

November 2006

Doris Hinson Pieroth. Seattle's Women Teachers of the Interwar Years: Shapers of a Livable City

Kathy Nickerson
Salve regina University, nickersk@salve.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/jift>

Recommended Citation

Nickerson, Kathy (2006) "Doris Hinson Pieroth. Seattle's Women Teachers of the Interwar Years: Shapers of a Livable City," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Feminist Thought*. Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/jift/vol1/iss1/8>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Salve Regina. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Interdisciplinary Feminist Thought by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Salve Regina. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@salve.edu.

Doris Hinson Pieroth. *Seattle's Women Teachers of the Interwar Years: Shapers of a Livable City.*

Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004. 283 pp. \$30 (hardcover), ISBN: 0-295-98445-7

Reviewed by Kathy Nickerson, Ph.D., Education Department, Salve Regina University, Newport, R.I.

Between 1919 and 1940, some 700 strong and capable women taught in the Seattle Public School System. According to Doris Hinson Pieroth, they were responsible for shaping Seattle into the modern, vital city it is today. *Seattle Women Teachers of the Interwar Years* is an informative and entertaining account of the history and the legacy these teachers created from the turn of the century to the end of World War II.

Although Pieroth's major purpose in writing this book is to document the role teachers played during the interwar years, she also provides a wealth of information about the development of the city of Seattle. The book begins with a discussion of the transformation of Seattle in the late 1870s from a supply depot for gold miners headed for the Klondike and loggers headed to the great redwood forests to a city equipped to face the needs of the twentieth century. Her description of the city's development is well organized and thoroughly researched. Pieroth adds first-hand testimonies and interesting anecdotes whenever possible and elaborates on specific events and periods crucial to the evolution of Seattle into a thriving metropolis. The descriptions are clear and very colorful, and primary accounts, such as personal letters, educational correspondence, and individual teacher testimonies, are used to clarify specific topics. The reader cannot help but imagine the hustle and bustle that occurred as Seattle slowly evolved from a small frontier town into a city capable of supporting a population of thousands.

This book can be read for many reasons. It provides an accurate historical account of Seattle at the turn of the twentieth century, as well as the life of the people who settled there. Educators who are interested in the historical development of the teaching profession in the United States will find it particularly significant. Pieroth traces the evolution of the so-called Seattle Way, the philosophy and pedagogy behind public education in the city of Seattle. The author maintains that the person behind the vision was Superintendent of Schools Frank Cooper, who served Seattle for twenty-nine years and who hired most of the teachers who served during the interwar years. A follower of John Dewey and progressive philosophy, Cooper proposed teaching "the whole child." To that end, he created curriculum and teaching methods to ensure that the children of Seattle were instructed using the Seattle Way, which emphasized sound training techniques, character development, and domestic relations or citizenship. The philosophy behind the approach was "the development of a social being intelligently and sympathetically interested" in others. Cooper also took sole responsibility for the training of his teachers, who were responsible for delivering this curriculum using his teaching methods, and established laboratory schools where teachers could participate in professional development and observe the best teaching practices. In 1917 a Cadet Teacher Program was established, and beginning teachers were guided in using the

Seattle Way and mentored by more experienced teachers during their first year in the classroom.

Most teachers at the turn of the century came from other states in the West, Midwest, and Northeast; yet, despite previous training, each was required to implement “The Way.” Further, whatever their reasons for coming, most stayed because of the opportunities for professional growth and success. Cooper’s policies stayed for decades, and most of the teachers serving in classrooms during World War I and II had been hired and trained by him. The teachers of Seattle were proud of themselves and their superintendent’s accomplishments and were sustained by a corps of fellow teachers who supported one another and, in doing so, added to the cultural enlightenment of the emerging city.

Pieroth describes the teachers of Seattle as self-assured, involved, adventurous, and highly educated. Most went beyond the normal school two-year certificate and earned four-year college degrees at the University of Washington during their careers. These women also lived the Seattle Way by taking an active role in promoting democratic principles in their city as well as in their classrooms. Some went on to fill local political posts, as well as national positions in education and teacher associations. Long teaching tenure marked their careers, and the vast majority of them taught until retirement.

As in many cities around the country at this time, teachers who chose to get married were automatically removed from their positions, a nicer way of saying that they were fired. One can infer from the women’s own writings that many preferred the financial independence, freedom, and respect that teaching afforded them to that of a wife and mother. The reader cannot help but be impressed by the adventurous lives these teachers led at a time when most women were homebound. Many used their entire summer vacation to travel, venturing to Asia, Europe, and other parts of the United States. They usually traveled in groups, but many headed out on their own. Others asked for and were granted sabbatical leaves to seek advanced degrees at prestigious colleges and universities across the country. Those who stayed at home joined teachers’ clubs where they participated in climbing, hiking, canoeing, and camping. The teachers of Seattle were some of the first citizens to own and drive cars. During the year, they were also some of the staunchest patrons of cultural events and had a major influence on the intellectual climate of Seattle.

It is this spirit of adventure and courage that served them well during World War I and II as well as the Great Depression. These teachers persevered during both wars and the Depression even though their salaries were low, their classroom enrollments high, and their ability to formally organize discouraged for many years. Many teachers volunteered and served abroad during both wars. It was the Seattle teachers who collected clothes and handed out food and money during the Great Depression. They stood up for their Japanese students when they and their families were interred in camps during World War II and were the first ones to welcome them back at the end of the war. The author provides many personal narratives to support just how these women modeled and lived the best principles of democracy, according to the Seattle Way. They were resilient women who were able to forge close and lasting relationships with one another due to the

amount of time they had spent together in classrooms across the city. Pieroth credits these remarkable women with shaping the character and values of generations of adult citizens in the city of Seattle.

Seattle's Women Teachers of the Interwar Years is an exceptionally interesting, well-written book with a strong message for educators, but it also relevant in the study of the role of professional women in America at the turn of the twentieth century. All teachers should have a sense of educational history in order to appreciate just how far the profession has advanced. There was a real sense of purpose in the lives of these teachers. This book offers exceptional insight into the formation of the city and the lives of individual teachers, and it allows the reader to connect to these women through the use of personal testimonies, narratives, and letters. The author provides further insight into the life of a teacher by listing both the salary and expenses of a first-year teacher in 1910. The salary/ budget comparison really helped the reader visualize the reality of teaching in the early twentieth century.

Unfortunately, this book leaves the reader wanting more. It would have been helpful if the author could have made comparisons to other public school systems around the nation, especially other large cities on the West Coast like Portland, San Francisco, or Los Angeles. It is hard to judge the quality of the Seattle educational system and the treatment of teachers without this information. Although the author uses the last chapter to identify Seattle citizens who were influenced by their education and the Seattle Way, the reader also wants to know what happened to the Seattle Way. Is it still in existence and if not, why? What has taken its place? Does the Cadet Program still exist? Lastly, in what ways, if any, do the present teachers of Seattle recognize the contributions made by their predecessors during the interwar years?

Many books have been written to praise the accomplishments of teachers, but few attribute the development of a city to their lasting influence. Doris Hinson-Pieroth has managed to create such an account in *Seattle's Women Teachers of the Interwar Years*.