

Pressure Groups and Canadian Recreation Services in the 1930's*
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Background

One of the major initiatives of the federal government in Canada is the promotion of "well-being," including "wellness," and "active living." This paper reports on an investigation of how the services which contribute to that well-being developed in the 1930's. During that decade, surrounded by economic, political and social turmoil, the federal government was being urged to promote and support activities which we in the 1990's would consider to be ones that contribute to the well-being of Canadians.

The larger study from which this paper is drawn addressed the efforts and impact of influential individuals and groups as advocates for national recreation services in Canada in the 1930's. Preoccupied through the decade with economic depression, unemployment, and social and political unrest, the Canadian federal government did not put leisure, recreation and sport matters into its top priorities in the 1930's. However, there were several groups of social reformers and practitioners who were promoting that recreation be given both financial and moral support. The description of "recreation" used by these groups of advocates focused on play or recreation in the "out of doors" or sport or physical activity.

Not all the efforts of these prominent groups and individual were directed at the federal government, but the main emphasis in this investigation was on their work at that level. The most visible support for national recreation services involved the unsuccessful bid to establish a National Ministry of Sports (including recreation) in 1937 and the successful work to include recreation as part of the Youth Training Programs of the Department of Labour in the late 1930's. However, these visible endeavours in recreation were preceded by almost a decade of work which is the subject of this paper.

Past Research

Past research by Blackstock (1965), Bray (1957), MacDiarmid (1970), McFarland (1970), Galasso (1972), Gear (1973), West (1973), Sawula (1973, 1974 & 1977), Morrow (1977), Lappage (1978), Broom and Baka (1979), Schrodtt (1979 & 1984) and Gurney (1982) attribute the federal government's involvement in physical activity and sport to the work of a few individuals and groups such as Ian Eisenhardt and the British Columbia Pro-Rec Movement, and A.S. Lamb and the Canadian Physical Education Association, the Strathcona Trust, with a passing reference to the 1937 efforts by Hugh Plaxton, M.P. to introduce into the House of Commons a bill which would establish a Ministry of Sports. There has also been brief mention of the unsuccessful external efforts of the Health Committee of the League of Nations to promote the development of national committees for physical training.

New Findings

This investigation has found archival material indicating the existence of several other very active advocacy groups. These groups include the National Council of Women of Canada, the Canadian National Parks Association, the Canadian Council on Child Welfare, the U.S. based Playgrounds and Recreation Association of America, the Y.M.C.A., and the proponents and opponents of the military Cadet Services. Individuals who played high profile roles in support of these advocacy efforts included Selby Walker of the Canadian National Parks Association, Charlotte Whitton of the Council on Child Welfare, Major Bowie of the Montreal Parks and Playgrounds

Association, and Joseph McCulley of the Y.M.C.A.

The National Council of Women, an umbrella organization for a wide variety of groups advocating social reform, pursued goals that included recreation, conservation, health and planning. The N.C.W.'s involvement in national recreation issues began in 1901 when it became a national advocate promoting vacation schools and supervised playgrounds. By the 1930's the N.C.W.'s role was primarily one of liaison between groups who were actively engaged in advocacy or service delivery and the Council's provincial and local member organizations. Thus, the N.C.W. had appointed liaisons with the Canadian Council on Child Welfare and the Canadian National Parks Association. When matters arose in these organizations that the N.C.W. executive deemed to warrant further promotion, the Council wrote letters of support and reported on this at the next annual meeting. As an advocacy group in the 1930's, the Council promoted the causes with information to its local members, but put very little pressure upon decision makers at the federal level. One might say that they gently were in favour of recreation for wellbeing.

The Canadian National Parks Association which began in 1923 as an advocacy group with strong ties to the Alpine Club of Canada, promoted recreation in the out of doors. Although its original mandate was to protect a national park in the Rocky Mountains against development and resource extraction, it changed that mandate to promote recreation in the out of doors when that first issue was resolved (Bella and Markham, 1984). Through its executive, individual members and member organizations such as the National Council of Women, the Association worked throughout the 1930's to promote government involvement in recreation citing the various benefits to individual and community health and using as a proposed model the German "out into the open" movement. In the late 1930's the mandate changed again to promote recreational travel with issues of parks, highways and the preservation of scenery. The Association's Executive Secretary, Selby Walker was a realtor by trade but a committed environmentalist in his volunteer activities. He ran the organization from his home and office, published a newsletter/bulletin service, wrote countless letters to supporters and opponents of the Association, and lobbied appropriate government departments. While the efforts of the Association were wide ranging, the impact upon the key decision makers of the time appears to have been slight. However, this does not take into account the role that this organization may have played in raising the consciousness of decision makers and educating the many recipients of the newsletters and bulletins about the issues of the day. The vision of recreation promoted by the C.N.P.A. was one of wellness with some efforts to provide work through recreation.

The Canadian Council on Child Welfare through its Recreation Division was involved in promoting recreation services throughout Canada. The Council attempted to promote the development of a national organization for recreation in Canada, communicated with those who were working in recreation in Canada from the United States, and attempted to promote the development of local level recreation services in Canada.

The Council's efforts to promote recreation matters began in the 1920's through its Education and Recreation Section. The Section's 1923 progress report describes a survey of playgrounds. More action came two years later in the Section's 1925 progress report which relates its belief in the right to play, its beliefs that play leads to physical, mental, moral and social fitness (what we in 1994 call wellbeing) and contains 25 recommendations including one promoting the establishment of an organization similar the Playground and Recreation Association of America. This was the first documentation of what would be a ten year quest to position the Council in a leadership role concerning national recreation services in Canada.

The plans to develop a national organization began to be implemented in 1929 by the

Council's Executive Director, Charlotte Whitton, whom many Canadians will know from her familiar role as mayor of Ottawa. Her contact with the New York based Playground and Recreation Association of America (P.R.A.A.) began early in 1929 as she attempted to organize a meeting between herself, William Bowie who was the head of the Council's Recreation Division and the P.R.A.A.'s field worker for the north-eastern U.S., Mr. A.R. Wellington. Her goal was not only to develop a national organization, but also to hire staff. The correspondence includes several references to hiring "an excellent young chap" and "a good young chap, with energy and promise" - not a young woman, but a young man. The meeting to get assistance in forming a national organization does not seem to have taken place due to the inability of all parties to coordinate their schedules (another 1990's problem), as well the efforts to hire a staff person did not occur immediately.

Miss Whitton's bid to meet with the P.R.A.A. (later the National Recreation Association) appears to have been carried out in isolation from many of the recreation workers in Canada. While she was trying to arrange a meeting with P.R.A.A. staff, Canadian recreation personnel were already members of that organization, were honorary members and honorary directors, and soon worked successfully to organize the first N.R.A. congress held outside the United States. That Congress was held in October 1931, and as late as April of that year, Miss Whitton was unaware that this event was going to occur.

The U.S. organization continued to act, although definitely in an arms-length relationship, as the organization which provided services to Canadian cities. The N.R.A.'s annual review of statistics contained material from Canadian cities, and as noted previously there were Canadian members, honorary members and honorary directors. Canadian cities received publications from the Association; and at least one Canadian city, Hamilton, used one of their field service workers to study and make recommendations on recreation. However, the relationship wherein the N.R.A. provided information to and about Canadian cities was viewed by the Council as an irritating and frustrating situation, as noted by Charlotte Whitton when she wants to find ways and means to finance a national organization and not "be left to exist on the incidental services of the United States organization."

Notwithstanding the setbacks in the efforts to establish a national organization for recreation, the Council continued in its work to raise the profile of recreation in Canada. By now, of course, Canada was in the grips of the Depression, with the unemployed, particularly unemployed men, being viewed as a major social problem in many communities. In 1932, the Recreation Division's chairman, William Bowie of Montreal, took on the twofold mission of making a trip funded by the Council to various Western Canadian cities. Bowie was to investigate the role that the Council could play in coordinating recreation services in Canada, and also to speak to interested groups about providing recreation services for the unemployed. The Council's offer of Bowie's services was met with mixed reactions. He was certainly not welcomed with open arms by local officials, many of whom felt that they did not have a problem, or if they did they could solve it and he could not tell them anything new, or if there was anything new, they could not afford the solution. The final report from Bowie's trip points up some interesting contrasts between those cities which did not think that the issue was relevant when they were originally contacted and the events and discussion at the actual meeting.

The Council's promotion of recreation moved into a higher gear in 1933 coincident with the desperate unemployment situation that led the federal government to take measures such as relief camps for unemployed men. While there was still no national organization for recreation, the Council held its first Round Table Conference on Leisure, inviting 16 key individuals and

representatives of organizations to a one day meeting in Ottawa to discuss the challenge of leisure. As plans for the Round Table were being finalized, the Council, in partnership with the National Council on Education, hired a staff person, Eric Muncaster, to initiate contacts with national and provincial organizations and to provide assistance to local groups through a series of bulletins which he wrote. The distribution network for these bulletins included at least 600 names.

Among the Council's efforts to promote recreation services was an investigation of the recreation programs and facilities in the federal Relief Camps for unemployed men. Described by some as "slave camps" with an underlying motive to make men fit for war, should it ever come (Burton, p. 179), the relief camps were woefully lacking in recreation opportunities. The Council's efforts then focused on finding local groups such as the Kiwanis Club to supply playing cards, games and books to the Department of National defence run relief camps. In this fashion, the Council continued to promote, but not provide, recreation services.

Thus, although there was no separate national recreation organization, the Council's Recreation Division acted as one. All this changed again though when neither the Council nor the National Council on Education could fund Muncaster's employment after March 31, 1934. While there is no "proof" of the effectiveness of the Council's work in recreation, in July 1934 William Bowie proclaimed that "there is no doubt that the work that has been done . . . has had a telling effect on community consciousness. Supervised play has almost become a slogan in certain cities across the country." In the heart of the depression, with exceedingly limited funding the Council's organized, concerted involvement in national recreation began to decline. The Recreation Division, engaged in occasional correspondence with other groups, such as the Y.M.C.A., the Kiwanis, B.C. Pro-Rec and groups focusing on Adult Education, but did little to actively promote recreation. The Council's initiatives appear to have been eclipsed by those emanating from the national Y.M.C.A. and Ian Eisenhardt and the B.C. Pro-Rec organization. The Council's impact on national recreation services which had focused on the broad theme of wellbeing may well have increased the local and national consciousness of the problems, but did little to create new national recreation services.

As the Council on Child Welfare's efforts were declining, the Pro-Rec efforts were increasing with strong political and financial support within British Columbia. Eisenhardt was one of the many entries on the mailing lists from the Recreation Division of Council on Child Welfare, but he was not known to Charlotte Whitton who did not seem to know who he was and who misspelled his name and referred to him as "Mr. Eisendratt, or some similar name" in September 1933. However, by late 1934, the Council was very interested in Pro-Rec and was soliciting information from him after Eisenhardt's work was noted in an editorial in the Montreal Gazette. Soon after this, part of the text of one of Eisenhardt's radio broadcasts was used in a Council publication. The leadership role appears to have shifted - from the Council to Eisenhardt.

The Young Men's Christian Association's mission during the 1930's was to provide social, educational and recreational opportunities for young men. As was the case with other organizations, the social issue of dealing with the unemployed became critical to the Y.M.C.A. early in the 1930's. The Calgary Leisure Time League became a model of the provision of the Y.M.C.A.'s services to unemployed young men. While it does not appear to have been a serious dispute between organizations, there is evidence in the files of the Canadian Council on Child Welfare to suggest that there was the potential for a clash between the Council's programs and those of the Y.M.C.A. Any potential clash was not viewed seriously by the Council which viewed the Y.M.C.A. as restricted to Protestant groups and, of course, to men and boys. Apparently the Y.M.C.A. wanted to cooperate and shared a similar philosophy to the Council that "the problem is much too large for voluntary organizations to handle adequately and that a thorough-going policy on the part of Government is

essential."

The Y.M.C.A. joined the ranks of those critical of and interested in improving relief camps in 1935 when it called upon the Department of National Defence to hire a man (preferably with Y.M.C.A. experience) to arrange for religious, mental and social activities in the camps. While always a key player in the delivery of local recreation services, in 1936 the Y.M.C.A. attempted to have an impact on the policies and programs recommended by the National Employment Commission, citing the organization's "technical knowledge and practical experience." While the proposals from the Y.M.C.A. which offered to cooperate in program delivery, to provide assistance and expertise, and to share the Y.M.'s experience in programs such as the Calgary Leisure Time League were politely received, the N.E.C. records indicate that the proposals were noted by the N.E.C. with no further action. However, the Y.M. did have one influential individual who, I'm sure, quietly promoted the Y.'s ideas. Joseph McCulley, who was chairman of the Y.M.C.A.'s Young Men's Committee, was a member of the Youth Employment Committee of the N.E.C. His work and that of the Committee were believed to have had an impact on the development of the policy and plan of the Youth Employment Committee. The strength of the Y.M.C.A. was in its delivery of local services. At the national level it appears that it was not a high profile, key player, but may have done so behind the scenes in its promotion of recreation for wellbeing and recreation for Christian young men.

The role of physical training and physical activity was also debated in discussions of the Cadet Service within Canada's military services. The records of the House of Commons budget debates in 1934, 1936 and 1937 offer prime examples of the rhetoric about physical activity helping to make men fit for work and for war. As the federal financial support for cadet service declined each year, sparks flew between the hawks and the doves. The hawks always carried the day in the vote to approve the funds, but the doves, often led by members of the newly formed Cooperative Commonwealth federation (C.C.F.) raised key issues about whether the cadet corps was providing adequate physical training to the boys in it. Although the budget was always passed, there is evidence that questions were being raised about the adequacy of the physical training not only by members of parliament, but also by educators.

The primary contribution of Hugh J. Plaxton, M.P. was to bring forth to the House of Commons on January 20, 1937 the motion that "in the opinion of this house, in the interest of public health there should be established a ministry of sports." The wide ranging debate which followed provides splendid examples of rhetoric in which recreation through physical activity could improve health, build character and develop a hardy race.

In the end, the motion was withdrawn. Plaxton was not heard from on this matter again and the matter as such was not discussed again in the House of Commons; but, yet again, the cadet services issue and physical training was debated four weeks later. This time with no input from Mr. Plaxton. Although Ian Eisenhardt in B.C. was interested in Plaxton's ideas and wanted to use him to "help . . . in putting over the idea of keeping young Canadians fit," there is no record of Plaxton responding to Eisenhardt's overtures. Thus, Plaxton's contribution, which had the potential to be quite impressive, warrants but a small chapter in the review of the advocates.

In Conclusion

The contribution of this paper to our understanding of history is through the investigation and publicizing of the role of several advocacy groups and individuals whose efforts have not been previously recognized as contributing to the development of leisure, recreation and sport in Canada; advocates who delivered rhetoric and action; advocates who raised consciousness.

This study's findings that it can assist proponents of recreation, well-being and active living to understand the historical context of the current policies and the role of advocates including both social reformers and professionals in the development of these concepts as well as the policies to implement them. This paper adds some more pieces to the jigsaw puzzle that is our history.

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