and influential laymen.⁴⁸ Women accepted that a Teachers' Federation was needed: however, they were reluctant to associate themselves with anything that resembled a labour union. A.J. Struthers, an early member of the MTF stated, "We are not concerned about the general public: anyway most people had shown themselves massively in different to our doings. But some businessmen, certainly some school trustees, regulated this movement as a revolutionary Bolshevik plot to bring on a general strike."⁴⁹ Therefore, in the early stages of the Manitoba Teachers' Society (MTS), only men were involved in the creation and formation of a professional organization. In 1919, the MTF, now known as the MTS was, created. The main reason was to combat the low status of the teaching profession and

provide teachers with the ability to be more actively involved in the decision making for this profession.

Women teachers were ready for change and were desperate to improve their teaching conditions, salaries and promote the status of teaching for all women.⁵⁰ For many years, women argued that boards had autonomous rights to dismiss teachers, set salaries and prescribe behaviour for teachers during non-teaching hours. The MTS seemed like the ultimate solution to years of inadequate treatment and inequity for women teachers. Yet the notion of the organization being male dominated stood as a challenge for many women who felt it was difficult to resolve women's issues in education when men continued to sit at the forefront of this organization. By the 1920s, women made their voices heard at the MTS general meetings. Women members felt they could eliminate the inequalities and injustices that existed in the system for them, using this powerful federation.⁵¹ During the first decade of the MTS's existence, issues such as men for administrative positions, salary differentials between men and women or the exclusion of married women were not discussed during general meetings.⁵² When the MTS instituted a \$2.00 membership fee, it was very difficult for some women to afford especially those who were making minimal salaries.⁵³ The MTS reported that it was difficult to increase membership fees for rural school teachers. Most rural school teachers did not have the time, the money or the interest in the MTS.⁵⁴ Many of these women were permit teachers, these teachers only held their

positions temporarily and therefore they were not interested in the long-term activities of the profession.⁵⁵

The MTS continued to be concerned about the welfare of its members, but progress towards reforms for women teachers was slow. The dedicated female members of the MTS felt that the policies such as forced retirement upon marriage or pregnancy were biased against female teachers. In 1933, the Winnipeg Teachers' Association split into two locals, the male teachers in one and the female teachers in another. They continued as separate organizations until 1963.⁵⁶ Both locals played an active role at preserving the best interests of educators in the province of Manitoba.

It is important to note that many individuals in society could no longer pay taxes that funded the schools and teachers had to accept a 20 percent cut in salaries during the Depression. Furthermore, boards then proposed to cut the salaries of all women principals, supervisors and high school teachers by \$400.00.⁵⁷ The temporary solution was problematic to more than 90 percent of women because they had dependents in their lives, including children and elderly parents to support.⁵⁸ It was noted by the woman's local that some of the male teachers were single and did not have children to support.⁵⁹ This reduction in salary also affected urban teachers and administrators but the rural teacher's salaries dropped to an average of \$500.00 per year.⁶⁰ These reductions in salary further increased the differentials between men and women's salaries. The argument for this reduction of salaries by board officials was that women teachers

were already supported by their husbands, fathers, or brothers and could withstand the proposed decrease in salary.⁶¹ The MTS was the only organization that could take on the task of persuading the provincial government to take major action to support female teachers.

A number of prominent leaders such as Aileen Garland, Sybil Shack, Edith Smith, Doris Hunt, and Avis Clark were members of the MTS. These women struggled to advance policies aimed at implementing changes in education for women. Smith, Hunt and Clark were actively involved in improving pensions and policies related to the retirement age of a female teacher. Women were at a disadvantage because they were forced to retire at the age of 60, while men were able to work until the age of 65. In 1925, the legislature passed a Teachers' Retirement Fund Act and teachers who wanted to participate could contribute one percent of their salaries. The government did not contribute at this stage.⁶² In 1930 the Act was amended so that the government contributed dollar for dollar, which increased the contribution by two percent.⁶³ A letter to the editor of the Manitoba Free Press dated Feb. 21, 1925, stated that the Minister of Education assured the house that the teachers wanted this bill passed. However, the teachers' bill provided an age limit for retirement of 60 for men and 55 for women. The teachers' bill provided a minimum pension of \$300.00 and a maximum of \$600.00 per year upon retirement.⁶⁴ This bill forced women to retire earlier than men, which affected their overall earnings and pensions. Smith, Hunt and Clark were

strong advocates of the fight by women teachers to ensure that this bill eventually became equitable for women.

Aileen Garland was one of the prominent women leaders and activist for the rights and equality of women in education. Garland proved to be an advocate for all women educators and stated in her fight against injustice, "It is fair to say that the women who are active in the struggle were more concerned with the status of women than the money. We are ready to wear out our old clothes, refurbish our hats, substitute meat loaf for roast beef, but we are not willing to suffer the injustices of the differential already too great."⁶⁵ She was an active member of the women's local and advocated for pay equity and the rights of married women to work. Later she became the president of the Winnipeg Women's Local. She was a well-respected principal and teacher in Manitoba for the majority of her life. Garland believed it was necessary for women to advocate for themselves and their career positions. She negotiated with the school boards on behalf of the women's local during the depression years for female teachers. Historian Clare Levin noted in her commemorative document to women educators that "Garland was able to prevent an increase in the pay differential and work out a sliding scale of wage cuts that would apply equally to men and women."⁶⁶ All female educators in the province of Manitoba will remember the work of Garland.

Sybil Shack became the President of the MTS for 1960-61 and was also a prominent and dedicated activist for women's rights in education. She believed strongly in women playing a more active role in the development of the education

system, by taking on more administrative positions, by becoming better trained and more involved in their workplace.⁶⁷ She encouraged thousands of women to get involved in their careers and fight for more opportunities for female teachers throughout her career. She was the author of three personal autobiographies entitled, *The Making of a Teacher, 1917-1935*, *Why Teach?*, and *The Two-Thirds Minority: Women in Canadian Education*.

Teachers across the country continued to voice their professional concerns to the government for economic security and equal status to law and medicine. By 1948, the MTS began to acquire full bargaining rights, including the right to strike. However in 1956, negotiation procedures substituting binding arbitration for strike rights was written into the Manitoba Public Schools Act.⁶⁸

All teachers, including females continued to get involved in the MTS to better the future of the teaching profession in the province of Manitoba.

Historical events like The Winnipeg General Strike, The Great Depression, World Wars One and Two had lasting effects on the education system in Manitoba. These events contributed to further reductions in salary for female teachers and the creation of a professional teachers' organization. In the early twentieth century, the education system in the province of Manitoba underwent a series of gradual reforms. Unfortunately, educational reform was slow and issues such as pay equity and equal status in the teaching profession remained unresolved for female teachers. Women teachers continued to feel frustrated with their salary

schedules, imposed rules of conduct, marriage prohibition laws and genuine lack of support from the MTS in its' early years of existence.

The early efforts of dedicated female activists laid the groundwork for changes including equal salary for male and female teachers, abolishment of the marriage bar and more opportunities for women teachers to secure positions as administrators. Female activists such as Shack and Garland were instrumental in fighting for equal rights for female teachers. They conducted many negotiations with school boards and government officials to have women on an equal playing field with their male counterparts. Without the contributions of these women, changes in policies may not have existed.

Finally, with the introduction of the MTS, women in the teaching profession formed their own local and worked together to establish much needed changes in the area of education in the province of Manitoba. It was clear that changes were well on their way to being established and deeply rooted in the teaching contracts of all female teachers in the province of Manitoba.

End Notes:

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Search the web for fonds (digitized archival material) concerning:

Barton, Marie

Pickering-Thomson, Mary (Mamie) Louise

Shack, Sybil
