

Your Opinion

Valuable history or dusty books?



**NORTHERN
INSIGHTS**

by Larry Sanders



Dorothy Shields, the efficient administrative assistant to the director of education, had warned me to expect "a mess." I had phoned to make the appointment two days before. My associate, Peter Sadowy, and I were on a field trip to Kenora, working on the inventory of archival resources of northwestern Ontario for the Centre for Northern Studies at Lakehead University that I've written about previously in this column.

This project has taken us to dank crawl spaces (under the municipal offices in Keewatin, the former coal bin in Knox United Church in Fort Frances), to an abandoned office building now used as storage (the condemned former municipal building in Atikokan), and the worst of them all - an attic carpeted with two inches of dead flies (above the fire hall in Devlin).

This was the first time I had to climb a stepladder. The place was the Kenora Board of Education. Dorothy Shields was exaggerating. The records room was not "a mess" - just dusty and crowded. I hauled a stepladder from the furnace room, climbed to the top shelf, and found records in quite good order. Minutes of now-defunct school boards in Keewatin and Jaffray-Melick were neatly bound in binders, with bright red sticky labels on the binders' spines telling me the dates. An archival inventory-takers dream. Other records were neatly stored in filing boxes, again with labels.

A surprise was waiting for us inside a brown accordion file containing records from the 1920s and 1930s. Some administrator had stored away the board's annual income tax submissions, annual financial statements and annual statistical reports to the Ministry of Education about the number of students, teachers and administrators in the system. The administrator, whoever *he* was, obviously hadn't encountered the issue of women's equality. In the file for the year 1927 was a memo from the administrator to the Ministry of education, giving details of the Board's salary schedule for teachers. There were two categories of teachers — "assistant teachers" and "teachers." Each category had a pay scale based on years of experience. For example, an "assistant teacher" with one year's experience was paid \$850 a year, while the "teacher" with the same experience level was paid \$1,000 a year. That might not sound like much, but consider the year - 1927. Janitors in the same time period were paid \$600 a year. Textbooks cost \$1.50 to \$2. A box of 25 pencils cost a dime.

The administrators sexist practices were revealed by his marginal notes. He had crossed out the words "assistant teacher" at the top of the first pay scale and written in "female teacher" in red ink. The "teacher" label on the second list was crossed out and replaced with "male." In other words, sexism was institutionalized. Females were hired as "assistants" and paid 15 per cent less than a male teacher with the same level of experience. One can only speculate why the labels on the two pay scales were changed in the administrators handwriting on the copy he kept for his own records, rather than on the typed version sent to the Ministry of Education. Did the province get one story, while the truth was something different? Or had someone else come along years later, and added the red pen notes? The answer is lost in the mists of time.

Peter Sadowy and I were digging through the accordion file in the coffee room across the hall from the records room. We moved there to find enough space to write comfortably, sitting down at a table. We made the discovery of the sexist pay schedule during coffee break time—when the room was filled with secretaries and administrators, mostly female. I explained what we had found, but no one seemed surprised. "I wonder how they justified that back then?" one woman calmly asked another. Without any acid or bitterness in her voice, the other woman replied: "I guess they thought men were the bread winners. Women weren't expected to teach for long, before they left to have babies." The conversation between the two women

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