

Leisure and The National Council Of Women Of Canada
Manuscript for paper presented at the International Conference on Women and Leisure,
May 1995 by Susan Markham

Introduction

This paper reviews the role in leisure of the National Council of Women of Canada and of one of its leaders, Mabel Peters of St. John, New Brunswick during the first two decades of the twentieth century. The National Council of Women and Mabel Peters are among the "invisible pioneers" in the provision and promotion of leisure services. I hope that this presentation will be a lead-in to the workshop on "Women - The Invisible Pioneers in Recreation and Leisure," presented at a session later today, with further discussion at that workshop.

The National Council of Women of Canada

The National Council of Women of Canada, established in 1893, is an umbrella organization for a collection of groups advocating social reform. Among the wide variety of goals that the NCW has pursued have been goals related to recreation, conservation, health, civic beautification and town planning - all issues that are associated with various aspects of leisure. The NCW's involvement in national leisure issues began in 1901 when the Council became a national advocate promoting vacation schools and supervised playgrounds.

A few words about the structure of the Council of Women:

- local
- provincial
- national
- international

The motion that led the National Council of Women into its lengthy commitment to recreation was the following one;

whereas the agitation for vacation Schools and Playgrounds where children may find organized recreation having become so wide-spread that it is now known as the Playground Movement, and whereas the establishment of such Vacation Schools and Playgrounds is acknowledged by educators and philanthropists to be desired in every community, and whereas the necessity for such schools and playgrounds to improve the condition of children in the cities of Canada is obvious, therefore be it resolved that this National Council of Women of Canada declare themselves in favour of the establishment of Vacation Schools and Playgrounds, and pledge themselves to do all in their power to promote their organization.¹

The paper read after the motion gave a summary of the history of playgrounds including the vacation schools established in 1885 in Boston, and the experiences in New York and Philadelphia in the United States, and London and Manchester in England. The educational theories of Froebel and Plato were also brought out as ammunition to the assembled group.

But what was the underlying motive for the establishment of these playgrounds - the social reform impulse. In the words of the Mabel Peters

This National Council of Canada cannot bring into the lives of Canadian children a greater boon than by organizing vacation schools and public playgrounds. All

1. National Council of Women of Canada, Yearbook, 1901, p. 152.

methods of reform that do not begin with childhood, strike only at leaves and branches of evil, and fail to touch the root. Train the child correctly and the adult will not need reformation.²

In the eyes of the National Council of Women, being an advocate for playgrounds, did not necessarily mean being the operator of such playgrounds. They preferred to be an advocate for playgrounds, a catalyst for their establishment and an arms-length supporter of them. Playground provision was handled at the level of the Local Councils of Women where the model of development that Councils typically 'pursued' was as follows:³ [with examples from Halifax]

- Establishment of a Local Council of Women Playgrounds Committee
 - Halifax 1906 - five years after the NCW resolution
 - mention Margaret Marshall Saunders -children's books Beautiful Joe and Girl from Vermont (an account of the experiences of an early playground leader)
- Establishment of one or more summer playgrounds focusing on games, arts and crafts often with hired staff - not Council of Women members
 - Halifax 1906
 - funded through grants and fund raising
 - eg Halifax Newspapers
 - Mrs. Dennis of LCW, Mr. Dennis was newspaper publisher.
- School Boards were very often involved at this stage, as they had land and buildings. The resolution at that 1901 National Council meeting had recognized the necessity of making this partnership with the following motion:

That application be made by Local Councils to the different School Boards to allow the existing school grounds to be used for recreation, under proper supervision, during vacation months.⁴
- Movement toward a local Playground Association
 - more broadly based than the Local Council of Women with citizens and representatives of groups who could assist - eg School Board, City or Town Council
- Establishment of Playgrounds Commission as part of Civic Government
 - Halifax 1914
 - with broad membership, but a commission of civic government (LCW, School Board, City Council)
- Incorporation of this function into a Civic Department (1910s to 1960s)
 - Halifax 1969

The staff that a Local Council or its successors very often hired were from local school teachers - often women. Veronica Strong-Boag in her doctoral dissertation about the National Council of Women, The Parliament of Women, puts this into a national feminist perspective when she noted that:

The National Council was instrumental in establishing influential social institutions in the vacation school and the public playground. Both entailed further feminine supervision of the nation's development and represented new

2. National Council of Women of Canada, Yearbook, 1901, p. 155.

3. E.M. McFarland, The Development of Public Recreation in Canada (Ottawa: Canadian Parks/Recreation Association, 1970) p. 38.

4. National Council of Women of Canada, Yearbook, 1901, p. 155.

forums for the propagandizing of middle class values. They also provided new opportunities for paid feminine employment.⁵

But, paid employment often requires training, and it was to this end that, in 1912, the National Council advocated that the provincial Normal School departments develop courses to train playground teachers and supervisors. Thus, in Strong-Boag's terms "the professional status of jobs selected for feminine penetration would therefore be affirmed."⁶ Alas, the requested training was very slow in coming, although there are examples that the Normal School in Nova Scotia was providing its trainee teachers with information about recreation and leisure in the late 1920's in hopes that they would, in the words of the time, "help to spread the gospel of 'a wise use of leisure'".⁷

From the early years of hiring female teachers to be playground leaders, the playgrounds moved to more inclusive hiring. However, McFarland concludes that:

With the advent of male supervisors a much greater emphasis on physical activities and competitions became apparent and the concept of the arts as unmanly grew to plague later attempts to establish broad recreation programs.⁸

The National Council's Playgrounds Committee's triumphs were recorded annually as cities and towns established playgrounds with the assistance of the local Councils of Women, moved onward to establish broadly based Playground Associations and then saw the playgrounds become a responsibility of the civic government. Women were involved as organizers of leisure. Women were involved as providers of leisure.

In 1970 the National Council of Women of Canada was awarded the Canadian Parks/Recreation Association's Citation for Outstanding Achievement.⁹ The sad note about the award is that the Council did not seem aware of its substantial contribution to the development of recreation and leisure services in Canada until they received the award. The most recent history of the NCW, written to commemorate its 100th anniversary, makes very little mention of the vacation schools and supervised playgrounds and no mention of Mabel Peters.¹⁰

Mabel Peters

The forthcoming Dictionary of Canadian Biography¹¹ entry for Mabel Peters will read as

5. V. Strong-Boag, The Parliament of Women: The National Council of Women of Canada 1893-1929 (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1974) p. 270.

6. Strong-Boag, p. 270.

7. National Archives of Canada, MG28 I10, Vol. 8, File 41, 16 March 1929.

8. McFarland, p. 39.

9. E.M. McFarland, "Editorial - Recreation Pioneers Honored at Conference," Recreation Canada 28 (October 1970): 5.

10. N.E.S. Griffiths, The Splendid Vision - Centennial History of the National Council of Women of Canada: 1893-1993 Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1993.

The matters related to recreation and leisure that are noted include mention of the Vacation Schools and Playgrounds Committee as a standing committee in 1903 (p. 92); reference to V. Strong-Boag's reference to "13 local councils had active committees organizing playgrounds" by 1913 (p. 103); the issue of "Education and Recreation" being part of the 1917 "Women's Platform" (pp. 139, 142); the inclusion of committees on Supervised Playgrounds and on Recreation and Social Centres in 1919 (p. 158); and the note that women were the driving force behind a number of initiatives including "the creation and maintenance of playing grounds and parks" by 1930 (p. 159)

11. Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Vol. 14, s.v. "Peters, Mabel Phoebe," by S.E. Markham.

follows:

Peters, Mabel Phoebe, hotel proprietor and social reformer; born 12 June 1861, Saint John, N.B., daughter of Alexander Nevers Peters and Martha Hamm Lewis Peters;¹² died 30 August 1914 in Boston, Mass.;¹³ buried 4 September 1914 in Saint John, N.B.¹⁴

Mabel Peters, best known as a zealous campaigner at the local, national and international scene for supervised playgrounds for children, may be called the "Mother of the Canadian Playground Movement." Her family were loyalists from New York who contributed substantially to the business and political life of New Brunswick.¹⁵ Her education and early years are scantily documented and much of her early adult life appears to have been spent helping operate her father's hotel in Saint John, N.B.¹⁶

While the thread between helping run a hotel and being a zealous advocate of various social causes may seem slim, her family background provides a glimpse of a strong willed reformer. Her mother, Martha Hamm Lewis Peters, was the first woman to be admitted to and complete teacher training at the New Brunswick Normal School, although it required an order in council by the Executive Council of the province to permit her admission.¹⁷ She taught for six years until marrying Alexander Nevers, a Saint John newspaper manager turned retail grocer who later became a hotel proprietor.¹⁸ From such educated, entrepreneurial, middle class roots came many social reformers such as Miss Peters.¹⁹

Following their mother's death in 1892, Mabel and her older sister Evelyn, the two sisters remaining in Saint John, took over proprietorship of the hotel from their aging father.²⁰ After his

12. Public Archives of New Brunswick, RS 184, New Brunswick Museum Records, Peters Family Tree, microfilm F11089.

13. Massachusetts, State Department of Public Health, Registry of Vital records and Statistics, Return of a Death-1914, City of Boston, p. 595.

14. Public Archives of New Brunswick, RS315A23, Saint John Board of Health, Burial Permits, 4 September 1914.

15. Public Archives of New Brunswick, RS 184, New Brunswick Museum Records, "The William Peters Family," microfilm F11089; and

Dictionary of Canadian Biography, s.v. "Lewis, Martha Hamm (Peters)," by Elizabeth W. McGahan.

16. Nominal Census of Canada, 1881, New Brunswick, Saint John City, Queens Ward, Division 2, pp. 69-70;

Nominal Census of Canada, 1891, New Brunswick, Saint John City, Queens Ward, Division 1, p. 38;

Nominal Census of Canada, 1901, New Brunswick, Saint John City, Queens Ward, Sub-division 1, p. 29.

17. Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Vol. 12, s.v. "Lewis, Martha Hamm (Peters)," by E.W. McGahan.

18. McGahan and PANB, RS 184, "The William Peters Family."

19. P. Rutherford, Saving the Canadian City: The First Phase 1880-1920, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), pp. ix-xxiii.

20. Saint John Daily Telegraph, 21 November 1892, p. 8; and Saint John Globe, 1 April 1901, p. 1.

death in 1901 they managed the hotel for two more years.²¹ One older sister, Mrs Clara Arthurs, herself a teacher before marrying,²² was a leader in the development of playgrounds in Detroit, Michigan.²³ The youngest sister, Sarah, moved to Detroit after their mother's death.²⁴ While the four sisters lived far apart there were frequent visits by all of them to and from Detroit, Saint John and Westfield, New Brunswick, the location of the family's summer home.²⁵ This travel provided Mabel Peters with the opportunity to receive ideas from elsewhere, ideas which she subsequently used in her pursuit of social reforms.

Mabel Peters' influence at the national level began in 1901 when she prepared the paper promoting vacation schools and playgrounds which was read at the previously noted annual meeting of the National Council of Women of Canada. The paper was read by her sister, Mrs Arthurs, who also moved the resolution that ". . . the National Council of Women of Canada declare themselves in favour of the establishment of Vacation Schools and Playgrounds and pledge themselves to do all in their power to promote their organization."²⁶ Although Mrs Arthurs resided in Detroit, she made frequent visits to Saint John, hosted Mabel and her sisters in Detroit, and provided Miss Peters with much information about the Detroit playgrounds.²⁷ Thus, while Mabel Peters was the visible, vocal advocate for playgrounds, her sister provided backup information and support.

Mabel Peters' social reform work was not limited to the causes of children and playgrounds. She sat on the Board of Governors of the Home for Aged Women and was a member of the S.P.C.A. as well as being a key member of the Saint John Women's Enfranchisement Association²⁸ - all suitable occupations for a spinster with adequate financial resources. But, her most visible work during the first fourteen years of the twentieth century until her illness and death in 1914 focused on playgrounds and suffrage - two crusades in which she worked with other advocates at the local, national and international levels.

The playground work which she initiated at the National Council of Women's meeting in 1901 gained momentum at the Council's national meeting in 1902 where the Council formed the Standing Committee on Supervised Playgrounds and Vacation Schools and subsequently made her its Convenor.²⁹ Playgrounds were seen by Miss Peters and her colleagues as a way to "overcome the evils of enforced idleness," by providing children with opportunities of "rational

21. McAlpine's Saint John Directory, 1901 to 1904.

22. Saint John Board of School Trustees, Report of the Board of School Trustees of Saint John, 1878 to 1883 [Saint John Regional Library, RA 372.971532].

23. National Council of Women of Canada, Yearbook, 1902, p. 184.

24. Census of Canada, 1891, New Brunswick, Saint John City, Queens Ward, Division 1, p. 38; Census of Canada, 1901, New Brunswick, Saint John City, Queens Ward, Sub-division 1, p. 29; and Saint John Daily Telegraph, 1 September 1914, p. 7.

25. Saint John Daily Telegraph, 1 September 1914, p. 7.

26. National Council of Women of Canada, Yearbook, 1901, p. 152.

27. National Council of Women of Canada, Yearbook, 1902, p. 184;

National Council of Women of Canada, Yearbook, 1903, p. 69;

National Council of Women of Canada, Yearbook, 1905, p. p. 100; and Saint John Daily Telegraph, 6 June 1906, p. 6.

28. M.E. Clarke, "The Saint John Women's Enfranchisement Association, 1914-1919" (Masters Thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1979), p. 96).

29. National Council of Women of Canada, Yearbook, 1902, p. 184.

activity and healthy play."³⁰ These thoughts were classic examples of the social reformers' agenda of uplifting pursuits. For the next twelve years she continued in that position, reporting annually to the Council of the triumphs and setbacks in the campaign to educate public opinion about playgrounds and to enlist the support of civic authorities to establish and operate playgrounds.³¹ As noted earlier, the role which the Council of Women saw for itself was not that of operating playgrounds; rather, being an advocate for playgrounds, a catalyst for their establishment and an arms-length supporter of them.³² The Committee's triumphs were recorded annually as cities and towns established playgrounds and with the assistance of the local Councils of Women, moved onward to establish broadly based Playground Associations and then saw the playgrounds become a responsibility of the civic government.³³

While the triumphs across the country were many, on the home front in Saint John there were several setbacks as this city was slow to warm to the idea of the need for supervised playgrounds for children.³⁴ It was not until 1906 that the first playground was established in Saint John, with Mabel Peters leading the way as Convenor of Playgrounds for the local Council of Women.³⁵ Hers was not a hands-off approach to running the Saint John playground as exemplified by the activities on opening day in 1906. She was at the playground site early, pressing people into service, and having her sisters bring flowers into the city from their summer home.³⁶ Six weeks later, she presided over the closing ceremony and had Mrs Arthurs join her as part of the platform party.³⁷ For two months prior to the playground's opening she had supplied one of the local newspapers with articles extolling the benefits of playgrounds including examples from Detroit and other major cities; and had worked in fund raising and gathering contributions of goods from local merchants.³⁸ She continued to work toward making Saint John's playgrounds a civic responsibility for several years, but she was not always patient in her approach. For example, in 1908, when the city fathers waffled over funding playgrounds, she threatened to withdraw her involvement, stating that "if the City of St. John did not think it worthwhile to support this undertaking at the end of this, the third year, she, personally, would refuse to devote her energies to the furtherance of a work which it was the duty of the city to carry on, . . ."³⁹ Even though they did not contribute funding, she continued her work. By 1912 she had advanced the playgrounds movement in Saint John to the next stage of development where a broadly based Playgrounds Association was formed, with herself, Mabel Peters as its first President and with three playgrounds operating.⁴⁰

She travelled widely through Canada and the United States, speaking both to those

30. National Council of Women of Canada, Yearbook, 1901, pp. 152, 154.

31. National Council of Women of Canada, Yearbook, 1901 to Yearbook, 1914.

32. National Council of Women of Canada, Yearbook, 1911, p. 55.

33. National Council of Women of Canada, Yearbook, 1901 to Yearbook, 1914.

34. National Council of Women of Canada, Yearbook, 1906, p. 96.

35. National Council of Women of Canada, Yearbook, 1906, p. ix.

36. Saint John Daily Telegraph, 4 July 1906, p. 7.

37. Saint John Daily Telegraph, 18 August 1906, p. 5.

38. Saint John Daily Telegraph, 31 May 1906, p. 5; 6 June 1906, p. 6; 8 June 1906, p. 6; 21 June 1906, p. 11; 26 June 1906, p. 9.

39. Saint John Daily Telegraph, 26 June 1908, p. 2.

40. St. John Playgrounds Association, First Annual Report, (Saint John, N.B.; St. John Playgrounds Association, 1913).

committed to the playground movement and those not yet committed. After she and her sister sold the family hotel, it was reported that they spent the summers at the family home at Westfield and their winters in Detroit and "sunny clime(s)" such as California and Florida.⁴¹ She did venture away from those sunny climes for many visits and speeches. In one year alone (1912-13) she visited Ottawa, Toronto, Hamilton, London, Walkerville and Moncton; she was invited to Truro; and she attended the National Council of Women annual meeting.⁴² Her travels in the United States including visits to Washington, DC and New York brought her in contact with Jane Addams, a key social activist in Chicago,⁴³ and put her in contact with the members of the Playgrounds Association of America of which she was an early member and member of the National Council in 1907 and 1908.⁴⁴ In 1908 she was made one of the Honorary Vice-Presidents of that association's congress in New York City.⁴⁵

One of her ambitions was to form a Canadian association similar in mandate to the Playgrounds Association of America, but focusing on the Canadian situation.⁴⁶ In 1913 she reported to the National Council of Women that there was strong support for the proposed National Canadian Playgrounds Association.⁴⁷ However, even though there was strong support, when she died, the idea also died.⁴⁸

Her legacy of playgrounds for children lives on in every Canadian city, even though her name has not been associated with any of them. In 1920 the National Council of Women called upon all cities with two or more playgrounds to name one of them "The Mabel Peters Playground" in commemoration of her work.⁴⁹ No city has done that.⁵⁰

Mabel Peters carried out work promoting women's suffrage at the same time as she championed children's playgrounds. With comparable zeal she contributed to the work of the Saint John Women's Enfranchisement Association in many ways. She travelled, gathered information for local groups, and spoke at conferences such as the Washington National Suffrage Conference in 1902.⁵¹ She joined other women and men in delegations to attempt to get politicians to vote in favour of suffrage. Most often these delegations encountered responses such as that of the New Brunswick Premier in 1908 that "women might better cling to the lines of activity for which they were better suited than be `burdened with the public work of the country."⁵²

41. Saint John Daily Telegraph, 1 September 1914, p. 7.

42. National Council of Women of Canada, Yearbook, 1913, pp. 45-46.

43. Clarke, p. 96.

44. National Council of Women of Canada, Yearbook, 1908, p. 39; and The Playground, no.3 (1907), p. 11.

45. The Playground, no. 18 (1908), p. 39.

46. Saint John Playgrounds Association, First Annual Report, (Saint John, N.B.; St. John Playgrounds Association, 1913), pp. 2, 6.

47. National Council of Women of Canada, Yearbook, 1913, pp. 44-45.

48. There is no mention of the idea in any sources after 1914.

49. National Council of Women of Canada, Yearbook, 1920.

50. Interview with David Goss, Saint John Recreation Department, 19 October 1988, regarding his investigations concerning "Mabel Peters Playgrounds."

51. Clarke, p. 96.

52. Saint John Daily Telegraph, 14 May 1908, quoted in C.L. Cleverdon, The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950), p. 186.

Her travels where she gathered information about playgrounds, also included work on behalf of women's suffrage. At the Quinquennial Women's Congress in 1909 she met James L. Hughes, a Canadian suffragist, and Anna Howard Shaw, who is described as a suffrage orator.⁵³ As part of her mission, she sent back to Saint John correspondence and literature which apparently was "eagerly devoured by the members."⁵⁴

She was not averse to using both positive reinforcement and sharp criticism as she promoted worthy causes. For example, in 1908, as she was leading the local Council of Women's promotion of playgrounds, she wrote to the Saint John Evening Times, criticizing some women's organizations for their conservative stance regarding giving women the vote, noting that "women's advancement has no greater stumbling block as . . . conservative women's clubs."⁵⁵ Undoubtedly, some of the conservative women's clubs that she was criticizing were members of the Saint John Council of Women.

Success came slowly to the Saint John women's suffrage advocates. After many years of labour, married women were granted the right to vote in municipal elections in Saint John in 1915 - the year after Mabel Peters died.⁵⁶

Often described as innovative, vocal, vigorous, energetic, powerful, and a worker with unceasing efforts, Mabel Peters became seriously ill in 1913.⁵⁷ She died a year later of breast cancer.⁵⁸

Conclusion

The enduring National Council of Women and its tireless advocate for playgrounds, Mabel Peters, are among the invisible pioneers for leisure.

53. Clarke, p. 96.

54. Cleverdon, p. 189.

55. Cleverden, p. 185; and Clarke, pp. 81-82.

56. Cleverdon, p. 186.

57. Saint John Daily Telegraph, 1 September 1914, p. 7.

58. Massachusetts, State Department of Public Health, Registry of Vital Records and Statistics, Return of a Death-1914, City of Boston, p. 595.