Nobody’s Sweetheart:  
the story of a mid century rural New Brunswick woman teacher

by

Gracie Ina MacDonald  
Bachelor of Education, University of Victoria, 1999  
Bachelor of Arts, Concordia University, 1986

A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

Rural women teachers have been cast in the popular and academic press as either passive victims or heroines struggling against adversity meted out by cruel trustees, indifferent parents, stern inspectors and primitive living conditions. More recent tropes generalize about women's oppression and teacher's role in maintaining the status quo. Such narratives reinforce dominant ideologies about women's work and place in society. Women's experiences, as told in their oral histories, are in fact much more complex and nuanced than such stereotypes. Using oral history and primary documents, this is the story of rural woman teacher who started her career in a one-room school in rural New Brunswick in the late 1950s and retired as an administrator in Montreal. Here is revealed a woman whose destiny was formed by her own strengths and weaknesses as much as by circumstance, a teacher who turned 'women's work' into an emancipatory career.
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“No mercy for Camp 6 Sweetheart,” read the headlines in the *Cowichan Citizen* over the dry early summer months of 2009 (Patterson, 2009). Almost eighty years after Vancouver Island's most famous teacher shot herself in her cabin “while temporarily insane,” the lurid details of 20 year old Mabel Jones' torment in a local logging camp continues to fascinate both press and public. Camp 6 was, and is, just about as far wild west as geographically and figuratively possible for urban, educated society to imagine. Of course, civilizing was Jones’ very duty, westward expansion being a moral imperative then, and more recently. Teachers “helped to civilize the frontier,” central Canadian educational leader and feminist Sybil Shack declared in a Toronto lecture 25 years ago, without a hint of irony (Shack, 1977). In fact, Jones was from Cumberland, a few hours away from her school by train, a village only marginally more civilized than the camp at Nixon Creek. In both popular and academic press, Jones' story has been inflated by visions of colonial conquest, fear of women’s power, and cautionary tales about women who go bush.

Now abandoned, with little but metal scrap and foundations to mark its former place, the former camp’s few inhabitants can drive their children (if they have any) to a modern consolidated school a half hour away. Mabel Jones herself left nothing but two suicide notes. As a result, historians have had to engage in scholarly objectification of Mabel, as with so many women teachers,
treat them “as objects, by talking about them rather than having them talk” (Biklen, 1995 p. 7).

The fallout from the publicity around Jones’ death resulted in the firing of the locally elected school board by the provincial government, a symptom of the growing centralization of control over education. Trustee Malvina Peck’s sensational and unrepentant testimony at inquest that she was actively lobbying to replace Mabel with a man despite Jones' positive inspection reports, as well as evidence that Jones was well aware of camp gossip and Peck’s back door campaign, spawned the newspaper headline “Jury Finds Criticism of Trustees led Girl Teacher to Kill Self” (Patterson, 2009). The provincial government’s other response was the appointment of a “rural teachers’ welfare officer” to help ease the lot of hundreds of single young women teaching in British Columbia’s remote schools. Lottie Bowron’s appointment was a patriarchal response to the “rural school problem,” and that problem was women.

Instead of choosing to make the structural changes he might have—revised school classifications, higher salaries, and police visits to teachers, (the premier) chose to shore up individual teachers by naming someone who could offer pastoral care to the troubled female teachers in the province’s isolated areas. The appointee was a noted club woman rather than an experienced teacher, whose culture was one of sociability, service, and subordination. The decision to appoint Bowron was made, therefore, without
intention to attack the rural school problem at its roots. (Wilson, in Barman, Sutherland and Wilson, 1995, p. 285)

Jones’ and Bowron’s stories, described in numerous scholarly articles in the past 20 years, are both emblematic and exceptional, a lingering image of a selfless and choice-less young woman teacher, a passive victim of the rural horrors both environmental and human. I start with Mabel Jones because she has become such an iconic personality in both popular media and historical research, revisited and revised and objectified to meet our need to prove the deprivations of times past. As well, my own classroom’s physical proximity to Nixon Creek (a half hour away) and my experience teaching in “fly in” and other isolated communities as well as my mother’s experience as a one room school teacher make me feel connected to her in multiple ways.

Perhaps our fascination with her story is like slowing down for a car crash. Citing Mabel Jones as well as quantitative studies in the United States and Canada, Diane Hallmann (1992) wrote that historians have until recently played on “some variation of a familiar narrative of epic struggle against adversity” (p. 116). Hallmann, who was writing about her mother’s experiences as a beginning rural teacher in Nova Scotia, points out that while we should not dismiss the struggles, perhaps our “willingness to privilege the dramatic over the mundane misses much of the story” (p. 117). That story, until recently, has been told about women, instead of by women, and it has tended to perpetuate two dimensional stereotypes about women teachers.
These stories, both academic and popular, also serve to reinforce out-of-date but dominant ideologies and myths, particularly during times of change and insecurity. Following World War I popular images of teachers, including the “Our Miss Brooks” radio show, “did not promulgate teaching as a long-term career, but harkened back to a nineteenth century perspective on teaching as a middle passage between adolescence and marriage” (Ryan and Terzian, 2009, p.89). The narrative of the woman teacher in perpetual virginal holding pattern justified women teachers’ poor salaries and working conditions. Just as business interests argue now that minimum wage workers don’t need a raise because their salaries are a modern version of ‘pin money,’ teachers such as Miss Brooks were only passing through, not professional, and thus undeserving of professional treatment and needing male administrators to manage their work.

Mirroring popular media portrayals, scholarly research about women teachers was, until the 1980s, silent about the realities of daily life except in the most extraordinary circumstances. “The narrative of the brave but long-suffering female teacher good heart-heartedly managing,” a story appropriated for worthy ends by unions and others of “toiling for low or no pay, lacking job security and pension, easily exploited by and subject to the whims of demanding trustees” (Coulter, 2005, p. 212). Prior to the 1980s, most scholarship appears to hinge heavily on three well worn stereotypes of women teachers, thereby excluding women themselves from any choice making. Teachers were either distressed damsels waiting for marriage, withered crones, or “Lady Bountiful shedding
reason and light upon the land,” as Helen Harper (2005) puts it. The reality of women’s lives is that they were none of these things.

These stereotypes have continued to plague historians, becoming “true” generalizations divorced from the complexity of individual reality. “Who is this subject: the school marm, the spinster, the mother-teacher? These are subjects constructed out of desires and fears that are not my own. They are what nevertheless function as truths” (Munro, 1998, p. 1). Such pigeon-holing has also recently been described as “false essentialism of inscribed gender ideologies” (Llewellyn, 2006, p. 322) or reducing women's behaviour into narrowly prescribed social roles that deny women autonomy and silence, their active performance as both resisters and conservers (Biklen, 1995). An example of such essentialism at work in the education field as late as 2007 is my superintendent, advising me, in my second year as a vice principal, to “be a better wife” to the principal who was not allowing me to do my job. To this day I have been unable to form a coherent response to those words.

Historians have been guilty of reproducing a gendered discussion: women, “if they were discussed at all, were frequently portrayed as young, naïve, and malleable; it was their acceptance of low wages and poor working conditions, some historians implied, that undermined men teachers’ more important professional quest” (Prentice and Theobold, 1991, p.4). Even feminist theorists have laid some of the blame for women teachers’ “plight” on the shoulders of other women. Teachers, to some stay-at-home women, were “traitors.” (Grumet, p. 25), “explaining” the vitriol with which women like Mabel
Jones' tormenter trustee have castigated female teachers. Alternately, perhaps this line of theorizing allows us to blame another woman for Jones’ mental health issues. Either way, it was likely personal, and not professional, criticisms that Jones took so badly. “The things which nearly broke her heart must have been the other things which were being said about her, the whispered, evil, nasty things that were turning her happy and innocent romance into something sordid and dirty” (Glegg, 2005, p.110). The idea that Jones made her own choices and likely was suffering from depression has only recently been considered (Glegg, 2005).

If teaching was such a life threatening, impoverishing, soul destroying endeavour, why did so many young women do it? To endure such risk, were these women heroes? Victims? The truth, of course, is more complex, as historical researchers are starting to discover through the oral histories of women who actually taught. “They were more than martyrs and saints,” write Harper and Coulter in their recent study of Ontario teachers (2005). Other researchers also caution against the heroic narrative, even when it celebrates commitment and resistance to the work. “Heroic tropes… do not provide insight into the rich and complex ways in which teachers’ lives in schools are constrained by institutional discourses and at the same time expanded through their interactions with children” (Biklen, 1995, p. 5). And, teachers themselves have resisted romanticizing the experience. While describing her largely positive experience teaching in a one-room school for four years to her historian daughter Dianne
Hallman, Nova Scotia teacher Margaret Johnston ironically termed rural teaching as the “not so good old days” (Hallman, 1992).

Until recently feminist research was largely silent on the issue of women teachers, who were seen as so co-opted by the patriarchy (as reproducers of the status quo) that they were unworthy of study. “Teaching was women's work,” Petra Munro (1988) so precisely described this urge to dismiss teaching when thinking back about her own career choices. “Teachers’ work represented rather than challenged the position of women in the society. Women who had been seriously exploited, or who were unusually successful attracted more interest” (Biklen, p. 16). “Women’s complicity” in the patriarchy that is the public education system has made them both “subjects and objects” (Grumet, p. 87), an uneasy relationship. More recently other researchers have noted the tension between our conflicting images of women. Efforts to restore women’s past have sometimes made value judgments that are not of women teachers’ making, and as a result the historiography has been fundamentally shaped by an uneasy juxtaposition of celebration and critique (Sager, 2000).

This balancing act between oppression and affirmation, between structure and agency, is at the root of Janina Trotman’s 2006 study of “bush” teachers of western Australia. Far from being victims, despite their outrageous stories of trials and tribulations, many of these women went on to “act strategically and politically and demonstrate leadership,” (p. 273). Amy Brown, a B.C. teacher who was removed from her first teaching assignment in Tate Creek, went on to form a successful career and volunteer life (Raptis, 2010). Margaret Johnston, Dianne
Hallmann’s mother in rural Nova Scotia, important because she is one of the few women teachers outside of BC and Ontario in the Canadian literature, became a leader in her community. Trotman’s Australian bush teachers largely survived and often prospered despite their humble career beginnings, some rising in their profession, others tackling different careers. Women went into teaching for financial, service related, intellectual, and liberating reasons, writes Biklen (1995). They didn’t live to teach, they taught to live, according to Coulter (2005).

A voice of their own

Allison Prentice once wrote about a fellow teacher who, during the 1950s, tried to shore up her spirits with stories from her rural teaching days in the 1930s. The stories had nothing to do with chalk, or students, or pay scales. They were simply about living: “the one that I remember after all these years” writes Prentice (2000) “is about having to lock herself in the boarding house bathroom with the window wide open when she wanted to smoke. Of course, the story was not just about community control of a teacher’s life but also about her resistance and survival,” (p. 391). These are women’s stories, and they are more nuanced and complex than early researchers imagined.

By the 1980s, influenced by feminist, constructivist, and critical and post-structural theory, educational historians started to notice that which was so familiar that it had become invisible: women themselves. By 1991, Prentice and Theobold argued for more work on teachers’ stories: “How did individuals and
groups of women who taught construct their lives? The agenda for the historiography of female teachers is a very exciting one indeed” (p. 24).

In more recent years, “researchers focusing more closely on the particulars of individual teachers’ experiences soon displaced the ‘universal’ approach, creating more complex portraits of women’s lives as ‘contradictory, heterogeneous, and fragmented” (Raptis, 2010, p. 4). Trotman’s study of bush teachers is representative of this new direction, using open ended conversation: “First, why and how did they become teachers? Second, what was it like being a young woman teaching in a bush school? Finally, how did those teachers interpret the bureaucratic practices and discourses framing their work?” Rebecca Coulter and Helen Harper (2005) have asked similar questions: “How did women teachers ‘make meaning’ in their lives when the conditions in which they labored challenged the claim that their work was valued?” (p. 20) Other researchers have described the resistance of women teachers to the 1950s version of the “civilizing” narrative. With a post-war public anxious over cultural instability, “women teachers, upheld as the mothers of the school family, and thus, the gatekeepers for future citizens, were expected to perform accordingly,” writes Kristina Llewellyn in her 2006 study of post-war Toronto teachers (p. 309). Teachers resisted this role at the same time as performing it. “While women teachers attempted to embody this function, they also attempted to re-cast those ideals to fit their own lives, performing the citizenship qualities they deemed most effective for their gender and occupational identities” (Llewellyn, p. 310).
False dichotomies and other binaries

Other researchers have exposed similar resistance to dichotomies between women’s “feminine” and “professional” role, certainly both patriarchal constructs. In *Country Schoolwomen*, Kathleen Weiler describes the competing image of teaching as a “source of power for women,” (1998, p. 4) and teachers as victims of increasing state control over their work. There are multiple contradictions in ways that teachers are and were constructed (Biklen, 1995); they are resisters and conservers. Women struggled under the contradictory roles as “female role models” in the traditional feminine sense, and “professional teachers,” which have come to mean authoritative figures divorced from the communities they teach in. In these positions they are both “empowered and scrutinized” writes Llewellyn (2006, p. 322). Reality, of course, is somewhere in between these binaries, and we should embrace the contradictions: “We need to accept and to problematize ambiguity and paradox: an occupation that was exploitative and oppressive could also be self-affirming and empowering” (Cunningham, 2000.) Women’s power was generally garnered via personal attributes and teaching talent, not from the position. “A powerful and much loved teacher in a one-room school, might achieve great influence through force of character, persuasion, and sabotage” (Tyack, 1972, p. 7).

Rural women teachers have resisted institutional and societal constraints and sometimes flourished in small ways – much in the way that other survivors have. Though not intended to minimize the horrors of residential schooling, I’d like to draw a parallel between aspects of rural women teachers’ resistance and
those of the First Nations children portrayed in *Resistance and Renewal*, Celia Haig-Brown’s 1988 groundbreaking study of the residential school abuse. Haig-Brown presents the Indian not as “victim” but as resistor. “The most outstanding notion which emerges from these stories of Native people attending the Kamloops Indian Residential School is the extent and complexity of their resistance. The students in their wisdom recognized the injustice of the system which attempted to control them and to transform them. In innumerable ways, they fought for some control in an unpersonalized system” (1988, p.115).

Drawing on such revisionist readings of residential schools and the life histories of survivors, we might now consider rural women teachers not from a deficit model, but from a resilience model: carving out autonomy and job satisfaction despite sexism and privations.

These resistances, as researchers of oral histories have discovered, tend to be small ‘p’ political, based not in grand narratives but in personal battles and persuasions. It is a campaign with no name: “Women teachers noticed gender discrimination and sexual harassment even when they did not have the language to name it,” writes Coulter (2005, p. 225). American researchers have also noted this phenomenon: “One can be a resister without making a clear ideological case for what one does,” (Biklen, 1995, p. 40). Biklen points out that traditional discourse about women teachers fails to capture the private nature of women’s struggle: “they resisted the discourse of work for women even though they did not attempt to persuade others to act as they did” (p. 41)
Women, Kathleen Casey (1993) found in her oral histories project, “do not want to devote much of their energy to large, long-established, institutional organizations, even apparently alternative ones” (p.163). Theirs is not a politics of winning or losing or wallowing in despair after setbacks. “While others may be rendered impotent in such conditions, these women actually increase their efforts to assist those whose suffering is exacerbated by hard times. Seizing not the state itself, but its social service functions, they shelter the homeless, feed the hungry, and advise the vulnerable” (p. 163). This conservative, individualist attitude amongst teachers is consistent with Dan Lortie’s 1975 classic study, “Teacher individualism is evident in the very inception of entry into the profession” (Lortie, p. 236) and very little is done afterwards to discourage this; in fact, “schools were organized around teacher separation rather than teacher interdependence” (p. 14).

For feminist historians, this ability to ‘do’ politics on a more intimate scale is connected to our gender and women’s abilities to blur the line between home and work, private and public, personal and political. For women teachers, asserts Casey (1993), the personal has always been the political because teachers have been so regulated in both their personal and public lives. Teachers did not see family and work as oppositional (Biklen p. 40). Researchers have ignored this link between the public and private spheres in the past, obscuring the complex relationship between them (Strober and Tyack, 1980). Constructing such separate spheres is a recent imposition, on teachers and students, according to others. “A child growing up in (a rural) community could see work-family-
recreation-school as an organically related system of human relationships” (Tyack, p. 30, 1972). The image of work or school or classroom as a separate sphere that one enters and leaves like a time traveller appears to be an invention of the early 20th century scientific management philosophy. Tyack's point is that teachers and students in the real world are connected in more complex ways than simply via school, as a place, or school, as curriculum. We are simultaneously humans, students, teachers, community members, family members.

Great Escapes

Oral histories have revealed much about the motives for women entering teaching, and very few of them have to do with a desire to “civilize the frontier” or mother other people’s children. Teaching, for both women and their families, was often seen as a way out of poverty, an escape from worse fates, such as the mill, the barn, the typing pool. “My mother didn’t want me to be a farmer and work hard, like a horse,” one rural teacher told Helen Harper (2005, p. 60). Women were sometimes groomed at an early age to enter this station in their life, not as a servant, but as an educated person. Extraordinary measures were required from an early age. “This is why I don’t cook to this date. They wouldn’t let me cook,” remembers one African American teacher. “I was not to serve whites in any way, and I didn’t,” (Casey, 13, p. 118). Said another: “my father wanted me to be in a position to never lift anything heavier than a pen” (p. 123).
Much of the research, even in oral histories, only briefly touches on class dynamics of teaching; of the work as a way up and out for thousands of poor women. The classic woman teacher, even in oral history collections, remains a white, middle class, Protestant woman, although there are exceptions like the African American woman quoted above. While there is evidence that women from middle and labouring classes tended to, and continue to, 'go into teaching,' women such as Amy Brown, Mabel Jones, and myself, my mother and grandmother, the classic archetype of the woman teacher is someone who doesn't really need to support herself financially as she is either on her way to marriage, a dependent of either family or husband who presumably have the means to support her. Biklen (1995) turns that assumption on its head: readings of teacher letters, diaries and oral history reveal that many teachers entered the profession to support their families or to support their own independence.

Universals and essentials

Early macro-historical narratives tended to argue that women entered teaching in growing numbers because they were cheap to employ. The parallel and reinforcing cultural inclusion of teaching as “women’s work” served to grow this phenomenon. Other researchers have pointed to the demand side pressures of population growth and the increased commitment to universal education, as well as the supply sides of increasingly educated women and the movement of production outside of the house (Strober and Tyack, 1980, p. 495).
Other universal narratives, such as assumptions about white European cultural supremacy, colonialism, and the spread of ideas such as scientific efficiency and its offspring, mental hygiene, served to create a march towards progress that was linear, inevitable, and righteous. Rather than a linear event, the ideas and practices of teaching were negotiated through a “subtle web of communication” says Llewellyn (2002, p. 173). Oral histories challenge linear narratives.

This approach and its vision of an objective, unified and overarching history of Canada has given way to multiple, and particularly local histories and perspectives not normally represented in historical chronicles: the history of women, Aboriginal peoples, new immigrants, workers, the poor, among others, with greater attention paid to the private sphere.” (Coulter and Harper, 2005, p. 16)

As well, other researchers have stressed the importance of liberating ourselves from generalizations and universal truths around oppression: “The rejection of universal categories that theorize gender, oppression and other also the very possibility of a unified theory of oppression” (Munro, 1998, p. 26). Oral histories defy such generalizations.

Confusions about race

Race, a topic itself rescued from the closet, has undergone a similar category blurring, with women teachers challenging the stereotypes inherent in
traditional historical narratives. “A consensus has formed that women are not unitary categories, devoid of race and social class” and we must “move away from the concepts of identity and community as essentialized and fixed, to consideration of them as fluid, relational and multi-positional” (Rezai-Rashti, 2005, p. 98). In Canada, researchers have recently examined the experiences of black teachers working in Mohawk communities (Norman, 2008) and Chinese-Canadian teachers (Llewellyn, 2008). Immigrant women of colour are the focus of Goli Rezai-Rashti 2005 study. She concludes that their narrative accounts contribute to “our understanding that gender and race are not fixed and essentialized categories” and that the intersection of race, gender, immigration and religion are complex ones; add to the mix an individual woman’s power to resist and overcome and the old binaries of oppressor and oppressed become a spectrum, not a dichotomy.

Women’s narratives challenge their own oppression: “the purpose of this life history is not simply to document victimization; quite the reverse, the object is to wage and to win an interpretive war” (Casey, 1993, p. 115). Playing with the slave account (I was born on a cotton plantation…), one of Casey’s teachers describes her childhood as a familiar story with a twist. The counter-narrative turns the original on its head, and makes it uniquely hers, “so no stereotypical assumption is left unopposed as the narrator repeatedly challenges the listener: you do not know who I am. You think I am a middle class teacher… but I picked cotton as a child. I worked in the fields… but my father owned the land” (Casey, p. 119).
The rural school problem

Much has been made in popular and scholarly press about the limitations of the one-room school, and women, almost exclusively the teacher, became synonymous with backwardness. Men continued to be seen as better disciplinarians, Strober and Tyack (1980) point out, an issue which plagued young teachers such as Mabel Jones and Amy Brown, and led to the burgeoning managerial class in urban school systems: women managed children and men managed women. This hierarchy continues largely unchallenged in schools today, where most administrators in public schools continue to be male, and full time Canadian women educators continue to earn less than men (Fortin and Huberman, 2007).

Mabel Jones’ contemporaries in positions of educational authority identified a “rural school problem,” and it was women. They were lacking in “those qualities of leadership so essential in rural progress, needing supervision from men of adequate preparation, deep social and professional insight, and large executive skill and personal power” (Cubberly as cited in Weiler, 1994, p. 221).

In Canada and the U.S., three reforms, consolidation, bureaucratization, and professionalization would serve to centralize control while reducing women teachers’ autonomy. “Schoolmen” could see the deficiencies of one-room schools without the virtues. Teachers themselves were not consulted, and the reforms further served to isolate teachers from their natural allies, parents and the community.
Tyack (1972) has pointed out that as centralized control increased, the power of parents decreased as well. Parental differences over issues such as discipline and teaching styles were common. Although popularly portrayed as “a tribe of barbarians and hypocrites, ignorant, violent, sinister,” (Tyack, 1972, p. 413), more recent investigations in Ontario have interpreted parental and trustee interactions as much more complex. Parents were just as likely to be concerned about their child's well being, aware of larger trends in education, and managing financial prudence while competing for the best (most trained and likely to stay) teachers. “Relationships between the school board, teachers and parents were mired in complexity and ambiguity” (Poutanen, 2003, p. 240). Trustees, then as now, walked a fine line between their provincial government masters and the needs and wants of their communities. While teachers and their communities were and are natural allies, they have not had a common voice against reforms that have taken control away from them.

Gaps in the literature

Much of the historical research on Canadian women teachers in the past 20 years has emanated from BC and Ontario. Despite its lengthier colonial history and ties to New England, very little has been written about Maritimes' teachers, despite the long standing history of women teaching in both the French and English systems. Writing about her mother's experiences in rural Nova Scotia, Dianne Hallmann (1992) has pointed out rather dryly what historian Peter Cunningham has called the “twice hidden” role of women teachers as women,
and teachers, in historical research. “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 a mile or more to teach school all day has not been the priority of (Nova Scotia’s) educational historians,” (p. 114). This situation has not changed since Hallman wrote this in 1992.

In his 1986 study of federally funded Indian day schools of the Maritimes, Hamilton provides a window into state funded education in the Maritime provinces between the days of religious dominance and the full integration of the 1960s. Hamilton skims through his subject matter, but does reach some interesting conclusions. High teacher turnover may actually have been a positive thing for both teacher and community: “In such small, isolated communities, animosities and resentments were easily sparked and fanned. In short, more problems were often created by teachers remaining too long in these schools than by leaving too soon,” (p. 14). Hamilton describes a handful of First Nations teachers going to teach in their communities, including John Sark, a WWI veteran who was nearly fired numerous times over issues outside the classroom such as community infighting and alleged drunken behavior. Like Mabel Jones, John Sark was criticized by his community; unlike Jones, Sark had powerful local leaders such as the priest and the local member of parliament to defend him.

Hamilton’s study touches on the apparent conflict between inspectors and teachers and community, and the intensely political fights over what were essentially patronage appointments for friends and family of well connected people, as well as the sometimes blurred line between the churches and the
state. One priest, who was also a school inspector, was forced to back down after recommending the firing of a Miss Hughes for being uppity. “The dominant attitude that Miss Hughes has toward me makes it imperative that either one of us should resign” (Hamilton, 1986, p.118). Miss Hughes’ brother was a provincial judge. Miss Hughes stayed. (In the end, despite his hysteria, so did the inspector).

More recently, researchers in Ontario have gone back to the historical record to revisit the relationship between schools and community (more complex than originally imagined) and the famous pay disparities between men and women teachers (they existed but women still earned more than they could in virtually any other field). “Women were being drawn into an occupation in which they were subordinates in a hierarchy of gender and income, but their movement into teaching was also a movement towards material independence, intellectual self-realization, and social respectability” (Sager, 2007).

Also of note are recent papers on non-white teachers’ experiences teaching in both integrated (white) high schools and on a reserve, such as Alison Norman’s (2008) work on the lives of the African Canadian Alexander family teaching in a Mohawk community, and Kristina Llewellyn’s (2008) study of the life of Sadie Chow, a Chinese Canadian teacher in post-war Vancouver. As well, Rebecca Preigert-Coulter and Helen Harper recently compiled a seminal collection of oral histories of 20th century Canadian teachers, in which they have discovered that “freedom may not be found as much as it is forged,” (Coulter p. 73). Helen Raptis’ (2010) recent examination of Amy Brown’s rich and complex
career, which started in a refugee camp in northern B.C. demonstrates a more nuanced description of a young teacher in an isolated community, so different from our hapless Mabel Jones.

Purpose

The purpose of this project is to explore one rural woman teachers' life story through a series of open ended interviews. The interviews started with a set of questions (see Appendix) but the teacher was encouraged to elaborate on memories of interest to her. The interviews took place in the home of the retired teacher in the spring of 2010. The interviews comprise approximately four hours of conversation. While this type of oral history is timely research-wise, it is also timely in a more immediate, sense: women who taught in one room schools prior to the massive consolidation (centralization and busing of rural students into towns and cities) push of the late 1940s to the 1960s are now in their seventies and eighties, and there are fewer of them each year. Such an oral history is to take seriously the contradictions and complexities of a teaching life. For a practicing teacher, daughter and granddaughter of a teacher, this is dangerous and fertile ground. Encounters with teacher testimonies are uncomfortable, writes Marjorie Theobold in her chapter of Weiler and Middleton's groundbreaking *Telling Women’s Lives* (1999).

For me, this is both a professional and a personal journey as the teacher is known to me, although she and everyone else in the study will be given pseudonyms to protect their privacy. As researchers and professionals, teachers
can learn much from the voices of women teachers. Individually, their stories are a kind of truth only recently heard. Collectively, they move us closer to a more comprehensive understanding of teaching and school and of the cultures they both navigated and created. For some of us, such research can also raise conflicting loyalties and unresolved tensions. For me, the unreconciled issues are personal, about judging my mother for doing “women's work”.

“I did not want to be a teacher. Teaching was women's work,” Petra Munro wrote in the introduction to her 1988 book, *Subject to Fiction: Women Teachers' Life Histories and the Cultural Politics of Resistance*. Munro's words are so familiar to me because I have thought them, unconsciously and consciously, before choosing teaching and in every year since. Coming from an extended multi-generational family of women teachers, I made a commitment to myself to do work that I thought had a larger purpose, and certainly came with more power; a career that would not have been possible for my mother. I remember being angry at her for what I saw as allowing herself to be undervalued by her boss. I cringed at the catering she sometimes had to do for unreasonable parents. I remember being jealous of her hours of before and after school preparation, concerts, parent meetings. I remember thinking with her smarts and work ethic, she aimed too low when choosing a career. I emigrated to my father's world, as Madelaine Grumet describes it. Maybe I too was “attempting to escape (my) maternal domination as (I) simultaneously attempt to compensate (my) mother for her disappointments by achieving what was denied to her,” (Grumet, 1998, p. 194). By the end of that year, I made my first attempt to leave the “larger
purpose” career and two years later I entered the world of women's work as a
teaching assistant. How to resolve this conflict between an immense need for
autonomy and a teaching career? It remains a daily battle. I have no idea how
my mother negotiated similar conflicts; indeed, until I became a teacher, it never
occurred to me that she had any.

Research Questions

The guiding questions are both large and small scale; the larger ones I've
been considering since the day I entered teacher training myself, and they arise
on a nearly daily basis at work. Coulter and Harper describe them:

How are women teachers and school systems implicated in the
reproduction of gender and other inequalities? How could women
teachers take pride in their work and yet practice in a system that was
hierarchical and reinforced systemic patterns of discrimination? How
did women teachers ‘make meaning’ in their lives when the conditions
in which they laboured challenged the claim that their work was
valued?(2005)

On a smaller scale, the big questions are also about negotiation and
identity: what role was played by her social and racial identity, and her
geographic place? Did she understand and construct her professional identity?
How was her life shaped by the community, the state, and her profession? How
were her professional and personal life integrated?
Significance

Cunningham (2000) asserts that there are practical reasons for appreciating women teachers’ stories: “Teachers with a critical grasp of the historical development of their work, of folk memory and precedent will be in a strong position to question and challenge contemporary constructions of teachers as service providers” (p. 274). Other researchers caution that we must approach oral history with respect and care:

(The) woman teacher of the twentieth-century, like the nineteenth-century counterpart, is often left between heroic/pure and oppressed/structured histories. Her narrative has often been constructed inappropriately as either anecdotal, corrective evidence, ‘truer’ sources, or depicted, unintentionally, as a fictionalized account of history created from false consciousness.

Each of these approaches of female teachers’ narratives of history diminishes the potential of the resource and the subjects.

(Llewellyn, 2002, p.27)

What practices endure, in modern form, in our classrooms? What battles have already been waged? How can we support young inexperienced women in isolated communities both personally and professionally? Is the one-room school a form of Universal Design? While not the focus of my research questions, these are significant issues which might be illuminated by looking at collections of women teachers’ stories. Such research also has timely significance: the woman in this study is 71 years old. There are an increasingly
limited number of women who taught school in the 1950s, fewer still who did so in New Brunswick, in a resource and sport fishing dependent hamlet, and were of mixed racial heritage.

My research is also significant in that it takes seriously the voice previously unheard, and honours that which we have overlooked as stories. “To conduct the life histories of women teachers is to take seriously the lives of women teachers. To take seriously their conversation as more than just ‘idle talk’ or mere gossip,” (Munro, 1998, p. 5). I do not pretend to be objective, but I will draw conclusions, as previous researchers have done: “the lessons we learn from history may have less to do with what happened and more to do with how we interpret what happened, then and now,” (Coulter and Harper, 2005, p. 17). This teacher's story, I suspect, will both confirm and confound some of the generalizations we are starting from about women teachers.

Research Method: Why oral history?

Oral history is a powerful method, generating multiple perspectives, stories, and more fragmented and shifting identities. The outsider, the silent, can now legitimately figure in historical accounts. “Oral history has proven to be a particularly useful method for learning about the lives of women teachers who have worked unremarked in the province's classrooms for decades” (Coulter and Harper, 2005, p. 17). While I am starting with a semi-structured interview approach, they are meant to be generative, to encourage interviewee’s informal narrative. It is important to make the “interview” as open ended as possible, to
make it more like a conversation. “If we ask women who teach to talk about their work in the language that dominates the discourse of schooling, we invite language that celebrates system and denies doubt, that touts objectives and denies ambivalence, that confesses frustration but withholds love” (Grumet, 1988, p. 59). As such, while some oral histories are semi-structured interviews, a more recent approach is the “narrative interview” in which the interviewee is not interrupted or evaluated after an initial generative question. (Flick, 2002).

In the U.S., theorists have based their call for more research about women’s lives on “big P” political reasons: with recent policy proposals recommending even more control over teachers, and working conditions, “[w]e must accept the challenge to publicize the past and present effects of such agendas on women teachers’ lives” (Casey and Apple, 1989, p. 183).

Feminists have argued that excluding women’s voices dooms us to a continuous loop of mis-communication between men and women, wherein real change is not possible. “The programs stay on paper, the administrators’ theory barred from practice, the teachers’ practice barred from theory by the impenetrable barriers of resistance sustained by sexual politics” (Grumet, 1988, p. 25).

However, perhaps the strongest call for more research comes from the field of oral history. According to Kate Rousmaniere, (1999) there is a ‘great gap between administrative record-keeping and people’s actual lives’ as records ‘chronicle events’ but do not explain “how those events came about or how they were experienced by teachers or students”, (p. 50). Enabling women to tell their
own stories moves us closer to more comprehensive portrayals of the teaching world. What were previously criticisms of life history, its lack of representativeness and its subjective nature, are now its greatest strength (Munro, 1998). Much of the most interesting oral histories of late use a “grounded theory approach, which “gives preference to the data and the field under study as against theoretical assumptions… the aim is not to reduce complexity by breaking it down into variables but rather to increase complexity by adding context” (Flick, 2002, p. 41). As such, my approach is inductive in style.

At least one Canadian researcher has attempted to rejoin the material and oral histories of teachers. Recently, we have seen a “confluence of three historiographical currents,” historian Peter Cunningham wrote in 2000 in his scholarly review of recent works on women, history, and education. Oral history, women’s history and the history of teaching “inform each other in highly productive ways” (Cunningham, 2000, p. 273). Perhaps both life histories and the sweep of historical events can inform each other. “I argue that between structure and agency, between macro-historical context and the individual subject, there is no fundamental opposition but a necessary complementarity” (Sager, 2007, p. 203). I will try to create this complementarity in this project.

Of course, as with any method, oral history has its limitations. Writing about qualitative research generally, Uwe Flick asserts simply that the problem of how to assess it has not been solved, and this dilemma is “repeatedly taken up as an argument in order to raise general questions about the legitimacy of this kind of research” (2002, p. 218). Practical issues abound. Open ended
interviews create reams of data. Ethically and practically, interviewer and interviewee are not interchangeable and thus not repeatable (Esterberg, 2002); there is an inherent power dynamic in the roles. As well, coding inevitably is a value judgement. As well, “owing to the complex structure of the single case (one interview), attempts at generalization face the problem of how to summarize different subjective theories (arising from the research) in groups” (Flick, 2002, p. 85). A common trap is to assume that memories about past life are “real” in a concrete sense. Past attempts at “mirroring reality in presentation, research and text has ended in crisis” (Flick, p.. 37). Oral history presents a particular “process of mimesis” or creative understanding, wherein experience, construction and interpretation are continuously creating each other, and are not fixed truths. “A biographical narrative of one’s own life is not a representation of factual processes” (Flick, 2002, p. 36). It is an interpretation of a construction.
To our knowledge, there have been no such studies of New Brunswick teachers, which is a province with a unique educational history, having moved to consolidation and centralization fairly late, at the end of the 1960s, following recommendations from a royal commission (the Byrne Commission) in 1964. New Brunswick then and now educated about one third of its students in French, it being the home of thousands of people deported from Nova Scotia following British conquest of French forces 250 years ago. By the mid twentieth century, there was little immigration to the province, with more people leaving than moving to it. The majority of English speakers were protestant United Empire Loyalists who arrived following the American Revolution, and Catholic refugees from the highland clearings in Scotland. There was also a scattering of descendents of mixed race Bermudian seafarers, adventurers from the mercantile trade triangle of fish, sugar, and rum (Soucoup, 2009). New Brunswick was and is also home to a sizable First Nations population, who, in the 1950s and 1960s, were still largely attending day and residential schools run by Catholic religious orders. These communities publicly operated as separate solitudes, however, privately, intermarriage was common, although it often required one spouse choosing to leave their culture, language, and religion behind. Religious organizations also operated day and boarding schools for white children, as public non denominational school, while free until grade 12, required
rural students to move to a town and board with relatives to attend high school after grade eight. Most students finished school at the end of elementary. The provincial government was concerned about the mish mash of school boards and the disparities between them as early as the 1940s. *The County Schools Finance Act* of 1943 was intended to be a major step towards equality of educational opportunity in that it provided for enlarging the size of the local unit from the school district to the county for the purpose of raising operating revenue and controlling operating costs for schools, according to the Byrne commission report (Byrne, 1963).

All the counties adopted the county finance system except Restigouche County, which Byrne complained ‘has been singularly backward with respect to improving its educational facilities and in which the unit of educational finance continues to be the school district.’ Nevertheless, Byrne goes on to qualify with ‘in spite of this, educational standards in some parts of Restigouche County compare favourably with those elsewhere in the province’ (Byrne, 1963, p. 76).

At that time, there were 66 school districts in Restigouche alone, each one presumably operating its own school, many of them one-room elementaries. In addition to property taxes, Restigouche schools were receiving almost $200,000 a year in grants from the province to run its schools by 1961, or $26.73 per student—by far the cheapest per student cost in the province at the time. Restigouche also had the highest student-teacher ratio in the province, at just over 30 students per teacher, five students above the provincial average. In Restigouche, the county apparently refused to be coerced or bribed into taking
over its schools, apparently for economic reasons, because while education was run on a relative shoe string in Restigouche, that shoe string came from New York City. Restigouche districts paid their teachers better than any other rural schools in the province, because of its unique property tax base: the private sports fishing lodges of the extremely wealthy U.S. capitalists, “Wall Street fishermen,” as the New York Times put it, “in the land of Evangeline (1889).” The first wave of 40 owners, including William Vanderbilt, William Dodge, and future U.S. president Chester Arthur, bought their initial land and “riparian rights,” or control of the fishery, for which they asked and received a special law change to do, in 1880, for $32,000. Their original lot was 1,600 acres, 400 of it cleared, and “the remainder being virgin forests of the most romantic description,” (“A Sportsman’s Paradise”, 1880). They entertained British royalty and central Canada’s elite, but their real mission was, and remains, fly fishing for mammoth Atlantic salmon that grew to forty pounds or more in their private, guarded, deep Restigouche River pools.

The river was highly romanticized: “The waters of the Restigouche are deliciously clear and cool and swift in their flow, and the bed of the river is of stone almost as regular in its surface as a street well paved with cobblestone,” waxed a Times reporter of the day (“A Sportsman’s Paradise”, 1880). While conservation is now a stated goal of the clubs, at first it was all about the numbers: in 1883 it was reported they netted 480 fish weighing a total of 9880 pounds; the year after it was 446 fish caught by 26 members and their 22 guests. Fishing and money were a natural, as “there is a close affinity between the
presence of money and the pursuit of fish. Both are elusive before capture and slippery after it,” (“Wall Street Fishermen”, 1889). “There was a time when the salmon taken on the Restigouche on a Monday was served at the Whitehouse on Friday,” was popular wisdom. (Adams, 2009, p. 1)

The sports, as they were called, eventually paid for school districts, usually set up to run a rural school near their lodges, at a rate most impoverished local landowners could never afford. In a land of loggers, fishers, and farmers, this allowed families who might otherwise not send their children to school at all, or to send some of them to religious boarding school, to do so. This arrangement also reflected self interest, as it provided the families who guided, cooked, cleaned and drove for the sports with an incentive to stay in the bush season after season. A typical sports camp, then, as now, employed two cooks (one for members, one for staff,) two guides per member, a valet, and a “man of all work” (Adams, 2009, p. 1). The Restigouche Salmon Club, which now costs $40,000 to join and has a twenty year waiting list, continues to value educational opportunities for its staff. In exchange for their loyal service:

We, in turn, have annually provided scholarships to the children of many of our employees, to encourage them and make it financially possible for more of them to go to colleges and universities to continue their education. They have earned degrees which have varied from medicine and nursing to marine biology and engineering. (Restigouche Salmon Club website, July 2010)
Not everyone is grateful for this patronage, then or now. A local fishing
guide and conservationist recently summed up the evidence that sports clubs
permanently damaged the ecosystem and the local economy in a scathing
critique of industrial logging and sports fishing in north eastern North American
watersheds. Club members, writes Peter Dube, are irrationally possessive of
“their” river, and to them, “all others (on the river) are poachers, especially the
local ‘peasants’ bordering the riverbank” (Dube, 2009, p. 15).

Restigouche women, while they worked in and outside the home in
support positions for fishing lodges, logging operations and on farms, were, even
into the sixties, not given the same voting rights as men. Unmarried women could
not vote in local school elections, and married women had to be at least 21 and
married to a man who owned property. Women were paid less than men to
teach, even if they had the same qualifications, until the late sixties, and men and
women were paid just over half what their counterparts in B.C. were making, a
median of $2840 versus $5442 in 1961-62 (Bryne, 1963, p. 80). There were no
unions, although fledgling teachers associations had been formed in the early
1960s and they did make submissions to the royal commission.

“There was no money”: Early life

It was into this landscape that Rosa Doucet, (not her real name,) was
born, downriver, in Campbellton New Brunswick on March 12, 1939 to parents of
mixed Scottish, Acadian and Micmac and Bermudian descent. While there was
an aunt in the family who had become a teacher, virtually everyone else in
Rosa's family had dropped out after elementary school to work in seasonal jobs in the logging industry or to raise children and farm. Rosa says she “didn't get to school until she was six” because her birthday fell in March, and that school was a two-room building that required a three-mile walk there and back daily. In the afternoon she walked all by herself as primary students were let out an hour early, and her older brother and sister were intermediates and younger brother Larry was not in school yet. Rosa describes her rural village home on the outskirts of Campbellton as the “backwoods,” although she was later to find there were places even more “unsophisticated” than that.

Rosa says she always knew she was going to be a teacher, and lined up her dolls for teaching sessions at a young age. She thinks her mother was also an inspiration, even though she remembers teaching herself to read. “My mother was always reading, so I thought it was what you were supposed to do.”

Rosa’s parents met when Jack went to work for her grandfather, Charlie: “he had a fairly large farm for that area, a couple of hundred acres, and they did a lot of lumbering on that land, and that's how he employed my father.” Rosa’s parents were both the oldest children of 10. Money was scarce, and education was apparently considered a luxury. About her mother, Rosa says “I learned later in life that she didn't like school all that well, she fell in love kind of at a young age, well it wasn't young in those days, but she was married at 20, and she never went past grade eight or took any formal training after that either.” Father Jack was supportive of his children's education, because “there wasn't much opportunity” in his day, and “they didn't value education in his family.” In fact,
Rosa recalls that one of her paternal grandfather’s “favourite expressions was ‘too much larnin’ made you stupid.’” Jack worked many seasonal jobs, cooking, lumbering, often away from home. Rosa’s mother Anne “did not go out to work”; however, she did run a restaurant in her home for a time, and after her children grew up returned to the workforce as a cook.

Rosa was not expected to cook but was taught to sew her own clothes, as store-bought clothing was out of the question. Rosa loved school, and while she passed her matriculation exam to enter university upon completing grade 12, she could not follow her dream. “I didn’t go to university right away as there was no money.” Rosa did scrape together enough tip money from working in her mother’s restaurant (“and I think Mumma gave me some money,”) to attend Mount Allison University for two courses in the summer right out of high school, but did not have enough to continue on that winter. She says she chose “Mount A” because it was fairly close, on the train route, and had residences. Residences seemed to clinch the deal, but Mount A also had the advantage of offering courses that she wanted: biology and first year English literature, which she thoroughly enjoyed. In mid-August, when courses finished, out of money, Rosa took her maternal grandfather up on his suggestion that she try “teaching without a license,” and “he happened to know a Mrs. MacFarlane, who was head of the school board up in Kedgwick River, and, he took me up and she interviewed me and I got the job of teaching.” It was a posting that would have lasting personal and professional effect, as the school board chair would later
become her mother in law, and the job would turn into a 50-year-long teaching career.

School life: “Busy, yes, very very busy trying to toss all those apples at the same time.”

Rosa does not remember what they asked her in the interview, but they served tea, and were very nice, and they took her over to see the school, which was a “lovely little building, very modern and well equipped, it had a good heating system, lots of cupboards, it was well set up for a school.” Significantly, “they had blackboards and shelves in all four corners of the room, so that meant that you could have one little group working on math, and be quite independent, and they didn't have to be all lined up facing the teacher's desk.” This arrangement, or rather Rosa’s use of it, was to be a recurring theme in her career. Rosa’s school was well stocked and financed, she reports, because of the “sport camps,” although none of the sports had children in the school. Their “assessment” paid for supplies and a teacher salary higher than any other rural school district, or at least, that’s what Rosa’s research had told her. Rosa narrowly missed seeing President Eisenhower and Prime Minister Diefenbaker arrive the following summer for a spot of fishing, after their meetings about joint security (Eisenhower, Diefenbaker Meet, 1958).

Rosa boarded with the McNally's, one of nine families in the village, and the grandparents of the majority of her students. Rosa’s nine students were from three families, and they ranged in grade level from grade one to eight, with no child in grade seven. It was the winter of 1957-58, and Rosa was earning $1,800
for her year, fresh out of high school with no teaching experience beyond what
she had “experienced herself or read in books.”

Moving on: “My plan was to get a degree.”

Following her one room school house experience Rosa gave notice and
returned to Mount Allison for summer school and then entered Teacher's College
in Fredericton, where she enrolled in the one-year long “elementary” as opposed
to the “primary” program. She boarded with a widow and her daughter for the
year for $15 a week. To her knowledge she was the only student in her cohort
who had either teacher experience or university coursework under her belt.

Once graduated, Rosa took a teaching position, again in Restigouche
County, because it paid more than other jobs. Redlands, a lobstering and farming
community, was a “nightmare,” she says. The school was “old, supplied by the
government, but the desks were old, the place was never very clean, big wood
stove stuck in the middle of the floor, no basement underneath, windows on both
sides, which was how they built schools in those days, so the wind whistled in all
winter. There was a toilet attached to it, but I never used it.” The MacFee's,
where she boarded, also did not have indoor plumbing, and “they didn’t heat the
house, only the kitchen, so upstairs I had a basin, you know the nice old
fashioned basin with the pitcher? Well, morning it was frozen. It's the only place
I've ever gone to bed and dressed.” Rosa taught about thirty students in grades
five to nine; another, unlicensed teacher taught the primary students.
The following year Rosa moved on to teach at a large school in a small English hamlet on the other side of the Restigouche River, in Quebec. A 20-minute sleigh ride away from her parents' home in the winter over ice, this school was hours away by vehicle the rest of the time, there being no bridge from New Brunswick to Quebec at that point. Money was the motivating factor, says Rosa, who thinks she earned $500 more on the Quebec side. This school had five classrooms and Rosa boarded, with another teacher, with a family that felt like home.

The following summer, 1961, Rosa married a son of her first employer from Kedgwick River, with a small reception afterwards at her parents' home. While not a teacher himself, John came from a family of teachers. Rosa's parents did not attend the wedding as it took place on the front steps of the Catholic Church, and they were Protestants. The Church had agreed to marry the two, on condition that she baptize all her children Catholics. However, as she would not convert, they were not permitted to marry in the church itself. Following the wedding the couple moved to Montreal, renting a three storey walk up apartment in an English neighbourhood. Rosa and John were part of a mass migration of young job seekers from the Maritimes, and from all over the world. Montreal area schools were bursting at the seams. Rosa got on teaching in Chomedy, which meant long bus rides each way to the north end of the island. Her husband, whose previous work experience was with Fraser Paper, working in the woods and the office, worked in the shoe department at Eaton's. Rosa taught for two years in the suburb of Chomedy, where “they couldn't build schools fast
enough,” and left in the end to work for the Protestant School board in Montreal, which was a faster commute.

Chomedy had its negative aspects: while she loved teaching grade one, overcrowding was an issue. The first year, “the classroom was really well set up, you could have groups doing one thing, groups doing another, but the second year it became so over-crowded they took the gym, made two classrooms in there, and all they had was this wall board, and I was on one side with a grade one class, and there was this girl on the other side who was teaching grade four, and she had terrible disciplinary problems in her class, the noise was so bad it was unbelievable, you had to talk into the children’s ear so they could hear you.”

Rosa’s next school, for the school year 1963-64, was a nearly new elementary school in Ville Saint Laurent, which, while not growing as fast as Chomedy, was home to an up and coming European immigrant population. About half of her grade one class did not speak English when they arrived in September. Rosa stayed for half a year, because “unfortunately, I was pregnant,” and spent the next eight years at home raising three children while her husband took night courses and landed work as an engineer at an aircraft manufacturer in suburban Montreal.

“I was getting pretty bored at home,” she explains of her return to teaching in 1972. “I saw an ad in the paper, and went in for an interview, and got hired on the spot.” This school was a private Montessori school then being run out of a church basement in suburban Montreal. Rosa also returned to school, at night, working on an arts degree, although she never finished it. “I was doing really well
for a while, going a couple of nights a week, and then Mary, (her youngest child,) started having problems in school, and she couldn't read, she didn't like school, it was such a drain, so I finished the courses I had started in the fall but in January I didn't reapply because she needed more attention."

Rosa’s 30 student school in the basement expanded over the next 29 years to six schools with almost 400 students spread around suburban Montreal, offering bilingual day care and primary school with trained teachers to an increasingly multicultural population. She thought about returning to the public system, “but I really enjoyed what I was doing, so I never did.” Rosa’s authority increased to directress of the entire system, working in one home base with frequent visits to satellite schools to work with head teachers and staff. Rosa retired slowly, working on contract and part time, until she stopped for good in 1998.

Family connections: the ladder, the safety net

A striking theme in Rosa's career was the influence that family, particularly extended family, played in her choices and in her world view, at least until leaving Northern New Brunswick for the big city. While Rosa believes that her decisions were her own, there is ample evidence that family networks supported her choices along the way. Rosa credits inheriting her father's personality and values with her progress, but it was just as often the women in the family who laid the path for her success. Education, for a poor family, was a way up and out. “My father really encouraged me to go to school, and so did Mum, because he might
have gone to school if he’d had different parents, because there were people from his area that went on, but see his father, I told you what his favourite expression was.”

Rosa recalls that no one in her family had ever started, never mind finished, a university degree except for her mother’s sister, Jeannie, who, in turn, had been given a hand up and out by her distant aunt, a nurse working near Boston, Massachusetts. Jeannie would later do her part to help other women in the family, but for the most part, women in Rosa’s family all got married, had children, and rarely worked outside the home. Communication, even between villages eight miles apart, was done by mail, or in person, by boat, sleigh, car or bus. Telephones were an extravagance. One could live an entire life within a few miles of one’s birthplace, and most people did. Business was generally done via barter and shared labour, and people met their future life partners at kitchen tables. Families intermarried, sometimes more than once, in a weave of relationships that was both safety net and social pact. Rosa’s father worked for her grandfather; her grandfather used his (distant relative) connection to the school trustee to get her that first teaching job; Rosa’s landlady during Teacher’s College was doing a family favour (and making some money on the side.)

Rosa describes the village she first taught in as “nine families” in size, as opposed to the one eight miles away, which was probably “50 families” large. Her landlords from the second posting, the McFee’s, with the cold house, “had a daughter, and she had a daughter, and that daughter is Mumma’s doctor now.” This progression, Rosa explains, from no plumbing to doctor in three
generations, was accomplished, because “the mother was a nurse.” Families were expected to take in their relative’s children for schooling. Rosa, while using this network to her advantage, (to the point of marrying a distant relative), did put limits on this arrangement; limits that changed the course of her life. When the Boston aunt Jeannie invited her to board and attend university in the U.S., Rosa considered the offer: “she would have financed me, you know, and I would have had to pay her back.” Rosa eventually said no. “It had to do with the fact that I would have owed her something. It would have lessened my independence. Pretty much that was it.” As it was, Jeannie did pay the last three months of Rosa's room and board costs while at teacher's college, plus two dollars spending money. Such networks were invaluable to women like Rosa who had limited access to more formal networks, such as teacher's unions, or even fellow educators. While this put women in a position of dependency, Rosa's experience was that this dependency could also be a safety net or even a ladder if needed, and it was up to the individual to set boundaries and chart their own destiny in the end.

Creating a life: “I always wanted to be in the classroom, whether it was in front of it or behind it.”

Rosa credits her success with a fierce need to be independent, combined with internal fortitude and feistiness inherited from her father. Still, while determined to be independent, Rosa's sheltered transition into the workforce meant that she could still think of herself as a child, without all the obligations of adulthood. When asked if she was the only single woman in town in her first
teaching job, Rosa says “I still looked upon myself as a girl, not as a single woman.” She didn’t have to lift a finger at most of her boarding situations, the teacher being in a category of above things like cooking or housework. Even so, Rosa was aware that she was forging a more radical path within the family. In her experience, all the women in her family and girls in her high school class had settled down to raise a family early. Why did Rosa not “stay at home, just to be a wife and mother?” (She finished the question before I did.) “Well, things were changing then and it was more acceptable for women to go out to work, it had probably been more acceptable for women to go out to work in larger communities before that. But I think it made a difference in the fact that I read so much, I wasn’t confined to what the church said, and what the community said, and, I knew there were things beyond that.” Rosa, despite never having traveled more than a few miles from her birthplace in the “backwoods,” was well aware that there were other options, and she wanted them. As for why she didn't choose nursing, another popular path and one that her aunt Jeannie had chosen, Rosa saw teaching as more professional and less demeaning. Beginning nurses, she knew, were “virtual slaves,” while beginning teachers could run their own show right from the beginning, and that sense of freedom was important to her. Still, Rosa does not see teaching as especially valued by others. “I don't think it has prestige now and I don't think it ever did. You could be like Oprah and Dr. Phil going on about what the world would be like without teachers, but there's precious few who feel that way. But I think from families that are attending the school you get a lot of respect if you are doing a good job.” Rosa developed a
belief that it was the parents who were the ultimate judge of one’s talents, even though she rarely had parents in the classroom itself.

In her first years teaching, Rosa was not ruling marriage out: she says she just wanted to have her own ability to support herself and an identity that went beyond cooking and cleaning. She did not consider herself especially progressive or modern at the time. Marriage was still the default. She describes the fastidious adult daughter of her Fredericton landlady as a “typical old maid,” in other words, an excellent housekeeper. Rosa sounds proud when she admits that she never learned to cook for herself until her husband taught her how to in their tiny Montreal apartment. It was simple while she was boarding with families; she looks back on the experience as liberating. Not yet “a woman,” she was free from responsibility, within the regular constraints put on women at the time.

Rosa was aware that it was unusual for women to go to teacher’s college after having started on a letter of permission; in fact, she did not know any one else with teaching experience in her class at Teacher’s College (some of the instructors included, apparently,). She later discovered that her much sought after university degree, the one she coveted but never finished, would have streamed her into teaching high school, and not elementary. Just as elementary teachers were “not qualified” to teach high school or even grade one, university graduates, she learned, were expected to teach high school, as there was always a shortage of high school teachers, and it paid better. “If you had a degree, that was one thing I kind of learned, they wanted you to teach at the high
Rosa attributes her ability to survive and even thrive under the difficult teaching and living conditions of her first three postings to her personality. Describing her impromptu strike during her second year of teaching because she hadn’t been paid for three months, she says “My father was a feisty little shit and I wasn’t going to continue to work under those circumstances and not get paid.”

Later on, when describing lower pay scales for women and other more subtle forms of discrimination, Rosa says, “I never noticed,” and then qualifies this by describing her accommodation: “I think it was different for some people, they wouldn’t have the same self-assurance that I had. Maybe I had too much! So I think if you feel you are less, then you are, and I never felt that way.” Her theory was that oppression could only happen to you if you let it, although she did allow that for some things, like higher pay for men, that’s just the way it was. Of the pay differentials between men and women, Rosa says it was well known, “it’s not like they were trying to hide it.... they had a scale.” The year Rosa taught in the Gaspe region of Quebec the federal government passed the Bill of Rights and the birth control pill was made available to some women by prescription. It would be a few more years before the effect of these and other reforms made a difference for women in the classroom.

Motivations for moving on were purely to do with money, and not even freezing bedrooms could influence her decision to stay or go, a justification that she thinks is self evident. “If someone on that block offered you 50 dollars an
hour and someone up there offered you 70, where would you go?” Years later, as a private school administrator paying poor wages to qualified teachers, she would experience the other end of this teacher mobility trying to keep teachers, but until children, Rosa was a rolling stone.

Motherhood, while later described as a good fit with teaching, was at first a major career disruption, one that she continues to be ambivalent about. Almost 50 years later, she still describes her first, unplanned, pregnancy and thus exit from teaching for eight years, negatively: “unfortunately, I was pregnant.” Coming two years after the first introduction of birth control pills but before the advent of benefits for working women, “there was no maternity leave, no holding your job for you, and no day cares,” children were hard to avoid and hard to work a career around. Rosa says that she went back after Christmas, eight months pregnant, and worked with the teacher who replaced her for two weeks “for no pay” to help her. The teacher’s union at the time, she says, was “mostly working on pay scales and I suppose they eventually got into the working on maternity leaves.” While she hadn’t thought of it when deciding to become a teacher, Rosa says in the end it was a good fit with her personal life. “It was a great career as far as raising a family, because our holidays were very similar, and the workdays were short, mind you there were days I had to work evenings and that sort of thing. But it was more regular than irregular, so it allowed me to be home with the family.”

Identities created by others: “you had to act accordingly.”
Teaching, according to Rosa, did engender some status within the tiny communities she started out in. Rosa recalls her first landlord's custom of seating her, by herself, in the dining room every day to eat, while the family ate at a different time in the kitchen. “Everything was for the teacher,” she says. Rosa thinks this was not always the case, and in her mind, the respect had to come with obligations. “It was unusual (the respect) because in some communities it didn't happen. No, you were respected, but I bet there were a few things you weren't allowed to do. You had to act accordingly. (chuckles)” Asked if anyone, in the community or the inspector, ever told her what these things were: “No, I could have gone to school bare top for all anyone ever told. But you knew, uh huh, you wouldn't last that long.” Free time was spent knitting and at women-only card parties and traveling home to her mother's for a visit. In her second year of teaching, Rosa was invited to make a presentation about sewing your own clothing to the local chapter of the Women's Institute, a nod to the time she spent at the sewing machine. Rosa knew that the trade off for community support was fitting into the role model of teacher and of dutiful daughter; she didn't even think of herself as a “woman” independent of parents until her marriage and move to Montreal. Her expertise in the womanly art and craft of making one's own clothing helped her gain respect and belonging with women in her second teaching position, which likely helped garner community support when required.

Later on, Rosa recalls running into stereotypes of imaginary elementary teacher. “I remember once being at a party in Montreal and I met this young woman, and of course we'd never seen each other before, and she said what do
you do, and I said I'm a teacher, and she said you don't look like a teacher, uh, so people thought they were supposed to look different than other people.” (What did she think you were supposed to look like?) “Well, I didn't ask, but I didn't think teachers looked different but apparently some people did, and right on the heels of that she asked me what grade I taught, and then I was teaching grade one, and she said well maybe when you get older you'll be able to teach older kids. So you know it was like that. You'd have to have someone pretty dumb in this day and age to think along those lines.”

Working with parents: “I was quite certain she was going to have a stroke, she screamed and yelled so much, anyway, as a result, David didn't get any extra help.”

Rosa’s relationship with parents, was, she reports, for the most part fairly positive. While she doesn't recall a time when they came to help her in the classroom, in her first year some parents and grandparent, particularly if they had a teaching background, were there to give out advice when asked. “I knew I could get help any time I wanted, was Mrs. Macfarlane, (Kedgwick River River trustee, sometimes teacher, mother of eight, and future mother-in-law,) because she had a lot of experience teaching and she was very very helpful, I could ask her questions, and for her it was simple, because she had taught in a one-room school many many times.” In the absence of administrators, parents and trustees were the supports and trials one dealt with on a daily basis. Inspectors, while helpful, rarely appeared. Rosa thinks that parent attitudes to education are paramount to a child's success and even inclusion in school.
Dealing with annoyed parents started in Kedgwick River with Stella McNally, the Acadian daughter-in-law of her landlord, who screamed and yelled at Rosa over her well meaning offer to provide Stella's son with extra help. The showdown was so threatening that the senior McNally took it upon himself to physically guard Rosa and the school for the rest of the day: “he came over and stayed all afternoon in the school yard that day.... I think they knew Stella was a bit off the wall: 'pay no attention, Rosa Mae, pay no attention.'” Rosa assumes the voice of her landlady. Rosa describes that flap in some detail:

I decided there was nothing I could do for David during school hours, because it was just too much, there was too much else to do. How do you teach a grade two to read without a lot of assistance? So I offered to do that, and I explained it very well to the oldest girl, Jeanette, because I had didn't go home on weekends, and I had nothing to do after school, except wait for dinner and go to bed, so I had lots of time on my hands, so what I decided I would do is have David come and spend time with me an hour on Saturday or a couple of afternoons after school, when the rest were gone to play, so I explained everything to Jeanette really well, there were no telephones, you know, well there were some telephones in the village but they didn't have one, so I explained it to the oldest girl, what my intentions were, and they all went home for lunch, and I went home for lunch as well, and when I came back, the mother of these children arrived. I could never really understand anything she
said but I was quite certain she was going to have a stroke, she screamed and yelled so much, anyway, as a result, David didn't get any extra help. .....Did I think he was stupid or what? So it was a very unsophisticated uneducated idea she had in her head.

In her third school, Rosa praises the advocacy of parents of a disabled girl to get their child into school and their willingness to help in the classroom if that was required (it wasn't). To Rosa, parents who posed a problem were generally the exception, and maybe even not quite right in the head, and their behavior could be curbed by others in the community. Another, more serious incident at her second school illustrates the potential dangers of working in isolation and the power of community to regulate behaviour.

The boys used to make out with the girls in the woodshed. (At lunch time?) Yes... I would walk over to McMillan's, it was like here to the park, have lunch, walk back...... Anyway, the first time this event occurred, I came back, there was a group of girls standing around the back of the school. But the woodshed was detached. The boys were all peering into the woodshed, through the cracks. (Chuckles.) Anyway, a little walk around the corner and you didn't have to have any imagination to see what was going on. So, I locked the school and I sent them home. All home. And I knew Mr. McFee (landlord and school trustee) was there at the house, so I said go and clean that place up, and get rid of that guy and that girl, they can't come to school..... So, when he got back that evening, or late afternoon,
he said they would both be expelled. So, okay, the next morning I go to school… and half the kids were there. So I, my normal thing was to come in a take off my coat and greet the kids and go from group to group because I always had them in groups, and the last part of the journey, it would probably take five or six minutes, my back would have been to the door. And there was big kafuffle took place…. The guy that was expelled came in. He was going to beat me up. But obviously, there must have been community gossip or whatever, two young fellows jumped up. The kafuffle was, they got a hold of him and threw him out the back door! Ha ha ha. And slammed the door. The girl never showed up. Whatever. That all took place, nobody said anything, we just went on with the morning. But that wasn’t the end of it:

I went home for lunch, I'm walking down the road, you know, it's like I said, such as short distance, and the father of this guy, I didn't realize it was him but I found out later, he was riding a farm tractor on the road, and he came up behind me, and I could hear this vehicle and I knew it was close, and uh, I turned around, you know, he is kind of close. But something made me think, you know, just a little inkling, that this may be related to what happened. I just kept walking. In fact, instead of going faster I went slower. Because I said to myself, he's not going to run over anyone with that tractor. His life wouldn't be worth two pennies if he did. Anyway, so he
followed me probably for about 100 feet, he’s only 18 inches behind me, with this great big tractor, and then he got off in the ditch and went off into the field and the traitor flying, and so, I can't say I wasn't a little shaken up. I'm pretty bold but I'm not that bold, uh, so when I got down to McFee's.... and he knew who it was, and he knew all about the scuffle that had taken place earlier, because the father had gone to complain that the kids had thrown his kid out of school! Well old McFee told him, he's expelled, that's what it means. Ha ha ha..... Anyway, I never had any more trouble like that and the kid never came back to school which was rather unfortunate but as well for the rest of them.

Later on, while running the Montessori schools, Rosa says she found parents expected more and more of their schools and their child's academic performance, but less and less of their behaviour. “They expected them to learn more at an earlier age,” while their children became more challenging to manage because of “changes in parenting.... I think the media had something to do with it. You had to be more entertaining... and the children at one point (were) expected by their parents to be polite and respect elders, I think that is completely out of sight now.” Parents also communicated less with school itself. “One of the things that changed, we had a bus company, there were children that we had for a whole year I never met their parents. They came by bus, they left by bus, and even though we had parent evenings.”
Colleagues: “A lot of people were nervous about inspectors, but I felt that they came to help.”

Rosa has high praise for some teachers and inspectors she worked with along the way, but she did not form life long relationships with them. Of the primary teacher in her second posting, Rosa says, “the girl that was teaching the one to four had been on one of those special permits for years and she couldn't teach for love or anything, so the kids arrived in grade five and didn't know how to add or carry, they could do two and five but not five and six, so the math was a nightmare, it was a nightmare.”

Later on, sharing a gym with another teacher who had “discipline problems,” Rosa complains that the principal didn't do anything to fix the problem. Teachers in her third posting were “great,” but most of them were quite a bit older than her. As an administrator at the Montessori school, Rosa found that her status as “boss” made it difficult to be friends, although she continues to socialize with a former colleague who went on to start her own Montessori school. By the end of her career, Rosa thought that more “modern” teachers “had much more problems with discipline in the class; they just don't know how to keep the children focused.”

Rosa has only good things to say about inspectors: “they were very helpful..... well, I learned later a lot of people were very nervous about inspectors, but I felt that they came to help, and they always did.... the reason I say they were very helpful is that that year and another year I was teaching in (Restigouche) when they would come in, I always knew they would come so I
had a handful of questions, of you know, for instance, you had children in grade five and four and three, and how to get them all up to date in their math, basically. The other subjects were easy, because they were pretty straightforward.

Later, Rosa’s role as “the boss” meant she had more control over the working conditions, but the trade off was the loss of co-worker camaraderie and distance from working directly with children. Perhaps because Rosa’s “boss,” the school’s owner, was also a woman, being a woman administrator did not seem remarkable to Rosa, and, as there were few men teachers in the organization, Rosa rarely had to manage men. Rosa’s motivation to “run her own show” kept her in the private school system, where she perceived there was less outside bureaucracy interfering with her work. She did not consider the possibility of leadership in the public system, and even so, she rationalized, there would be less freedom for innovation. And innovation was something she is very proud of.

Rosa related her first experience with special education integration:

There was this family, they had a child, she wasn't Down Syndrome, but she was definitely retarded, she probably was about nine years old and she had never been to school. All the rest of the kids in the family were all perfectly normal. She had a lot of problems with coordination. She wasn't ADD or anything like that but she was definitely retarded. But she was kind and gentle and small, but she was, she had the strength of a 10 year old but the brains of a two year old. Anyway, there obviously had been some
controversy, nothing to do with me, but between the family and the school, and the family thought it would be better for her to get into some kind of a program, any kind of a program....anyway, the school board....decided they should have a meeting with me, but they didn't tell me what it was about. And I was kind of worried, because it was the first year I had taught grade one, and I had been so dedicated and thought I was doing it all right, but what they wanted to have the meeting about was too see if I would accept this child... There was no pressure on me to accept this child, they didn't make me do it, they even offered for it to be a trial basis, two weeks and a review.... I was absolutely dumbfounded...I never worked with any retarded people. Anybody I knew was smart like me, ha ha ha.

Of Rosa’s foremost concerns for her new student was safety: specifically, not freezing to death at recess.

They offered to give me any kind of help, an older student to come in and dress her, a family member, even her mother offered to come in and undress her, because....instead of unbuttoning her coat, she would pull it off, it was a safety thing... so, I suggested we get a group of safety pins, and if the buttons came off, we could just pin the coat. Well, I wasn't going to get into a fighting match with her about doing it. You see, the kids those days were they were pretty independent; they came from families that had more than one child,
so they all knew how to button and unbutton their clothes. And they were used to winter, so, there was no problem with them getting dressed. So basically, out of the 20 of them, I only had to watch her. And so, what I would do direct her attention to what the rest of them were doing. And so by spring you know, the buttons stayed on. So she learned. She learned a few things. The other kids, she was just like one of them for all they were concerned. It didn't bother them that she would sometimes try to go and sit in the same desk as them.... we (had a place where) she could go colour, keep her quite occupied with that, she liked books, uh, and I taught the other kids, and she wasn't extremely disruptive... what I taught the other kids, because they weren't scared of her, they knew she was different but they didn't display that towards her, so, if she went in someone else's' seat, they either got me, who was helping someone, or they walked her back to her own place..... She had her own desk here and desk here and desk here, one had colouring, one had books, so she had a whole little circle of stuff to do.

Rosa thinks her teaching style contributed to how well the integration experiment went, although she questions whether she was doing anything different than any of her colleagues. While she had no teaching assistant to help, things went smoothly because:

(In) those days you read stories to the children, you had group things, where you were teaching fun games about numbers and all
that stuff, I guess everybody did it, I certainly did, and so that kind of thing you just sat around on the floor and when she was in the room, and I had one of those same kind of people in Montreal, a loose sort of thing, used to walk around on top of the window sills! But anyway, she wasn't quite that disruptive, but when we had a group study period, I just put her beside me and she stayed there. You know, she'd hug me, and I'd pat her, and I'd just keep on going. And she wasn't, I think because of the way I handled it, she wasn't a disruption for the kids. And those children, were....used to not everybody being the same. Of course when you think about it, there must have been other children in the community. God knows how many there were! What an awful thing to not allow that kid to go out and socialize. She learned an awful lot that year.

Standing up: “My father was a feisty little shit and I wasn't going to continue to work under those circumstances and then not get paid.”

Rosa was hardly a shrinking violet, and without a union or a principal in those early days she had to deal directly with the local parents and trustees, which according to her required some pluck or one risked being taken advantage of. In her second posting, she describes a one-woman strike.

I didn't get paid for three months because the people who were supposed to collect the money, the taxes would only do it on occasion. Ha ha ha. So after it was going to be the third month, it was November, and I asked (McFee, her landlord and the school
trustee,) if he had my money, because you know, I was looking forward to buying Christmas presents for the first time in my life, and (How were you supporting yourself?) I was living at his house as a boarder, so I didn't pay any board, at that time, because they didn't pay me, and my father happened to be around, so he would come around and pick me up on Friday and bring me back on Sunday, so I really didn't have any expenses. But after you're working for three months and you don't get paid, uh, so he went, well, he said yes, he was going to go around collecting, and then he said he didn't get enough money, and I said okay, I'm not going to school. He said you can't do that, and I said huh, I most surely can, and I don't think he ever thought for a second that I would not go to school. But I didn't.

Rosa says she can't recall even hearing about anyone going on strike before, and she can't remember where she got the idea, expect that it was something her father, who had a rebellious nature and a keen sense of justice, would do.

My father was a feisty little shit and I wasn't going to continue to work under those circumstances and then not get paid. ….there was two classrooms, the woman that lived across the road from the school, she taught grade one to four, and she was a married woman, so she didn't care. It didn't make much difference, I mean she knew eventually the money would come, but I was young and I
wasn't going to work for nothing, I mean, one month went by, then a
second month, and I'm saying 'am I going to get paid this month?'
And he'd say, he'd be there smoking his pipe, 'well, I'll have to go
collect some taxes.' And then he went around pretended he collects
the taxes and.... I don't know how the subject came up again, I
probably asked him because I wasn't shy to ask, he said 'I don't
think I'm going to have enough to get it covered'. And I said, 'well,
then I'm not going to work.' Of course, he didn't pay any attention to
that; it was like water off a duck's back. Anyway, the next morning
Mrs. McFee started yelling up to the stairs 'You're going to be late!' I
let her do that for a couple of times, and finally I got dressed and
come down, and she said, 'you're going to be really late.' I said 'no
I'm not late, I'm not late at all, I'm not going. I told Mr. McFee last
night, I'm not going.' By noon he had the money. (Cash?) No, they
gave me a check. And I ... didn't get the chance to cash the check
until the weekend, but it didn't bounce. (And they paid you on time
after that?) After that there was no trouble.

Later on, it was this assertiveness that helped her negotiate better working
conditions and pay from her private employer. Having to argue for what you
wanted was to be expected, she thought. "That would have happened no matter
where you were, no matter where you were. The only difference was that there
was no union, but even in the public school during that time there was no union,
and in a lot of ways, there were parts of that that I enjoyed, arguing and
convincing, and if I could build up a big enough case I could win my point."

Rosa also knew that some people had it worse off than she did. She
alluded to other teachers not being treated with respect in their community, and
to inequalities not just between schools but between language groups. French
neighbours, she later realized, had even more difficulties, including having to
teach their students using English books.

The girl I met from Bathurst, she was teaching at a French Catholic
school in Chomedy, and we just happened to be traveling the same
bus route for a couple of years, so we got to be friends, she could
speak English in a sort of a broken fashion, I could not speak
French, uh, but we travelled on the bus every school day for two
years, and that was one of the topics that we discussed, which was
pretty interesting... when she was teaching she was using French
books, but when she grew up, she used English books. (Well it
must have contributed to the bilingualism of all those French kids.
Lucky for them in a funny way!) Lucky for them in a kind of back
handed sort of way! You’d hope that those French teachers would
be able to translate the books, and those poor kids, it was trial by
error. Ha ha ha, or trial by fire!

The journey: “I always knew I was going to teach. And the harder it was the more
I liked it.”
Rosa truly believes in the power of individual strengths to overcome barriers the world puts up for you, an idea that she thinks came from her parents, particularly her father, who was Métis. She didn't allow her relative poverty, her gender, and a mixed bag of cultural backgrounds to get in the way of her career goal, nor to define her as a person. She thinks it is important to instil this independence in both her children and her students. Later, she says the Montessori philosophy was a good match for her. “I thought it was an excellent way to teach young people.” she says. Success in Montessori, she says, was creating independent thinkers. “Part of the Montessori philosophy, … your greatest success was having the child develop so that he or she wanted to learn, so not dependent on praise, and stars, and teddy bear stickers or anything like that, that was what your goal was and that would be your greatest achievement.”

Rosa does admit to sometimes adapting the fairly strict teachings of the International Montessori Association to fit the realities of the day. For example, she did group students by age at times, a “no-no” in Montessori philosophy. She also innovated with bilingual education, offering students, (most of them French Canadians or new immigrants speaking neither English nor French) full immersion in French and English, and one language in the morning, the other in the afternoon. This, she says, grew to be their most popular option.

She dismisses most of what she learned at Teacher’s College as boring and unmemorable, and wonders if any of her instructors had ever taught in the kind of school she had.
Becoming a teacher: “If I had been a less strong spirit I probably would have quit.”

At Teacher's College, courses were a combination of “how to teach someone something” and subject area instruction; however, at no point did they cover how to teach a multi-grade classroom. One class stood out for her. They taught you to teach one grade at a time all in the same room. It was, there was one of the classes that was very good, it was English Literature, and it was very good, and they taught you mock ups of classes where you had different levels of readers, but they were all seven years old, just not functioning at the same level, and they gave you information about setting up little groups, where some had free rein with the books, and other ones you had to concentrate on because they weren't as quick as the others. But other than that, any other courses, they were a little behind the time.

Rosa is also critical of the methods taught at Teacher's College:

I don't know what your question is going to be but there was a few times I wanted to tell some of those professors how to teach something, and what they're saying didn't work! Ha ha. (Can you think of any specific?) I can't think of anything in particular, but part of it might have been the cockiness of youth, and part of it uh, having had experience trying to do it. What were the teachers like? Boring. Boring. I never was so bored in school in my life. So they
weren’t showing you how to do it. No, no, no. It was kind of do as I say not do as I do. But there was a lot of that in the teaching field at the time. (You mean they were talking and you were listening) oh yeah, your bum was getting sore. Even in high school it was better.

Practicums were not much better, particularly the first one, with a teacher who seemed more intent on breaking her than helping her learn: “She’d be half way through something… and she’d throw the book at me! And say finish the lesson! And walk out of the room! I didn't have a clue what to do. Because I hadn't the book previous to her having thrown it at me, so you talk about winging things, all three weeks I never wrote a single lesson plan.” This may have been more common than you would think: in a memoir Gabrielle Roy (2006) writes about virtually the same thing happening to her in Manitoba a generation earlier.

Rosa also complained that they didn't learn about how people learn, and she only heard the names Piaget or Dewey many years later in Montreal. “They were behind the time,” she explains. Indeed, the Byrne commission recommended a few years later that educational psychology courses at the college be taught by actual psychologists and not educational methods experts. Rosa does grant that it would be impossible to teach them, all so young, everything they should know in only 10 months. Indeed, the powers that be agreed, and shortly after Rosa graduated, in 1962, teacher education was expanded from a one year to a two year program, and 11 years after that the program was transferred to the universities of Moncton and New Brunswick and remodelled into four year degree programs. Rosa now thinks teachers should
have a Masters degree before they turn to teaching, because “you are better prepared, and you're more mature, because it takes you so long to get there.” The idea of teaching at 18 years old, as she did, now seems absurd: “like today, with all the new equipment, and all the new ideas, I mean, at 18 would you even be able to take a role as an assistant? Never mind run the school... How ridiculous!” she laughs.

On the other hand, Rosa believes that some people are destined to teach. About discipline in the classroom, “I think that's an actual natural thing, you either have it or you don't have it; I don't think you can teach someone how to run a classroom that has a comfortable learning situation and good discipline at the same time. It's instinctive.” Rosa’s style as a teacher evolved from fairly traditional (workbooks, rote work, “busy work”) as she says she later called it, there, was lot of emphasis on that sort of thing in those years.” However, even in her first year she was experimenting with self paced work, peer mentoring, and using story telling in teaching, none of which was discussed at college. Later on she learned how to integrate special needs students into her regular classroom, and to teach English as a second language to new immigrants. Still later she pioneered bilingual Montessori instruction for primary students.

Rosa says she was simply “doing the best you can.” She remembers no grand reforms or new ideas or special in-service to deal with the realities in the classroom, but she does describe teaching as a sort of making it up as you go along: “I guess they just expected you to know all that stuff for some reason or another; that blows my mind when I think about it now.” Teaching grade one
English as a Second Language students in Chomedy and Montreal quickly turned out to be a passion she says, as "it was much easier than teaching the older children, because there was always a chunk of older students who had missed something,, and so you were always building on what they had lost, or never found, and with the grade ones, they were just shiny little coins. So if they didn't get something, it was your responsibility."

Discipline was something she prides herself on: “I kept a quiet classroom.” After the incident where male students physically removed the boy who'd been expelled, “That all took place, nobody said anything, we just went on with the morning.” Later on, she had to fire teachers for abusing their authority with students, if not physically, then emotionally: "psychological stuff," as she put it. "It was much better to have (students) working and enjoying themselves then they wouldn't get into any problems like that," she says.

As the years went on, Rosa says she spent more and more time in her administrator role until at the end she was not teaching at all. She has mixed feelings about this position of leadership.

There was a lot of it that I didn't like. The part I didn't like was because it kept you away from the children… but the part I liked about it was that I could develop the programs I was interested in doing, and making sure that each of the classes and each of the schools ran very much the same. And if I had new ideas I was free to develop them, so that was part of administration that I liked.
Working in the private system, she thinks, was also less restricting: “I actually found it more rewarding, because I actually had to set the goals, so I could actually set the bar where I liked, so that was, you know, very satisfying, whereas in the public sector, unless you had a really good principal, which wasn't always the case, your hands were tied a lot of the time.”
CHAPTER 3

Rosa’s story is neither a snapshot nor “true” account, but it does add to our understanding of how women experienced, and created a career and a life during a time of changing ideas about women’s place in the world. It is not how it “really was,” but instead, “glimpses.” (Llewellyn, 2002, p. 47) Of course, her memory of past events has been selectively edited by the passage of time. While she can remember most of the names of her first students, she could not remember the names of any of her teachers at Teachers’ College. Because Rosa is someone I know very well, and because I too am a teacher, our “interview” was really more of a conversation. There are silences and omissions: why did she choose Montreal? How did she teach children to read? Those questions are for another conversation. I choose to think that our relationship helped create a context and depth that might not otherwise be revealed. Good oral history, according to Llewellyn (2002), “demands fostering of a trustworthy relationship based on respect for subjects, while simultaneously recognizing that the history produced is an active formation, and the historian is part of the action and context of the narratives' construction.” (p. 17)

Rosa’s experience could be described as both unique and exemplary of women teachers of her time. A few years after Rosa left New Brunswick for Montreal consolidation reduced the number of school districts from 422 to 33. One-room and even two-room school houses were in their last years, having lingered later than most of North America. The Byrne report condemned multi-
age grouping and walking to school as backward and even dangerous, as it was
safer to have kids ride for miles on a bus than to be walking along winter roads a
shorter distance.

Children in graded schools have much better educational
opportunities than children in multiple grade schools. In a graded
school a teacher will devote 100 per cent of this or her time to one
grade or one class, while in a multiple grade school the teacher can
devote only a part of his or her time to each grade.” (Byrne, 1963, p.
78)

Rural teachers were also criticized for not being educated enough, and not
spending enough time on the basics; truly, as in the U.S., there was a “rural
school problem,” and part of that problem was women teachers.

The report was a repudiation of progressive innovations such as small
group instruction, self paced learning, and learning imbedded in local context. It
advocated formalism: a curriculum as fixed, standardized, graded and linear as
opposed to co-constructed with the student at the center. It was out of date
before it was published. More than 60 years earlier, John Dewey (1897)
proposed a model that would have sounded familiar to Rosa in her first year of
teaching. Dewey re-imagined the way that the learning process should take
place, as well as the role that the teacher should play within that process.
According to Dewey, the teacher should not be one to stand at the front of the
room doling out bits of information to be absorbed by passive students. Instead,
the teacher’s role should be that of facilitator and guide. “The teacher is not in the
school to impose certain ideas or to form certain habits in the child, but is there as a member of the community to select the influences which shall affect the child and to assist him in properly responding to these influences" (Dewey, 1897, p. 79). In its zeal to drag New Brunswick education out of the supposed dark ages, the Byrne commission was adopting the well worn lens of the efficiency model which had already swept the U.S. and other parts of Canada, and in the process dismissed the creative, and sometimes progressive teaching methods of rural teachers like Rosa (Madison, 1984). As well, while the government's interest in applying financial consistency to school district funding through consolidation was laudable, it had the effect of loosening local control over hiring, and making it harder for rural areas to attract better teachers with offers of more money, driving even more centralization. While some researchers have suggested that such resting of control from local “elites” may have made education more democratic (Steffes, 2008), it likely had consequences for teacher autonomy and innovation.

Rosa's dismissal of Teacher's College as not preparing her well for teaching is a common refrain from other women of her era; Amy Brown made similar complaints about her education in Vancouver (Raptis, 2010). However, Rosa tempers her criticism with an acknowledgment that most of her cohort was very young, and there was so much to learn. At the time the curriculum was a combination of subject area instruction and methods courses (a recent addition) as well as school law. It was virtually the same education that was offered to young women all over North America since WWI, and it emphasized textbook
learning, levelled readers, and rote. The child, the community, and the teacher herself were largely absent from the education equation, and the Byrne commission compounded this problem by suggesting that an “emphasis on techniques and methods for their own sake” devalued “knowledge of the subjects” (Byrne, 1963, p. 134).

Rosa’s negotiation of the various roles, teacher, student, professional, mother, role model in the community, did require compromises. Parental duties meant sacrifices, and Rosa was never able to finish her degree. However, choosing to teach in a private system, and rise to administrator of a chain of primary schools, allowed Rosa the freedom and control over her working conditions that she had first felt in that one-room school house. From this freedom came innovation and more child-centered learning. It was this way for other one-room teachers too. Marian Brooks, a progressive teacher educator of the Dewey school working in New Hampshire in the 1930s, also started out teaching in a one-room school, and while she later admitted the isolation from other teachers had its drawbacks, “it was equally important” for Rosa’s development that she was “free from many outside pressures and had the time to find (her) own style of responding to the children and to discover ways of making learning and school an experience that they could become excited about and enjoy” (Dropkin, 1975, p. 9). Here is an acknowledgment of the importance of a trusting bond between student and teacher, the complex relationship between public and private, and the connections between community and school.
Rosa’s “resistance” to authority, such as her one day strike for pay, were carefully chosen. In the era before unions and employment law, it was every woman for themselves in the job market. There was no teachers’ association that Rosa knew of, and help came from enlisting the goodwill of the community in times of crisis. Her experience with the children expelled for having sex in the woodshed was a case in point: a combination of personal assertiveness, community pressure, and student loyalty diffused a situation that could have turned from threat to actual violence. The informal but very complex interaction of community, family, and individual came together to deal with a problem not just there, but earlier on, when Rosa’s landlord, the school trustee, guarded her and the school in Kedgwick River from his angry daughter in law. Rosa used this network of family and community connections and obligations to her advantage, getting job interviews and later boarding with distant relatives, and marrying into the community, but she did not allow it to compromise what she saw as her independence: she drew a line at borrowing money and moving to the U.S.

Professionally, Rosa claims that she didn't notice any great trends and changes in education, as she was too busy teaching and yet in many ways she was experimenting with aspects of education that were ahead of their time. Integrating special needs children in regular classes, multi age peer mentoring, story telling, ESL and bilingual education continue to evolve; in Rosa’s career, they were experiments. One wonders whether there were teachers all over the country trying innovating practices in isolation, unaware that others were making it up as they went along as well. In traditional accounts of the progress of
educational reform “the teacher generally is represented as a functionary rather than a creative figure in the operation of the education system,” (Llewellyn, 2002, p. 17) Even early progressives, while sensitive to the individual needs and talents students, did not think of teachers the same way. “Unfortunately (progressive attitudes) did not seem to extend to individual teachers, who continued to be regarded as constants rather than variables in educational equations, a situation that arguably has continued to the day” (Glegg, 2005, p.22). Rosa’s experience was not functionary, but creative. Rosa used the safety net of family connections, kindly inspectors, and helpful colleagues, but in the end what she is most proud of is “developing new programs.”

Like other women teachers, Rosa negotiated identities, sometimes conflicting, of mother, teacher, “boss”, woman, and person. Rosa says she became a teacher before she became a woman; womanhood, apparently, occurred with marriage, an apparent contradiction of the independent spirit of her career moves. Apparently Rosa saw her personal time, boarding with a series of eccentric but kindly landlords, as transitory. The career, however, was not, and was it not for unplanned motherhood, Rosa might have continued teaching in the public system, and finished her degree, likely rising to administration there as well. Her life challenges the pervasive stereotype of the time of a hapless young lady dabbling in teaching while waiting for marriage. Her postings might have been temporary but the career was not, and that was her choice.

Conflict between home and work life arose in the 1970s, when Rosa dropped out of university because her youngest daughter needed her at home.
Such sacrifices are described matter of factly and without bitterness, as for Rosa, those were the realities of the times, fate that was beyond her control. The pervasive sexism of the time she also takes for granted as “that's the way it was.” “It's not like they were trying to hide it,” she says of the higher pay scale for men into the early 1960s. This ability to conserve appears to be as strategic as her resistances.

Still to be explored would be the relationship between women teachers and innovative teaching methods. It is a common line of thinking that “reform” and better teaching methods come from (male) dominated bureaucracies and “modern” centralization, standardization and efficiency results in better education systems. (Sutherland, 1986, Madison, 1984) Rosa’s experience, however, contradicts that narrative. Her experiments with peer tutoring, multi age grouping, special needs integration and ESL and bilingualism were all devised to meet the needs in front of her. They were not directed, mandated, or taught in a methods course, and they preceded government implementation. Rosa's innovating arose from circumstance and her belief system, which later on made a good fit with Montessori philosophy. She was of course not the only teacher doing this: Marian Brooks, the Dewey-school teacher educator who also started in a one-room school, similarly got rid of the rows of desks. Brooks also got rid of the daily schedule and vocabulary flashcards. A question to explore could be to what extent women’s work in the classroom – and not bureaucratic interventions – has led the way in educational innovation. This is a challenge to the grand linear
narrative of educational progress. Given the current appetite for even further consolidation and standardization, this would be an interesting study.

A further question for oral history work would be the stories of reserve and French system teachers in the Maritimes. Until the 1960s, and continuing now for hundreds of Aboriginal students in band-run schools, teachers were required to teach with inadequate resources, in poorly built schools, and with varying degrees of community support. Acadian teachers were using English textbooks. Jesuits were teaching sciences, including evolution. How were these contradictions managed?

Unlike the picture painted of poor Mabel Jones, Rosa was no wilting flower, and while they landed in strikingly similar first teaching positions, their destinies were formed by their own strengths and weaknesses as individuals as much as by circumstances (Glegg, 2005). While there are common themes among the accounts of young women who taught, particularly meddling trustees and poor working conditions, surviving and even flourishing in these one-room school towns required individual self esteem and pluck. Rosa believes that her feistiness, inherited from her Métis father, was what got her through the worst of times. Rosa’s successful navigation of community politics was something she attributes to her personality, and not to anything she was taught in school, and this was the most challenging part of their early career. Teaching was relatively easy; it’s all the other negotiations, dealing with coworkers, landlords, good classroom management, that requires special skills, which Rosa believes come from within. Like any woman working at the time, Rosa had to put up with
barriers and restrictions, making it up as she went along. Rosa’s story is one of strategic resistance, accommodation, and perseverance. She managed, like so many resilient women and their students, to turn “women's work” into an emancipatory career: one that pulled her, and the man she married, out of rural poverty and into suburban middle class with management jobs and a summer house. Rosa continues to be the most educated person in her generation, and, outside of military service, the most travelled.

At the edge of the revolution in women's ability to choose when and if they would reproduce, Rosa had to make do with the cards fate dealt her, put her career on hold, and later make compromises for her children. While she expresses no regret about this, there is a lingering question about what she and so many other women might have done were it not for becoming mothers.

Talking with Rosa about her life I thought again and again about the similarities between then and now, particularly in my teaching career, which has now evolved into a multi-aged classroom that in some ways looks an awful lot like the learning environment Rosa cultivated so many years ago. This too, is not something I learned in a methods course or at a workshop, but has sprung from experience, circumstances, and strongly held theories about motivation and power. Like Rosa, I like having the freedom to create new programs and curriculum. I too feel the public scrutiny of a woman in a position of authority living and teaching in a small town. I too feel the pressure to “cover the curriculum” rather than meet the students where they are at and help them with what they need. Five thousand kilometres and two generations away, everything,
and very little, has changed. This is not a linear view of progress; perhaps the story is more like a spiral than a line, and we are all somewhere in the same circle.


Dropkin, Ruth. (Ed.). (1975). Recollections of a One Room School House (An Interview with Marian Brooks.) New York: City College Workshop Centre for Open Education.


APPENDIX B

Questions