

IN UNION THERE IS STRENGTH: THE SASKATOON WOMEN TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION

Apolonja Maria Kojder

Le 3 juin 1918 quinze enseignantes se sont réunies à Saskatoon pour former le Saskatoon Women Teachers' Association. Elles voyaient un besoin pour une organisation séparée des enseignants, parce que celles qui existaient ne tenaient pas compte de leurs besoins particuliers comme enseignantes. Elles partageaient des problèmes tels que des salaires trop bas et un manque de prestige – bien qu'elles devinrent par la suite la majorité enseignante au niveau primaire. Apolonja Maria Kojder raconte l'histoire de cette organisation professionnelle exclusivement pour femmes, qui existe encore aujourd'hui.

On 3 June 1918, a group of fifteen women teachers gathered together in Saskatoon to form the Saskatoon Women Teachers' Association (SWTA).¹ With their motto "in union there is strength," these enterprising women were to build successfully an organization that has survived to the present day.

At that 1918 meeting, chaired by Victoria Miners, an exclusively female professional organization was established, to be known initially as the Women Teachers' Association of the Saskatoon Public Schools. Membership was to be limited to the women teachers of the Saskatoon public schools – a wise decision in retrospect, in building up a strong organization. The 1918 Constitution defined the aims of the SWTA:

- (1) To supply and foster a bond of union among the women teachers for mutual improvement and greater service;
- (2) To provide an efficient organization by which prompt and united action may be taken by the organization when such an action may be desired.

One member described the formation as follows:

We were not organizing through any spirit of hostility or criticism of any other body, but that we, the grade teachers, who form the essential part of the school system, have our own peculiar problems to work out, and an organization would help us in doing so; that it would raise the status of our opinions, help us to gain efficiency, and teach us loyalty to each other.²

Yet despite this conciliatory tone, once formed one of the first activities of the new group was to meet the school board to discuss salaries and a pension scheme.

Why did the Saskatoon women teachers decide to organize? In a sense, they were forced to organize because of the weakness and the limited scope of the early educational organizations. The loosely-organized Saskatchewan Education Association, formed in 1907, was composed of public school teachers, normal school instructors, university professors, Department of Education personnel and a variety of interested citizens. Given the broad framework of this group and its tendency to look for leadership among the teachers' "betters," there was no significant teacher involvement. The first organization for teachers only, the Saskatchewan Teachers' Alliance (STA), formed in 1914, had difficulty maintaining membership because of its voluntary nature, the large turnover in the profession and its urban orientation.

The Saskatoon women teachers perceived a need to organize as a separate body from the male teachers because existing educational organizations were unable or unwilling to deal with their specific needs as female teachers. The perceived need of female elementary teachers to organize was unique neither to Saskatoon nor Saskatchewan: across Canada, with the apparent exception of British Columbia, women teachers formed similar locals.

As elementary school teachers, the SWTA women had common problems which set them apart from the male teachers. Central to their concern was their low status. Initially grudgingly accepted into the public school system, women eventually became the teaching majority at the elementary levels.³ Although the notion that women were suited to teach the young gained acceptance and allowed women into a new field of work, it was obtained at a cost. While the public school system expanded and flourished because of the feminization of the teaching profession, it was literally at the expense of the elementary women

teachers. On the one hand, teaching provided women with opportunities to earn a living other than as domestics; yet, at the same time, the low pay ensured their inferior professional status. Negative attitudes towards women teachers remained. Their intellectual aptitudes, disciplinary and administrative abilities were constantly questioned. They were perceived as fulfilling their womanly roles of teaching the very young only while awaiting matrimony. The idealized image of woman-as-teacher precluded such demeaning action as demanding monetary recognition for such significant work in society. The SWTA members balked at the situation in which they found themselves.

The SWTA was very much a product of its time. The First World War brought social upheavals that had repercussions for everybody, including the teaching profession:

Inflation was presenting teachers with new economic burdens. The supply of teachers was inadequate and had to be supplemented by recruits from Great Britain and elsewhere. Teachers became impatient with the failure of others to solve educational problems and began searching for ways to make their views known.⁴

There was a surge in organizational activity, both provincially and locally. Various reasons are cited for these changes.

The teacher shortage during the war resulted in a large number of 'permit' teachers. To stop the increase of incompetence in the classroom, teachers across the country followed the example of labor and sought to establish militant organizations. A large number of provincial teacher federations or associations were established to encourage vigorous and persistent action for improved teaching conditions. One explanation of this flood of organizational activity is that the influx of teachers from abroad provided a more aggressive leadership and a heightened awareness of educational standards on the part of Canadian-born teachers . . . Other factors were instrumental, such as the absolutely deplorable conditions, both physical and contractual, under which teachers worked . . . The profession was being rapidly depleted by



Victoria Miners (c. 1917), first president of SWTA, 1918-21

Credit: Saskatchewan Archives

*teachers who were disgusted with the hopelessness of their positions.*⁵

The suffrage movement had also provided an impetus for women organizing in Saskatchewan. Suffrage activity was brief and successful, receiving much support from farm organizations such as the Grain Growers' Association. There was a flurry of women's activities in those years. Nellie McClung came to Saskatoon in 1914 to promote temperance and women's suffrage. Saskatchewan could also boast of its own women leaders active in the women's rights movement. It brought to the attention of the public outstanding women. Violet McNaughton, founding president of the Women's Section of the Saskatchewan Grain Growers' Association, utilized the clout of that organization to promote women's suffrage. Together with Francis Beynon, women's editor of the *Grain Growers' Guide*, she organized the first two farm women's conventions held in Saskatchewan in 1913 and 1914.

Saskatchewan women won the provincial vote in 1916. Women's organizations of all kinds were being established and remarkable women were attaining positions of leadership. Ethel MacLauchlin was appointed Judge of Saskatchewan's first juvenile court in 1917 and became the first woman in Canada to hold the position of Justice of the Peace. In 1919 Sarah Ramsland was elected the first woman MLA in Saskatchewan. That same year the Saskatchewan Provincial Council of Women was formed. It was within such a context that the SWTA was formed.

A significant function that SWTA and other women teachers' organizations served was to encourage women to train as leaders. It was more feasible to assume leadership roles in the women teachers'

organizations rather than attempt to break into other existing organizations dominated by men. The very existence of these women teachers' organizations encouraged development of leadership among women teachers. From their ranks came many dynamic women. Two of the founding members of the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) were leaders in women teachers' organizations in Canada. Helen Arbuthnot, a leader of the Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario, and Victoria Miners, one of the founders of SWTA and a representative of STA at that time, were the only two women present at the inaugural meeting of the CTF in 1919.

The success of SWTA was in large part attributed to the work of Josephine Victoria Miners, the organization's first president. A native of Ontario, Victoria worked for a time in a law office before



Hattie Wolfe, past president of SWTA and president of STA in 1932

Credit: Saskatchewan Archives

registering at the age of twenty-one at the London Normal School in 1909, where she obtained a Second Class certificate the following year. She then taught in Huron County West from 1911 to 1913. Significantly, it was the London women teachers, organized in 1907, who took the first step in 1917 towards forming a provincial women teachers' organization in Ontario. Victoria decided to go to Saskatoon at Christmas in 1913. Her brothers had already established in Saskatoon what was to become a flourishing business, Miners' Construction. But there was an even greater motive for the move. The west was seen as a land of opportunity. The process of settling the prairies was going on at a rapid rate. By the first decade of the twentieth century the increased population had resulted in overcrowded schools. Saskatoon was

expanding into a flourishing modern community. After a brief depression from 1907 to 1908, a period of unparalleled expansion began. It took the form of a boom in real estate and building, including the building of a great number of schools, lasting from 1910 to 1913, when a depression struck the world's economy. Nevertheless, by that time Saskatoon could be regarded as one of the fastest growing cities in Canada.

Known to her friends as "Tory," Miners was an outstanding figure in the early history of the SWTA. She was principal at Haultain School in Saskatoon from its inception until her retirement (1924-48), and for many years was the city's only woman principal. As its first president (1918-21), Victoria Miners was able to build the SWTA into one of the largest single teachers' organizations in Saskatchewan. She also devoted much energy towards helping the floundering provincial teachers' organization (STA), by acting as its president from 1920 to 1921 and head of the Publicity Committee in 1925. Added to the busy schedule of teaching, administration and organizational work, Victoria was able to acquire higher education: B.A. (1928, Saskatchewan, with distinction); B.Ed. (1936, Chicago); M.Ed. (1937, Saskatchewan, the second woman to receive this degree in the province). Even after her retirement this energetic woman continued to work at the University of Saskatchewan until her tragic death in 1956 as the result of an accident in Ontario.

Another woman of distinction in this early period was Hattie Wolfe. Like Victoria Miners, this Maritimer came to Saskatoon in the boom period. She was president of the SWTA from 1926 to 1929. Serving as representative to STA from 1928 to 1929, and as vice-president in 1931,



Victoria Miners (standing) and Neva Myrick, members of SWTA

Credit: Courtesy of Neva Myrick

she became president of the provincial organization from 1932-1933, taking over this role at a time when difficulties for the organization were becoming insurmountable.

The organizational skills acquired through participation in SWTA were to be utilized in many other fields. Neva Myrick (nee Davie), a long time friend of Victoria Miners, is a good example of how this organization encouraged women's greater participation in the life of the community. An Ontario farm girl, Neva got her teachers' certification in Peterborough. She taught for two years in Ontario before coming to Saskatoon in the fall of 1913 at the age of twenty-one. She had a sister there, and the bustling city she had visited previously appealed to her sense of adventure. There were a lot of new teachers and portable classrooms were being used because of the lack of sufficient school buildings. At Christmas of that year Victoria Miners arrived from the east and the two became very good friends:

There was a movement amongst the women teachers. They were an up and coming bunch of teachers, aware of a lot of things. We worked at it for a few years before we finally formed it (SWTA). We would have meetings. I was one of the women instrumental in setting it up. We needed something to represent us and our viewpoint before the board. At the back of our minds, what we wanted most of all was more money because we were being so very badly paid.⁶

Neva became a member of the SWTA and taught in Saskatoon until 1920 when she got married and went to live on a farm. Later, during the "dirty thirties", Neva wanted to do some substitute teaching but, despite her eight years of experience, the school board refused to hire her: "At that time women who had married were rarely accepted as active teachers. How times have changed!"⁷ Neva became involved in farm organizations, first with the Grain Growers and then the United Farmers of Canada, Saskatchewan Section, serving as one of three women directors for several years: "Many were former teachers in these organizations and their influence was certainly felt in education. We had an Education Committee which worked quite closely with the Department of Education."⁸ Besides her involvement in the farming movement, Neva was also active in political affairs, and attended the founding meeting of the CCF in Regina in

1933. Years later Neva, who had volunteered to teach in a neighboring country school to replace an inadequate teacher aid, was asked: "How old are you?" She responded by asking, "How old are you?"⁹ Neva was about fifty at the time. She did not get the job. Although it was the 1940s, times had not changed all that much. Despite the fact that married women were systematically excluded from teaching, they brought to other associations their sense of commitment, idealism, vitality and organizational skills.

The SWTA was a pioneer in Saskatchewan women teachers' drive for advancement. It assumed responsibility for bargaining with respect to salaries and other contractual terms, as well as for professional development. The SWTA fought for the equal-pay-for-equal-work principle, more equitable contractual terms, and an end to the arbitrary nature of salaries. It challenged board policy of firing women teachers who got married. No other organization had the status of women teachers as its priority. The SWTA filled this gap, and the emergence of many strong leaders from its ranks helped to ensure its continued existence.

¹See detailed study of the SWTA by Apolonja Maria Kojder, "The Saskatoon Women Teachers' Association" (unpublished M.Ed. thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1976); "The Saskatoon Women Teachers' Association: A Demand for Recognition," *Saskatchewan History*, Vol. XXX, No. 2 (Spring 1977), pp.63-74, reprinted in *Shaping the Schools of the Canadian West*, ed. David Jones, et al.

(Calgary: Detselig Enterprises, 1979), pp. 177-191.

²SWTA, *Minutes*, 3 June 1918.

³See Wendy B. Bryans, "Virtuous Women at Half the Price: The Feminization of the Teaching Force and Early Women Teacher Organizations in Ontario" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Toronto, 1974); Alison Prentice, "The Feminization of Teaching," *The Neglected Majority*, ed. Susan Mann Trofimankoff and Alison Prentice (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), pp. 49-65.

⁴Sterling McDowell, "The Dynamics of the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Alberta, 1965), p.29.

⁵Robert S. Paterson, "Society and Education During the Wars and their Interlude: 1914-1945," *Canadian Education: A History*, ed. J.D. Wilson, et al. (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1970), pp. 362-3.

⁶Neva Myrick, personal interview, 14 June 1986, Saskatoon.

⁷Letter from Neva Myrick, Saskatoon, 8 October 1980.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Myrick, personal interview.

Apolonja Maria Kojder was born and brought up in Saskatchewan; a former teacher, she did her M.Ed. thesis on the Saskatoon Women Teachers' Association. She worked on the Saskatoon Calendar Collective (A Canadian Women's Calendar, Herstory), for two years, and has written several articles on the role of women in education, Canadian Slavic Women, and Poles in Canada.

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