

Returning to the Classroom: Married Women Fill the Void for Teachers in Saskatchewan

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses first hand accounts to explore the circumstances underlying the entry of married women into classrooms in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan during the key transitional period after 1940. By moving into the uncharted domain of being a married teacher, these women challenged prevailing patriarchal attitudes, transformed their own lives, and provided opportunities for the next generation of married women.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article se sert de récits de première main pour explorer les circonstances à la base de l'entrée de femmes mariées dans les salles de classes dans la province canadienne de la Saskatchewan durant la période clé de transition après 1940. En entrant dans le domaine inconnu d'enseignante mariée, ces femmes ont défié les attitudes patriarcales dominantes, ont transformé leurs propres vies, et ont fourni des occasions à la prochaine génération de femmes mariées.

In 1950, Rita Gerwing married Art Tagseth in a small town in Saskatchewan, settled into life as a traditional wife, and within two years was mother of two children. Three years after her marriage, an urgent appeal by the school superintendent propelled Rita Tagseth back into the classroom. She recalled hanging diapers on the line as she listened to Mr. Sheehan, the superintendent, urging her to teach. Rita Tagseth agreed to take another country school the following fall even though she was seven months pregnant with her third child. She gave birth in November, stayed home for three weeks and then continued teaching. She quit in June 1956 and withdrew her superannuation contributions in order to make improvements on their home. She did not think she would teach long enough to get a pension. From 1956 to 1970, she had five more babies and taught eight more years.

In 1971, Rita Tagseth, now forty-six years old, intended to quit teaching permanently. "All my eight kids would be in school. I'd paint, do pottery and just live the life of Riley!" She rejected the superintendent's plea to take a small two room school but when the whole school board arrived *en masse* she agreed. "It was supposed to be for one year; the school was going to be closing. That one

year led into thirteen years." She superannuated in 1984, forty years and eight children after she began teaching.

The actions of Rita Tagseth capture the strength and resiliency of the women who broke the marriage ban to combine a career in teaching with marriage and children. Before then, few women taught while raising as many as eight children, but during the forties and fifties, women with children began returning to careers in the classroom.

Rita Tagseth joined a workforce that was increasingly comprised of married women. By 1941, 23 percent of all women but only 4 percent of married women were in the labour force; but by 1971, the proportion had increased to 39 percent of all women and 33 per cent of married women (Statistics Canada 1995). A growing body of research has contributed to understanding the multidimensional complexity of the lives of employed married women and thereby has exposed as false the domestic stereotype popularized by American television (Iacovetta 1992; Parr 1990; Prentice et al. 1988; Sinister 1995a, 1995b; Strong-Boag 1997).

Immediately after the War of 1939-45, the barriers to the entry of married women into the

profession of teaching diminished rapidly. In Saskatchewan, by 1940-41 only 12 percent of women teachers were married, and by 1945-46 still only 14 percent were married (Province of Saskatchewan 1942 & 1946). Increasingly though, as the rigid division of labour between income earner and homemaker became nonviable, the number of married women teachers increased. In 1954-55, 42 percent of women teachers were married (Province of Saskatchewan 1960), and by the mid-90s, 74 percent were married (Hallman 1997). Research on teachers in the post-war period in Alberta (Sheehan 1992), Manitoba (Bruno-Jofre and Ross 1993 Kinnear 1994 & 1995; Shack 1993), Saskatchewan (Hallman 1997) and Ontario (Reynolds 1990, 1995) documents how the material and practical life experience of these women formed the basis for how they made decisions regarding their lives.

In my research, presented in this article, I follow the approach of such educational historians as Danylewycz and Prentice (1986) and Goodson (1992) in tracing the experiences of women in Saskatchewan who combined the responsibilities of wife, mother and teacher in the post-war period. This article argues that married women entered the teaching workforce in Saskatchewan after 1940 in response to high demand for teachers, family-based economic imperatives, as well as for the intrinsic satisfaction associated with the job. They taught despite a myriad of constraints such as transportation issues, absence of organized child-care, obligations at home or on the farm, and entrenched attitudes opposed to employment for wives and mothers. These married women were active agents who took advantage of the shortage of teachers to overcome patriarchal attitudes toward married women's employment. In so doing, they were open to personal transformations, which challenged and in turn changed prevailing social conventions.

METHODOLOGY

Both my parents filled my childhood with stories of their escapades in rural schools and my mother told of her experiences as a rural teacher. All evidence of my father's school vanished in 1958; my brother now grows grain on the

schoolyard. My parents' stories assumed additional poignancy when my mother, my aunts and the mothers of my childhood friends approached their seventies. Intent on capturing their experiences, I interviewed these women, and using the snowball technique I contacted other retired teachers. Professor Irene Poelzer generously gave me her collection of two hundred hand-written and taped accounts provided by Saskatchewan women teachers who had begun teaching between 1910 and 1950. Both collections contain interviews with women of various European backgrounds and tenures of teaching.

This paper is based on accounts of women who started to teach during the 1940s and taught again at some point after marriage. The accounts are not representative because a list of women who taught from about 1886 onward was not available, and, given the time period of the study, many had already died. The employment profiles of women in this collection are similar to other sources (Regina Normal School Reunion Committee 1994). The women, contacted by Irene Poelzer and myself, eagerly shared their experiences by giving interviews, writing long responses, as well as making available teaching contracts, attendance records, and photographs. This project gave them the opportunity to reflect on long-dormant memories of a very important period in their lives by recounting hardships, joys, challenges, and accomplishments. Some of the women chose to have their names associated with their accounts; others chose to remain anonymous.

Capturing the authentic feelings of the past is complicated because recollections are not simple reenactments of past experiences (Measor and Sikes 1992; Sangster 1997). In this case, the women revived their experiences in a thematically focused context: the interviews were based on negotiations about what the teacher and the interviewer considered relevant. Written responses contained events meaningful to the writer and those thought to be of interest to the researcher. Time constraints, memory limitations, inclination to sentimentalize the past, family connection with the interviewer and the desire to protect both oneself and family members interacted to colour the interviewees' recollections of the events, the complex web of feelings and the contradictions behind the stories.

Cognizant of these complications, my goal was both to record the past from the point of view of the retired teachers and to understand how their personal lives were linked to public issues (Mills 1959).

EMPTY CLASSROOMS RELAX PREVAILING RESTRICTIONS

The transition of married women and of mothers into classrooms in Saskatchewan has not been smooth. In rural boards, customary practice in the 1920s and 1930s excluded married women from employment as teachers. Dorothy Hamre's mother was directly affected by this policy in the 1920s: "my mom and dad were married during her last year of teaching but never let it be known, for fear of losing her job." Some urban centers continued a ban against married women teachers well into the 1940s. Even during the shortage of teachers during the war of 1939-1945, the Board of Education in Saskatoon refused to hire married women teachers. In 1942 Mrs. Cook had to plead to the Saskatoon Board for a job because of the low pay received by her husband in the New Zealand airforce.¹

Post-war prosperity dramatically increased the demand for teachers while at the same time the supply of male teachers decreased (McConnell 1983). The shortage of men, the constant exit of young women at marriage, and the movement of single teachers in search of better jobs created severe vacancy chains throughout the rural school districts (Corman 1999). Even as late as 1959-60, 29 percent of all teaching spots were still in rural schools (Province of Saskatchewan 1960). An additional consequence of the outflow of women at marriage meant that children were often taught by new, inexperienced teachers: in 1944, one-half of the teachers were 19 years old or under (McConnell 1983). The shortage of teachers remained so acute that by 1952-53, boards employed 666 untrained study supervisors in eight per cent of all classrooms (McDowell 1965).

Classrooms needed teachers and in response, prominent officials made attempts to sway the opinion of the public and of the ex-teachers themselves to support married women's employment. Representatives of the Saskatchewan Teachers Federation, government officials,

superintendents and trustees began to advocate for the recruitment of married women.

The Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation supported the employment of married teachers in their presentation to the Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life held in 1953. Hector Trout explained to the Commissioners: "We have so many women who have taught for years, married and then out of teaching, who have returned. Were it not for those married women back in the teaching profession, we would have a very much greater acute shortage (Presentation 72, 10)." In response to a question from Commissioner Adams as to whether returning married women were making a contribution, another S.T.F. representative, Miss C. Robins, responded that "the married women who are returning always liked teaching and are making a very fine contribution (Presentation 72, 20)."

The Director of Teacher Training for the Province of Saskatchewan, Mr. J.W. Tait, argued forcefully at the Commission for the employment of married women. "The teacher shortage has made us tolerant to married women staying in the profession. Even the cities are now tolerant, but some still have a feeling once you get married you're out. We should make an effort to retain married women (Presentation 103, 37)."

His remarks captured the contradiction emerging in Saskatchewan: the importance of hiring married women to ensure sufficient teachers in the context of lingering antipathy to married women's employment. Tait tried to overcome this antipathy by associating the qualities of a good wife with those of a good teacher.

Marriage is taking the very cream of our teachers because quite frequently the very qualities that make a young girl attractive to the opposite sex are qualities which are invaluable in the classroom: they're personable and they like young people. Those are extremely fine qualities for our classrooms. (Presentation 103, 37)

In a similar vein, Robins, the representative of the S.T.F., made the case to the Commission for hiring mothers because being a mother enhanced teaching abilities: "Because of their experience in the home, they add a great deal

to a classroom (Presentation 72, 20). In the post war period, the circumstance of being a mother was used to prevent women from taking employment: women ought to be home with their own children. Ten years later, the experience of raising children was used as an argument for hiring mothers as teachers.

To overcome public prejudices against married women's employment and to encourage married women to apply for positions, Tait advocated for the Provincial Government to launch campaigns and incentives:

We should conduct specific campaigns to keep married women in the profession. I was very impressed when I visited New York two years ago (1951). I was astounded to find that over half of the elementary school teachers were married women. They not only encourage them to go back to teaching, but they had all sorts of arrangements so that young married women could stay in the profession. We've done nothing of that kind and I think it would be worth our attention.

(Presentation 103, 37)

These arguments began to sway school boards to follow the policy enacted earlier by some of their counterparts. During the war, the shortage of teachers had begun to open doors for married women's employment in rural areas. Elinor H. knew of three married women teachers in the 1940s who had gone back to work when their husbands went to fight in the war and remained working after they returned.² Dorothy Hamre explained that "during the war years, it was permissible for girls to continue teaching while married. Many of them were married before their husbands went off to war." In the postwar period, school boards that had practised marriage ban relaxed it to ensure that qualified teachers were in the classroom. Superintendents began to recruit married women into the classroom with more energy.

REDEFINING THEIR LIVES

Many women such as Rita Tagseth answered the appeals from superintendents to teach

in rural and small town schools in spite of prevailing post-war expectations for married women to become homemakers and mothers after marriage and for their husbands to provide the necessary income. Acceptable practice dictated that farm women remain on the farm to stretch the income by storing garden produce for the winter, baking bread, sewing clothes, raising chickens for meat and eggs, as well as milking cows. Some women also toiled alongside their husbands in the fields and pastures to produce commodities to sell in the market place.

Taking employment as teachers contravened not only local norms and their husbands' expectations, but also the women's own internalized values. Alice Stein explained that "married women teachers were frowned upon. They were expected to stay at home to perform household duties and raise the children." After completing normal school, only a few of these women had envisioned permanent careers as teachers; most had thought that they would settle into full time work as wife and mother after marriage. Anita Bella is typical:

At the time I don't think I intended a lifetime career of teaching. It was generally understood that your teaching career ended with marriage. In fact, prior to 1951, I never met any married women teachers. I heard of one lady, in the 1930s, who had kept her marriage a secret for a number of years. Her child was raised in another province until he was about ten. It was generally accepted that you quit teaching if you married and no one questioned this idea. I started teaching in 1946, married in 1953 and stayed home for five years. I returned to teach in 1958 and I taught 25 more years before retiring in 1983.

Working wives and mothers in Canada made and interpreted their decisions in communities that harbored strong attitudes against employment after marriage. Many women had profoundly assimilated this prohibition (Sangster 1995b). Not surprisingly, then, as with Rita Tagseth, many teachers spoke about returning to

work as an event initiated by the superintendent's appeal to take a classroom that otherwise would not have had a teacher. Marie Stang described taking paid employment as "being coaxed" to "return to the classroom." Helen Thorson used similar wording, "I had taught at Armstrong Creek one year and four months before my marriage. After I married and had two children, they pleaded for me to come back. My youngest child was eighteen months old."

Some spoke of filling the vacancy as a contribution to the community. According to Ester Strate, "I had two children only one year apart but again I accepted a position at Lonesome Pine school for one year because they couldn't get a teacher." Lucy Rollheiser also spoke of feeling compelled to teach, despite being pregnant, because no one else was available. "In 1955, when I was pregnant, I had planned to resign at end of April but had to continue because no other teacher was available." Speaking in terms of "being coaxed" or "doing a favour" in taking paid employment softened their contravention of the established practice of remaining home full-time with their children.

In Saskatchewan, being a teacher and a mother had been mutually exclusive, and consequently these women teachers were among the first to parent while being employed as teachers. They were often alone in developing an alternative model of parenting because they lived and worked in a context of farm women, on the farm with their children. As with Rita Tagseth, these women examined the decision to take employment in this context and also in light of their own earlier expectation of making motherhood a full-time activity.

It was always hard for me to leave the children. One day when I was teaching kindergarten, I came home at noon and my pre-schooler had picked all the buds off the tiger lilies. I asked him, "Why did you do that?" He said, "because you went away, Momma." Then I felt like shouldn't have left them.

Contradictory feelings arose from taking on both activities at the same time. Their paycheques bought goods and services for their children, but at the same time the women were

separated from their pre-school children for a large part of the day. Rita Tagseth clearly articulates this dilemma:

After my kids were grown up I admitted to them that I often felt guilty about leaving them to go teaching. I told them, "We wanted to give you all the opportunities and we both had to work to do that. That's my only regret, that I shouldn't have been gone so much." They assured me that I should not feel guilty, "When you were home you were really with us, Mom. We learned how to do things on our own."

SUPPORTING THE FAMILY

Financial stress on women living in small towns prompted them to willingly respond to the appeal for teachers. In Rita Tagseth's case, the family needed money to buy a first home and later to make improvements. In retirement, her pension continued to be important. "This pension means so much to me - it means security."

The financial pressure on farm families brought on by the legacy of the depression also provided a strong incentive for ex-teachers to return to the classroom to earn a steady, reliable salary. For some families an infusion of cash was a more significant contribution than intensifying the woman's labour in the house or on the farm. This monetary contribution, in times of need, provided a rationale for the women to overcome the perceived restrictions on married women's employment.

Elinor H. is typical of women who had not planned to make teaching a career but who were drawn back to earn money and then taught for over two decades. She, along with many other women, manoeuvred to combine employment with their routine obligations. After six weeks at normal school in 1943, Elinor taught one term. She completed normal school, taught one more year and married with the intention of working as a farm wife and mother: "that was the way things were done at the time." Teaching never crossed her mind: "you just didn't do that."

In the summer of 1964, she responded favourably to the Superintendent's encouragement to take a teaching position because "poor crops

threatened the family income" and because of her "desire to seek employment now that her three boys were older." She thought that she ought to resign when her youngest son died that year of leukemia, but the superintendent convinced her to remain, stating that teaching would help with her grief. Elinor became submersed in her career and graduated with her degree in 1977. Her husband, then retired from farming, indicated that he would accompany her to the school of her choice. She moved twice and taught ten more years.³

Elinor discarded her vision of "life on the family farm making meals for her husband and the hired hand as well as tending the house and huge garden" to embrace a career of teaching. In so doing, Elinor and these other women overcame the constraints imposed by their own and others' beliefs about what was appropriate.

For a minority of women, marital problems and ensuing financial difficulties precipitated the return to teaching. After sixteen years as housewife and mother, Margie R. returned to the classroom for fourteen years because of marital and financial problems. For a few women, such as Helen Thorson, the death of their spouse provided the financial inducement to return.

I was sure that teaching was to be just a career until marriage. I had no idea that I was to become a widow at age 33 with two children to raise. My first husband was a diabetic and then developed ulcers. He passed away after we had been married for twelve years. I was a single mother with two children to raise. I taught 30 years.

These women took an initiative with their own lives that was unusual at the time and in so doing helped to expand the notion about appropriate activities for married women and appropriate forms of support that women could contribute to their families.

CARING FOR FAMILY MEMBERS

During this early period, few resources were available to women teachers to help balance the conflicts inherent in combining paid

employment with mothering. Maternity leave provisions that provided a source of income and job guarantee after a leave did not exist. Furthermore, some school boards did not accept pregnant women. Mrs. Hancock reported that "by the early 1950s pregnant women often had to resign because a pregnant teacher was 'useless' (apparently!)." Some school units would not allow husbands and wives to work in the same school. In small towns, this policy meant that one person had to commute. Sister Frances Kosolofski explained:

I know of a school unit whose policy in the 1960s did not allow for both husband and wife on the same staff. So one lady traveled to our town on Monday morning and returned to her family a good distance away on Friday. Her husband taught on the hometown staff.

Given these complications, some women, such as Marie Stang, stayed out of the labour force until their children were in school.

I taught eight years, married and taught another eighteen months - till six weeks before my first child was born (something that was seldom done then and somewhat frowned upon!). I stayed home for ten years to raise my three sons, was coaxed to come back for one year, stayed home for four more years, came back for another fifteen years and then superannuated in 1986 (of all things!). That had never been in my early plans.

Married women preferred schools close to their homes, husbands and children. Transplanting the whole family closer to the school was not realistic for farm women because their husbands' work was tied to the farm and often their own gardening and animal tending necessitated being on the farm. Women from urban areas also could not uproot their families because there was little employment for their husbands in rural areas. In addition, housing in rural areas was not available for families because the only options consisted of either boarding with a farm family or living in a tiny teacherage.

When women took positions in rural schools at some distance from their home they often had to relocate during the week because roads were in poor condition, or public transportation to the schools along rural roads was not available, or few families had a second car. According to Elinor H., there were no positions available near her new farm home. "You couldn't hop in the car and drive twenty kilometers to work like you do today!"

In the absence of regularized child-care, some women took their young children with them during the week. Rita Tagseth explained that she almost declined the job because "we didn't have a road-worthy car." After reflecting with her husband on the benefits of the job, they bought an old car. Art Tagseth drove Rita and their children (one and two years of age) to the school on Monday morning and retrieved them on Friday. A girl who was enrolled in a grade nine correspondence course cared for the children during the day. The next year at a different school, Rita and her children boarded with farm families and various farm women took turns caring for her children during the day.

If women continued to teach while they had young children, they often rotated in and out of the workforce. Rita Tagseth's experience captures this irregularity. In 1956-57, she substituted for the principal, who had had a baby. Rita then stayed home in 1957-58 to have her fourth baby. In 1958-59, she substituted for two other married women teachers. In 1960 and 1961, she stayed home to have her fifth and sixth babies. In 1962-63, she replaced two other teachers. In 1963, she stayed home to have her seventh child. In school year 1963-64, she again worked as a substitute. In 1965, with an eighth baby on the way, she stayed home. By 1966, she returned to teach; her own eight children ranged from one to fifteen.

Some women returned to the classroom to ensure that they could remain living with their children rather than boarding them in town. Since there were no schools within seventeen miles of Evelyn Ahner's ranch, her six-year-old son would have had to board in a dormitory. The roads were not passable for weeks in the winter and they did not have a telephone on the farm. Evelyn Ahner explained: "I simply could not send my young son to board in town so I took a teaching job where I could take him with me. For four years, I taught in

three rural schools, taking my sons and later my daughter with me so they could get to school."

Living conditions during the week were often less amenable than at home and increased the work associated with child-care. From February 1950 until June 1952, Evelyn Ahner lived with her two children in a shed that her husband moved to the schoolyard.

It was one room, 12 feet by 20 feet with bare board walls, and a bare wood floor. It was heated with a coal and wood heater. This heater had two burners on top for cooking. I slept on a davenport with my two children. A kerosene lamp was used for a light at night. I would get up several times during the night to replenish the fire.

INTRINSIC REWARDS

Although Evelyn Ahner's re-entry to the classroom was initially motivated by the need to provide an education for her children, it precipitated a permanent return, motivated by the joy of being back in the classroom. Many women who had been initially approached by the superintendent and who responded out of duty and financial stress enjoyed the intrinsic reward of teaching and continued on after the financial urgency disappeared. Irene Johansen taught two years, married a farmer, quit teaching and then returned for twenty-six years.

I expected to teach only until marriage. My husband farmed and in the beginning he preferred that I not teach. Travel to a distant school was out of the question. Six years later our home school, two miles away, needed a teacher. I applied, partly because I missed teaching and partly because we could use the money. When it was closed after eight years, I taught for another 15 years in the nearest small town. I continued because I found teaching more challenging and rewarding than straight housework.

A few women actually planned a lifetime career teaching, but took time out at home before

they resumed their goal. Mary Nickel remained home to have three children in seven years. When she returned she "never looked back until retirement." Ruth Dobrowolski concurred: "I was interested in making teaching a lifetime career and I did. Although I married I was still able to continue my dream of teaching children." E. M. Johnson, who taught 26 years, explained how the enjoyment of teaching brought her back into the classroom.

I planned a life-long career, but did stop for about eleven years to raise three children until the youngest was of school age. Even then, when there was not a teacher available I filled in for weeks or months at a time. I enjoyed teaching and found it rewarding and challenging.

Most of the women who participated in this study echoed a strong sense of pride in their careers as teachers. Often they had been drawn back into the classroom to ensure that local children had a teacher. Although earning an income was a monetary compensation for their job, a strong sense of accomplishment was also enormously important in their continuing commitment. They overcame the constraints on their gender and the restrictions that they themselves had internalized to forge satisfying careers for themselves.

CONCLUSION

The lives of these teachers, as with so many other women, were organized by social relations beyond their control, including the high demand for teachers and poor family economies due to poor crops or their husbands' inadequate job prospects. Both these conditions softened ideological predispositions, held by the public and the women themselves toward married women staying at home. These women had enjoyed the autonomy and money associated with their previous experience as teachers and were prepared to break established conventions to combine a career in teaching with raising their children. In keeping with the spirit of their parents and grandparents who homesteaded on the prairies, these women confronted their own circumstances with a creative energy that transformed their lives beyond the realm of typical possibilities. Their personal transformations helped establish the precedent that enabled successive generations of married women and pregnant women to establish careers as schoolteachers.

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ENDNOTES

1. Letter regarding Mrs. Cook from S. Graham and J. Laurie, of the Saskatoon Women's Association, to the Saskatoon Board of Education, June 30, 1942.
2. Interview conducted by Judith Stewart, January 20, 1989. Contained in the Irene Poelzer collection.
3. Interview conducted by Judith Stewart, January 20, 1989. Contained in the Irene Poelzer collection.

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