

GLADYS STRUM: FARM WOMAN, TEACHER AND POLITICIAN

Georgina M. Taylor

Au cours de sa vie extrêmement productive, Gladys Strum combina plusieurs rôles: elle était fermière sur les prairies pendant les dures années 30, épouse et mère, enseignante, et politicienne. Dans sa carrière politique, elle est devenue la première femme canadienne à être élue présidente d'un parti politique, la cinquième femme député, et la cinquième député de l'assemblée législative du Saskatchewan. Bien que sa première loyauté était au socialisme, elle a bâti à partir des fondations mises en place par les premières partisans qui avaient obtenu le vote pour les femmes.

Gladys Strum, like many women in Canadian history, was a juggler. She spent her adult life juggling the various roles she played as a farm woman, teacher and politician. Her strong political convictions grew out of her experiences as a farm woman on the prairies in the 1930s. As the only woman in the House of Commons from 1945 to 1949 she was like the pork in a can of pork and beans, "vastly outnumbered." Women politicians had to develop very tough hides in order to endure the often vicious slings and arrows that the world threw at them. This Strum learned during a political career in which she became the first woman in Canada to be elected the president of a political party, the fifth woman MP, and fifth woman MLA in Saskatchewan. While she was a politician she was also working as a farm woman, wife and mother and often, in addition, she was going to university and running a boarding house, running a motel, or teaching school.

In 1906 Gladys Lamb was born "almost in the hen house" on a farm near Gladstone, Manitoba where she and her sisters worked in the fields and in the house. In 1922 she went to Saskatchewan to teach in a rural school on a temporary certificate. After attending Normal School she continued to teach in one-room rural school

houses. In 1926 she married Warner Strum, a farmer from Windthorst, who was the head of a family of orphaned brothers and sisters. Gladys and Warner added a daughter, Carol, to this family. Like many teachers who taught in several rural schools and then married a farmer, Strum had a wider perspective than most of the local women and she was better educated than the majority of people in the district. Such women were often tremendous assets to their communities and their pragmatic neighbours recognized this.

Work on their farm was heavy but it was nothing new for Strum, who took pride in doing a good job. Warner, whose family had been involved in the Non-Partisan League in North Dakota, had long discussions about politics with a Fabian neighbour. Preoccupied with her numerous tasks Gladys Strum paid little attention to politics, for like many women in the '20s she did not see a connection between her world and the world of politics. Then the dirty '30s struck Saskatchewan with vicious force, bringing a parched dustbowl and an economic depression which made the prairie farmers' old problems look pale. Unlike many of their neighbours the Strums never were on relief but their income was so low that they often just subsisted. Sceptical of individualistic economic explanations, they knew they were able to stay off relief because they were lucky enough to have a farm with some bluffs of trees. To add to their problems, tuberculosis struck Warner and he began a battle with the dreaded disease which was to last for decades, with periodic stays in the sanatorium, treatments or surgery a regular part of his life. They worried that they might lose their beloved daughter as a result of having such a contagion in their home.

Gladys Strum belonged to the Homemakers' Clubs, which were affiliated with the Women's Institutes, a women's organization which helped support and

educate women for their role as rural homemakers. Louise Lucas, a leading member of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), came to district in 1935 for a Homemakers' Convention. Lucas had not met Strum before being billeted with the Strum family; the two women thus had an opportunity to get acquainted before they went to the convention. Strum, an articulate, capable farm woman impressed Lucas who possessed similar assertive and out-spoken characteristics. Lucas told the Homemakers gathered at the convention that Strum was destined to go far and from then until her death in 1945 she was Strum's role model, mentor and friend. Lucas, who was reputed to have made more speeches than any other CCF speaker in Canada, taught Strum and hundreds of other CCFers "the ABCs of socialism" and the importance of women participating in politics. Strum described her as an elementary school teacher who taught people basic ideas before going on to more sophisticated ideas. Strum had not been able to understand the conversations between Warner and his Fabian neighbour but, under Lucas's tutelage, she began to understand democratic socialism and to think that perhaps there were political solutions for the many problems of the people of Saskatchewan.

When a CCF organizer who knew Lucas telephoned and asked her to speak for the CCF, she was taken by surprise; before she could refuse he rang off. She protested that she could not do it but Warner urged her to try. He started his many years as her researcher and primary political supporter by finding some newspaper clippings and coaching her as she prepared her first political speech. Although he loved politics his health was not good enough to be involved himself, except at a local level. Thus began her twenty-nine year career as a politician. In the hundreds of speeches that followed Strum developed a convincing rhetorical

style. A quick thinker, she had the essential political skill of being able to speak spontaneously and she had a caustic wit which people liked when she turned it on their enemies and hated when she used it to try to move them. Using apt metaphors, she was particularly articulate when describing the lives and needs of ordinary people, especially those of farm people, women, the sick, and the elderly. Once into the political fray Strum was a dynamo, fuelled by her fear that she and her family would lose all they had worked for because of the depression and illness. She became convinced that the CCF was the vehicle through which the people of Saskatchewan and Canada could improve their lives. Along with hundreds of other Saskatchewan women and men, who were convinced agrarian socialists, she worked to improve farm programs, health care, pensions and schools and to secure other basic social programs. Like several other leading women in the CCF she was particularly committed to educating women to act as full political "persons" by voting and getting involved in the CCF.

In the 1938 provincial election Strum ran for the CCF in the Cannington constituency. Because it appeared impossible to defeat W.J. Patterson, the Liberal Premier since 1935, she easily won the nomination, a common experience for women. Patterson won by a wide margin of 1,696 votes but Strum had laid the foundation for the next election. She was a political "Jill-of-all-trades" who stoically endured the insults of partisan politics, the sugar in her gas tank, the birds' eggs on her car seat, and the calf named after her because "women should not be in politics." Her activities included helping with traditional women's support work – such as fund-raising – by putting on turkey suppers and picnics and billeting CCF people in her home, popularly known as "the local CCF hotel." As the main political organizer for the CCF in the south-eastern part of the province from 1938 to 1944, she spent so much time organizing that her work at home reached a crisis point. Even though she was organizing in three constituencies she was not being paid, as were some of the other organizers. Mounting a letter-writing campaign to convince the CCF to pay her expenses, she poured out her frustration to the Provincial Executive:

It is slowly dawning on me that I'm supposed to be practically a full time CCF orga-

nizer – without pay . . . This morning I'm about to do the family wash – which I couldn't do last week because I spent the entire week in Souris-Estevan . . . God knows what I'm going to talk about [at the meeting in Highview]. Perhaps I'll warn women to stay out of politics . . . Somebody is crazy – I'm beginning to suspect its me . . . I must get busy at the washing – the water's hot. I'm eating breakfast and interspersing these paragraphs with toast and coffee . . . I have had two solid weeks and two days of CCF meetings ahead. I'll have to be put on as an organizer or quit. After all I have a husband and a family. Yet. Does the CCF ever contest divorce suits as correspondent?

The Provincial Executive decided to pay her expenses and she was able to hire some help at home but her assertiveness appears to have made some enemies.

Strum also used her skills as a political educator, undertaking youth work, teaching in CCF organizational schools, and travelling widely as a speaker. Before the 1944 election she went on speaking tours with T.C. Douglas and a fund-raiser. As the leader of the provincial CCF, Douglas would give the main speech, the fund-raiser would appeal for donations, and Strum would make a speech especially designed to appeal to women voters. In the 1944 provincial election she again ran against Premier Patterson and this time there was only a six vote margin between them. She was one of the few CCF candidates who was not elected in the landslide and the recount procedures were apparently mishandled by people whom she had antagonized earlier.

That same year the Provincial CCF Convention elected her the President of the Provincial Party, the first woman in Canada to hold such a post. She spent the year in intense organization all over the province in preparation for the Federal Election in 1945. Once again she won the nomination in a seat that looked unwinnable. The CCF was, however, at its electoral peak in 1945 and eighteen of the twenty-one Saskatchewan MPs elected were from the CCF Party. Strum herself won a close three-way contest in the Qu'Appelle constituency against Ernest Perley, who had been the Conservative MP from 1930, and General Andrew McNaughton, the Liberal Minister of Defence. McNaughton later said he would rather deal with an atomic bomb than with Strum.

As the lone woman MP Strum was immediately stereotyped as a "mother" by the press. She was caught on the horns of a dilemma. In order to stay in sight and to get re-elected she had to have publicity and she believed that she had to follow the advice of Louise Lucas to "not only be puritanical but appear to be puritanical." Strum had to convince the public that she was a good wife and mother – in addition to being a politician. But once cast in the role of the country's "mother" she had extra work because of this role. She answered numerous letters from women all over Canada, and she was frequently the MP chosen to meet with women's delegations (such as the one protesting against the removal of the subsidy on milk and those of the veterans' wives. Strum also lead a successful one-woman campaign to have the wages of the waitresses in the parliamentary restaurant raised and another to remove the rule that women had to wear hats in the visitors' gallery.

At the same time she proved herself a competent MP, speaking in the House and across the country in support of a wide variety of proposed programs including pensions. She also played a highly visible role at Party functions. Her term was enhanced by the support of the men in the CCF caucus, many of whom were also new MPs from Saskatchewan. The friendship she developed with Yukoner Martha Black was also tremendously helpful to her. Black, a Conservative had been the second woman Federal MP sitting in her husband's stead while he was ill from 1935 to 1940. During Strum's term she was an onlooker in the visitor's gallery. Although the two women were loyal members of different parties they were kindred spirits who loved one another as friends. Black, who was bored with the company of political wives, enjoyed Strum and supported her psychologically as the only woman MP at this time.

In 1945 Strum was defeated; she returned to teaching. In 1952 the Strums moved to British Columbia, seeking a milder climate for Warner. There Gladys ran for the CCF in another unwinnable seat. Unable to get a teaching position for political reasons, she and Warner ran a motel. Finding this work unsatisfactory, they returned in 1955 to the Saskatchewan farm they still owned. Strum resumed her teaching career, interrupting it twice to go to university in Saskatoon. While more education would increase her teaching

salary, the family finances were still shaky, so she ran a boarding house for nine boarders in order to finance her education.

In 1960 she was elected MLA for Saskatoon City, a multi-member seat which elected three members for the city as a whole, rather than having the city divided into separate constituencies. This helped women to get elected because each voter could vote for three candidates: they could vote for one or two men and still have a vote left for a woman. This was the only time in Strum's career that she was nominated for a seat that she had a chance of winning.

Unlike her stay in Ottawa, during her term in Regina Gladys felt like an intruder. Many of the CCF caucus were veteran MLAs and she was a newcomer. She did not have a friend like Martha Black and she was constantly compared to Marjorie Cooper, an urban CCF MLA who had been in the Assembly since 1952 and who had a very different style from Strum. Premier T.C. Douglas had been in the practice of putting a small bouquet of roses on Cooper's desk when a session opened and he extended this courtesy to Strum. In her usual forthright country way she let it be known that she did not want citified courtliness; she wanted a woman in the cabinet. John Diefenbaker had named Ellen Fairclough as the first woman in the federal Cabinet; Strum believed that women should be represented in the Saskatchewan cabinet. A prophet crying in the wilderness, she was regarded as being too "ambitious" and too "aggressive" by many CCF leaders. The days of CCF sweeps in the '40s were over. The CCF was in the midst of the medicare battle in Saskatchewan and, as it was fighting for survival, it did not want to debate the role of women too. Medicare, which Strum had promoted for twenty-six years, was established in 1961 but the CCF was in trouble. In 1964 it was defeated by the Liberals led by the feisty Ross Thatcher. Strum lost her bid for re-election after a suspense-filled recount. She became involved in hurtful recriminations which followed the election in the scrappy Saskatoon constituency, where the CCFers fought with one another at the best of times – let alone when they had just been swept out of office. This may have been the result of the fact that, as the province's university city at the time, Saskatoon seems to have had more than



CCF MP's in Ottawa after 1945 election; Gladys Strum (front row)

Credit: Saskatchewan Archives Board

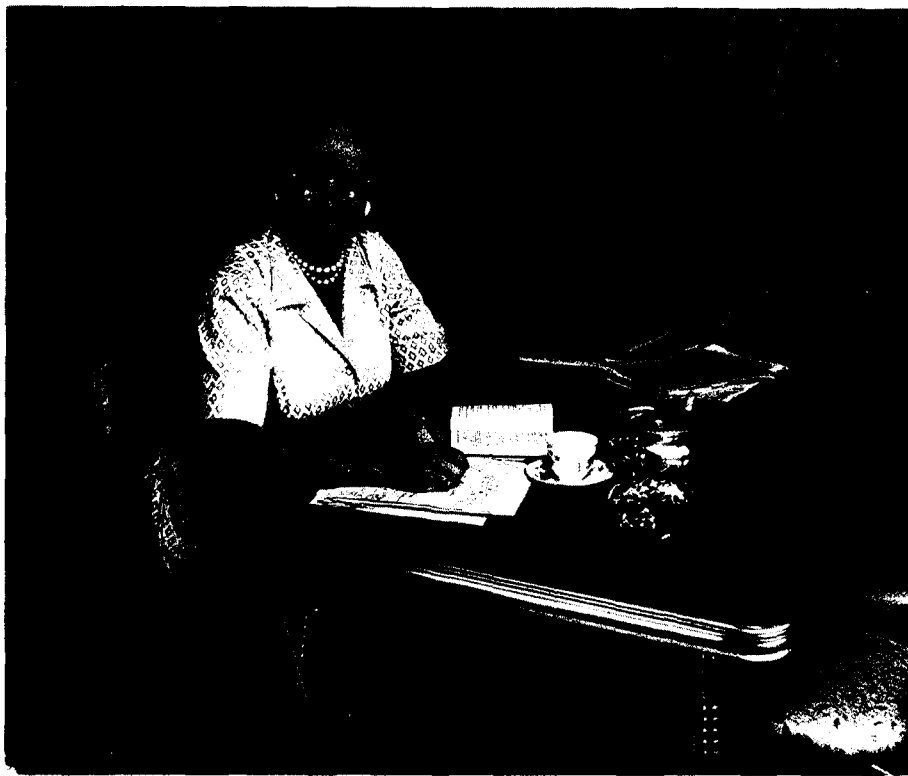
its fair share of the province's theorists and "gabbers" as some called them. In other CCF constituency associations (such as Regina), there appears to have been more practical co-operation and mutual support, regardless of differences.

Towards the end of the '60s the Saskatchewan CCF/NDP, in which women had always had a more equitable role than in the other political parties, officially acknowledged the subordination of women and began rebuilding a party which would include in its program measures to promote the equality of women. But this new approach had not begun in 1964 when, at fifty-eight years of age, Strum found herself defeated and worn out emotionally. For twenty-nine years she had been juggling the roles of farm woman, teacher and politician. Although there were people who still supported her, she was so depressed and exhausted that she did not hear their encouragement. This was the low point in her life, but with the support of her faithful husband she managed to recover.

While she had been an MLA she had graduated with a B.A. and a B.Ed., thereby allowing her to earn a decent salary when she returned to the country to teach. In the three years that she was principal of a nine-room school at Corning, close to their farm, she made new friends and enjoyed life. The Strums eventually retired to Penticton where their daughter and her family lived. Warner's health improved and, although Strum had never expected it, they were by then financially secure enough to travel to several countries, including Russia, China and

Cuba. Gladys did community work and she and Warner continued supporting the New Democratic Party, different from the old CCF, but still a child of their years of dedication.

Strum worked for the equality of women in the years when the turn-of-the-century women's movement had lost momentum and the modern women's movement had not yet had an effect on Canada. In the '50s and the early '60s many people were not prepared to deal graciously with a forthright country woman, who was in many ways like an assertive modern feminist. In those years Strum was not a feminist in the modern sense. Her first loyalty was still to socialism – not to the cause of women. She also lacked a coherent feminist ideology and a feminist support system. In the late '60s and '70s Strum, who had always been an admirer of the turn-of-the-century feminists, watched with interest as the women's movement grew in Canada. Realizing that many women had experienced discrimination and had been isolated, just as she had been, she became a self-declared feminist. She decided that if she ever wrote an autobiography she would call it "Sorry, I'm Early." Women like Strum built on the foundations laid by the suffragists who had gained the vote for women. Although they were vastly out-numbered as legislators and leaders of political parties, they were a voice for women. They showed that women could reconcile their role as politicians with their other roles. It was possible to be a farm woman, a teacher and also a politician – like Gladys Strum.



Gladys Strum, successful CCF candidate in Saskatoon, 11 June 1960

Credit: Saskatchewan Archives Board

This article is based on extensive documentary sources and on the taped interviews held by the Saskatchewan Archives Board. In particular, see the eight-hour interview done with Strum in 1981 and the interviews with Marjorie Cooper, Eloise (Lucas) Metheral and Olive Wells.

Further Reading:

Saskatchewan

Kohl, Seena. *Working Together: Women and Family in Southwestern Saskatchewan*. Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston of Canada, Limited, 1976.

Taylor, Georgina M. "Equals and Partners?" An Examination of How Saskatchewan Women Reconciled Their Political Activities for the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation." M.A. Thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1983. Publication pending by the University of Alberta Press and the University of Nebraska Press.

—. "Sophia Dixon: Progressive Always – Indifferent Never." Vol. 1 of *Saskatoon History*. Saskatoon: The Saskatchewan Heritage Society, 1980, pp. 25-31.

—. "The Women...

Shall Help to Lead the Way": Saskatchewan CCF-NDP Women Candidates in Provincial and Federal Elections, 1934-1965." In *"Building the Cooperative Commonwealth": Essays on the Democratic Socialist Tradition in Canada*. Ed. J. William Brennan. Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1984, pp. 141-160.

—. "Using Oral Sources for Women's History: Saskatchewan Cooperative Commonwealth Women and the 'Enormous Condescension of Posterity'". Forthcoming in *Canadian Oral History Journal*, Vol. 7 (1984).

—. "'Should I Drown Myself Now or Later?' The Isolation of Rural Women in Saskatchewan and their Participation in the Homemakers' Clubs, the Farm Movement and the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation." A paper presented at the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women 1985 Conference.

—. Wright, J.F.C. *The Louise Lucas Story: This Time Tomorrow*. Montreal: Harvest House, 1965. This book should be used with great caution and only in conjunction with Taylor, "Using Oral Sources for

Women's History" and the taped interview by the author with Eloise (Lucas) Metheral held by the Saskatchewan Archives Board.

Canada and the Other Provinces

Beeby, Dean. "Women in the Ontario C.C.F., 1940 – 1950." *Ontario History*, Vol. 74 (December 1982), pp. 259-283.

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Manley, John. "Women and the Left in the 1930s: The Case of the Toronto CCF Women's Joint Committee." *Atlantis*, Vol. 5 (Spring 1980), pp. 100-119.

Sangster, Joan. "Canadian Women in Radical Politics and Labour." Ph.D. Diss. McMaster University, 1984.

"Women and the New Era': The Role of Women in the Early CCF, 1933 – 1940."

"Building the Cooperation Commonwealth," pp. 69-98.

Trofimenkoff, Susan Mann. "Therese Casgrain and the CCF in Quebec." *The Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. 66 (June 1985), pp. 125-153

Walsh, Susan. "The Peacock and the Guinea Hen: Political Profiles of Dorothy Steeves and Grace MacInnis." Vol. Two of *The Neglected Majority*. Ed. Alison Prentice and Susan Mann Trofimenkoff. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985, pp. 144-159.



Gladys Strum, ca. 1945-49

Credit: Saskatchewan Archives Board

Other Resources

Evans, Barbara. "Ground for Common Action," a National Film Board film, to be released in the Fall of 1986. The film is about women in the farm movement on the prairies. Several of the women in the film were also in the CCF, including Sophia Dixon, Elsie Hart and Neva Myrick of Saskatchewan and Nellie Peterson of Alberta.

Taylor, Georgina M. "Saskatchewan Women in the Cooperative Common-

wealth Federation." A collection of taped interviews on the role of Saskatchewan women in the CCF, held by the Saskatchewan Archives Board. In particular, see the lengthy interview with Gladys Strum and the interviews with Marjory Cooper, Eloise (Lucas) Metheral and with Olive Wells.

Georgina M. Taylor was a member of the Saskatoon Women's Calendar Collective which wrote the 1980 and 1981 editions of Herstory. She did an extensive oral history project on the

role of Saskatchewan women in the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation. Her study of CCF women, which is to be published by the University of Alberta Press and the University of Nebraska Press, was based in part on this collection of taped interviews. Several of her articles on the history of women in Saskatchewan have been published. A doctoral student, she is doing research on Violet McNaughton, a prairie pioneer who was one of Canada's leading reformers.

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ON THE BIRTH OF AN UNNAMED MALE—JULY 1984

Your father is long since gone.
Your teenaged mother dreams only
of the Caribbean to come
where palms and the hot lagoons
will unteach your November seed
and all the stunned months since.

Your grandfather's swift and sudden tears
announce you to the waiting family
before the succulent arms of social workers
can nestle you off to their fortress of forms.

Across town
wait those other two:
30's, professional, eager
and able to prove
along with financial stability
that no blood is as strong as their wanting.

Had they been allowed
to be present now
where gathered relatives resolutely stare
at the beige tile floor
and swallow the need to congratulate
they could not have lessened
the profound embarrassment
of your coming.

And yet, when you ball your tiny fists
and open your pink mouth like a wound
to scream at the white fluorescent light
another viewpoint is heard from.

In days made cheap with the slogans of slick politicians
there is still this one small democracy
this crib of all possibility
this yell as good as anybody's
singular and strong.

Rosemary Aubert
Toronto, Ontario