

**“A THING OF THE PAST”:
TEACHING IN ONE-ROOM SCHOOLS*
IN RURAL NOVA SCOTIA, 1936-1941**

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My mother writes:

I taught six years, most of them in the thirties....In most cases the country one-room school was approximately 20 feet by 30 feet. The entrance was divided into two porches, one for the girls, and one for the boys. In the centre of the room there was a rectangular box-type cast iron stove (wood-burning). Attached to the back of the school room there was a shed with a slanted roof. This is where the wood was stored for the winter months...out back there were two small buildings commonly called “outhouses”—one for the girls and one for the boys...

Most schools had two rows of seats on either side of the stove. Each seat or desk accommodated two pupils. These desks were on metal frames which were fastened to the floor with screws. Under the top of the desk was a divided compartment where the pupils kept their scribblers, books, pencil boxes, etc. There were no ballpoint pens. The higher grades sometimes used fountain pens which had to be filled from a bottle of ink. As there was no electricity, the school room had three large windows on two opposite sides. The blackboards were between the windows and were just ordinary boards painted black. The cross-lighting caused a glare which made it difficult for the pupils to copy assignments for the next day, for the younger ones to see their math questions, or any other work that was taught from the board.¹

With consolidation, the “not-so-good old school days,” as my mother refers to them, became a “thing of the past.”² And the one-room schoolhouses in Nova Scotia where those days unwound, morning and afternoon, day after day, two hundred days of the year, are mostly gone too...some, victims of simple disuse and deterioration, others of a good soak in kerosene and a well-aimed match. The place where my three brothers and one sister began their schooling has long since been obliterated, probably by the latter means. The present hardy growth of alders where the schoolhouse formerly stood successfully conceals any feature of the landscape which might stir a memory of other presences—effaces any hint of the easy-going, intimate familiarity that generations of children had with the trees, rocks, and coarse grasses there—children whose learning included where

to look for the first spring mayflowers, and the biggest wild strawberries. These schools, the material surroundings of my mother's work as a teacher, have become, to borrow my mother's words again, a "thing of the past." I call attention to the singular form because I think it is particularly revealing that the enormous subtleties of experience within teaching, its material conditions, and the myriad unseen political and administrative structures which organized that experience are compacted and reduced by historical convention to a "thing". It is this "thing of the past"—which is not one thing but many—that I begin the work of uncovering in this essay.

This paper is based on a personal history of teaching as recorded by Margaret Elizabeth Johnston (my mother). Margaret Johnston graduated from the Provincial Normal College, Truro, Nova Scotia, with a "B" licence in 1935, and taught in one-room rural schools in three different counties in Nova Scotia until her marriage in 1941. I have used the recorded recollections of my mother to inform my questions about how the public education system in Nova Scotia was constituted at that time, and to act as a sounding board for ideas gleaned from present-day accounts of the history of female teachers.³

Historiographers of education in Nova Scotia by and large have studied the structures and personalities of officialdom, but have ignored the individual teacher, except perhaps to confirm *her* general shortcomings.⁴ The day-to-day work of teachers and their personal evaluations of that work—what was rewarding, frustrating, commonplace, or tedious—have received short shrift in the historical record of education in Nova Scotia. Oddly enough, however, glimpses into the personal lives of teachers sometimes emerge from the pages of the Annual Reports of the Superintendent of Education. The many photographs of country schools, and brief descriptions of events such as Saturday morning weaving classes for teachers, evoke an almost tangible, if fleeting, sense of the nature of some of teachers' daily activities.⁵ However, the thoughts and feelings of the women who got up each morning, who bathed in water drawn from a well and heated on a wood stove, and who then walked a half mile or more to teach school all day, have not been the priority of the province's educational historians. This study focuses on the work experience of one such woman, while also explicating some of the economic and administrative variables that ordered that experience.

In other parts of Canada, the United States, and Australia, interest in the history of teachers, specifically the experience of female teachers, has generated a vibrant literature which highlights the close mesh between the personal and political aspects of teachers' lives. This literature has led me to consider my mother's teaching career from a variety of angles and with respect to a number of issues: the image of the female rural schoolteacher as a pawn and a pauper; gender inequity in pay scales; the question of a bar against married female teachers; the numerical dominance of women in the teaching profession; the numerical dominance of men in the administration of teaching; and the ways in which broadly based administrative concerns affected the individual teacher. The questions that I put to my mother in order to draw out pertinent information

along these lines did not always elicit what I expected. Part of the work of this essay, then, is to consider the ways that my mother saw her work as typical (or not) of her time and place, and to assess how her impressions are confirmed, elaborated, or called into question by the literature; alternatively, how the literature is confirmed, elaborated, or called into question by her recollections.

The dialectic between experience and interpretation of that experience occurs on at least two levels throughout the paper: first, my mother has mulled over her memories of teaching, and has selected, shaped, pruned, and written what she considered significant for a daughter's research project. Both her memories and her interpretation of those memories have no doubt been affected by the events of the intervening fifty years, in ways that would be virtually impossible to discern. Other influences on her decisions about what to record are likewise inaccessible. Second, from my mother's written recollections, I have pulled out the elements that I consider important for a research project—selected, shaped, pruned, and written a story that is ultimately neither mine nor my mother's. One source of my interpretation is an intertextual frame of reference formed from the annual reports, historical articles, and theses on the development of public education in Nova Scotia, and revisionist history which brings a feminist analysis to bear on the work of women teachers. Another is the ongoing dialogue I have with my mother as I test the impressions received from texts against her recollections of her experience.

As I set about the work of saying something about what it was like to teach in rural one-room schools in Nova Scotia during the 1930s, I realize that there are any number of ways I could render my mother's experience; there are any number of ways that my authorial voice can "talk over" my mother's—suppressing, ignoring, or misconstruing what she has to say. The complexity of attempting a fair representation of someone else's "lived actuality" is a lesson in epistemological and methodological humility.⁶ I am deeply aware that there are divides I cannot cross, and depths I cannot plumb. Moreover, I feel like something between a pirate and a pope: pilfering from my mother's memory bank a "usable" past; making official pronouncements about what is historically relevant. Yet I know that when I "contextualize" her experience, I am being incredibly presumptuous. Beware!

The female rural schoolteacher, Margaret Nelson suggests, is "one of our favourite victims."⁷ Low pay, adverse working conditions, isolation, loneliness, and restrictive rules governing behaviour are themes that pervade the literature on rural schoolteachers, factors which combine to create an image of a hapless schoolmarm. J. Donald Wilson begins one of his articles on rural women teachers in British Columbia with an account of the death of Mabel Jones, a young schoolteacher in the Cowichan Lake District, who in 1928 was driven to take her own life. It was widely believed that the insurmountable difficulties of her teaching situation in isolated, hostile surroundings provoked her final, desperate

act. Although Jones' response to her working conditions was extreme, Wilson's use of this example in his introduction sets the tone for what is to follow in the remainder of the article—a focus on rural female schoolteachers in dire straits during the period from 1929-34.⁸ Similarly, Robert Patterson's essay on the experiences of novice rural schoolteachers on the Canadian Prairies between the two World Wars concentrates on the trials and tribulations of these young, and for the most part, female teachers.⁹

In addition to the above studies, the general tenor of quantitative work done in the United States and Canada on the debilitating effects on teachers of the economic hard times of the 1930s provides a broad outline of despair in terms of abundance of candidates for positions; low salaries—sometimes even no salaries at all; worsening working conditions; and no job security. Furthermore, female teachers are considered to have been hurt by the Depression even more than men. They were more vulnerable partly because of their higher numbers in the profession, and partly because of specific policies directed toward squeezing them out. In Lois Scharf's study of the effects of the Depression on American working women, for example, the chapter on teachers is entitled "Even Spinsters Need Not Apply..."; a caption which epitomizes the negative effects of retrenchment policies on female teachers who, in 1930, had constituted four-fifths of the teaching force in the United States.¹⁰ Scharf points out how "economic competition, structural changes, and public sentiment all worked to the advantage of men at the expense of female teachers generally."¹¹ This was a legacy that was to last well beyond the Depression years.

Taken together, these studies give support to the tendency to approach the experiences of all female rural schoolteachers with the expectation of hearing some variation of a familiar narrative of epic struggle against adversity. While I in no way want to diminish the very real difficulties women teaching in rural areas generally faced, or to discount regional variations in the types of problems with which they had to contend, I believe that a willingness to privilege the dramatic over the mundane misses much of the story. Margaret Nelson found, for instance, that what was disclosed in her oral interviews of women who taught in rural Vermont prior to 1950 challenged the impression obtained from the written records of the teacher as a proper object of pity or scorn. The women's reflections on their teaching experience brought to light a sense of their own agency in creating the circumstances of their employment: pride in their work, striving to improve conditions, and manipulation of constraints to their own advantage. They felt respected by the community and worked hard to keep that respect.¹²

My mother's account of her teaching experience also counters the received notion of the country schoolteacher as the pawn of trustees, the subject of gossip, and the community drudge. The theme that runs throughout her account is one of mutual respect: respect for her work on the part of the community; and respect on her part for the children and communities she served. To explain why she wanted to be a teacher my mother says: "In those days, much more than now,

the teacher was a role model much respected and looked up to."¹³ She appears never to have been disillusioned on this score. Tangible signs of this respect are discernible throughout her career.

As a teacher, completing the work for up to twelve grades made for "difficult days"; yet my mother frequently remarks that "it was amazing how cooperative those students were." She habitually went to her boarding home for the midday meal, leaving the children unsupervised. On this point, she says:

During my six years of teaching, I never had any noon-time problems. The children mostly were well disciplined in their homes, so therefore they were well behaved in school and had respect for their teacher as well as their elders.¹⁴

Boarding places were generally arranged for her before she arrived. Although they lacked running water and indoor bathrooms (conveniences she had had in her own rural home), she says that she adjusted quickly. Otherwise she comments:

The food was excellent even in those hard times. In one home deer meat and cranberries were quite prevalent, but I really liked both very much....The teacher wasn't expected to lift a hand to do anything, but I usually enjoyed drying dishes and exchanging the news of the day.¹⁵

Her description of her work reveals a close and lively connection to the community:

The fun time of the year was the preparation for a Christmas concert. All the pupils took part, even the youngest. They loved it and we all worked hard to make it the best concert around. In May we had Arbor Day. This was clean up day. Everyone worked at it, washed the windows, washed the woodwork, washed the desks, and scrubbed the floor. The boys cleaned and raked the yard. They also carried the water from the nearest home which was heated on the school stove for the cleaning. There was no water or electricity in the school....When everything at the school was spic-and-span, the rest of the day was spent having a picnic. There were games, races, and lots of good food. Not much money was available to spend on the school room. Teachers often organized and had pie sales to raise money for this purpose. I was able one year to completely paint the interior, have a cement step made, and a school sign painted which I did myself.¹⁶

Although my mother agrees that the prevailing expectation was that the teacher had to "maintain a good reputation," this did not seem to be particularly

problematic for her, or cause her undue worry. She portrays relations with the schools' communities as clear sailing:

It was easy for a teacher to make friends in the community where she taught...especially families who had children in school were very pleased to have the teacher visit the home, often inviting her for the evening meal. Sometimes there would be card parties and other social get togethers. The more the teacher participated the better she became acquainted and the more popular she became.¹⁷

Many of the relationships my mother formed while teaching were to continue many years beyond her teaching career. One that she made in her first year of teaching was especially enduring—he was later to become her husband, and they have been together for more than fifty years.

The diminutiveness of teachers' salaries in the United States and Canada was legendary in these times. In 1930, according to Lois Scharf's U.S. study, the median salary for a teacher in a one-room rural school was \$788; by 1935, the salaries of rural teachers were cut by an average of 33%.¹⁸ Many schools were unable to meet even this reduced payroll. In Canada, one of the provinces hit hardest by the Depression was Saskatchewan, where farmers not only had to contend with the general economic exigencies but with one crop failure after another. John E. Lyons compares the school taxes collected in 1929 (\$11 million) to those collected in 1937 (less than \$4.5 million) to show emphatically the impact of the Depression on public schools in Saskatchewan.¹⁹ Here teachers' salaries dropped 50% or more in six years. In 1930, a female rural schoolteacher holding a first-class certificate would have earned on average \$1,142; by 1936, this had fallen to \$407.²⁰ Wage cuts during the Depression were perhaps not quite so dramatic in Ontario, but nonetheless significant, with the brunt of the wage loss borne by female teachers. Judith Arbus highlights how the Depression exacerbated gender inequities and discrimination against women in hiring and promotion, and notes that the teaching salaries were reduced by 55% for women during the period from 1930 to 1936, whereas men's salaries were reduced by only 38%.²¹

Salaries for teachers in Nova Scotia before the 1930s were among the lowest in Canada. The Depression brought even harder times, but it is a time-honoured phrase in Nova Scotia that it suffers less from recessions in the economy than other places, because "rock bottom" is never far away. The decrease in teachers' salaries was not as precipitous or as severely detrimental to women as what appears to have been the case for Ontario and Saskatchewan. The overall average salary for teachers decreased 4.4%, from \$754 in 1931 to \$721 in 1934, its lowest point. The average salary of female teachers as a whole decreased 4.6% from its 1931 level of \$709. The average salary for male teachers declined about 15% in

this period from a high of \$1,194, and continued to decline for a year or two after women's salaries stabilized. In the ten years surveyed, from 1931 to 1941, the lowest average salary for women teaching in rural schools was \$518 in 1934, a 5.4% decrease from the 1931 level; for men in rural schools it was \$606 in 1935, a 4.5% decrease. It would appear that men teaching in urban areas bore the brunt of wage cuts. Their average salaries dropped 16%, from a high of \$1,912 in 1932 to a low of \$1,598 in 1935. However, in comparison to the wages of most teachers, their predicament was far from pitiable.²²

According to the Annual Report of 1935, the year my mother entered teaching, the average salary for female teachers in rural schools was \$519, inclusive of provincial aid.²³ What appears statistically as an average salary may be a far cry, however, from what the "average" teacher gets to put in her pocketbook. In my mother's recollection, the salaries ranged from \$300 to about \$500 or \$600 a year, plus a provincial grant paid directly to the teacher and based on the level of certification (about \$160 for a "B" licence such as my mother had). A teaching job in a "poor section" would certainly not net the elusive average wage.²⁴ During these years, she notes, "teachers were very plentiful," and teachers changed schools often in order to "try and better their situation," a practice that drew criticism from school inspectors, but went on nevertheless.²⁵ My mother taught in five different schools during her six years of teaching, expressing the view that this was a matter of course.

The ultimate test of earning a livelihood is not how much you make, but how much you can buy with what you make. Discussion of Depression retrenchment policies generally neglect to compare teachers' relative standard of living before and after the wage cuts. The loss in real spending power represented by wage reductions cannot be adequately addressed here, but a brief profile of my mother's standard of living can. My mother paid three to five dollars a week for board (\$120 to \$200 a year for a 40-week school year). She generally spent summers at the home of her parents. Being a single woman with no dependants, she was able to save enough in three years to buy a car, and from then on, often travelled to her parents' home for weekends. She found the pay low, but reasoned that "men in the thirties (labourers) with families worked at any kind of work they could get for \$1.00 a day often walking several miles to and from jobs."²⁶ Like the women Judith Arbus interviewed, she was "grateful to be working."²⁷

When asked to comment specifically on gender differentials in the rates of pay, my mother replied:

Men received the same wages as women with the same qualifications. If they held the position of Principal, they received more. A female Principal would receive the same as a male if they had the same qualifications. Usually men were chosen to be Principal with the general belief that they could assert more control [than women].²⁸

Nova Scotia's adherence to the widespread belief that maleness was a prerequisite for effective principalship came as no surprise to me, but how did my mother receive the impression that equity in pay between men and women existed when the documentary evidence appears to give such overwhelming support to the contrary? However, a close look at the official statistics reveals that salary differentiation on the basis of gender was a subtle, ambiguous issue. It must be considered in conjunction with teacher qualifications, length of teaching experience, and placement in rural or urban schools, factors which are difficult to unravel and isolate with respect to sex from the departmental data.

When my mother started teaching in 1935, the average salary for women teachers was 69% of that of men. Yet women with a "B" licence made 89% of what men with the same licence made. At that time teaching licences were ranked in accordance with years of study and/or Normal College training beyond provincial examinations. An "Ac" licence was at the top and required a university degree plus professional training or teaching experience; an "A" licence required two years of training beyond Grade XII; a "B" licence one year plus a summer school course beyond Grade XI; and the "C" and "D" licences were of a temporary or permissive status and signified even shorter periods of training. Teachers with "B" licences were the largest group in the teaching force (36%).

Female teachers in rural and village schools made 85% of what men similarly placed did. It was in the urban schools that the disparity between men and women widened considerably, with female teachers making only 59.5% of what male teachers made. At this time, men comprised only about 14% of the total number of teachers, so they must have held a high proportion of the top-grade "Ac" and "A" licences, and have been concentrated in the better-paying urban schools in order to have tipped the average salary differential so dramatically in their favour.²⁹ This would appear to have been the case for the school year 1937-38. The data compiled by the Dominion Bureau of Statistics shows that 66.9% of the men teaching had Class 1 or higher certificates ("A" or "Ac" licences) compared to 36% of the women.³⁰ It can also be seen that the largest group of teachers (786 out of a total of 3,393) were paid in the range of \$400-\$499. Of these teachers, 715 were women. However, of the 73 teachers that were in the top range of salaries (over \$2,000), 66 or 90% were men. No woman earned over \$2,500 whereas 21 men did. Men made up 27% of those commanding mid-range salaries (\$1,000-\$2,000), and only 13% of those making below \$1000.³¹

An historical snapshot such as that provided by the *Biennial Survey of Education* cannot be relied upon to show trends, but the statistics given for the length of tenure in schools create the impression that women in general stayed in the profession longer than men. It has been generally assumed, however, that women's stay in the teaching profession was shorter than men's due to their customary retirement upon marriage. In rural schools women with fifteen years of experience or more accounted for 3.9% of all teachers, whereas men in the same tenure category comprised only 0.9% of all teachers. These teachers would have been in schools of more than one room, for there were almost no teachers

with over seven years experience in one-room rural schools. In urban schools women with fifteen or more years of experience accounted for 23% of all teachers compared to men at 2.8%. Even when the greater number of female teachers in the profession as a whole is taken into consideration, it still holds true that higher numbers of women stayed in the profession longer than men: 27.8% of all female teachers in urban schools had fifteen years of experience or more, compared to 18.4% of all male teachers. In rural schools, it would appear that men may have taught longer: 6.9% of male teachers had over fifteen years of experience compared to 4.5% of female teachers. However, in the case of rural schools, the actual number of teachers with a long tenure was very small for both sexes.³²

When my mother left teaching in 1941, women were faring even more poorly in comparison to men than they had in 1935; their average salary in Nova Scotia as a whole was only 65% of what men earned (although this was a slight improvement over 1931 when it was only about 60% of the male average). The average salary for all teachers had increased 10% between 1935 and 1941 but men's had increased by 12% whereas women's had risen by only 8%. Women with a "B" licence were making 5% less than they had in 1935, but a startling 13% more than their male counterparts. However, this differential likely reflected a movement of more experienced teachers upward, and their replacement by less experienced teachers at a lower salary, with the then-current group of male "B" teachers being newer to the job. By this time, those with "A" licences comprised the largest group of teachers (43%); while those with "B" licences remained relatively constant at 35%. Men still made up about 14% of the teaching force, and the greatest discrepancy in salaries remained in the urban schools, with women losing ground slightly, making 59% of what men earned.³³

Unfortunately, grades of licences, years of experience, and numbers of teachers in urban and rural schools were not analyzed by sex in the annual reports or the *Biennial Survey* in such a way that one can determine the relative salary of men and women with the same teaching licence, same years of experience, and teaching in the same type of school. Although a precise picture is impossible to draw from the statistics available, it would seem that the lower salaries accorded to women were not merely a function of their overrepresentation in rural schools, lower qualifications, or fewer years of experience. This would agree with Arbus' Ontario finding that the most prestigious and best-paid jobs were the preference and the prerogative of men.³⁴ Yet from the perspective of my mother—a teacher with a "B" licence in a rural school—men's and women's salaries would have appeared to be tolerably matched.³⁵

The retirement of female teachers upon marriage was a complex phenomenon determined not only by administrative policies, employment opportunities, and social conventions and constraints, but also each individual woman's peculiar accommodation to her perceived possibilities and constraints. My mother remarks that some of her female classmates continued to teach after

marriage. Many, like herself, did not. She does not remember any sort of a bar against married women teaching, or an active discouragement of mixing marriage with teaching on the part of the administrators. In her case, her marriage was followed by the birth of four children in relatively quick succession (including a set of twins); and as well she ran a post office, cared for two aging parents in her home, helped to run a farm, and did all the cooking, cleaning, canning, and gardening, for several years without the benefits of running water or electricity. Teaching, itself at least a ten-hour-a-day job, was not a practical option. By the time the family responsibilities lightened, the higher qualifications then required of teachers would have been an obstacle to her return. By 1956 an "A" licence had become the minimum required standard.³⁶ However, to assume that my mother's retirement from teaching signalled her retirement from the public sphere would be seriously misleading. She continued, and continues to this day, to lead a very active life in the community and the church; and for many years, her juggling of conflicting demands always included some form of paid part-time work—from running a post office to doing surveys for the Dominion Bureau of Statistics.

My aunt, on the other hand, who also graduated from Provincial Normal College with a "B" licence about the same time as my mother, went back to teaching shortly after her third child was born, after a ten-year absence. Having fewer children farther apart, and a husband whose regular waged employment allowed the family freedom from a dependence upon farming for its livelihood, she was able to overcome the domestic impediments to her return to teaching. The different adaptations of these two women to their particular circumstances are a caution against generalizing a "typical" response by female teachers to marriage. The shortage of teachers after the start of the Second World War might also have allowed some women more room than they had before to negotiate working conditions, including work after marriage, during pregnancies, and after childbirth.³⁷

While several facets of the so-called feminization of teaching have been considered in the scholarly literature, a question which has received little attention is how women managed to maintain their numerical dominance in the teaching profession during the Depression. In Nova Scotia more male teachers were highly desired, according to the rhetoric of both the Superintendent's office, and the Nova Scotia Teachers' Union,³⁸ they enjoyed higher salaries on average than female teachers; and even the poorest school offered as much as the labourer's going rate of pay of "a dollar a day." Yet throughout my mother's teaching career, male teachers made up only between 14% to 16% of the teaching force. Why were men not breaking down the doors to get into teaching? My mother's only brother Gerald, who taught for one year, provides some interesting clues. He finished Grade XI in the spring of 1930, went to the Provincial Normal College summer school in Truro, and received a Temporary licence. He writes:

I thought it [teaching] would give me a bit better income as any jobs I took around Clarence [his home] paid fifteen cents per hour, ten hours a day—nine dollars per week....I had a single-room school with 45 pupils from primary to Grade 11....My pay from the school was \$300 and a Provincial Grant of \$150, and from that I had to pay board for a short week. I felt I could do better, so the next year I went to the Nova Scotia Agricultural College and took a degree course in two years. The Agricultural College year was short, so I had time to work on the farm in the summer, and I also went to Army Camp for 10 days each summer and worked my way up to C.S.M., then I took my Commission and qualified as a Lieutenant. When war was looking close, we were called in—actually the 28th August 1939. When I was called in I was working full time in a warehouse at fifteen cents per hour, ten hours a day, and six days a week. On the 28th August I got five dollars per day, seven days a week, so that was more what I wanted.³⁹

The army offered this young man economic opportunities unavailable elsewhere in his locale, a chance to get ahead, a relatively secure future. For many men who took up this opportunity, it turned out to be either a very short future, ending abruptly on the battlefield; or, as in Gerald's case, a long lifetime of suffering the effects of a permanent war injury and chronic ill health. Yet at 26 years of age, the chance to make \$35 per week, compared to \$9 per week, was clearly irresistible. The army, then, may have drawn some men away from teaching. Yet Gerald had already been drawn away before he joined the army, first by the Agricultural College, and then by the type of job he was hoping to avoid by going into teaching in the first place. Therefore the economic attractions of the army as an alternative occupation do not satisfactorily explain men's staying away from the classroom in droves. The nature of the relationship between teaching and farming, and between the Provincial Normal College and the Agricultural College in terms of female/male entry into different occupations, would be extraordinarily difficult to unravel, but a very promising area of inquiry in terms of solving the puzzle as to why men in Nova Scotia typically did not teach.

Another insight into the apparent male reluctance to enter teaching was offered by my mother. Most men, she said, were expected to work in order to support themselves and help out their families before they acquired enough schooling to get a teaching licence. Finishing Grade XI and a year at Normal College (the minimum requirement starting from 1933) was an impossible luxury for young men whose obligations to provide, in the straitened economic circumstances of the 1930s, often coincided with puberty. On the other hand, perhaps the Depression merely exacerbated a pattern of male early-leaving already established, a practice that was also evident in nineteenth-century rural Quebec.⁴⁰ In any case, this explanation does not account for those men (like Gerald) who did have the academic qualifications to teach, but who chose other occupations over teaching, even though they were not necessarily more lucrative.

One area where men were definitely numerically dominant was in the administration of teaching. The implications for female teachers of a practically all-male inspectorate have yet to be fully explored. Robert S. Patterson's article leaves the impression that teachers on the Canadian prairies customarily discovered the Inspector to be distant and of little practical assistance.⁴¹ Wayne E. Fuller's study of rural schools in the American context also confirms the infrequency of visits by the county superintendents, the American equivalent to inspectors, and further suggests that their calls precipitated great anxiety in inexperienced teachers.⁴² Moreover, through her case studies of women teaching in Vermont, Margaret Nelson has begun to document the vulnerability of female rural schoolteachers to sexual harassment by their supervisors.⁴³

About the inspectors for whom my mother worked, she says equivocally: "Some you were glad to see come; others not so glad." One was a particular favourite and he literally became a household word for many years as she named her horse after him. She describes him as having been there to help, not to criticize...a description that hopefully fitted the inspector better than it did the horse. She enjoyed the few occasions that he would take over the class, finding it interesting to watch "how he dealt with some of the crazy answers the kids gave you." Still, one could rarely expect a visit more than the twice-yearly norm, although the submissions to the annual reports of this particular inspector detail as many as four visits a year to some schools. About one in the "not-so-glad-to-see" category, she recalls asking for help with an algebra problem of a type that she had never encountered before:

He took off his bowler hat and sat at the desk for about fifteen minutes with the book. Then he put on his hat, handed me the book on the way out the door, saying, "here, take this home with you tonight—you'll figure it out."⁴⁴

My mother's conclusion was that he did not know how to do the problem either. Ignorance on the part of inspectors of the curriculum teachers were required to teach was a frequent complaint of the teachers Patterson interviewed.

During the 1930s and 1940s, two major themes were reiterated throughout the annual reports to the legislature by the Department of Education. One was the applauding of higher standards of certification for teachers; the other, the promotion of the larger municipal unit. Both were couched in the rhetoric of progressive education then in vogue throughout North America. Improved teacher training seems to have been seen as somewhat of a panacea for all the ills of the education system.

The Minimum Professional Qualification, which had allowed prospective teachers with as little as Grade X education to teach without further professional training, was abolished in 1926. That same year three universities instituted a

one-year programme of professional teacher training beyond the Arts and Science degree programmes which led to an Academic or "Ac" licence. It continued to be possible to obtain a "Temporary" licence after successful completion of Grade X examinations and a Normal summer school, or a "C" licence after a half-year course at the Provincial Normal College until 1933. In 1933, a "B" licence became the minimum standard. This required a full one-year Normal School training plus a summer school session beyond successful completion of Grade XI examinations. Normal-trained teachers accounted for 86% of the teaching force in 1935, when my mother began teaching, and 92% of the teaching force in 1941, when she retired. The following table shows the distribution of teachers according to grade of licence for the years 1935-41, and documents a steady increase in the proportion of teachers with Academic and "A" licences, a relatively stable proportion with "B" licences, and a significant decrease in the percentage of teachers with "C" and "D" licences. Licence requirements were downgraded for a period during World War II when candidates for teaching were in short supply. Although there was a temporary increase in the number of teachers with the lowest category of licence, those with an "A" licence—which required two full years of Normal College training beyond Grade XII—were in the majority by 1941 (43%). Enrolment in the Normal College during the war dropped by as much as 41% from pre-war levels, precipitating a shortage of teachers and slowing down (but not reversing) the upward trend in teacher qualifications. In 1956, an "A" licence became the mandatory minimum.

Commenting on the upward movement of academic standards and professional standards, Henry Munro, the Superintendent of Education from 1926 to 1948, stated:

As the trained teacher is the pivotal factor in the field of education, it is encouraging to note how our teachers are equipping themselves for their important task....It may be added that the men now engaged in teaching are in growing numbers taking it up as a permanent profession and qualifying themselves on both the academic and professional sides.⁴⁵

As has been previously noted, most teachers "equipped themselves for the task" through training at the Provincial Normal College in Truro, Nova Scotia. My mother attended PNC for one year following completion of her Grade XI Provincial examinations. This is how she described her year:

I took two classes in Maths, two in English, Health, Music, Art, and Industrial Arts. All these classes were methods of teaching the different subjects to all grade levels. Each class lasted about forty minutes with ten minutes to change to the next class. At quarter to 12:00 noon, all classes met in the large assembly room with Dr. Davis, the Principal, for comments, instructions, and announcements. Afternoon classes lasted from 1:30 to 3:30 p.m. Each night we had to prepare lesson plans.

DISTRIBUTION OF TEACHERS ACCORDING TO GRADE OF LICENCE									
Year end	# of teachers	Normal trained	University Graduates	Ac.	A	B	C	D*	
1935	3649	3166	577	105	1077	1328	944	145	
1936	3659	3284	571	101	1190	1371	865	132	
1937	3714	3395	600	110	1293	1421	769	121	
1938	3794	3507	628	121	1422	1436	669	146	
1939	3829	3495	645	140	1510	1441	601	137	
1940	3868	3651	644	148	1634	1432	525	129	
1941	4016	3732	669	165	1740	1406	488	217	

* Temporary or Permissive.

Source: *Annual Report for 1941*, xxvii.

Next day, someone in the class would be called upon to teach the lesson. This continued until Christmas, giving each student an opportunity to teach every subject at least once.

Most every Friday night a social evening was held. If a dance was planned they often invited the Agricultural students who were mostly boys. [The Agricultural College was in the same town.] PNC had nearly four times as many girls as boys.

Christmas was really the first break when everyone got the chance to go home. After Christmas teaching practice began in earnest. Each class was divided into groups of five or six. Friday mornings, the group along with their Instructor went out to a local school, and one in the group taught the assigned lesson. On our return, the Instructor praised or criticized the teaching and pointed out the mistakes. This teaching practice continued until all in the group had taught a lesson in each subject in different local schools.

By the end of May, the graduation list was posted. Then we were given the names of schools requiring teachers. Each student sent out several applications, and many received positive replies before leaving for home. Much preparation went into the graduation exercises which were held in the theatre by the middle of June. It was a proud and memorable day for all the graduates.⁴⁶

My mother's favourite class was Industrial Arts. The purpose of this course was to enable teachers to instruct boys in the elements of woodworking and similar manual work. The contradiction in training women to teach a course meant only for boys went without remark. At any rate, my mother was never able to teach her favourite subject due to the lack of appropriate facilities and equipment. The travelling "shopmobiles" designed to enable instruction in mechanical science to rural boys came too late for her to utilize.⁴⁷

In his submission to the Annual Report for 1935, Principal Davis of the Provincial Normal College stressed that the training in all departments was directed towards the needs of rural schools (even though 37.7% of all teachers at that time taught in urban schools). He wrote, "while it is not incumbent on teachers in the rural schools to be farmers, all should be able to discuss freely and feel emotionally the right relation of man and land in Nova Scotia."⁴⁸ How the needs of rural schools were perceived and how the notion of "right relation" was conceptualized embodied many unspoken assumptions and contradictory ideas. Where, for instance, did women fit into this concept of right relation and with what implications for their education? Moreover, the promotion of an educational ideology and practice aimed to keep Nova Scotians on the land, coexisting with one aimed to make rural students competitive workers in an industrial economy, seems, at first glance, to have been contradictory. Furthermore, by 1938 the number of urban students almost matched that of rural students.⁴⁹ Were the urban

students also educated to stay on their non-existent farms? Explication of the nature and scope of these contradictions will have to await further study.

The promotion of the larger municipal unit was articulated in terms of extending equality of opportunity to all children. Read in the light shed by later revisionist history which views schools as the means through which the state moulds its future workers, and through which class and gender-based inequities are reproduced, there is a tendency to be suspicious of rhetoric portending the democratization of education. On the other hand, the inequities produced by the local administration of schools were very real and increasing yearly, as urban schools grew richer and rural schools poorer.

Each rural community had its own "school board", made up of three trustees and a Secretary-Treasurer, which budgeted the teacher's salary, school repairs, and wood for the fire in the expenditures drawn from the school portion of the local property taxes. This system of administration had existed virtually unchanged for over fifty years and, in the official circles of the Department of Education, it was blamed for most of the inequalities in education in the province. The fiscal policies of trustees were typically viewed as miserly, a reputation that was probably well deserved. Loran DeWolfe's 1915 assessment of trustees was one that he maintained throughout his long career in the Rural Science Department and Rural Education Division of the Department of Education (1913-43):

If always the most intelligent and progressive men (or women) in the section were elected trustees the system would be fairly good. But it frequently happens that those elected are ignorant of school law, of educational progress, of twentieth century ideals—in fact, of everything except that they should hire the cheapest teacher who applies.⁵⁰

My mother's assessment of trustees was less severe, pointing out that their efforts were circumscribed by limited funds. They had little incentive to spend a lot of money on a teacher, and a lot of incentive to spend little money.

An enormous amount of energy was expended by the Department of Education over the years in attempts to redress this situation of regional inequity. The move towards the larger unit was a pet project of the Superintendent of Education, Henry Munro. Every one of his submissions to the annual reports during these years alludes to the disparity and wasteful duplication of services involved in maintaining one-room schoolhouses, and speaks to the educational advantages and economic viability of consolidation.⁵¹ A full history of the consolidation of schools in Nova Scotia has yet to be written, but it is known that it was a very long and slow process. Munro did not live to see the full fruition of his efforts. Mine was the first class in my home area to complete all its elementary schooling in a consolidated school, beginning in 1960-61. In remote sections this would have occurred even later.

And yet it was with this steady, irrevocable change towards consolidation that, as my mother puts it, "the not-so-good old school days" became "a thing of the past."⁵² There are ways in which my mother's teaching experience belongs to an era so distant and different from that which occurs in today's schools that it can only be dimly imagined. Yet it had its own subtle gradations of satisfaction and of frustration, a range of practical tasks to be negotiated daily, and was connected in obvious and less obvious ways to a changing administrative bureaucracy. The mutability of these aspects of teaching is missed in the tendency to treat rural school teaching as a solitary historical phenomenon—a thing of the past. Reflective readings of my mother's experience can provide a fresh perspective on public education in Nova Scotia, and confirmation of, as well as challenge to, some of the present-day literature on female rural school-teachers.

NOTES

- * This paper is dedicated to the memory of Gerald F. Johnston. His contribution to this paper was greatly appreciated. I would like to thank my mother Margaret Johnston Miller for her generous sharing of her time and her memories. I would also like to thank Dr. Alison Prentice for her comments on an earlier version of this paper. I gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
1. Margaret Elizabeth Johnston, Lansdowne, Nova Scotia, to Dianne M. Hallman, Oakville, Ontario, 28 Feb. 1991. Personal letter retained by Dianne M. Hallman. It is interesting to note that "movable chair desks" were a highly esteemed innovation for a rural school. In 1929, Hillsborough School won the School Improvement Contest for providing movable desks. It was apparently the first rural school in Nova Scotia to have them; see Jane M. Norman, *Loran Arthur DeWolfe and The Reform of Education in Nova Scotia, 1891-1959* (Truro, Nova Scotia: Atlantic Early Learning Productions, 1989), 147.
 2. Johnston to Hallman, 1991.
 3. I asked my mother to write about her recollections of teaching. Her response became the basis for further questions and discussion through letters and telephone conversations. Direct quotations are taken from her letters which were combined, transcribed, and dated 28 Feb. 1991.
 4. Historical works consulted were Norman, *DeWolfe*; Arthur Thomas Conrad, "Educational Development in Nova Scotia under Henry Fraser Munro" (M.A. thesis, St. Mary's University, 1960); John Earle, "The Development of the Teaching Profession in Nova Scotia" (M.A. thesis, St. Mary's University, 1960); A. George MacIntosh, "The Development of Teacher Education in Nova Scotia" (M.A. thesis, St. Mary's University, 1964); Robert Alexander MacKay, "The Development of Rural Education in Nova Scotia, 1900 to the Present" (M.Ed. thesis, St. Francis Xavier University, 1966); Grace Helen Whitman, "The Development of the Public Schools of Nova Scotia, 1920-1940" (M.Ed. thesis, Acadia University, 1965). None of these works challenge the view that defects in the educational system were at least in part

- traceable to defects in the teacher, almost invariably referred to as "she" when the author was being critical.
5. Copies of the *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Education for Nova Scotia* were surveyed for the years 1935-41.
 6. The concept of epistemological and methodological humility is outlined in Uma Narayan, "Working Together Across Difference: Some Considerations on Emotions and Political Practice," *Hypatia* 3, 2 (Summer 1988): 37.
 7. Margaret Nelson, "Using Oral Histories to Reconstruct the Experiences of Women Teachers in Vermont, 1900-1950," in *Studying Teachers' Lives*, ed. Ivor Goodson (New York: Routledge, Teachers' College Press, forthcoming Feb. 1992).
 8. J. Donald Wilson, "'I am ready to be of assistance when I can': Lottie Bowron and Rural Women Teachers in British Columbia," in *Women Who Taught: Perspectives on the History of Women and Teaching*, ed. Alison Prentice and Marjorie R. Theobald (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), esp. 203-4. For a more comprehensive account by the same author see "The Visions of Ordinary Participants: Teachers' Views of Rural Schooling in British Columbia in the 1920s," in *A History of British Columbia: Selected Readings*, ed. Patricia E. Roy (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1989), 239-55.
 9. Robert S. Patterson, "Voices from the Past: The Personal and Professional Struggle of Rural School Teachers," in *Schools in the West: Essays in Canadian Educational History*, ed. Nancy M. Sheehan, J. Donald Wilson, and David C. Jones (Calgary, Alberta: Detselig, 1986), 99-111.
 10. Lois Scharf, *To Work and to Wed: Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980), 66.
 11. *Ibid.*, 85.
 12. Nelson, "Using Oral Histories," 21-22.
 13. Johnston to Hallman, 1991.
 14. *Ibid.*
 15. *Ibid.*
 16. *Ibid.* The Rural Education Division of the Department made a big effort to reward communities for improvements made to their schools through prizes and letters of recognition. It is interesting that my mother does not recall anything of the work of this division, headed by Loran DeWolfe. See Norman, *DeWolfe*, chap. 7, esp. 146-54.
 17. Johnston to Hallman, 1991.
 18. Scharf, *To Work and to Wed*, 69.
 19. John E. Lyons, "Ten Forgotten Years: The Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation and The Legacy of the Depression," in *Schools in the West: Essays in Canadian Educational History*, 114.
 20. *Ibid.*
 21. Judith Arbus, "Grateful to be Working: Women Teachers During the Great Depression," in *Feminism and Education: A Canadian Perspective*, ed. Frieda Forman, Mary O'Brien, Jane Haddad, Dianne Hallman, and Philinda Masters (Toronto: Centre for Women's Studies in Education, OISE, 1990), 182.
 22. *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Education for the year ending July 31, 1935* (Halifax: King's Printer, 1936), xxii; and *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Education for the year ending July 31, 1941* (Halifax: King's Printer, 1942), xxvii.
 23. *Annual Report for 1935*, xxii.

24. Poor sections were areas where there were few taxpayers to support a school, and which relied on government assistance. Teachers were paid the bare minimum. In 1935 grants to assisted schools totalled \$15,560 over and above regular grants, just over 1% of all expenditures. Out of 1,764 sections, 353 received assistance.
25. Johnston to Hallman, 1991. Throughout the Annual Reports for the period, Inspector T.A.M. Kirk reiterates this concern: "The frequent changing of teachers is not desirable and I have been impressing on trustees and teachers alike that it is unwise and inefficient to change when conditions are mutually satisfactory." *Annual Report for 1939*, 39.
26. Johnston to Hallman, 1991.
27. Arbus, "Grateful to be Working," 178, 180.
28. Johnston to Hallman, 1991.
29. *Annual Report for 1935*, xxii.
30. *Biennial Survey of Education, Elementary and Secondary, 1936-38*, compiled by the Dominion Bureau of Statistics (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1940), 58.
31. *Ibid.*, 52.
32. *Ibid.*, 58.
33. *Annual Report for 1941*, xxvii.
34. Arbus, "Grateful to be Working," 187.
35. Considerable work has been done comparing urban and rural teachers which addresses the gender politics of teacher placement and salary differentials. For a Canadian example, see Marta Danylewycz, Beth Light, and Alison Prentice, "The Evolution of the Sexual Division of Labour in Teaching: A Nineteenth-Century Ontario and Quebec Case Study," *Histoire sociale/Social History* XVI, 31 (May 1983): 81-109; for an American one, see David F. Labaree, "Career Ladders and the Early Public-High School Teacher: A Study of Inequality and Opportunity," in *American Teachers: Histories of a Profession At Work*, ed. Donald Warren (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989), 157-89.
36. Conrad, "Educational Development in Nova Scotia," 93.
37. Margaret Nelson makes the point that women in Vermont had considerable latitude in negotiating their work after marriage and childbirth, even in the thirties. See "Using Oral Histories," 9-13.
38. MacIntosh, "The Development of Teacher Education," *passim*.
39. Gerald F. Johnston, Yarmouth, Nova Scotia to Dianne M. Hallman, Oakville, Ontario, 26 Mar., 1991. Personal letter retained by Dianne M. Hallman.
40. Danylewycz, Light, and Prentice, "The Evolution of a Sexual Division of Labour," 91.
41. Patterson, "Voices from the Past," 109.
42. Wayne E. Fuller, "The Teacher in the Country School," in *American Teachers: Histories of a Profession at Work*, 105, 113.
43. Margaret K. Nelson, "The Threat of Sexual Harassment: Rural Vermont School Teachers, 1915-1950," *Educational Foundations* 2, 2 (Summer 1985).
44. Johnston to Hallman, 1991.
45. *Annual Report for 1935*, xxi.
46. Johnston to Hallman, 1991.
47. *Annual Report for 1941*, xi.
48. *Annual Report for 1935*, 87.
49. There were 55,486 urban students, compared to 60,952 rural. See the *Biennial Survey of Education, 1936-38*, 31.

50. "Report of the Director of Rural Science, 1913-14," *Journal of the House of Assembly* (1915): 101, quoted in Jane M. Norman, *DeWolfe*, 44.
51. See Conrad, "Educational Development in Nova Scotia," passim.
52. Johnston to Hallman, 1991.