

It's Elementary

by Barbara Richter

The beginnings of public education

Throughout the early 1800s the government attempted to establish publicly funded education in Upper Canada but made only marginal inroads. Early teaching positions were filled by the clergy or by individuals with few or no qualifications to teach. Local trustees competed with each other not for the best teachers but for the cheapest ones. One education historian said of the period "... a teaching post was commonly regarded as the last refuge of the incompetent, the inept, the unreliable."¹ This early perception of teachers would remain difficult to overcome and the struggle for recognition as a profession continued into the next century.

Barbara Richter recently retired after spending 36 years as a staff officer at ETFO and its predecessor organization, the Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario.

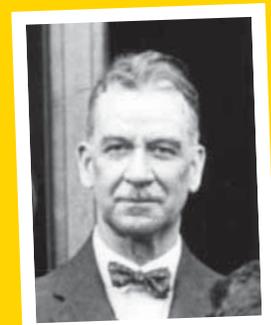
A brief history of Ontario's public elementary teachers and their federations



PART 2:
Early 1800s to 1944



Miss Hazel Roberts (later Hazel McWilliams) of Hamilton, FWTAO president, 1923-1926.



In 1920 Milton M. Kerr became the first president of the OPSMTF.



Official delegates to the 1920 inaugural meeting of the CTF in Calgary included FWTAO president, Miss H.S. Arbuthnot (front row 2nd from left) and OPSMTF representative C.G. Fraser (back row, 2nd from right).



Teachers at Church St. PS, Toronto. *Sesquicentennial Museum & Archives, Toronto District School Board*



Students teachers practice teaching Kindergarten at the Toronto Normal School. *Archives of Ontario*



Egerton Ryerson, appointed Superintendent of Education for Upper Canada in 1844, is generally credited as the father of public education in Ontario as he was a committed advocate of publicly funded mass education. He once wrote, “On the importance of education generally we may remark, it is as necessary as the light; it should be as common as water, and as free as air.” He was also aware that Ontario needed a

disciplined workforce to support the industrial revolution.

While Ryerson was the driving force behind public education, the *Common School Act* of 1846 gave it life. Building on the previous laws, it established a series of local school districts. Each district had three trustees who were responsible for hiring, paying, and firing teachers and administering funds collected through local taxes and provincial grants. In order to provide some measure of uniformity and raise the standards of education, the Act also created a system of provincially appointed inspectors as well as normal schools, the province’s first teacher training institutions.

The Toronto Normal School, the first in Ontario, opened in 1847. Women were allowed to attend but in 1853 school authorities established a rule that there could be no communication between male and female students. Entrance requirements were minimal. Those applying had to be over 16, be able to read and write, do simple arithmetic, and have a clergyman’s letter in hand attesting to their sound moral character. Lectures ran from 9 in the morning to 8 in the evening with a curfew set at 9:30. All students had to attend church on Sunday.²

Conditions for teachers were appalling, particularly in rural Ontario where most of the school boards consisted of a single one-room school, some with over 100 pupils. In return for poverty-level salaries, teachers prepared for and taught all grades and maintained discipline through measures considered criminal by today’s standards. They kept the schools clean, hauled wood for the stove, brought water from the well, and started a pot to boil in the morning so students, bringing whatever meager offerings they could from their homes, would have a hot lunch at noon. Some teachers tended gardens on the school site to provide additional food for themselves or their students.

Teachers had no job security, no sick leave, no pensions, no health insurance, no rights. Some lived under the harsh scrutiny of communities eager to judge their every action and worked for parsimonious trustees who could neither read nor write but who had ultimate control over their livelihoods.

In 1847, the first year government records listed teachers by gender, only one in five public school teachers was a woman. In 1860 they were one in four, almost equal in 1870, and in the majority by 1880.³ Although women were well educated, made excellent teachers, and were able to maintain dis-

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cipline, the driving force behind their increased numbers in education was economic. The great irony of public education in Ontario is that it was built on high principles but implemented with tight purse strings. Simply put, a school board could hire two women for the price of one man – even though his salary was already low.

Why did women work for less?

- Women had few opportunities to work outside the home. They could become seamstresses, domestics, factory workers, nurses, or teachers.
- Once married, women were not allowed to remain in teaching. They were not considered true professionals and were sometimes called “trousseau teachers” because the few short years between school and marriage gave them limited experience.
- Requirements for women teachers were lower than men’s, reinforcing the notion of lower pay.
- Women were hired for the younger grades because it was thought they lacked the ability to discipline older children. Teaching young children was thought to be a motherly role not a scholarly one. It was undervalued and salaries were lower.

A hierarchy developed and even though women made up the majority of teachers, they were isolated from positions of power and decision making. Men earned more and became principals, headmasters, and inspectors.

Early teacher organizations

In the following decades a variety of organizations for teachers sprang up around the province. Many were government sponsored and most focused on some form of professional development. Many included ratepayers, trustees, inspectors, and other interested members of the public.

Common Rules For Teachers 1872

1. Teachers each day will fill lamps, clean chimneys and trim wicks.
2. Each teacher will bring a bucket of water and a scuttle of coal for the day’s session.
3. Make your pens carefully. You may whittle nibs to the individual tastes of the pupils.
4. Men teachers may take one evening each week for courting purposes, or two evenings a week if they go to Church regularly.
5. After ten hours in school the teachers should spend their remaining time reading the Bible or other good books.
6. Women teachers who marry or engage in uncomely conduct will be dismissed.
7. Every teacher should lay aside from each pay a goodly sum of his earnings for his benefit during his declining years so that he will not become a burden on society.
8. Any teacher who smokes, uses liquor in any form, frequents pool or public halls, or gets shaved in a barbershop will give good reason to suspect his worth, intentions, integrity and honesty.

The teacher who performs his labours faithfully and without fault for five years will be given an increase of 25 cents per week in his pay providing the Board of Education approves. (Staton, Pat, and Beth Light. *Speak With Their Own Voices*. Toronto: Federation of Women Teachers’ Associations of Ontario, 1987, p. 23.)

The first recorded teacher association organized specifically for the protection of teachers was the Teachers’ Protective Association/Organization established in 1886 in Perth County. School officials were highly suspicious, considering it too radical. They feared that once organized, teachers would support strikes and boycotts for better wages – a radical idea at the time. Some organizations, like the Ontario Teachers’ Alliance, were active only in urban areas.⁴

The birth of teacher federations

The Federation of Women Teachers’ Associations of Ontario (FWTAO) and the Ontario Public School Men Teachers’ Federation (OPSMTF) – ETFO’s predecessor organizations – and the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation (OSSTF) were the first Ontario organizations formed to advance both the interests of their members and the status of the teaching profession.

In 1888 a group of eight women formed the Lady Teachers’ Associa-



A class of student teachers in a county model school (providing basic teacher training) possibly in Gananoque, 1905. *Archives of Ontario*



Teachers and students at a rural school, 1905. *Archives of Ontario*

tion of Toronto. Soon after, women teachers in London, Galt, and Ottawa formed similar associations. These early associations of elementary women teachers banded together in 1918 to form FWTAO.

It is not unusual that women would have been the first to organize into a federation to advance their interests and those of the profession – and not just because their pay was poorer. Women were already organizing. Excluded from many professional associations they began to form groups for their own advancement and for social change. Riding on what history now terms the first wave of feminism many of these early women teachers were involved in the women’s suffrage movement, joined local chapters of the National Council of Women, Women’s Institutes, and the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. About the only group they didn’t join were the local labour councils

Although talk about creating a federation for male elementary teachers began in 1918 in Peterborough, OPSMTF was not officially formed until 1920. The original founders lobbied to have one federation for all teachers but when their efforts were unsuccessful, they formed their own organization.⁵

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation was formed in 1919. L’association des enseignants francontariens (AEFO) was formed in 1939 and the Ontario English Catholic Teachers’ Association (OECTA) in 1944.

In 1935 FWTAO, OPSMTF, and OSSTF formed the Ontario Teachers’ Council (OTC) to help them pool their resources to pay fees to the Canadian Teachers’ Federation (CTF) formed in 1920. In 1944 the OTC became the Ontario Teachers’ Federation.

Building the new federations

Today, when teachers hold federation meetings in their staff rooms and busloads of teachers can be seen arriving at demonstrations or strike votes, it is hard to imagine the difficulties faced by federation pioneers. Because membership in FWTAO and OPSMTF was voluntary, much of their resources and energy were devoted to signing up new members and renewing existing memberships.

In rural areas this was very difficult. Teachers worked in one-room schools scattered throughout the province hard even to find because of distance and poor travel conditions. A rural teacher boarding with a trustee, with no job security, aware that younger, cheaper, eager teachers were waiting in the wings, had to be brave to join the emerging federations. School officials and many others were suspicious of the new federations reflecting the anti-union atmosphere of the times. One newspaper called on an FWTAO organizer “to pack her kit and head for Russia.”⁶

One early OPSMTF organizer remembers, “The greatest objection to

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joining was plain fear of the trustees and of the inspector. Early members preaching the federation gospel were very susceptible to the occupational hazard of dismissal. The monikers 'rebel', 'troublemaker', 'trade-unionist', and 'rabble rouser' were frequently attached to those making successful additions to the recruiting program. ... Some board members bluntly stated that the teacher could be fired. If that proved too difficult, the teacher could be punished by no raise in salary and, in some cases, reduced salary."⁷

In spite of these drawbacks the hardy volunteers continued to give their time and energy to successfully build membership in both federations.

Working to protect members – 1918-1939

Even in hard times, higher salaries and job security were priority issues for both federations as they worked to improve the working lives of teachers.

Without the benefit of collective bargaining, teachers, particularly those in rural areas, negotiated their salaries individually. Both federations worked to help teachers get higher pay and to dissuade others from undercutting incumbents by working for less. They made gains in these early years, sometimes with the threat of strike,⁸ but the 1920s and 1930s proved to be difficult years. A serious recession, coupled with a teacher surplus in the mid 1920s stalled further improvements. Just as conditions began to improve at the end of the decade, what had been built up came tumbling down, and fell even further with the stock market crash of 1929.

All teachers, regardless of when they taught, know only too well that the response of government and school boards to any economic downturn is to cut costs, slash salaries, close schools, and fire teachers.

To cut costs, between 1920 and 1927,⁹ the Toronto Board denied women teachers their \$100 annual increments while continuing to give them to men. During the Depression of the 1930s the Hamilton Board threatened to close kindergartens, putting 33 teachers out of work and leaving many students without schooling.¹⁰ Other boards also threatened terminations unless teachers accepted pay cuts. In rural areas teachers fared even worse, with those out of work undercutting each other for the chance of a job.

The provincial government response was to slash grants to education and cut salaries down to the statutory minimum of \$500. In 1928 the average salaries for men and women teachers were \$1,703 and \$1,155 respectively. Between 1930 and 1936 male teachers lost about 38 per cent of their salaries and women 55 per cent.¹¹

To keep the teacher surplus from lowering salaries and fuelling underbidding, the federations recommended adding an additional year to the Normal School program. This would control the number of new teachers and would vastly improve teacher training. That, in turn, would improve

1870 average annual public school salaries¹

| | Men | Women |
|----------|-------|-------|
| Counties | \$260 | \$187 |
| Towns | \$450 | \$200 |
| Cities | \$597 | \$231 |

1925 average annual salaries²

| | Men | Women |
|----------|---------|---------|
| Rural | \$1,168 | \$ 994 |
| Cities | \$2,321 | \$1,397 |
| Towns | \$1,806 | \$1,082 |
| Villages | \$1,386 | \$1,001 |

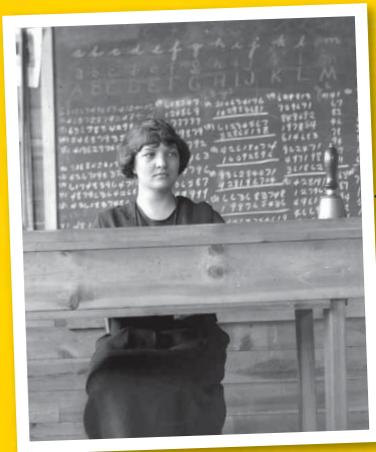
1 Althouse, *The Ontario Teacher, 1800-1910*. p. 74.

2 Dear Teacher, FWTAO, 1978, p. 18.

student learning and raise the status of the profession. The government eventually agreed.

The federations made significant gains in protecting teachers as employees and improving their job security during these difficult years. In 1928 federations began lobbying for a model individual contract. It would make the terms of employment consistent across the province, outline each party's rights and obligations, and protect individual teachers from the impulsive or vengeful acts of trustees. By 1931 the provincial government had adopted the federations' model contract and encouraged boards to use it. It became law two decades later. The federations also successfully lobbied the government to pass *An Act Respecting Disputes Between Teachers and Boards/ The Boards of Reference Act* protecting teachers by giving them the right to challenge dismissal in court. By 1943, boards were also required to give reasons for dismissal in writing.

The federations also established programs to help individual teachers. FWTAO offered counseling services and hired a lawyer to assist members in their disputes with boards. This was a



Schoolteacher,
Miss Ella Miller
in her classroom
in Longlac, 1925.
Archives of Ontario



first and proved so popular in attracting new members that the federation limited access to legal counsel to new teachers and those who had been members for six months. An Employment Exchange Service helped women find jobs and a sick benefit fund provided some income security. OPSMTF offered a range of services, including insurance plans, and developed a counseling and relations committee to help teachers in difficulty.



Final Report

Mr. Sherman has during the past Sessions, taught the Classes assigned to him with some efficiency and success.

Language: *Jerky manner of speaking – slight Hibernian accent – speaks rapidly.*

Manner: *Pleasant – sympathetic – not impressive.*

Style of teaching: *Not very accurate or thorough – rader crude as yet.*

...

In my opinion he will now make a passable teacher and for power, capability and aptitude to teach, as evinced in the Model School, I would award Sixty per cent.

In ETFO Today...

Over the decades, these early services expanded and adapted to become today's professional relations services (PRS), which now handles about 4000 calls a year from ETFO members experiencing professional difficulty.

In the early years, most teachers' calls were about dismissal or salary. PRS work evolved to reflect the increasingly complex demands of teaching. ETFO established a Legal Support Committee to deal with requests from members for representation in criminal and civil cases, College of Teacher complaints, long-term disability and worker compensation claims, and much more. Approximately \$1 million per year is spent in legal fees for these cases. ETFO cases have set positive precedents in human rights, including the duty to accommodate, discrimination, harassment, and homophobia.

ETFO's video *It Can Happen to You* and other resource materials are used to inform teachers of their rights and teach them how to respond if they face allegations of misconduct.

Every day PRS staff help members cope with the challenges of teaching. Emphasizing prevention through member education, PRS offers workshops on such topics as performance appraisal, conflict resolution, harassment and human rights, parent-teacher relationships, professionalism, professional boundaries, LGBT issues, pregnancy and parental leave.

The monthly broadsheet PRS Matters and regular articles in *Voice* advise members about emerging issues. Two resources, *After the Chalkdust Settles*, a health and wellness guide for teachers, and *Parent-Teacher Relationships, a guide to working with parents*, are among the most popular with ETFO members.

Local and provincial Breaking the Silence workshops provided by Equity and Women's Services explore how violence against women affects the personal and professional lives of ETFO members. ETFO creates curriculum documents and other resources to promote healthy relationships and to assist members dealing with children exposed to violence in the home.

ETFO also works with other federations and with the government to ensure the best possible protection for teacher rights when new initiatives are considered or new legislation is developed.



Ottawa Normal School class photograph, ca.1925
Archives of Ontario

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Teachers reach out to those in need

Despite earning little themselves, elementary teachers were always ready to help others in need. The Depression hit Canada's western provinces first and Ontario teachers sent money, food, and clothing to colleagues working for reduced pay, if they were paid at all. Many local teacher groups adopted western schools. When their own salaries plummeted, Ontario teachers still collected children's clothes and shoes, fed their students hot meals in class, and sent firewood home to parents. Since unemployed single women didn't qualify for relief programs, Toronto women teachers gave one per cent of their meager pay to support them.

When the Depression ended teachers moved directly into war work. Some spent their summers working on farms or in war industries. Others worked with refugee children, raised money, did administrative work, collected used materials like paper and rubber that factories needed, and volunteered for a variety of government committees formed to advance the war effort.

More than 200 women teachers spent the summer of 1943 filling fuses at the General Engineering Company in Scarborough. Their pay and working conditions were far superior to anything they knew in the schools, and the company magazine ran a story about them that read, in part, "Teachers expressed amazement at facilities provided for employees in a modern war plant. Free bus service! Low cost sickness insurance and hospitalization! Free medical care ... Two recesses a day with no children to look after. ... These we must assume from their surprise are not things usually provided for school teachers."¹²

In ETFO Today....

ETFO continues the work of its predecessors. Through the Canadian Teachers' Federation, ETFO supports such international programs as Project Overseas and initiatives in South Asia and West Africa. ETFO supports literacy and teacher training projects in Peru and Tanzania and for many years, has supported Women for Women in Afghanistan. The ETFO Humanity Fund, a bargaining priority for locals, supports the Stephen Lewis Foundation, which works in Africa to counter the devastating effect of HIV/AIDS on women and children. ETFO is also involved with a number of initiatives through the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC).

ETFO provides financial assistance to national and provincial organizations working for social change such as the Ontario Coalition for Social Justice, Women's Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF), December 6 Fund, Make Poverty History Campaign, Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, the Native Women's Association of Canada, and the National Congress of Black Women Foundation.

ETFO locals and members support social justice groups in their communities, working on anti-poverty and homelessness issues, supporting women's crisis shelters, literacy programs for Aboriginal children, and other initiatives.

Whether it is tsunami relief for Sri Lanka, flood relief for New Orleans, or assistance to colleagues in British Columbia, ETFO members have always been generous in their support.

The war years and mandatory membership

September 10, 1939. Canada was officially at war. Most teacher salaries had not recovered from Depression-era cuts and were well under \$2000 per year,¹³ and teachers left the classroom for the more lucrative work in war industries. Men – and some women – enlisted in the armed forces. Although married women and retirees were welcomed back, the exodus created a severe teacher shortage. The federal government responded by declaring teaching an essential service and forcing teachers to remain in the positions they held in 1942-43.¹⁴ This made bargaining wage increases extremely difficult.

For many years the federations had lobbied the government to make federation membership mandatory. Teacher federations in Saskatchewan, Alberta, Manitoba, and New Brunswick already had mandatory membership. The Ontario federations finally found an ally in George Drew, elected Premier in 1943. Education issues were an important part of his election platform and he assumed the education portfolio when he became premier.



The Winchester PS girls' basketball team, 1927.
Archives of Ontario



Schoolhouse, 1906. *Archives of Ontario*



Schoolchildren crowding the blackboard at recess, ca.1917
Archives of Ontario

Next installment: In the three decades following the war, women teachers pushed for the rights of married women teachers, and equal pay and opportunity in the workplace. The baby boom brought challenges and new prospects. Federations expanded professional development programs, built bargaining departments, fought for bargaining rights, and in the 1970s proposed creative solutions to declining enrolment.

Teacher Pensions

A few early attempts to provide pensions for teachers were inadequate and woefully underfunded. Then in 1917 the Ontario legislature passed the Teachers' Superannuation Act. There were 14,000 members in the plan. They needed 40 years of service to receive an unreduced pension based on the best 15 years of earnings. The maximum pension was \$1,000 but the average being paid at the time was closer to \$250.

Source: "Pension Plan Milestones." *Pension News*, Summer 2005, p. 2.

It also helped that Drew had a minority government with the relatively new Canadian Commonwealth Federation (CCF) as the official opposition and some speculate that Drew also wanted to appease teachers to prevent them from turning too far "left" for an ally.

A 1943 poll showed 93 per cent of teachers favoured mandatory membership.¹⁵ With this strong mandate the federations renewed their efforts and in April 1944 the *Teaching Profession Act* was passed. It created the Ontario Teachers' Federation as the umbrella group with five teacher federations (FWTAO, OPSMTF, OSSTF, AEFO, OECTA) as affiliates.

The *Teaching Profession Act* gave statutory recognition to the federations as professional organizations eliminating any question about their right to represent their members. Federations would raise standards, enforce a code of ethics, and establish their right to bargain with school boards. They would put resources into member programs and member protection. With mandatory membership in place, the federations were ready to make history.

Endnotes

- 1 Althouse, J. G. *The Ontario Teacher: 1800-1910*. Toronto: W.J. Gage Ltd., 1967, p. 5.
- 2 French, Doris. *High Button Bootstraps*. Toronto : Ryerson Press, 1968, p. 17
- 3 Althouse, p. 46.
- 4 Hopkins, R.A. *The Long March*. Toronto: Baxter Publishing, 1969, p. 35.
- 5 Morgan, Charlotte. "Happy 75th Anniversary, OPSTF" in *OPSTF News*, February 1996, pp. 6-7.
- 6 Labatt, Mary. *Always a Journey*. Toronto: FWTAO, 1993, p. 22.
- 7 Hopkins, p. 56.
- 8 French, p. 43
- 9 Labatt, p. 18.
- 10 French, p. 77.
- 11 Staton Pat, and Beth Light. *Speak with Their Own Voice: A Documentary History of the Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario*. Toronto: Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario, 1987, p.100.
- 12 French, *op.cit.*, p.97.
- 13 Hopkins, *op.cit.*, p. 391.
- 14 Federal Order in Council P.C. 4862
- 15 Hopkins, *op.cit.*, p. 123.