

The Founding of the BC Teachers' Federation; January 4, 1917

By Ken Novakowski

An historic event for BC teachers and for public education in the province occurred on January 4, 1917 when teachers from a handful of BC communities gathered at King Edward High School in Vancouver to establish the BC Teachers' Federation. This first annual general meeting of the new organization approved a constitution, elected a president and executive and passed a motion instructing the new executive to "confer with Council of Public Instruction on educational matters". This was an early indication of teachers' interest in curriculum and related professional matters, something the BCTF has continued to pursue throughout its one hundred years of existence.

Prior to this historic development in BC education, teachers only met with each other through the Provincial Teachers' Institute and locally organized teacher institutes. However, the Superintendent of Education, officials of the Education Department, Inspectors, Municipal inspectors and others who were in control of the education system also belonged to and participated in these institutes. Hence, many questions of direct and vital interest to teachers could not be discussed at Institute gatherings and in any event meetings of the institutes tended to be held very infrequently, often only once a year.

Given this situation, a number of teachers began to envision a new organization where teachers could discuss matters of direct concern to them like the economic and financial status of the teacher. Soon local associations of teachers began to form in the larger urban areas where they discussed issues concerning the welfare of teachers. J. George Lister, who presided over the Vancouver Teachers' Association, initiated an organizing meeting of his and other local teacher organizations at Dawson School in Vancouver on October 28, 1916. The main purpose of this meeting was to discuss the organization of a provincial federation of teachers. Teacher representatives from Vancouver, Point Grey, South Vancouver, North Vancouver, and Victoria attended this meeting and set out to organize the founding meeting of a provincial teacher organization in BC.

The founding meeting established the objectives of the new organization as part of its constitution. They were:

- To foster and promote the cause of education
- To raise the status of the teaching profession in BC
- To promote the welfare of the teachers of BC

Writing about the Federation's founding some twenty years later, Harry Charlesworth, a Victoria teacher who in 1919 went on to become the first General Secretary of the new organization, stated: "It was an organization of the teachers, by the teachers, and for the

teachers.” The new Federation was to be a federation of local associations and the founding meeting admitted the following associations to membership in the BCTF:

- Vancouver Teachers’ Association
- Vancouver Women’s Educational Club
- South Vancouver Teachers’ Association
- Point Grey Teachers’ Association
- New Westminster Teachers’ Institute
- Victoria Teachers’ Association
- Chilliwack Valley Association

BCTF membership was voluntary and would remain so for thirty years. Membership was available to all teachers regardless of their sex, religion or race. However, in its early years, BCTF membership to most teachers came through their memberships in local associations that affiliated to the BCTF. Even though a special category was created to allow individual teachers to join where no local association existed, the fact that the Federation was essentially an organization of affiliated locals hindered its capacity to act effectively when locals needed significant assistance such as during the Victoria and New Westminster strikes of 1919 and 1921 respectively.

A year after the founding AGM, the second BCTF AGM had a motion presented by Mrs. Templar dealing with the question of “Equal pay for equal work, with equal privileges for women” and asked the Federation to endorse the principle therein expressed.

The minutes of the 128 AGM record “An interesting debate followed both for and against the principle involved. The President, however, pointed out that the Constitution did not make provision for dealing with such questions. It was, therefore, decided to have the question brought before the Federation at another time, after proper provision had been made by an amendment to the Constitution”.

The following year on July 12, 1919, the BCTF was incorporated as a society under the provincial Societies Act to provide it with a legal framework. It has remained a society to this day, although it is now also recognized as a union under the Labour Code.