

# VALIDATING WOMEN'S WORK THROUGH "GRASS-ROOTS" HISTORY: BERTHA ADKINS — A CASE STUDY

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*Certain(e)s historien(ne)s ont examiné des organisations telles que les associations d'enseignantes dans leur contexte historique, le fonctionnement interne de ces groupes, et leurs réussites. Une dimension également importante de ce genre d'histoire collective est la recherche menée auprès des femmes individuelles qui ont contribué à l'établissement de ces organisations. Cette histoire populaire confirme la valeur de leurs vies et de leur travail, et donne une certaine profondeur à l'histoire des organisations.*

*Pat Staton fournit un exemple qui marche, d'une méthodologie bien choisie, avec l'étude qui suit de Bertha Adkins, personnage-clé des débuts de la Fédération des Associations d'enseignantes de l'Ontario.*

Little specific information is available about the individual women who founded women teachers' organizations in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Ontario. We do know they prepared and taught classes, worked for cultural and charitable groups, supported parents, sisters and brothers, and still found the time to form organizations for women teachers' protection and advancement — thus showing initiative, energy, and organizational skill. We also know that at least one of the earliest women teachers' groups was closely linked to the struggle for the franchise and the opening of higher educational opportunities for women. In Toronto, in 1884, some women teachers paid the municipal tax in order to vote, even though their incomes were less than the four hundred dollar minimum property qualification. Many of them were members of the Women's Educational Association, an outgrowth of the Women's Literary Society of 1876 that successfully campaigned for the admission of women to the University of Toronto (1884). In 1885, a group of women teachers began to meet informally to discuss common problems and in 1892 they organized as the Women's Teachers'

Association of Toronto.<sup>1</sup> Following the Toronto group's example, associations were formed in other centres such as London, Ottawa and Peterborough and inevitably the women's thoughts turned to the advantages of provincial federation.

While it is important to study such organizations in the context of the times, and also to look at the internal workings of the groups and their achievements as some historians have done,<sup>2</sup> another important dimension of this kind of collective history is to research the individual characters and personalities of the women who were instrumental in founding them. This is a difficult task because most were unassuming women who left no collections of papers and wrote no autobiographies. Nearly all were unmarried, and their families rarely preserved their personal records. Presumably these women were not concerned about their place in history and their personalities have been lost in the past, merged into the stereotype of the prim and proper "old maid" school-teacher. Challenging this stereotype and bringing these women into focus requires detective work. The enterprise is both challenging and frustrating, but it is important because this kind of "grass-roots" history validates the lives and work of such women. Professional historians do not have time to research profiles of the women who influenced these important organizations, yet such research links with their work and gives colour and depth to organizational histories. The following case study may encourage others to take up the search in government archives, local history files in libraries, genealogical societies,<sup>3</sup> local newspapers, cemetery records, professional association records and journals.

I chose Bertha Adkins for this study because, although she was a key figure in the early days of the Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario (FWTAO), very little is known about her. Doris French, in her 1968 study of FWTAO<sup>4</sup> had access to the Federation's

private archives but found little except a membership report in the minutes and a brief tribute published at the time of her death. Two avenues of investigation were undertaken: reading FWTAO publications and education journals,<sup>5</sup> and searching in Adkins' home city, St. Thomas, Ontario. Both produced results.

Bertha Adkins began her work for FWTAO by organizing her own colleagues in St. Thomas. On 30 January 1917 the St. Thomas *Daily Times* announced:

## TEACHERS' GUILD ORGANIZED HERE

*The women teachers of the city have organized a "St. Thomas Women Teachers' Guild." The object of this guild is to promote the literary, social, and professional interests of the women teachers. The following officers have been elected:*

*President, Miss Adkins . . .<sup>6</sup>*

Throughout 1917 and early 1918 the St. Thomas Women Teachers' Guild lobbied school trustees for improved salaries and class size.

We do not know how Bertha Adkins met her sister FWTAO organizers, Evelyn Johnson of the London Women Teachers' Guild (LWTG) and Harriett Johnston and Helen Arbuthnot of the Toronto Women Teachers' Association (TWTA). Perhaps the activities of the LWTG and the TWTA were reported in the St. Thomas *Daily Times*, or perhaps the women met at annual teachers' meetings. In any event, when a number of representatives of local women teachers' organizations met at University College, University of Toronto on 3 April 1918, to form FWTAO, Adkins played a primary role.

The new organization received immediate notice in the St. Thomas *Daily Times*, as did Adkins' address "Why are Women With the Same Training And Qualifications As Men Relegated to the Less Remunerative Positions?" The *Daily Times* headline read "St. Thomas Teacher Says Appointments Are Made By Men, For Men and of Men, Capable Address is Delivered at Organization of Women

Teachers' Association by Miss Bertha Adkins, Who is Elected To Office Of Secretary-Treasurer." In this speech Adkins spoke out publically on the issue of Equal Pay, a principle she would continue to support. A few weeks before the 1920 FWTAO annual meeting she wrote a strongly-worded editorial on the subject for the FWTAO column in *Women's Century*, the journal of the National Council of Women (NCW):

*If the teachers of this province will get behind the movement for equalizing economic conditions of sexes, they will have performed a great work for their own profession. It is sheer goat-sense if teachers do not stand up for "Equal Pay for Equal Work." So spoke Dr. Sedgewick of the University of British Columbia in a recent address to the annual convention of the Federation of British Columbia teachers.*

Do the teachers of Ontario – even the women teachers – agree with him? Theoretically, they are popularly supposed to do so. Practically, they apparently do not.

The willingness with which many women teachers through-out the province are falling in line to support the claim for a 25% increase for all teachers would seem to indicate that, far from advocating an equal standard of pay for men and women, they are seeking to increase the difference which already exists.

Since salary increases are absolutely necessary in order that teachers may escape the poorhouse, does not the woman teacher who is receiving \$800 require as large an increase as the man who receives \$2,000?

Of course, some one will arise to remark just here that "the man has a family to support." That is the advantage of being a man. It is always assumed that he has a large standing army of dependents in the background. Nobody ever asks whether they really exist or not. The man gets the money just the same as a reward for being a man.

On the other hand, did any person ever know a woman to support a widowed mother or an invalid father or to educate her younger brothers and sisters? Certainly not!

If a man get a \$500 increase any woman should be proud and happy to receive a \$200 increase.

Of course! Why not?

That is the way percentage increases work out.<sup>8</sup>

As further evidence of Adkins' radical views, in the same column, she included a letter from Adelaide McGuiness,



Bertha Adkins

President, South Wellington (Women Teachers' Association) describing organizational strategies specifically aimed at rural teachers, including a hypothetical strike:

*Just to emphasize the importance of union and to grasp the hugeness of its strength, consider the following supposition. Supposing on the 12th day of April this year I remained at home. The pupils would loiter about for a time, go home, a few wondering remarks would be passed as to where the teacher was. There it would end. On the other hand, supposing we all, ten thousand women teachers remained at home on that self-same day and declared our intentions of remaining at home until we were granted a few requests. I am not even saying that such will be the case. But aren't we justified? Wouldn't it cause a howling sensation? Wouldn't the next day's papers be filled with startling red headlines? Wouldn't the telephones buzz? Then why not stand together? Our success depends upon our numbers and I trust that we shall be able to awaken public opinion to such an extent that substantial justice may be had in the very near future.*

*Yours for the cause,  
Miss Adelaide McGuiness  
President, South Wellington W.T.A.  
Fergus, Feb. 5th, 1920*

No Ontario teachers did go on strike, although in St. Thomas they came close to doing so over salaries in 1921. In 1922 the Federation supported their striking colleagues in Brandon, Manitoba with a contribution of ten cents per FWTAO mem-

ber. Not content with this gesture of support, Bertha Adkins wrote to individual associations seeking additional assistance. The minutes of the Peterborough Women Teachers' Guild contain the following note:

June 22, 1922

*A letter was read from Miss Adkins, stating some important facts regarding the Brandon teachers' troubles. It was moved by Misses Buck and Dix that \$100 be sent to aid the Brandon Teachers.<sup>9</sup>*

Adkin's strong organizational skills are apparent in the plan she devised for persuading thousands of women teachers to join FWTAO by sending stamped post cards via the inspectors for return to the Federation. A succinct report of her organizational activities appeared in *Woman's Century*:

#### TO THE WOMEN TEACHERS OF ONTARIO:

*Dear Friends: Greetings from the FWTAO of Ontario. This is a brief summary of our work to date:*

1. *Organized Easter, 1918.*
2. *Letter sent to Minister of Education stating our objects. In reply, received a cordial letter of endorsement of sympathy.*
3. *Letters sent to Inspectors. Many, in reply, expressed sympathy, and have proved it by cordial co-operation and help.*
4. *Letters sent to teachers in all Inspectors' districts urging them to present the matter to their women teachers and promote local organizations. Also letters to cities and towns asking them to organize. All cities are now organized, many towns, and over twenty County Inspectors.*
5. *We have now 4,600 members – the largest organization of teachers in Canada.<sup>10</sup>*

In only eighteen months, almost entirely due to the efforts of one woman, over 4,000 women teachers joined FWTAO.

A number of stories about the St. Thomas Women Teachers' Guild appear in the *St. Thomas Daily Times* between 1917 and 1926. One that certainly provided an example of the ironic humour also characteristic of Adkins' editorial columns in the *Woman's Century* described a Christmas entertainment:

#### Women Teachers Show Much Wit – Also Sarcasm

*Program of "The Fascinators" Reaches Public, Although it Was Only for Private*

Consumption.

The Teachers' Guild, an organization composed of the women school teachers of St. Thomas, recently produced "The Fascinators," described on the programs as a "bright, sparkling musical comedy," a stupendous spectacular sensation," giving "positively only one performance in Canada." The "engagement extraordinary" was presented behind closed doors in the public library auditorium, and it was agreed among the teachers that there was to be no publicity – even the neat programs, the handiwork of one of the teachers were to be kept among the teachers themselves. One copy of the program, however, has strayed out of its keeper's hands and has found its way to The Times office. The wording of the "advertisements" show that the high cost of living is a live question with the teachers, and that the recent refusal of the Board of Education to grant a request for higher salaries is, to say the least, unpopular. Here are a few of the "ads" dealing with this question.

"Are you overweight? Why not reduce? One method guaranteed to kill or cure: Try living for one year on the salary of a St. Thomas woman teacher. For treatment, apply to the St. Thomas Board of Education."

"Boost St. Thomas. Exceptional advantages to women teachers. In youth an opportunity to develop habits of frugality. In old age, a complete and comfortable poor-house."

An advertisement headed "Increase Your Earning Power" has been censored.

Some unsuspecting principal received one on the solar plexus in the following "ad".

"Develop your personality, Take a course in the Fascinator's Seminary". Number of pupils in the principals class strictly limited to 25. All others must go in any class."<sup>11</sup>

In 1924, Bertha Adkins resigned as Secretary-Treasurer of FWTAO. Two years later, on October 4, 1926, she died. The FWTAO *Bulletin* printed the following tribute, describing her early education, appointment as Art Supervisor and her community organization memberships.

#### MISS BERTHA ADKINS

Secretary-Treasurer of Our Federation  
1918-1924

The teaching profession of Ontario lost a worthy friend, and a distinguished educationist, when Miss Bertha Adkins passed away at St. Thomas on October 4th.

Miss Adkins secured her early education in the Public Schools and Collegiate Institute of St. Thomas. She was an outstanding

student in Modern Languages, English, Art and History. Her experience as a teacher was in the Public Schools of St. Thomas. Her work was characterized by enthusiasm, thoroughness, culture and excellence. Some four years ago her professional qualifications and ability were signally recognized in her appointment as Art Supervisor, which position she held at the time of her death.

Miss Adkins' interests were wider than the classroom. The Federation of Women Teachers' Association of Ontario, The St. Thomas Teachers' Guild, The Women's National Council, The Ontario Humane Society, The Horticultural, each received its share of her splendid leadership, her organizing and executive ability.

The name Miss Adkins will always be very dear to the hearts of ex-pupils and to the many friends who were fortunate to have come in contact with her great personality.<sup>12</sup>

Since the *Bulletin* tribute gave the date of her death, it was possible to locate her obituary. Obituaries can provide an excellent source of information, especially those in local newspapers, because they are often lengthy. The newspaper obituary and St. Thomas cemetery records enabled me to fill in many unknown facts about Adkins' life. Born in St. Thomas in 1876, she died in Memorial Hospital on Monday, October 4, 1926, only two years after her resignation from FWTAO. The previous summer she had undergone surgery in Cleveland. She taught for twenty-six years in St. Thomas, living at 11 Drake Street. Her parents, Austin Henry Adkins and Mary Ryckman Adkins had predeceased her and her relatives included an aunt, Mrs. D. Holcroft of Winnipeg and some Ryckman cousins. The obituary and the cemetery records also record the birth of Austin and Mary Adkins' son Frances, his death at age nineteen months, following the family's move from Detroit to St. Thomas in 1871, and the fact that Adkins' grandfather was a Methodist minister. The obituary concludes by noting that the funeral was to be held from the residence of Dr. G.T. Kennedy, 99 Metcalfe Street and that burial was to take place at the St. Thomas cemetery.

In some ways it was a surprise to discover that such an organized and efficient woman had not made a will, since she must have realized her medical condition. Elgin County Surrogate Court records

show a letter of application from her aunt, Emily Holcroft, requesting letters of administration authorizing the family friend, Dr. Kennedy, to handle the estate. This application is cross-filed by number in the Archives of Ontario to the official document. The list of Bertha Adkins' worldly goods was not long:

#11 Drake Street	
St. Thomas, value .....	\$3,600
a lot, value .....	\$1,000
household goods, value ....	\$ 300
insurance policy, value .....	\$1,000
automobile, value .....	\$ 100
	\$6,000

Apart from a \$500 mortgage on the lot, Adkins left no other debts. The estate was directed to Adkins' only heir – her aunt, Emily Holcroft of Winnipeg, Manitoba.

And finally, from the history files in the St. Thomas Library I located a photograph of Adkins with her colleagues at Wellington Street School, enabling me to put a face to this woman of strong principles, excellent organizational skills, humour and energy. It is tragic that Bertha Adkins died at fifty. Many of her contemporaries in the women teachers' struggle lived to see Equal Pay for women teachers become a reality, as well as the "Automatic Membership" legislation that was instrumental in making FWTAO the powerful force for improvement in teachers' lives that Bertha Adkins dreamed it could be.<sup>13</sup>

At first glance, Bertha Adkins might seem to be a typical small-town Ontario woman teacher, granddaughter of a Methodist Minister, a single woman who lived all her life in the same modest frame house with her parents. There seems little to set her apart from the commonly held view of the woman teacher. Her colleagues described her as a good scholar, a popular teacher and we can assume she was a devoted daughter. Adkins' views on Equal Pay, however, were radical for the time, especially given her social and working environment, and she had the courage to speak and write in support of these principles with conviction and humour. The relatively straightforward methods used to discover other dimensions to a little known personality yielded some interesting information, but for the moment, the trail ceases. Some questions remain, as well as ideas for new directions. Were there diaries and letters



Bertha Adkins (seated centre)

Credit: In Special Education Number and Annual Report of the Board of Education of the City of St. Thomas, 1906.

among the household goods? Were these sent to Winnipeg or discarded? If they were sent to Winnipeg, did Emily Holcroft treasure them and pass them to someone else? Three sources of information seem most hopeful: Holcroft's descendents, Bertha's mother's family, and possibly former pupils, who may remember a dynamic, inspiring teacher.

<sup>1</sup>A.A. Gray, Jessie Semple and Harriett Johnston, *The Story of the Women Teachers' Association of Toronto*, (Toronto: Thomas Nelson and Sons Limited, 1932).

<sup>2</sup>Alison Prentice, "Themes in the Early History of the Women Teachers' Association of Toronto," in Paula Bourne, ed., *Women's Paid and Unpaid Work: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1985).

<sup>3</sup>A number of genealogical societies publish handbooks on searching records, for example, Brenda Dougall Merriman's *Genealogy in Ontario: Searching the Records*.

<sup>4</sup>Doris French, *High Button Bootstraps: Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1968).

<sup>5</sup>See for example, *Woman's Century*, *FWTAO Bulletin*, *FWTAO Newsletter*, *The School*.

<sup>6</sup>St. Thomas Daily Times, (30 Jan. 1917). On microfilm, St. Thomas, Ontario Library. Research by Ann Daugherty and

Julie Siegal.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, 3 April 1918.

<sup>8</sup>*Woman's Century* (March 1920). NCW provided FWTAO a page (which Adkins edited) until the Federation began publishing its own *Bulletin* in 1924.

<sup>9</sup>Peterborough Women Teachers' Association Archives.

<sup>10</sup>*Woman's Century* (March, 1920).

<sup>11</sup>St. Thomas Daily Times (20 December 1918).

<sup>12</sup>FWTAO Bulletin (November 1926).

<sup>13</sup>The Teaching Profession Act, 1944 required all teachers to become members of the Ontario Teachers' Federation.

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when i was a child  
i used to watch the snow  
filling up the  
yard  
the pasture

the road —  
falling on  
the house  
the machines  
the barn-roof. . .

this strange  
silent  
white  
thing  
like  
the spaces  
where things  
were never  
talked about

then i  
remember  
the snow  
was like  
sand  
-dunes  
with  
intricate  
patterns  
carved  
by the sand  
as my Dad  
& I  
drove home  
from the Hat. . .

with the silences  
between us  
like snow  
on the ground

oh, I tried  
to talk  
but there was  
nothing  
to say. . .

and so  
my father  
remained  
a stranger  
and so  
the snow  
lay on  
the ground  
sifted  
& drifted  
with the wind. . .

**Gwen Hauser**  
Toronto, Ontario