

WHY WERE PRAIRIE WOMEN LEADERS IN THE CANADIAN WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT?

A. Background to the Suffrage Movement

1916 was an extremely important year for voting rights in Canada. It was in this year that women were granted the right to vote in the three Prairie Provinces. Saskatchewan was the second province to enfranchise women, with comparatively little controversy or opposition. The leader of the suffrage movement in Saskatchewan was Violet McNaughton, a British homesteader and social activist.

Learning Activity:

As an introduction, have the students listen to the CBC Radio interview with Violet McNaughton explaining the process of Women's Suffrage. While the students listen, have the students consider how such a process would be different in contemporary society, and how it would be the same. (**Continuity and Change**)

Divide the class into four equal groups, and ask each group to read the Women's Suffrage in Saskatchewan article, plus one of the four listed articles (one per group) that focuses on the life and activism of Violet McNaughton. While reading, have the students record/make note of:

- 3 interesting facts from the reading,
- 2 connections to prior historical knowledge, and
- 1 Big Idea that they've taken from the reading. (**Historical Significance**)

Women's Suffrage in Saskatchewan – Encyclopedia of Saskatchewan Entry:

- Included in this learning package, courtesy of University of Regina Press.

Violet McNaughton

- Violet Clara McNaughton: Encyclopedia of Saskatchewan entry: Included in this learning package, courtesy of University of Regina Press.
- "Violet McNaughton – The most influential farm woman in Canada," *Western Producer*, posted by Karen Morrison, December 27, 2007: <http://www.producer.com/2007/12/violet-mcnaughton-the-most-influential-farm-woman-in-canada/>
- Celebrating Women's Achievements: Activism: Violet McNaughton, Library and Archives Canada (archived): <https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/women/030001-1117-e.html>
- Women Suffrage and Beyond: Confronting the Democratic Deficit: Violet McNaughton: <http://womensuffrage.org/?p=1165>

B. Introduce the Inquiry Question:

Even though there were suffrage movements taking place in other provinces across Canada, it was on the Prairies that this movement had the most and earliest success. Ontario and British Columbia

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followed a year later, and women were granted the voted in national elections in 1918. Some provinces followed much later, and Quebec women were not enfranchised until 1940! Which begs the question:

Why were women in the three prairie provinces the leaders in the women's suffrage movement?
(Cause and Consequence)

C. Scaffolding Evidence Analysis

Using a contemporary political cartoon that addresses an issue the students would be familiar with (election, Syrian refugees, drop in oil prices, etc), model the process of analyzing primary sources. As you go through each of the steps, use the Think Aloud strategy to model how a historian will create knowledge and understanding of the past using a primary source. **(Evidence)**

- 1) Sourcing the Evidence - Who created this source? What is the political and social context surrounding the source? What is the viewpoint of the author?
- 2) Ask Questions – What questions can you ask of the cartoon that will prompt further inquiry?
- 3) Make inferences - What does the cartoon tell us about: the issue? The author? The social context?

D. Suffrage Source Analysis

Split the class into groups and provide them with three varied sources to analyze (a political cartoon or photograph, a personal correspondence, and a newspaper article), following the same process that was modelled for them. Have the students go through the analysis process for each source with the inquiry question in mind. This will allow students to construct historical understanding and make relevant connections between the suffrage movement and the political and social circumstances of the time. **(Evidence)**

A list of the available sources is located in Appendix A. The sources themselves are available for download from the Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan website, at www.saskarchives.com/Suffrage.

- 1) Sourcing the Evidence - Who created this source? What is the political and social context surrounding the source? What is the viewpoint of the author?
- 2) Ask questions - What questions can you ask of the text that will prompt further inquiry?
- 3) What does the source tell us about:
 - a) The author?
 - b) The suffrage movement?
 - c) The social and historical context?
- 4) What isn't being said in the source?
- 5) Why is this source significant?

E. Corroboration

Have the groups collaborate with other groups to compare and contrast inferences they have made about the suffrage movement and Prairie history. The students can use the following questions as a guide for their discussion:

- a) What is similar about your inferences? How do you account for the similarities? What can you conclude about the suffrage movement and the political and social climate of the prairies at the time?
- b) What is different about your inferences? How do you account for the differences? Do you need to rethink your inferences? Can both interpretations be correct?

As a further step in collaboration, have the students use internet and textbook research for further corroboration to ensure their analysis aligns with the accepted historical record? (**Evidence**)

F. Assessment

Have the students reflect on the original inquiry question: ***Why were the three Prairie provinces the leaders in the women's suffrage movement?*** (**Cause and Consequence**). The students will then present their individual understanding of the connection between the suffrage movement and Prairie culture and history using one of the following formats:

- Written essay
- Formal presentation
- Journal entries from the perspective of Violet McNaughton (or another suffragette)
- Art - Visual Art, music, dance, drama, etc.
- Film – Documentary, Canadian Heritage minute, film trailer of Violet McNaughton's biopic
- Storytelling

Appendix A

List of Primary Sources for Use with Suffrage Lesson

Background Information

- Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan (PAS), Tape R-6334. Violet McNaughton interview (excerpt). *Trans-Canada Matinee: Salute to Saskatchewan Women*. CBC Radio Broadcast, [1956].
- PAS, S-A1, Violet McNaughton fonds, File C.1. Personal Papers: Articles: Violet McNaughton Speech "How We Got the Franchise in Saskatchewan", n.d.

Editorial Cartoons

- PAS, S-B6493: "Votes for Women": an editorial cartoon showing Premier Walter Scott making women beg for the vote, from *Grain Growers' Guide*, 26 February 1913.
- PAS, R-A369-2: "The Door Steadily Opens": an editorial cartoon showing a woman entering a room of men (Special Privilege, Drink, Combine, White Slaver, Graft, Monopoly, Corrupt Press) with "Women Suffrage" broom, from *Grain Growers' Guide*, 21 September 1910.
- PAS, R-B10754, "The Vote Girl": an editorial cartoon showing a boy and girl fighting, from "The Grain Grower's Guide," 8 July 1914, 8.

Articles

- PAS, S-A1 Violet McNaughton fonds, File E.18, Equal Franchise League, 1914-1919, "Women Do Not Want It," by Alice Stone Blackwell, n.d..
- PAS, S-A1, Violet McNaughton fonds, File E.18, Equal Franchise League, 1914-1919, "Some Women Will Vote Wisely, Some Foolishly, and Some Not At All," *The Saturday Press and Prairie Farm*, 1 May 1915, 6.
- PAS, S-A1, Violet McNaughton fonds, File E.18, Equal Franchise League, 1914-1919, "Letters from Readers: Votes for Women," *The Montreal Weekly Witness*, 2 October 1917, 13.
- PAS, S-A1, Violet McNaughton fonds, File E.18, Equal Franchise League, 1914-1919, "Women and Political Parties," by Mrs. H.H. McKinney, *Saskatoon Star*, 13 December 1918.
- PAS, S-A1, Violet McNaughton fonds, File E.18, Equal Franchise League, 1914-1919, "Equal Suffrage in Saskatchewan," *The Saturday Press and Prairie Farmer*, 16 February 1916, 1.
- PAS, S-A1, Violet McNaughton fonds, File E.18, Equal Franchise League, 1914-1919, "An Appeal to the Men of Canada," Montreal Suffrage Association, n.d.

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- PAS, S-A1, Violet McNaughton fonds, File E.18, Equal Franchise League, 1914-1919, "Women's Section," including "Suffrage Board Will Meet in October" and "Eloquent Speeches by Suffragists," *The Evening Province and Standard* (Regina), 28 May 1916, 5.
- PAS, S-A1, Violet McNaughton fonds, File I.9, *The Saturday Press & Prairie Farmer*, 1915-1918, 19 February 1916, 1.
- PAS, Micro. R-1.618, Reel 78, Regina Morning Leader, "'Votes for Women' Are Asked in Petition, 30 April 1915, 8.
- PAS, Micro. R-6.18, Regina Morning Leader, Reel 79, "Petition for Women's Votes Presented," 28 May 1915, 12.
- PAS, S-B6544: "Women Receive the Vote..." Headline in the Regina Morning Leader, 15 February 1916.

Letters

- PAS, S-A1 Violet McNaughton fonds, File E.18, Equal Franchise League, 1914-1919, Letter from Lillian B. Thomas, Winnipeg, to Violet McNaughton, 17 September [c. 1916-1919?]
- PAS, S-A1 Violet McNaughton fonds, File E.18, Equal Franchise League, 1914-1919, Letter from Effie L. Storer, Battleford, to Violet McNaughton, 11 May 1914
- PAS, S-A1 Violet McNaughton fonds, File E.18, Equal Franchise League, 1914-1919, "Reasons Why Women Should Be Enfranchised," c. 1914-1916.
- PAS, S-A1 Violet McNaughton fonds, File E.18, Equal Franchise League, 1914-1919, Letter from Premier Walter Scott, Regina, to Violet McNaughton, 16 February 1916.
- PAS, S-A1 Violet McNaughton fonds, File E.18, Equal Franchise League, 1914-1919, Letter from M.A. Lawton of Yorkton and Nellie L. McClung of Edmonton, to Violet McNaughton, 28 June 1916.
- PAS, S-A1 Violet McNaughton fonds, File E.18, Equal Franchise League, 1914-1919, Letter from Lillian B. Thomas, Winnipeg, to Violet McNaughton, 21 December 1916.

Woman Suffrage

The prairie provinces were the first to grant the vote to women: Manitoba did so in January 1916, closely followed by Saskatchewan and Alberta. In Saskatchewan, there was little opposition to woman suffrage—and little campaigning in its favour. The Alberta-Saskatchewan division of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) had endorsed the idea since 1904, and the wife of Premier Walter Scott signed a WCTU suffrage petition in 1909. But despite the quiet support of many women, the Saskatchewan government did not discuss the issue until 1912. British suffragist Barbara Wylie, on a Christmas-time visit to her brother, David Wylie, the Conservative MLA for Maple Creek, addressed public meetings in Regina, Moose Jaw and Maple Creek. MLA J.E. Bradshaw (Conservative—Prince Albert) subsequently proposed in the legislature that it approve women's enfranchisement in principle; with one exception, and with some jocularly, the members who spoke to the resolution supported it. The Premier later stated that although the government favoured woman suffrage in principle, it would not act without proof that women themselves wanted the vote. The challenge was taken up by Francis Marion Beynon, women's editor of the *Grain Growers' Guide*, and her sister Lillian Beynon Thomas, of the *Winnipeg Free Press*, who urged their readers to write to Premier Scott to register their desire to vote. Over the next four months, Scott received more than 200 letters, mainly from rural women, arguing on both egalitarian and pragmatic grounds for votes for women.

In February 1913, a women's meeting held in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Saskatchewan Grain Growers' Association (SGGA) circulated a petition for woman suffrage. Between May and December 1913, a petition campaign organized by Violet McNaughton and sponsored by the SGGA produced more than 100 petitions from almost as many rural locations. These petitions were not placed before the Legislature because they were addressed to the Premier. In December, Bradshaw again proposed a resolution supporting woman suffrage, which passed unanimously. The government acknowledged that it had heard from more than 2,000 women during 1913, but said it could not grant the vote to women because the issue had not been discussed during the 1912 election campaign. In early 1914, Political Equality Leagues were established in Moosomin, Battleford and Prince Albert, and the Women's Grain Growers' Association (WGGA) was founded, with Violet McNaughton as president. McNaughton recognized that an effective suffrage campaign would need to unite the farm women's movement with urban women's organizations. She met with WCTU leaders, including Nellie Andrews and Margaret Armstrong, and agreed to organize a coalition of rural (WGGA) women and urban (WCTU) women to campaign for the vote. The founding meeting of the Provincial Equal Franchise Board (PEFB) in February 1915 resolved that there would be no active campaign during the war; but it decided to raise funds, compile a list of speakers, and reactivate the WCTU petition campaign.

On May 27, a delegation of women formally presented new petitions to the Legislature. In response, Premier Scott did not undertake to introduce legislation, but acknowledged that although he did not have an electoral mandate, public opinion could become strong enough to require action; he urged the women to gather more signatures. Premier Scott met with the Regina leadership of the WCTU and asked them to submit petitions from parts of the province that had not yet been heard from. During the first six weeks of 1916, another thirty-seven villages submitted petitions, and Regina increased its total. In the throne speech of January 1916, the government announced that it would enact woman suffrage; on Valentine's Day, when another large delegation attended at the legislature to present petitions totalling 10,000 names, the Premier reiterated this commitment. The bill granting Saskatchewan women the right to vote in provincial elections on equal terms with men received royal assent on March 14, 1916.

The Saskatchewan government had reacted to events in Manitoba. There the issue of votes for women had been controversial: Rodmond Roblin's Conservative government had stood firm against it; the Liberal opposition of T.C. Norris had championed it. The Manitoba Political Equality League was founded in 1912 by leading Manitoba suffragists including Nellie McClung and the Beynon sisters; but success came only after the Roblin government was defeated in August 1915. By September, not only Manitoba but also the Alberta government had indicated their intention to grant woman suffrage during the upcoming legislative session; when Scott saw that woman suffrage was inevitable, he took steps to ensure that Saskatchewan would not be left behind.

Elizabeth Kalmakoff

Further Reading

Kalmakoff, E.A. 1993. "Woman Suffrage in Saskatchewan." MA Thesis, Department of History, University of Regina; MacDonald, C. 1948. "How Saskatchewan Women Got the Vote," *Saskatchewan History* 1 (3): 1–8.

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McNaughton, Violet Clara (1879– 1968)



Violet McNaughton,
ca. 1920.
Saskatchewan
Archives Board
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Violet McNaughton (*née* Jackson) was a leader in the Canadian farm, women's, peace, and co-operative movements. She became the most influential farm woman in Canada and in Saskatchewan during the first half of the 20th century. Born on November 11, 1879, and raised in radical north Kent in southeastern England, she worked as a schoolteacher. Immigrating in 1909, she joined her father and brother, homesteaders near Harris; in May 1910 she married John McNaughton, a neighbouring homesteader. A feminist sympathizer, she became an active agrarian feminist by 1914, when she began to organize farm women. Her ardour arose out of the dire living and working conditions on the rural prairies during the newcomer settlement period. As well, she had had a serious gynecological operation in 1911 while living in these conditions. Unable to have children as a result, she resolved during her lengthy recovery to work to make the world a better place for all children.

She organized the Women Grain Growers (WGG) in Saskatchewan, a group whose class and gender analyses made it one of the most radical in Canada, and was elected its first president in 1914. A leader of the Saskatchewan women's suffrage movement, she also led the WGG's campaign for trained midwives as well as more nurses, doctors, and hospitals; the WGG wanted these services be to affordable and in close proximity to all farm families. As a result of their campaign, legislation in 1916 allowed for the establishment of union hospitals, municipal nurses, and municipal doctors. This was the first step on the long road to medicare in Saskatchewan and, later, Canada. McNaughton also helped to organize Euro-Canadian farm women's groups in several other provinces, and was president of the Inter-provincial Council of Farm Women and the Women's Section of the Canadian Council of Agriculture from 1919 to 1923.

By the early 1920s McNaughton was one of the three most influential people in the Saskatchewan Grain Growers' Association. As well, she was active in the Progressives, and helped to organize and maintain the Wheat Pools, the Saskatchewan Egg and Poultry Pool, and the *Western Producer*, the liveliest farm paper in Canada. She became the *Producer's* women's editor in 1925. The "Mainly for Women" pages and the "Young Co-operators," edited by McNaughton and her staff, were read by tens of thousands of western farm women and their families. She strongly supported the WGG and its successors, as well as United Farm women in Alberta, Manitoba, and Ontario. She also promoted Homemakers' Clubs and Women's Institutes, and other farm women's groups. She retired as women's editor in 1950, but wrote a *Western Producer* column for nine more years. She died in Saskatoon on February 2, 1968.

Georgina M. Taylor

Further Reading

Taylor, G.M. 2000. "Let Us Co-operate': Violet McNaughton and the Co-operative Ideal." Pp. 57–78 in B. Fairbairn and I. MacPherson (eds.), *Co-operatives in the Year 2000: Memory, Mutual Aid, and the Millennium*. Saskatoon: Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, University of Saskatchewan.

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