Luce Vermette

Great Events in Canadian Women's History

Celebrations and Commemorations

Anniversary celebrations play a large role in maintaining the historical consciousness of people everywhere. In Canada, the women's movement has not escaped this phenomenon. Thus, at the twilight of the present millennium, the country is experiencing numerous anniversary celebrations. Among these, three related to women's history have caught the attention of the public. In 1997, two institutions, the first Women's Institute and the Victorian Order of Nurses for Canada, celebrated their 100th anniversaries. In 1999, an event, the Persons' Case, will celebrate its 70th anniversary. These institutions and this event have in the past been designated of national historic significance by the government of Canada.

At the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th, important steps had been made in support of the women's movement. It was a period which saw enormous social and economic changes, such as industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. These changes were perceived as affecting women's role in the family. Women realized that they should group themselves together to meet these changes. Two ideological trends were followed by women at that time: there were those who believed that traditional values had to be strengthened, while others felt that it was the condition of women—higher education, universal suffrage, equal rights for men and women—that had to be improved. The latter perceived that it was by political means that the recognition of equality between women and men would be achieved, thus improving the condition of women which, in turn, would improve society as a whole.

Adelaide Hunter Hoodless and her three eldest children. She was enjoying a comfortable rural middle-class life when, in 1889, an infant son died after drinking impure milk. Thereafter she devoted herself to women's causes—specifically to better education of women for motherhood and home management. Photo courtesy National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

The creation of women's groups during the second half of the 19th century was a response to the social problems of the time: health care, poverty, and the well-being of families. Working in these groups, women also became familiar with management, notably of community organizations and the power of collective action. The National Council of Women, founded in 1893 by Lady Aberdeen, wife of the Governor General of Canada and President of the International Council of Women, was the end result of a widespread effort to unite the various women's groups. Within this context, two associations destined to become widely known were born: the first Women's Institute and the Victorian Order of Nurses for Canada.

Challenging the place and role assigned to women in society, other women dedicated their efforts to the advancement of women's rights as citizens. They first demanded the right to vote. This was followed by demands for the legal recognition of equality between men and women. They perceived that women could not change society without the assistance of the state, and to obtain this, women had to have the right to vote. This right was won in 1918 at the federal level of government. Women however still could not be appointed to the Senate and they regrouped to claim that right. The fight to obtain it led to the famous Person's Case.

The First Women's Institute

Adelaide Hunter Hoodless (1857-1910), reformer and educator from St. George, Ontario, founded on February 19, 1897, the first Women's

Adelaide Hunter Hoodless Homestead, St.George, Ontario. Built in the 1830s, this house, a wood frame building, is representative of a vernacular type widespread in eastern and central Canada during the first half of the 19th century. This house tells the story of the rural domestic experience. It was the hard labour and the isolation of the rural Canadian woman's lot that Adelaide Hunter Hoodless tried to alleviate. Photo courtesy National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

Institute with the help of Erland Lee of Stoney Creek, Ontario, a well known member of the Farmer's Institute. Their goal was to foster women's education in rural communities and to encourage their involvement in national and world issues. The organization's motto, For Home and Country, was a statement of its objectives: value rural life; inform women through the study of issues, especially those concerning women and children in Canada and around the world; and foster joint projects to achieve common goals. This group was especially focused on education, notably on domestic science and home economics. It was sometimes called the "university for rural women".

By 1913, there were Women's Institutes in all provinces and, by 1919, they had joined to form the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada. One hundred years later, it is still known as the organization that pioneered women's issues, strengthened family life, and enriched rural communities, not only across Canada but internationally. Seen as female public activists, its members spoke in public, learned parliamentary procedures, and lobbied governments for change.

In 1997, in the week of June 15-22, the Women's Institutes Centennial Celebration was organized in conjunction with the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada Convention in Hamilton, Ontario. There, amidst hundreds of Branch banners, thousands of delegates from women's institutes from around the world as well as from Canada, all holding miniature lights, ushered in the start of their Canadian members' second century in a moving and grand display of women's solidarity. This had been preceded by pageants, parades, tours, choirs, conferences, fashion shows, banquets, and a multicultural concert. Delegates came from as far as New Zealand, Australia, Hong Kong, South Africa, and Great Britain, as well as from the United States and all over Canada.

Part of the centennial celebration was the launching of the book *For Home and Country: The Ontario Women's Institutes History*, by Dr. Linda Ambrose, professor at Laurentian University and published by the Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario. The book relates the story of women throughout a century of work in rural communities across Ontario. The book is well documented with research from archives, government records, collections of correspondence, and policy manuals. It is also based on a survey of 900 branches and 100 hours of interviews with institute members.

Adelaide Hunter Hoodless is a household name among Women's Institute members. It is synonymous with important accomplishments in the women's cause. Founder of the first Women's Institute, a movement which spread throughout Canada and the world, she is also associated with the foundation of the Young Women's Christian Association, the National Council of Women and the Victorian Order of Nurses for Canada. She also campaigned for the teaching of domestic science and hygiene courses in schools, for which she published the text book, *Public School Domestic Science* (1898). For her important contributions to Canadian society, she was designated to be of national historic significance by the Government of Canada in 1962. Three years earlier, her homestead had been acquired by the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada. It was restored as a memorial to Adelaide Hunter Hoodless and as an historical museum interpreting women's role in rural family life during the 19th century. In 1995, the homestead was designated a National Historic Site by the Government of Canada.

The Victorian Order of Nurses

During 1997, numerous celebrations across Canada brought the Victorian Order of Nurses for Canada into its second century. This order was founded by Lady Ishbel Aberdeen, President of the National Council of Women of Canada, President of the International Council of Women, and wife of Canada's Governor General, the Earl of Aberdeen. Its foundation was intended as a memorial for the 60th anniversary of Queen Victoria's ascent to the throne of Great Britain. The idea was endorsed by the Prime Minister of Canada, Sir Wilfrid Laurier. Lady Aberdeen was nominated president of the new Order.

Originally named the Victorian Order of Home Helpers, it was conceived by Lady Aberdeen in the purest Christian tradition of visiting the poor and the sick, as a corps of women who would go from house to house to provide "all sorts of mercy and kindnesses." After a short training period, the helpers would provide first aid, nursing, basic

Lady Ishbel Aberdeen (Ishbel Maria Marjoribanks, 1857-1939), was instrumental in forming the Canadian Branch of the National Council of Women and in founding the Victorian Order of Nurses for Canada. Photo courtesy Victoria Order of Nurses for Canada, Ottawa.

cookery, and assistance in midwifery. However, this concept of home nursing ran counter to the aims of women who wished to establish nursing as a full profession within the field of medical services. At that time, some nursing leaders who were establishing new hospital training schools were trying to change the generally-held view, which Lady Aberdeen initially shared, that nursing was part of the traditional female domestic role which could be carried out by any middle class woman who volunteered her time. The newly professional nursing field viewed it as work to be performed by specially trained, remunerated, and professional nurses. Lady Aberdeen was soon convinced of the advantages of a professional status for women in nursing and the Victorian Order of Home Helpers became the Victorian Order of Nurses.

The vehement opposition of physicians over the practice of midwifery nearly derailed the project entirely. However, by 1900, many of the initial fears concerning the competition of nurses had dissipated and medical officials recognized the Victorian Order of Nurses as a dedicated and useful health care institution. Although geography and lack of funds constrained the organization's early efforts, the Victoria Order of Nurses helped pioneer prairie women in areas which were devoid of any medical services. It also helped provide for the health needs of the urban poor who could not afford heath care. By 1904, 36 nurses belonging to the Victorian Order of Nurses worked in cottage hospitals which the Order had founded or helped establish in many isolated areas of the country. Some 61 other nurses were involved in urban communities providing bedside care to people at home, and public health or educational services. As years passed, the Victorian Order of Nurses came to specialize in infant care and children's health, emphasizing traditional preventive measures such as a strict application of hygienic standards in the home. To do so, it ran an active program of immunization, school nursing, and well-baby clinics in some communities. During both world wars, many nurses from the Order served overseas with the Canadian forces while others saw to the health care of workers in the war industries. The Victorian Order of Nurses has always felt that its chief role was to look after the health care needs of Canadians. As well, it has always been a powerful advocate of nursing as a profession within the health care community.

Celebrations of the 100th anniversary of the Victorian Order of Nurses were held in all branches of the organization. Exhibitions, lectures and banquets were held throughout the year 1997. At the Centennial Annual Meeting held in Halifax, attended by over 400 volunteers as well as employees of the Order from coast to coast, lecturers recalled the Order's outstanding achievements and pondered the new directions for a second century of service to Canadians. In attendance were two special guests from Great Britain, the great granddaughters of Lady Aberdeen. The observances were marked by the introduction of a new book on the order, Sheila Penney's *A Century of Caring.*

Lady Aberdeen was commemorated by the Government of Canada in 1987 as a person of national historic significance, in recognition of her numerous accomplishments, amongst them the foundation of the National Council of Women, the Victorian Order of Nurses for Canada and the Aberdeen Association. The Order itself, although it was not the first nor the only association of visiting nurses in Canada, became the leader in the promotion of home nursing, public health services to all citizens, and the professionalization of nursing. As a result of its beneficial activity in Canadian society over the last 100 years, the Victorian Order of Nurses was designated of national historic significance by the Government of Canada in 1997.

The Person's Case

The third event which will be the object of great celebration at the end of this century, is the Person's Case. Although its purely legal effect was limited, its social and political effect has a relevance which continues to unfold. Having the merit of removing a barrier, that of the nomination of women to the Senate, the Person's Case symbolizes the rallying point of Canadian women, going beyond the women's movement itself and having implications in the broader sphere of human rights.

This event goes to the very heart of the struggle of women for fundamental rights: the right to vote, the right to higher education, and the right to full participation in political activities—in sum, equal rights between men and women. In 1918, the right to vote in federal elections had been granted to Canadian women (between 1916 and 1925 in all provinces except Québec which con-

Who's Who

Emily Murphy (1868-1933): instigator of the Persons Case. She pioneered married women's rights, was the first woman magistrate in the British Empire, president of the Canadian Women's Press Club, vice-president of the National Council of Women, and first president of the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada.

Nellie McClung (1847-1951): novelist, journalist, suffragist, and temperance worker. She was a member of the Alberta Legislative Assembly (1921-1926), the only woman on the Dominion War Council, and the first woman on the CBC Board of Governors. She was also the only woman in the Canadian delegation to the League of Nations in 1939.

Louise McKinney (1868-1931): politician and temperance campaigner. She was president of the Dominion Women's Christian Union and elected to the Alberta Legislature in 1917 as a representative of farmers' organizations, and served until 1921.

Irene Parlby (1878-1965): suffragist and politician. She was elected president of the Women's Branch of the United Farmers of Alberta in 1916 and became a member of the Alberta Legislature in 1912. She held her seat until 1935. She was president of the Alberta and Saskatchewan Temperance Union for 20 years.

Henrietta Muir Edwards (1849-1933): journalist, suffragist, and organizer. She started the Working Girls' Association in Montreal in 1875 which was a forerunner on the YWCA, She edited a paper for the working women of Canada. Later, while living in Alberta, she compiled two works on Alberta and federal laws affecting women and children.

Unveiling the plaque dedicated to the Famous Five Alberta women and the Persons' Case. In 1929, Canadian women were recognized as "persons" within the meaning of section 24 of the British North America Act. The case which led to recognition is commonly referred to as the "Persons' Case" and involved women's eligibility for appointment to the Senate. To commemorate the five Alberta women, Magistrate Emily F. Murphy, Henrietta Muir Edwards, Nellie L. McClung, Louise C. McKinney, and the Honourable Irene Parlby, a plaque was installed by the Canadian Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs and unveiled by the Right Honourable W. L. Mackenzie King, Prime Minister of Canada, on June 11, 1938. In this picture: the Honourable Irene Parlby (left), the Honourable W. L. Mackenzie King, Mrs. Nellie McClung, (right) and three representatives of the Women's Clubs. Photo courtesy National Archives of Canada, Ottawa, C-54523.

ceded it in 1940). In 1921, the year the first elections in which women voted, Agnes McPhail became the first woman to be elected Member of Parliament in Canada. However, while women could now sit in the House of Commons, all requests to nominate a woman to the Senate were rejected. Women's associations, including the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada and the National Council of Women, had asked the government at various times to appoint women to the Senate. After all, Article 24 of the British North America Act did declare that the Governor General would name to the Senate only "persons having the required qualities." If they were to be excluded, women would have to be declared not "persons."

Emily Murphy of Alberta, the first woman to be a judge in the British Empire and instigator of the now famous Person's Case, renewed the demand to appoint a woman to the Senate. When the government refused, she decided to use a little known right which permits a group of five Canadians to ask the Supreme Court for a reinterpretation of the law. By doing so, she wished to obtain a definition of the term "person" as applied to women in the British North America Act. She called on four Alberta women who all enjoyed a national reputation for their political and social work. They were Nellie McClung, Louise McKinney, Irene Parlby, and Henrietta Muir Edwards. Following their petition of August 27, 1927, the Supreme Court ruled against the five women in April 1928. They decided to appeal the case to the Judiciary Committee of the Privy Council in London, then the highest court in Canada. On October 18, 1929, the Judiciary Committee of the Privy Council overruled the decision of the Supreme Court of Canada and declared that, according to article 24 of the British North America Act, women were, indeed, persons and thus eligible to be named to the Canadian Senate. On February 20, 1930, Cairine Wilson became the first female senator in Canada as well as in the British Empire.

The efforts of the Famous Five were immortalized in 1938 by the dedication of a commemorative plaque at the Senate Building in Ottawa by the Canadian Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs and unveiled by the Prime Minister William MacKenzie King. In 1979 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Persons' Case, the Government of Canada created the Governor General's prize in commemoration of the Persons' Case, awarded to individuals in recognition for longstanding and substantial contributions to promoting the equality of women in Canada. Each year in October, this prize is presented at a ceremony in Ottawa, and five awards are usually presented each year.

A group of nurses of the Victorian Order of Nurses for Canada in front of their cars in the 1920s. Women driving automobiles were rare sight in Canada up to the 1920s. But a visiting nurse driving a car could make twice as many visits. Thus VON nurses were among the first Canadian women to get behind the wheel for their work. Photo courtesy Victorian Order of Nurses for Canada, Ottawa.

To celebrate the 70th anniversary, five Alberta professional women, called the Famous 5 Foundation, established a charitable non profit organization to honour the Famous Five and other Canadian women, commemorate the Persons' Case, and inspire women to improve their quality of life. The Foundation hopes to raise $1.1 million dollars in order to erect a monument to the Famous Five in Ottawa and a similar one in Calgary. The monument has been commissioned by the Foundation and designed by Edmonton sculptor Barbara Paterson, will consist of five figures showing Henrietta Muir sitting at table with her teacup raised in salute to Emily Murphy inviting the others to sit down. A newspaper announces the news of their victory.

The Foundation asked the Government of Canada to allow a statue of the Famous Five on Parliament Hill. Although the National Capital Commission rules state that only the deceased prime ministers, monarchs of Canada and fathers of Confederation can be honoured in this way, in December 1997, the House Of Commons passed an unanimous motion to put a statue honouring the pioneering women on Parliament Hill.

Foundation plans include leadership programs, awards, exhibits, and a Canadian version of the successful "Take our Daughters to Work" program created by the U.S. National Organization for Women.

References

Ambrose, Linda M. *For Home and Country—The Centennial History of the Women's Institutes in Ontario.* Ontario, Guelph, Federated Womens' Institutes of Ontario, 1996.

Barnett, Vicki. "Commemoration—Famous Five led the way in risk-taking", *Calgary Herald,* October, 19, 1996; "The Famous Five—Recognition sought for heroes of 'persons case,'" *Calgary Hearald,* October 19, 1996.

Dodd, Dianne. "Victorian Order of Nurses". Ottawa, Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, Agenda Paper, 1997-72, p.2165-2190.

Enman, Charles. "Famous Five backers distorting history, retired judge says—Former jurist argues foundation is exaggerating Persons Case's affect on Canadian law", *The Ottawa Citizen,* Ottawa, Décembre 1997; "'Famous were betrayed', Human Rights advocate wants 'Persons Case II' to end discrimination in Senate appointments", *The Ottawa Citizen,* Ottawa, December, 22, 1997.

MacLeod, Carol. "In the matter of a reference as the meaning of the word "persons" in section 24 of the British North America Act, 1867: The Persons Case". Ottawa, Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, Agenda Paper, (originally written in 1979), 1997-22, p.629-644.

McCallum, Sandra K. And A. Anne McLellan. "The Persons' Case A Beginning—Not The End," RFR/DRF, Resources for Feminist Research/Documentation sur la recherche féminine. Proceedings of the Third Annual Meeting of the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, November 9-11, 1979, p.76-79.

Maitland, Leslie. "Adelaide Hunter Hoodless Homestead, St.George, Ontario." Ottawa, Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, Agenda Paper, 1995-47, p.261-290.

Penney, Sheila. *A Century of Caring—The History of the Victorian Order of Nurses for Canada.* Ottawa, Victorian Order of Nurses of Canada, 1996.

Taylor, C. James. "Lady Aberdeen (1857-1939)". Ottawa, Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, Agenda Paper, 1979-47, p.241-256.

Luce Vermette, PhD, historian, System Development Branch, National Historic Sites Directorate, Parks Canada, Canadian Heritage, is presently managing a project enhancing women's history in national historic sites.

Thanks to Arlene Strugnell, Federated Women's Institutes of Canada and Jennifer Chow, Victorian Order of Nurses of Canada who provided information on the celebrations of their institutions.