

THE GIRL FROM VERMONT WAS SHE PART OF OUR RADICAL ROOTS? OR WERE OUR ROOTS REALLY RADICAL?

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Introduction

Margaret Marshall Saunders was a Canadian literary figure known primarily for her children's books. In 1910 she published *The Girl from Vermont – The Story of a Vacation School Teacher*. While she was writing the book she was also a leader in the establishment and operation of supervised playgrounds in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Using archival sources and present day reviews, this presentation will describe the investigation of the parallel, interwoven lives of Margaret Marshall Saunders as an author of books for children, and as a volunteer advocate for playgrounds in Halifax. Underlying the investigation of the work of Saunders is the continuing reference to and evaluation of the notion that the roots of recreation and leisure services were radical social reformers as described by Duncan's "Back to our Radical Roots" (1980) and used by Markham-Starr (1999 & 2000).

Background and Methods

Margaret Marshall Saunders was most noted for her children's books about animals. *Beautiful Joe*, the 1895 story about a dog that had been abused and then was rescued, is the most famous story. There were other stories about dogs, cats, sheep, birds, and occasionally about humans. In 1910 her novel about a playground leader, *The Girl From Vermont – The Story of a Vacation School Teacher*, was published through a publishing house long associated with her Baptist roots. During the decade before the publication of this book she was convener of the Halifax Council of Women's Supervised Playgrounds Committee and was associated with the National Council of Women's Vacation Schools and Supervised Playgrounds Committee. The project that led to this presentation investigated Miss Saunders' contribution to the development of these playgrounds against the backdrop of her writing *The Girl From Vermont*. The time period of the research was 1906 when the Halifax playgrounds were established to 1914 when Miss Saunders moved to Toronto.

Several theses and biographies have looked at the life of Miss Saunders (Binderup, 1992; Blakeley, 1971; Elson, 1930; Gerson, 1990; Langille, 1993; Pomeroy, 1955; Sanders, 1978; Waterston, 1992). However, very little attention was given in any of these investigations to the book *The Girl From Vermont*, or any investigation of possible links between Saunders' role in the Halifax Council of Women and the story that she portrays in the book. That gap in the literature led me to investigate Halifax newspapers and primary source materials from several archives (Acadia University, McMaster University, Queen's University, Nova Scotia Archives, National Archives) to determine what links, if any, there were between Saunders' community and literary pursuits.

The documented links of direct connections were few and far between. I had hoped to find a diary or journal that directly linked Margaret Marshall Saunders' committee work about playgrounds with her literary work on *The Girl From Vermont*. There was no such document! However, there were several documents in the Acadia University Archives that dealt with the book. The key document was a handwritten

manuscript of the book that includes three relevant inscriptions. Two were on the title page “The Girl From Vermont or Little White Slaves” and “written in Aug & Sept. 4 weeks 1906;” and one was on the back of a page in the synopsis “I dedicate this story to the school children of Picturesque Portland, Maine.” Halifax newspapers of the time also included several articles promoting supervised playgrounds and other services for children written by Miss Saunders in her advocacy role.

Discussion

One of the oft-cited descriptions of the roots of recreation is that of Mary Duncan in a chapter titled “Back to Our Radical Roots.” She began the chapter as follows:

The most dangerous woman in America, a civil rights-newspaper columnist, a man who started a playground at his own expense, a publicist who exposed filthy tenement conditions and advocates of socialism and leftist politics are frequently cited as being the founders or cornerstones of the park and recreation movement. (1980, p. 287)

She then went on to list the advocacy activities of Jane Addams, Frederick Law Olmsted, Joseph Lee, Jacob Riis and Luther Gulick and describe what they did. In her words:

In many ways these were the radical counterparts of Eldridge Cleaver, Jane Fonda, Caesar Chavez, Gloria Steinem and Ralph Nader. They continually fought city hall, organized labor strikes, marched in the streets, gave public speeches, and wrote award winning articles deploring the living conditions of the poor. The issues and problems they faced were well defined: slavery, the aftermath of the Civil War, thousands of new immigrants, slums, child labor, disease, the suffrage movement, World War I, and a rapidly industrializing nation. ...The work ethic and free enterprise system flourished, thus creating a paradox of strong economic growth at the expense of human suffering and exploitation. (p. 287)

Some of those issues are still with us today - you can find them on the streets of any of our communities and reported on our various media on any day of the week. Duncan summarized by saying that the founders of recreation and parks:

were not meek and mild, easily intimidated or swayed by local politicians. They worked in, around, and with the political system. The political battles they fought gave them the skills needed to establish the park, playground and recreation services we enjoy today. (p. 287)

But Duncan was describing the United States. Were Canadians radical? Today, over three decades after McFarland’s ground breaking investigation of the Development of Public Recreation in Canada (1970), it is time to look again the roots of recreation in Canada. McFarland concluded that:

Throughout the early literature expressing the ‘why’ of playgrounds there appears to be two streams of thought, those who saw the program as preventing social disorders such a delinquency and drunkenness and those who saw opportunities for wholesome recreation as an individual’s right. (1970, p. 38)

Neither of those thoughts were particularly radical ones. Were they accurate portrayals?

Miss Saunders’ links to social reformers in the United States were close. As a result, *The Girl from Vermont* was dedicated “to my esteemed fellow-workers in the

National Child Labor Committee, and the National Playground Association of America” (1910, p. 5). The prologue cited data from the Playgrounds Association of America regarding the number of playgrounds in the U.S. and various U.S. cities’ expenditures on playgrounds, and promoted using school yards for playgrounds. She also cited the costs to run a summer playground in comparison to the costs of supporting “a criminal, a pauper, or a diseased person” (p. 9). That latter statement sounds surprisingly similar to the rhetoric used in the recent Benefits Catalogue wherein we are exhorted to “Pay now or pay later” and told that “Recreation reduces health care, social service and police/justice costs” (1997, p.xv). The book included several photographs provided by the PAA and Saunders is reported to have moved beyond the rhetoric of the dedication and to have donated some of the royalties of the book to the Association (Sanders, 1978, p. 56).

The story line in *The Girl from Vermont* was about a young woman, Miss Patty Green, who arrived in Greenport from St. Peters, Vermont. She came to be a playground leader – in the words of the day, a “vacation school teacher.” Her job was described by one character as “teaching in a newfangled school – vacation school they call it, because it keeps the children off the street” (Saunders, 1910, p. 50). While there were some romantic subplots in the book, the essence of the rhetoric was about the work of the young woman to promote supervised playgrounds and to end child labour (white slavery) in a local cotton factory. The book gave some interesting insights into early twentieth century views of children, of poverty, of delinquency, of municipal governments’ responsibilities and of the role of women. On that latter note, the role of women as fundraisers for the playgrounds was described as follows:

Women are doing bravely, but they are not so strong as men. Delicate women...leave their beautiful homes and go all over the city to collect money for this playground, when the city ought to keep it up. If men would rise in their strength and say ‘The schoolboard must take care of the children all the time, and not half time,’ then women would have more time to devote to their homes, and indulge their natural inclination to lead quiet lives. (p. 35)

At the same time as *The Girl From Vermont* was being written and prepared for publication, Miss Saunders was engaged in playground advocacy in Halifax. As noted earlier, she was the convener of the Halifax Council of Women’s Supervised Playgrounds Committee. Among her advocacy work were efforts to convince the Halifax Board of School Commissioners to fund the playgrounds, just as she wrote in the book. She was also writing articles that Halifax newspapers published with titles such as “Systematic play is as necessary for the child’s intellect as systematic work” (March 28, 1906); and “Parks, gardens and streets are all for grown up people and no place for children to play” (April 18, 1906). One newspaper report with the headline “Vacation playground movement is meeting with success: Women’s Council now soliciting funds to make a practical demonstration of the idea – would make it part of the school system” (May 24, 1906) leads one to wonder if those were the women that Saunders was thinking of when she described fund raising women as “delicate women” who would rather “lead quiet lives” (1910, p. 35). The notation on the handwritten manuscript leads us to believe that she wrote *The Girl From Vermont* a mere three months after helping to solicit funds for the Halifax playgrounds. How close were her literary ideas to her advocacy ideas? Do

those ideas belie any thoughts about our roots being radical? That will be the content of the Congress' illustrated presentation.

Actual or Potential Applications

While the study of the historical roots of our field may be considered by some to be esoteric, irrelevant and impractical, I would assert that understanding those roots is essential to appreciating and working in all four of the conference sub-themes:

- Where were the early leisure settings? And perhaps more importantly, why were certain leisure settings established?
- What leisure experiences were promoted? Why? By Whom?
- Who were the potential and actual users? And why were they targeted? By whom?
- How was the service delivered? And why were particular sectors involved or not involved?

Most generally accepted definitions of “professions” include the notion that an understanding of the history of the field is essential to those who want to call themselves professionals and to be part of a profession. This is certainly applicable to both recreation and leisure practitioners and scholars. The study of our history is essential to understanding the current state of recreation and leisure services. Our scholars and practitioners need an appreciation of the base from which we have proceeded so that we can appreciate why we have taken the directions that we have.

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