Personal and Professonal Freedom in the Hinterlands: Women Teachers in Northern Ontario

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One of the themes in this oral history project has been the limits and challenges of personal and professional freedom in the lives of women teachers in twentieth-century Ontario. This paper examines the nature of this "freedom" in relation to the experiences of those women who taught in the hinterlands of Ontario; specifically, in small resource-based communities in northern and north-central Ontario. This area includes the cities and towns of Thunder Bay, Sudbury, Sault Ste. Marie, Hearst, Kapaskasing, Timmins, and Kirkland Lake, and surrounding area. Although sparsely populated, and highly reliant on forestry and mining, many of these centres have all the amenities and diversity of any southern Canadian town or city. The hinterlands also includes the resort towns and villages in the Muskoka area, as well as the small towns and more isolated, fly-in communities located in the most Northerly section of the province, where greater numbers of First Nations people (e.g. Lowland Cree) reside.

These northern and north-central communities, although very different from each other, share a social and geographical distance from both the vastly more populous and wealthy urban centres of Toronto and Ottawa, (from where provincial and national political power is dispensed), and from the long settled and densely populated agrarian communities of southwestern Ontario. Geographically the hinterlands are a densely forested land of lakes, muskeg and rocks with occasional patches of arable land. The most northerly section of the province has subarctic terrain and climate.

To various degrees Northern Ontario, particularly the far North, can be seen as politically, socially, and economically marginalized from southern Ontario, sometimes referred to as the heartland of the country. The degree of marginalization and isolation along with the economic and environmental difference offers an unusual, interesting blend of freedom and limits in the lives of Northerners and in the lives of women

teachers, more specifically. This paper concerns the nature and conditions of personal and professional freedom sought and found (or not) by women teachers in these northern hinterlands. Professional freedom was one of several defining elements in the lives of women teachers in Northern and North-central Ontario.

Freedom and Autonomy for Women and Women Teachers

It is not surprising that personal and professional freedom feature in the oral histories of women teachers in our study. The twentieth century saw increasing liberalization of women's social roles, greater economic status, and wider participation of women in the public sphere. It is important to remember that when the century began, women did not have the vote nor did they have easy access to higher education and to professional careers. The majority of women lived and worked on farms or in small urban or rural centres. By the early 1900s teaching became a career that secured respectability and what was seen as appropriate feminine work. Teaching young children was viewed as a simple extension of work already done in the home. However, by the end of the century it would be considered a profession. This did not come easily. In Ontario, as elsewhere, although teaching was a site of increasing professionalization, as women's work, it was also a site of contested professional autonomy in the latter part of the century (Dillabough, 2000). It is a struggle that continues to this day.

With regard to the northern hinterlands, freedom and autonomy are themes that underwrite much of the representation of the Canadian North.The North in the Canadian imagination has been seen as a place of few constraints, of many open doors—an unbounded place where freedom can find expression and the true and natural self can be established (Grace, 2001; Grace, 1997; Francis, 1997; Atwood, 1995; Mitcham, 1983). The dominant image of the North is of a vast and pure land, "where the disenchanted individual can hope to escape from the false utopia in which he seems trapped....where a man can yet pursue a personal dream—where he can hope to be an individual" (Mitcham, 1983, p.17). It has been said that "the wide open spaces of the North [is] where men could go to escape the world" (Phillip, 1967, p. 196);

moreover, that the North "imparts an element of freedom to Canadian life, even for those who never go there, a ''psychic freedom'' that forms the real basis of Canadian life" (Francis, 1997, p. 153).

Whether the North offers *women* actual or psychological freedom is a question not often considered. This paper examines this question with regard to women teachers of twentieth-century Ontario, in the hope that any insight offered might allow "freedom" to be better understood and deployed in the interests of women teachers and their students. I do believe, as Maxine Greene (1988) suggests, "A teacher in search of his/her own freedom may be the only kind of teacher who can arouse young persons to go in search of their own" (p. 14).

The Choice: Teaching in the Northern Hinterlands

Many of the women interviewed for the study were born and raised in small towns and villages in North-central Ontario, and after leaving for teacher training, generally returned to their own or nearby communities. Most though not all of those interviewed had retired in the same communities or at least in the same general area. So, by and large, those interviewed were locals rather than outsiders. In either case, pseudonyms and codes (ACPID000) are used in all citations to protect their privacy. In stark contrast, those who had taught in the far North were all originally from the south and had not stayed long in the North, let alone retired there. One teacher noted that in her experience,

> *There are very few people from outside who grow, retire and live out their lives [in the far North]....There are an awful lot of northerners who, when their children reach high school age, were looking to the south* (ACPID211).

One native teacher explained that often outsiders "couldn't teach native children....Whatever was wrong, they didn't stay around too long" (ACPID147).

Whether they stayed in the community or not, the vast majority of our interviewees stayed in teaching for much of their working lives. Many enjoyed their teaching immensely despite the fact that for many of them,

becoming a teacher and teaching in northern communities was not truly a matter of choice. Like other women, teachers in the hinterlands spoke of material obstacles and psychological wishes and desires that ultimately directed and determined their occupation:

> *You know in a little town in northern Ontario there were not too many career openings for women that we could think about....So teaching was about the best thing that we could consider at the time, you know, in the '40s* (ACPID183).

> *Well, I guess back when I was growing up, teaching, bookkeeping, nursing were the three big things for girls....I was always interested in children and did a lot of babysitting as a teenager .... We came from a very small town, so I suppose our experiences were limited in exploring what else was available* (ACPID043).

> *At that time most girls that I had been to school with were either going to be nurses, teachers or secretaries. There wasn't much encouragement for an alternative career* (ACPID089).

> *My father encouraged me to go the Toronto Normal School. I think we didn't have too much choice. There was teaching, nursing, being a secretary or a salesperson* (ACPID011).

These women's choices were limited by the social and geographical circumstances that narrowed the opportunity to consider and explore possibilities in the small communities where these women lived. Many teachers also spoke of financial considerations:

> *I really wanted to be a nurse or work in a library. But then my parents told me that they could pay only for one more year because my other sister was already in boarding school* (ACPID174).

> *It was instilled in me that I was to be the teacher and when I came to high school age, I wanted to go to university but my father died and at that point my mother didn't have the money*

> *to send me to university but you could go to teacher's college after your high school and you didn't have to pay tuition* (ACPID062).
>
> *There was this perception that education isn't for people of our class: poor people, and a waste of time for women because they're going to get married anyhow* (ACPID211).
>
> *And then as a young woman, I didn't see many opportunities for careers in other areas. I had two brothers and my dad always let me know that any money to be spent for university would be spent on the boys and not the girls* (ACPID042).

The discourse that denied the possibility of women engaging both in marriage and a teaching career continued well into the century as evident in the comments of one recently retired teacher:

> *I went to a private Catholic girls high school and it seemed that the nuns wanted us to either get married or be a teacher or a nurse...I guess it was about 1963, and I was accepted at the University of Toronto, and my dad said, 'I'm not sending you to university. I think you'll be married in a couple of years. You just go off to Teachers College.' And like a good little girl - I was only 17 and I was young, too - off I went* (ACPID030).

Many women teachers interviewed were required formally and/or informally to resign from teaching once they married or once they had children, although often they were rehired if teachers were in demand. One teacher recalled: "The reason I was changing [jobs] is that I got pregnant. I'd resign. Well then, somebody would come after the baby was born and want me to come teach because they needed a teacher" (ACPID057). Another commented that at her school, women received less salary and had to resign once they married: "The principal was a man, *naturally*, and there was one other man and he got more salary than the rest of us because he had a wife....everybody else was a woman and single. They wouldn't have a married woman on staff" (ACPID059).

According to those in our study, gender and class norms and related financial circumstances played a large role in directing material resources towards sons rather than daughters and in directing women into teaching, at least until they married or became pregnant. Moreover, any interest women might have expressed in children, i. e., babysitting, was read as a propensity for teaching. Nonetheless, for much of the twentieth century, some young women who were denied a university education were at least able to attend Normal School. Certainly the tuition waiver, instituted at times when the demand for teachers was critical, opened the profession to a class of women who could not otherwise afford the training.

In the North Country a teaching career was also made more possible by the establishment of Teachers Colleges in North Bay and Thunder Bay. More accessible for some, this was still a long way to go and caused distress for some of the very young women in leaving home, a pain many still remembered. One women wrote: "I took the train to Normal School in September, 1934, and I cried all the way to Port Arthur, now Thunder Bay, at the idea of leaving my family behind" (ACPID033). Leaving home was difficult but nonetheless an adventure, as one retired teacher described it: "So off I went to summer school. Left Kirkland Lake. I'd never been out of the community before. We had never traveled, ever, any of us...never been on a train before...and Toronto was very overwhelming" (ACPID189). Overwhelming and exciting, teaching offered "small town girls" a chance, during their training at least, to experience the world outside their home communities. It was an experience some dreamed of:

> *You see, when I started to teach, I wanted to see the world.....I said: "I'm going to teach two years and then I'm going to move [and teach elsewhere]. I enjoyed meeting new people. When I came to North Bay or Alexandra, I didn't know a soul* (ACPID174).

> *But I've done a lot of traveling and if I was told when I was a kid that I'd ever see the world the way I have, you know I couldn't have believed it. So with teaching I had the money, you know, to go* (ACPID037).

One interviewee chose teaching simply to escape another year of high school: "These teams came around and they asked about going.....to Teachers College so I thought "Oh great, I can get out of school" (ACPID025).

Teaching offered an escape from the physical labour of agricultural or factory work, as one elderly retiree recalled: "My mother didn't want me to be a farmer and work hard, like a horse. So she made sure I went to high school and encouraged me all along the way [to Teachers College]" (ACPID037).

Some women interviewed also spoke of what might be seen as a "calling," an explicable desire or conviction that lead them to be teachers: "I think it [the profession] chose me" (ACPID025).

> *I decided at a very young age I was going to be a teacher.....I wanted to be a teacher, just felt I wanted to do this* (ACPID189).
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> *I always wanted to be a teacher.....ever since I was a little girl. My mother remembers me sitting in my playhouse with all my dogs and my toys, all lined up and teaching them* (ACPID195).

One woman, who began her career in the early 1930s, when asked if she wanted to be a teacher, replied with some hesitation, "Well I think, I don't know, I really can't tell you because I enjoyed teaching so it must have been in me" (ACPID201).

This desire must be understood as organized in the socio-historical circumstances of the times. For these young women, the early desire to teach was surely rooted in traditions, religious teachings, community norms and family expectations.

For some women, what they personally wanted or desired at the time was irrelevant. Securing a job such as teaching was simply a matter of fulfilling one's role or duty in life — take the job and be glad you had it.

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> *one to grade eight was all in the same classroom . . . and so to me it wasn't a big deal. It was to other people who'd gone to schools in the cities because they never knew anything different* (ACPID195).

> *Well, I came back [North] because in Teachers College, [my husband] and I met. We got married the year after, so I went to Kapuskasing with him* (ACPID189).

> *My husband worked in the mines....I was happy to stay in Timmins. I didn't want to teach in the city. I have friends who have taught in the south, but I have never lived out of Timmins(ACPID 201).*

For some who came from elsewhere, the northern hinterlands became home. As one women explained,

> *I moved to Muskoka because I read in the paper about beautiful Muskoka and then when I came here, [laughter] there was only a post office, no store or anything in this little place where I went. It was just bush and bush....But I just loved it....I still enjoy it* (ACPID037).

And for some, the North and North Central communities were experienced briefly before leaving for larger population centres. When asked, "Why did you go north?" the response was:

> *A bit of an adventure....Well they [her parents] weren't too happy but we kept in touch....Only stayed one year. Well it was just more for the experience....There was a lot of transience, and the teaching part of it was fine, but there was nothing very much there to do socially* (ACPID025).

Ethnic and racial factors also influenced where one could get a position. At a time when there were few teaching positions available one teacher remembers that her ethnic background secured a job:

> *And then I knew also that a [nearby] Slovakian settlement was going to be looking for a teacher, and because I'm of Slav descent, (I'm Bulgarian), they offered me a job before they even had a school.* (ACPID201).

On a less positive note, there was a pay discrepancy between male and female teachers and women were cheaper to hire. Race was also related to employment. One Native woman explained that the federal government employed teachers on reserves, and with Native teachers,

> *they didn't have to supply their residence or look after them in any other way....If they hired a white person, they'd have to set up a house and everything but for a Native girl teacher, like me, they just paid my salary....only eighty dollars a month* (ACPID229).

There were better reasons to hire Native teachers, as another teacher indicated:

> *I think being a Native person and teaching your own ——the Native children — that made it easier on them; having some understanding of the difficulties they went through because I didn't speak English either [initially]...[but] I never forgot my language* (ACPID228).

There was the perception, if not the reality, that in the far northerly part of the province, teaching positions were filled by default. That is, with few applicants, less qualified teachers would be hired. One teacher commented:

> *Now back in the '60s most of the jobs were posted in February. Have you heard how huge the job listings were in the Globe and Mail? If you had good qualifications you tended to get jobs in southern Ontario. If you didn't quite match that hiring pool, then you'd move further north* (ACPID211).

But the more northern and more isolated communities did offer women teachers substantially better incomes and that drew some to take

positions there. One woman who had been teaching part-time at a college explained:

> *I had a daughter who was accepted into college, and if I didn't do something then there'd be no money to pay for it. So I applied, got the job and went north* (ACPID211).

The comments offered by women in the study suggest that the choice of occupation and the job location were generally organized by the social and economic circumstances of the times. Although some teachers were able to take on "an adventure", most accepted positions in places that were within the bounds of what was considered practical and commonsensical at the time.

The Challenge

The teachers in our study were generally glad to land a position and entered into the profession with great hope and youthful confidence: "When you're young, you don't feel daunted by too much....I probably would be far less ready to jump into that situation, knowing what I know now, but I think I did a good job" (ACPID056). Another teacher commented, "I was so young and naïïve, I probably didn't know that I wasn't prepared for the job....But I think I was probably as competent as the others" (ACPID030).

Confident or not, the teaching in the hinterlands proved demanding. The responsibilities were immense, particularly in one- and two-room school houses:

> *I had to teach the 8 grades and I have to say I was alone, I mean they talk about prep time and they talk about relief time [nowadays] and here you were by yourself all day in the bush with no relief, everyday, and you do it....Well, you had to want to love that job. I loved it* (ACPID189).

Another retired teacher wrote,

> *Young teachers had to oversee a learning environment that would make today's teacher shudder. We had eight or nine grades all in one room. Think of what we were doing each day*! (ACPID033).

It was hard work with few supplies:

> *I worked late every night and got to school at 7:30 or 8:00 in the morning to get everything on the blackboard, and we had limited resources as far as books were considered. The I.O.D.E. [the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire] used to send books north....[but] a lot of them weren't very satisfactory. Some were discards from the schools down south* (ACPID161).

> *It was a sad little school....It wasn't a log school, it was timbers but we had only a blackboard and the small library, very small library, and we had one big map that you could pull down. We had very little equipment....It was a very poor community, and actually I didn't get paid until Christmas...My salary was $460 a year* (ACPID119).

With the demise of the one-room schools, one teacher stated candidly, "Well, it had to come. I mean who's going to live in the country like that and be responsible for everything? I mean, it's silly" (ACPID106).

The job was demanding, yet many women in the study, especially those who taught in the first half of the century or in the most isolated of areas, also remembered considerable professional freedom:

> *Teaching in a rural school is wonderful because fact is, you're the boss, and I don't mean that you don't have somebody that inspects you ... but the inspector comes a couple of times a year. But you're going to teach the best you can because it's survival, and teaching eight grades is very difficult and you have a lot to cover and you have to work out a scheme that really works* (ACPID052).

This is one of those things that I hated about the school system, was the inspectors. They didn't know dip about what we were dealing with. I wasn't allowed to let children skip a grade. Well, the way I did it, it was seamless. Like if you're finished grade 1 work, you go into grade 2 and so on. And so he'd come along and say, "No, you're not allowed to let the children skip classes, skip grades." I did it anyway, and the same with the exams. Well you weren't called the principal, but yea, you were it. That's it. Whatever happened there was your baby (ACPID106).

You were given a lot of freedom as to what you would offer the students. So I did things that today may seem marginal but were most appreciated by the people of the community. I had shorthand and typing....We obtained enough funds to purchase typewriters...and these children were given this extra... opportunity so that when they completed their grade 10, they were able to go directly into work, but had a skill to offer to the employer. I think in this sense, they were much further than we could expect from a rural area (ACPID053).

I was never good at phys. ed. [physical education] although I enjoyed it....It was harder to keep the kids interested in phys. ed. and do the necessary things when you're in a school that is lacking equipment....We usually went outdoors. We ended up doing things like snowshoeing and skiing in the wintertime, tobogganing... We went on hikes, nature walks and things like that where the kids could identify trees, birds....The kids would plant trees and do things that probably you wouldn't do in another situation or in some schools in the city (ACPID089).

There were no text books in the school so we sort of had to base what we had on what we had brought along with us....The kids were wonderful. The kids were great. We were in a semi-isolated position. We were on a main highway and it wasn't that far from the city but we still had the option of making the classroom more exciting than maybe you would

have in a more structured area (ACPID089).

I started very independent in a three-room school. I could teach children until five o'clock, and it was no problem. I would tell them the day before: "Tomorrow we'll be working until five, tell your parents." And we'd work until five. Now, try and do that.....there is too much bureaucracy now (ACPID054).

The first year I had 43 kids in three grades, and they were probably easier to handle than they are now ....It was a small school: two rooms. The person I was teaching with was great; we still keep in touch, actually. It was a brand new experience. You look back on it: 43 kids in Grades 1,2, and 3 and the grade 1s had never been to school before. It sounds almost terrible, but it wasn't. The first three years up there were great. I think we had more leeway....I think you felt you had more control, maybe, of the whole situation (ACPID043).

As evident in these quotations, many of the women in the study spoke about the heavy responsibility they carried as teachers, but in the same breath often remembered their autonomy with great pleasure. Among other factors, the lack of supervision and surveillance by inspectors, principals and other teachers allowed for more professional freedom. The isolation of the schools and communities conferred such autonomy. However, at the same time, isolation made the job lonely and demanding, both personally and professionally.

Freedom in Isolation

Many of those who taught in the hinterlands spoke about the isolation and the harsh climate:

I didn't stay at home because at the time, because the roads were not always open in the winter, you had to travel by train, and there was only a train once a day.... So I had to stay at a farmer's place, you know. And it was quite an experience

> *[slight laugh] you know, no electricity in their home....We stayed there and walked to the school* (ACPID174).

> *It's a very cold spot in the winter time, and I had to walk about a mile and a half to school and there was no transportation into this area, and the ore train would come by at the end of this long street and the men on the ore train knew I was the teacher, and of course, they, some of them couldn't speak English at all. They stopped the train and they'd take me the other mile, and then I'd just have a little two or three blocks to walk....But you know the winters there were very, very bleak....You'd have a lot of indoor recesses* (ACPID011).

> *I boarded in a house about a mile away from the school... I remember the first year, we had one of those blasts of snow .... We were, I think, six weeks before we were ploughed out...and I remember praying for the snow plough* [laughter] (ACPID204).

> *It was lonely....In the fall my father would drive me to within three miles of the school and then I would walk on a wagon road, with rubber boots and I didn't wear pants then, wore a skirt, and my skirt would have two inches of mud on the hem, you know. And then in the winter I would ski. I skied eight miles into [town] and back again. But I enjoyed the children* (ACPID201).

Many women, southern as well as northern, faced such difficulties getting to the school to teach in the early part of the century. But teaching and living conditions remained a challenge for those in the northern hinterlands through the 1950s and 1960s. One interviewee, describing her first year teaching in 1959, remembered:

> *A couple of the fathers would come and have to lead me out [from the school] at night at 4 o'clock because I couldn't get through the snowdrifts. I had to walk two miles out to the road to catch the bus to get back to Kirkland Lake. The bus would never come in and get me....I got dropped off on the*

> *side of the road, we're talking 30 below zero in Kirkland Lake, walk to my school, start the stove, carry the water and keep the stove going all day, and teach. I think there were at least 20 some children in that school and they were extremely poor....I never had a telephone....no indoor plumbing. I had an inspector come once and he sort of said, 'Well, you know, it's a poor community' and off he went* (ACPID189) .

Another teacher remembered how glad she was when the inspector visited. "I was so really glad to see him. You're glad to see anybody from the outside when you're alone like that in the community" (ACPID161). Another woman who had recently retired from teaching in the far North spoke of how the isolation and darkness was considered mentally debilitating. Teachers would become "bushed" or experience "cabin fever" and need to be pulled out of the community permanently or for a brief holiday in the south (ACPID211).

Independence, Leadership and Professional Development

In the hinterlands, some women teachers took on additional administrative responsibilities simply because there was no one better qualified to do so:

> *We were two women in the school and [in addition to] the general aspect of being in a school that had no telephone and having all these children, I was classed as the principal, being a senior teacher in the school. Senior, because I taught the higher grades, not because I was had the longest teaching experience. Both of us were brand new teachers* (ACPID089).

Another teacher who became a leader in special education in her district commented:

> *I know there's not the freedom today. And I think why I had the freedom is 'cause nobody else knew what to do'...I was always one to find my own way....I went out and found out what the best people were doing and brought it back and generated it myself* (ACPID025).

Far from passive femininity, women teachers in the hinterlands had to display considerable initiative and resourcefulness, if not outright courage in attending to teaching and administrative tasks in situations and circumstances in which there was often little support and no training One teacher lamented:

> *I had no training. I think you should have some training: you should do the vice [principalship]....I had no one. The principal had left town. I had no vice [principal] so again I'm thrown into a situation with no background....The only person that could help me actually, when I was the principal up there, was the secretary, because she was the only one that knew what was going on* (ACPID189).

One Native teacher became an administrator at her school because "the principal got ill" and "I knew the school" (ACPID228).

With the demands of a new job, and increasing professionalization, this teacher, like many other women, spent considerable time upgrading her qualifications. Many women in the study completed degrees and gained additional qualifications by attending summer school or through year-long correspondence courses: "I went to summer school nearly every summer....Every summer I spent all that hot weather down in Toronto" (ACPID058).

When courses were offered locally, the teacher/instructors had difficulty getting to the courses, in part because the vast distances and tight schedule made driving horrendous, as one woman recalled:

> *I was able to give courses, which I don't think anybody else would try to do today because on Monday I taught in Timmins, on Tuesday I taught in Kirkland, on Wednesday I taught in North Bay, on Thursday I taught in Sudbury. It had to be a calling* (ACPID053).

Upgrading one's qualifications demanded considerable commitment from those in the hinterlands, a fact not necessarily appreciated by those

in the south who had greater choice. Moreover, the reception of northern teachers was not always encouraging. One teacher who spent six summers extending her qualifications noted how those from the hinterlands were treated:

> *I was from the North, quote "from the North", and it was almost as if you're just not quite up to what we're doing. You're just not as experienced or as worldly....We, coming from the North, were learning a lot about the South. We were very open to their ideas, but I don't know if they appreciated our ideas....We're talking isolation, we're talking about how difficult it is to come down here to learn, whereas they had to go down the street to go to [summer] school. I was traveling, leaving my family [behind].... It was really important to me* (ACPID189).

In the transcripts of the interviews, it is evident that isolation and marginalization of the hinterlands cut off or limited the contact with educational resources (human and material). The same isolation kept at bay bureaucratic restrictions and surveillance, thus securing more professional autonomy. But at the same time, additional resources could have made professional life and professional growth considerably easier for women teachers in the hinterlands. Without such support, the women replied heavily on their own personal/professional resources and on the community.

The Community: Promoting and Restricting Freedom

As with other women teachers in the twentieth century, those in the hinterlands had to maintain strict decorum. Standards were made clear in Teachers College but also in the community as well. Often, norms were expressed in terms of a woman's attire and living situation:

> *It was made very clear in assemblies [at Teachers College] that we were not allowed to be in certain places in the city...pubs, probably. We had to wear....dresses and nylons, very much a dress code.... The overall feeling was that you had to be very prim and proper* (ACPID043).

> *Skirts of any fashion were fine. I could never understand why mini-skirts were ok and trousers weren't. Obviously as a primary teacher, trousers were wonderful....I mean if you're doing finger painting that's not very practical. And on yard duty, a mini-skirt in Muskoka — it's ridiculous* (ACPID042).

> *Because of the community, we wore dresses. You didn't teach in pants in those days, I meant that was unheard of. So I would wear just tight little skirts and I would wear my pants under and then take them off when I taught and wear them when I was lighting the stove and things like that* (ACPID189).

> *Your personal life was scrutinized....For one of our women teachers, the boarding place wasn't suitable, so she rented an abandoned farmhouse and lived there. And the [school] board said she couldn't live there without a chaperone because she had a boyfriend. So she had to hire a young girl, who wasn't going to school, to be there as a chaperone* (ACPID059).

In the hinterlands as elsewhere, the community had much to say about the new teacher. The Christmas concert was a prime test. According to one teacher, your job depended on it:

> *One of the teacher's duties in those years was to have a Christmas concert and every child must be a part of the entertainment, must have a part to play. If the concert pleased the parents, the teacher would be asked to return to teach the following year* (ACPID230).

Provided the teachers respected decorum, and managed the Christmas concert, they could garner considerable respect and support in the community. According to those in the study, this was particularly true in the early days:

> *It was amazing how the parents appreciated the least little thing you did for them....But back then, in my first school I could have been the queen, you know. I was really*

> *the important person in the village. I'd be invited out to all the homes. The teacher was very important* (ACPID058).
>
> *The teacher was somehow apart from other people. There was great respect for "the teacher." School was actually the community centre. There was no church in this community, just the school* (ACPID106).
>
> *But in the community I was very well known. I taught the parents and the children and then almost the grandchildren, and then I was principal.....I was a very high profile person in the community* (ACPID189).
>
> *It was a small town. We had tremendous support from parents, [and] very local school boards where you knew all the people. It was more a community, family feeling, which sort of got lost in the shuffle later* (ACPID043)

Many of those interviewed believed that the status of teachers dwindled in the last decades of the twentieth century:

> *I think that when I first started teaching, you weren't really questioned about what you did. You were supposed to know what you were doing and I think in this 21st century, and even before that, parents began questioning* (ACPID062).
>
> *I want to state it again....In the beginning as a teacher, I was trusted. And when I left after teaching in a classroom for 33 years, I did not feel that I was trusted. I felt that I was questioned. I felt that I was being monitored....I didn't feel teachers were treated as professionals* (ACPID060).

While professional freedom and autonomy was made possible by the material conditions in which the women in the hinterlands taught-the climate, sparse population, the inaccessibility - these last comments suggest that something much more profound, but much less tangible might have been involved. Freedom is often understood in relation to external or physical conditions, but it may be that internal, more abstract beliefs,

feelings and desires should to be considered. In this instance, freedom and professional autonomy may have been a consequence of the social construction of 'teacher' in society generally and in the community in which one taught, more specifically. What allowed women teachers freedom and a degree of autonomy seems to have been, in large measure, the respect, trust and ultimately the status of women teachers. They had earned their autonomy, first by acquiring training, then by managing classroom challenges and personal isolation, and always by maintaining self discipline and fulfilling social expectations.

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