
The Women of Frontier College

The history of women in Frontier College mirrors the history of women in the field of education in Canada. In itself, this is not surprising. What is surprising is that women played as innovative and exciting a leadership role in the early days of Frontier College as they do today.

A unique Canadian institution, Frontier College is often known more to the “outside” education community than to Canadians. The College is not a college in the traditional sense. It awards no degrees and has no campus other than a head office in Toronto. Its “classrooms” are wherever people meet from coast to coast in Canada. There are no fees or qualifying examinations required to become a student of Frontier College. The only prerequisites are a desire to learn and have contact with a college program or staff member.

The College’s mandate is to work with people generally passed over by the education system. The central curriculum is literacy, which we interpret broadly to mean full participation in the day to day life of the country; that is, full citizenship. The central learning tool is called SCIL — student centered individualized learning. Based on sound research and practice, our experience with SCIL shows that all people can learn. Indeed, given the proper environments and learning conditions, those once labelled as unable, are capable of great things. In operation since 1899, Frontier College changed over the years, but it has always stayed within the philosophy outlined by the founder, Alfred Fitzpatrick. He believed fervently that we should take education to the people and never force people to accommodate themselves to formal institutional education structures. Today “taking education to the people” means working on the streets, in prisons, in hospitals and other institutions as well as in the factories and homes that provided the College’s early classrooms.

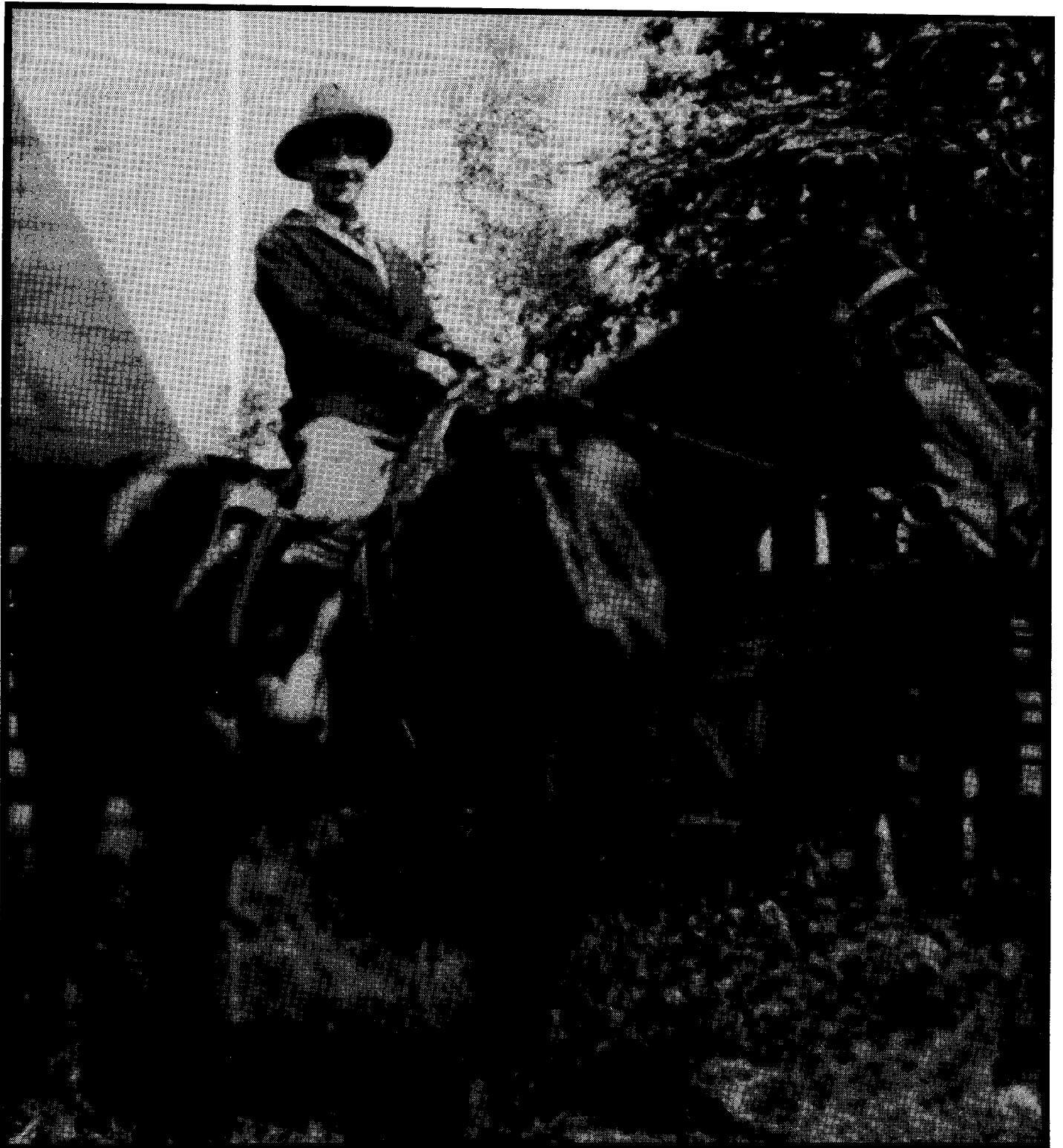
“Go North, young woman,” Alfred Fitzpatrick urged in his book *The University in Overalls*. He believed, even then, that women should also work in the settlements and camps of the Canadian frontier.

As early as 1902, women went into the reading rooms as instructors. By 1903, ten camp schools and fourteen Reading Camps were in existence; some used portable canvas tents, others, permanent log structures. Reading Camp instructors taught the workers in the evening. The concept of the labourer teacher was born in the winter of 1902-03 when a bored instructor near Nairn Center, Ontario decided that rather than wait for the labourers to finish their work and come to the camp in the evening, he would work alongside the workers as a labourer during the day and a teacher at night. The Reading Camp Association thus established a basic tenet of adult education — the Labourer Teacher was to be an active participant in the camp and be a part of the life of the student. In 1920, women worked in fish plants and mills as labourer teachers.

In 1929, the courageous Dr. Margaret Strang worked as a teacher, visitor and social influence among families in the Cochrane district of Ontario. An itinerant doctor, she visited settlements on horseback any hour of the day or night.

Some of the other women Frontier workers of the 1920s included Miriam Chisholme, a mill worker in Bear River, Nova Scotia; Isabel MacKey Kelly [see interview on p. 24], an education worker from Toronto who went to Stalwart, Saskatchewan; and Marjorie Wickwire, another mill worker, who made clothes pins and taught in Bear River with Miriam Chisholme. Jessie Lucas retired from Frontier College in 1963 after over four decades of dedication and hard work as the registrar and as the secretary/treasurer.

BY MARSHA FOREST & JAMES MORRISON



“GONORTH, YOUNG WOMAN,” FRONTIER COLLEGE
FOUNDER ALFRED FITZPATRICK URGED. HE BELIEVED, EVEN THEN, THAT WOMEN
SHOULD ALSO WORK IN THE SETTLEMENTS AND CAMPS OF THE CANADIAN FRONTIER.

After Edmund Bradwin assumed the Principalship of Frontier College in 1932, few women went to work on the frontier, a policy which he and his successor, Eric Robinson, maintained into the 1960s. During the 1970s and 1980s, the policy has been reversed. In fact, Fitzpatrick was years ahead of his time with regards to hiring women and his zeal and zest for social change included everyone. In 1899, with few staff, and hardly any money, he initiated in the wooded wilds of Ontario what has now become Frontier College. Then, the frontier was the isolated camp of the illiterate worker. The underlying core of Frontier College was best summarized by Bradwin in his book *The Bunkhouse Man*, in which he wrote in 1922: "It is a national necessity, that no body of illiterate adults whether on the frontier or crowded in the city, be left without reasonable means to improve themselves." The underlying credo of Frontier College has not changed much from the passionate and almost messianic fervor of Fitzpatrick and Bradwin. Jack Pearpoint, the College President since 1975, defined the city as the new frontier and committed the College to making "illiteracy" an issue in Canada. Our Programs are well-known; HELP, BEAT THE STREET, INDEPENDENT STUDIES, LEARNING IN THE WORKPLACE and READ CANADA.

In 1981, a woman with two crutches, walked into Frontier College and in a small, breathy but mighty voice announced that many of her friends who still lived in back wards of institutions for people with physical handicaps could not read and write. Marilyn Collins, 4'11" tall, was born with cerebral palsy and an extra dose of guts. She herself had made it through university but still had trouble getting jobs. Her friends, many of whom could not speak for themselves and who used symbol boards or sign language, were still alive but barely making it at all.

Marilyn convinced Jack Pearpoint to invest a little money and a lot of time and together they pieced together a small summer project to see what could be done. Marilyn's dream is today the Frontier College Independent Studies Program which does one-to-one and small group tutoring for over 100 students located all over Toronto. It is run and organized by Joy Evans, Anna Pratt and Ed Wadley. One of the students wrote:

I AM A PERSON

by Carol Parsons

All we are saying is give us a chance. To read and write to us, it's fulfilling our dreams. As we walk through the darkness of our life to survive we see, we hear, we talk. I can write now and tell you the real story of what we go through. We all have dreams and goals, but most of the time people never believed me or they'd laugh because they don't know what it's really like out there on the street.

We are human beings too. Our kids are the future. If you want to beat illiteracy and you want our world to be better then help us to help ourselves cause illiteracy can be beaten.

I learned the hard way. I don't want that same way for my kids. I feel like I'm starting over. People helped me and stuck by me when I wanted to give up and made me realize I'm not what all those others said I was. I'm a woman, a wife, a mother, a worker. I'm not a jar so don't label me what I'm not. I can do it. I will do it and as you see I did do it. I wrote this. By helping each other you can do it too.

(Published in *INSIGHTS*, a collection of writings, from the Independent Studies Program. Frontier College Press, 1988.)

Carol Parsons is now on the streets helping kids to read and write so they can finish high school, kick a drug habit or feed their children. That's what the Frontier College of this decade is all about.

About BEAT THE STREETS, much has been written. Now located in three Canadian cities (Toronto, Winnipeg, Regina), BTS was founded by two former students of Frontier programs, Rick Parsons and Tracy LeQuyere. The offices are now directed by three energetic women: Roxanne Cook (Toronto); Donna Beadle (Regina); and Ruby Braff (Winnipeg). The Winnipeg and Regina offices, led by Native women, focus on reaching Native people and especially single women with young children, so that their children will not inherit their mothers' difficulties.

The women at BTS want skills, not social workers. They want dignity and respect for who they are, not lectures

about what they should be. Most of all they want to get off the street and, quite literally, to have a room of their own for themselves and for their children. They want their sons and daughters to get a decent education. They want to read to their children and help them with their homework. They want to finish high school and get a job that pays a fair and decent wage. At BTS they get what they want — respect, skills, and the support they need, when they need it.

Learning in the Workplace is another model of what is possible in any factory to improve the education of the worker. It is run by Miria Ioannou, herself a woman who came to Canada with her parents from Cyprus at the age of ten.

In the workplaces chosen so far, women are eager members of the literacy and learning programs. They cite as their goals wanting to learn to help their own children "get ahead" or "stay out of trouble." As well, many have no control over their lives and want to learn their rights and to be able to read contracts, etc. Many of the women cannot even write out a cheque. Some are abused at home and the tutor becomes a friend and advocate.

At Frontier College, we work with women many people consider challenging: women on the street, in prisons, and in the workplace, women with labels of mental handicap, mental illness. They are into struggling for child care, fair wages, adequate education, peace for their children, food for their families. Their anger is raw, their hurt is real, their needs are acute and intense. Our programs are striving to meet their needs in a way that will give them the dignity and self-respect they so rightly deserve. This is in essence what Alfred Fitzpatrick was trying to achieve among the marginalized workers in isolated camps almost ninety years ago — dignity, self-respect and a measure of control over their own lives.

Marsha Forest is the Director of Education at Frontier College.

James Morrison, Dean of Arts at St. Mary's University in Halifax, has done historical research on Frontier College.