



Helena Gutteridge

Film Summary: This film highlights the work undertaken by Helena Gutteridge, a tailor, suffragette, politician, and advocate for working-class women in the early decades of the 20th century.

Curriculum Application:
Social Studies 10 and Social Studies 11

The Essential Question: What were the interrelationships in BC among important social reform movements, including the women’s suffrage movement, the peace movement, the social democratic movement, and the trade union movement?

Summary of the Lesson Activities

1. Focus questions for the vignettes provide a short lesson option. (15 minutes)
2. Small group activity to develop an understanding of the key vocabulary and terms.
3. Small group activity to examine assigned focus questions.
4. Mock interview with Helena Gutteridge and accompanying writing assignment
5. Optional questions for further research and discussion.

Learning Objectives

1. To learn about the achievements of Helena Gutteridge.
2. To appreciate the complicated and occasionally contradictory nature of political and social attitudes in particular historical contexts.
3. To appreciate that, while the struggles of working people ought to have been unified, there were divisions based on contemporaneous bigotry.
4. To understand the well-established (but little known) history of women’s union organizing and the political achievements of one woman, Helena Gutteridge, in British Columbia and to connect those with other socially progressive groups and activities.

Materials and Resources Provided

- [“Helena Gutteridge” Episode 2- Working People – A History of Labour in British Columbia](#)
- Lesson Activity 1: Backgrounder on Helena Gutteridge
- Lesson Activity 2: Vocabulary Activity
- Appendix 1: Teaching Suggestions and guiding questions

Additional Suggested Materials

- [“These were the reasons...” Chapter 7 Fighting for Equity” The 30’s, the War Years, and a Shoreworker’s Story](#)
- For additional vignettes and lessons that deal with gender roles see [Mattie Gunterman](#), [Trouble on the Line](#), [Helena Gutteridge](#), [The Professionals](#), [Connie Jervis](#), [Margaret Rutledge](#), [Home Front](#), [Work Front](#), [Bea Zucco](#) and [By Women, For Women](#).

Vignette Questions

1. Where did Helena Gutteridge emigrate from and in what year did she arrive in Vancouver?
2. What right did Helena strongly believe that women should have?
3. In 1917, women in British Columbia achieved the right to vote and hold public office with what restriction?
4. What economic issues for women did Helena work to improve?
5. Together with the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council Helen was successful in lobbying for what law that was first introduced into BC in 1918?

Lesson Activities

1. Have students work in small groups to define the vocabulary and terms (Lesson Activity 2). Debrief and discuss with the whole class.
2. In small groups (each group might deal with a single question) have students discuss and respond to the Seven Quick Questions and then debrief with the whole class. (Appendix 1)
3. This activity will likely require on-line or library research to provide enough information to respond to each significant question or issue. Divide students into small groups and assign one or more of the questions / issues to each. (Appendix 1). Have each student in each group keep detailed notes of points made and answers/ responses developed during group discussion. Students will present ideas, findings and responses to the whole class for further examination.
4. Write the word ORGANIZER in the center of a clean page, using all upper case letters. Then, using no more than three words for each idea, note on straight lines, everything about the work of Helena Gutteridge that is relevant to the central word. Connect with line and arrows to show relationships.
5. Role Playing Activity: In addition to reading the backgrounder on Helen Gutteridge, students and pair up and create an interview of the subject. (Lesson Activity 1)

Credit: Teaching Activities and Lesson Plan developed by Marcy Toms

Lesson Activity 1

Lesson: Helena Gutteridge

Helena Gutteridge: Unionist, Peace Activist, Politician and Tailor

A. In 1937, Helena Gutteridge was elected Vancouver's first woman City Councillor (alderman in the usage of the time). In many ways, this was a remarkable achievement. Some Canadian women had received the franchise a scant 20 years earlier, while others, of non-European heritage, had yet to obtain that right. As a dynamic leader of the British Columbia women's suffrage movement, Gutteridge played a key role in achieving that first victory. As well, she was a militant and outspoken labour activist and leader. She was also a member of the newly founded national left wing political party, the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) the precursor to the New Democratic Party (NDP). The same year as she was elected, a new civic party called the Non-Partisan Association (NPA), founded by business interests and members of Vancouver's 'old guard' of well-to-do families, aimed to prevent the CCF from gaining any ground on Vancouver's civic scene.

Gutteridge had come to Vancouver from England in 1911, already a militant suffrage activist, trade unionist and tailoress who had helped organize laundry and garment workers. She had begun her working life in a London clothing department, using her wages to pay for school and qualifying as a teacher with added credentials in hygiene and sanitary science. London, at the turn of the century, was a lively and diverse crucible for intellectual, artistic and literary experimentation and for equally exciting political debate. Women demanded the vote. And, despite restrictive long skirts and attitudes that insisted they be 'ladylike,' suffragists would soon be throwing hammers through shop windows, getting arrested and going on hunger strikes! Fiction writers explored real world issues and some used their pens to express a desire for social change. Gutteridge's worldview, as well as a strong dedication to the cause of Votes for Women, was formed in this heady environment.

B. When she arrived in Vancouver, an economic slump made life hard for workers, but as a skilled tailor, she got a job and soon threw herself into organizing unemployed women. For 8 years, she worked for the franchise, for better wages and working conditions for women, to establish a Minimum Wage Act, and to ensure world peace. In October of 1919, however, her life took a detour when she married Oliver Fearn. He was 26, she, 40. They set up life together in the Fraser Valley, becoming poultry farmers. Helena, as was her inclination, became enthusiastically involved in the political and social life of her new rural community.

By the early 1930s, however, Helena and Ollie Fearn's marriage had failed and she was back in Vancouver, as well as back in the thick of political activity. And what a time it was for her return. In 1932, many of Canada's various socialist groups had, along with radical farmers and Christians who preached the social gospel, formed a new federal political party. It was going to change Canada's capitalist economy to one based on the principles of modern social democracy, a co-operative commonwealth for all. And, of course, Helena Gutteridge joined the Co-operative Commonwealth

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Federation! Right away, she started to travel the province, educating people about the new party and its vision and seeking to gather support.

At this time, despite achieving a limited right to vote, very few women had formal political experience. Moreover, their ambitions were further restricted by the prevailing gender norms. Thus, women formed a distinct minority of those even choosing to run for elected positions. In fact, most Vancouver women who did enter the local political fray did so for seats as School Trustees, relying on their experience as mothers in Parent-Teacher organizations.

C. As a candidate, Gutteridge certainly stood out and, as she had for years, she swam against the tide. Although she had married, she had no children of her own. Despite this, however, she was known to refer to “women’s special qualities” and had suggested that the vote would help women take better care of their families and of the world at large. (1.) For Gutteridge and for many of her sisters in the suffrage movement, the vote would be a crucial step in protecting against social inequality. For working class women, voting as a block, would help eliminate sweated labour, the undervaluing of women’s work and prostitution resulting from poverty. (2.)

Her interest in caring for the wider world was obvious, too, in her two decades of active support for the cause of peace. Immediately following World War One, she had been an early member of the Vancouver branch of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). This global force had been established in 1915 in the Netherlands, and by the late 1930s was coming to terms with the rise of fascism in Europe. While many peace groups maintained an absolute dedication to pacifism, the WILPF was, perhaps, more realistic than that, recognizing that fascism might require robust, even military, engagement. Not surprisingly, a WILPF colleague described Helena Gutteridge as blunt, forthright and determined, with a sophisticated view of the world. (3)

D. These personal characteristics, as well as her ability as a powerful public speaker who could neither be bullied nor intimidated, served Gutteridge brilliantly in her key role as a labour organizer, union negotiator and political firebrand. She had worked among unemployed women in 1914 who, she said wanted work, not charity. That project evolved into another, which provided housing for fifty single women. And it also stretched to strong advocacy provincially for higher wages for women, among whom were store clerks who might work for 77 hours a week and earn only \$12.75 in total. She saw that “Low wages, long hours and miserable working conditions become a threat to everything unions had won.” (4) Walsh) But, as was common even among rank and file workers, labour leaders and socialist politicians, not all workers were equal in Gutteridge’s estimation. In 1915, she appeared at Vancouver City Hall to argue that Oriental (sic) hotel workers ought to be replaced by white women. (5.) She said:

I have no color prejudice, but I think in this case and in the interest of efficient white female labor in this city the board might put a while labor clause granting of hotel licenses, so that work being done be Chinese help to-day, maybe done by white women who are now out of employment. (6)

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Helena Gutteridge's biographer, Irene Howard, suggests that even given the bigoted social reality of the day, "For a woman with Helena's strong sense of social justice and human kinship ... this is a surprising statement." (7) Seeing conflict between support for all workers, including those harmed by racism, and preferential treatment for white women workers, she chose the latter. As Howard points out, Gutteridge was first and foremost a trade unionist who adhered to an anti-Asian policy, even though socialist ideology declared "... the system (was) the enemy, not the Chinese or Sikh worker." (8.)

E. Perhaps to a degree, Gutteridge's work during World War Two showed some growth away from bigotry. In the fall of 1942, just months after Canadians of Japanese background were ordered interned and their property was confiscated, she was hired to help administer the Lemon Creek relocation Project. 250 shacks were built to house 're-located' internees, away from the coast, in the forests of the Kootenays. Helena Gutteridge was the Welfare Manager. By all accounts she was competent and kindly, taking on the 'higher ups' to argue for improved conditions. She was also, likely, disturbed by the distastefulness of counseling distressed and dislocated people under constant pressure either to move to the east or, after war's end in 1945, to immigrate to Japan. In the early 1980s she was remembered with fondness by some of the younger internees, and one recalled that, by the spring of 1945, when Gutteridge resigned from Lemon Creek, "she'd had enough." (9.) Howard 239)

Although Helena Gutteridge was not re-elected to Vancouver's City Council, she always demonstrated a tremendous faith in the power of women to bring about social and political change. It could hardly have been otherwise, given her personal accomplishments and her total dedication to activism. Her views reflect her understanding that women would benefit as individuals from public life; their work would not only be for the purpose of helping others, whether in trade unions or among the unemployed and dispossessed, but also to enhance their own lives. "Women are part of the larger community. They owe it to themselves to develop their abilities and to work for a better peaceful world." (10.) she said in an interview three years before her death in 1960. Since her pioneering victory, many women have become City Councillors in Vancouver and provincial leaders of political parties, and each of them – whether she knows it or not - owes a debt to a young English woman who saw that there was, indeed, power both in a union and in uniting to promote other, related causes.

Citations

1. Susan Walsh, SFU MA Thesis, 1983.
2. Ibid.
3. Marcia Toms, SFU MA Thesis, 1993.
4. Walsh.
5. Irene Howard, Helena Gutteridge, The unknown reformer. 1992.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Howard, 239.
10. Pacific Tribune, March 8th 1957.

Optional Role Play Activity

Students will work in pairs in this activity. Having read the article, students will alternately assume the role of

- a. An interviewing reporter
or
- b. The “Outspoken lady politician and no-nonsense unionist, Helena Gutteridge.”

First, have students work together to compile a list of questions (say 10, with specific instructions to use Why? How? Describe, For what reasons? as prompts) for an article to suit the given title for Helena and then alternate so student reporters interview each other. Then, each student will write an article based on their notes. Consider posting the articles on your school website or a blog.

Lesson Activity 2

Lesson: Helena Gutteridge

Vocabulary Exercise: Define the following terms from the vignette and the backgrounder on Helena Gutteridge

Helena Gutteridge Vignette Vocabulary

1. immigrant
2. radical
3. suffrage
4. living wage
5. working conditions
6. women's rights
7. suffragettes

Additional Vocabulary from the backgrounder on Helena Gutteridge (Lesson Activity 1)

1. franchise
2. tailoress
3. hygiene
4. sanitary science
5. social gospel
6. co-operative commonwealth
7. gender norms
8. sweated labour
9. fascism
10. bigotry
11. social justice

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Vocabulary: Groups/Laws from the Helena Gutteridge Vignette

1. Vancouver Trades and Labour Council
2. Minimum Wage Act

Vocabulary: Groups/Laws from the Helena Gutteridge backgrounder

1. CCF
2. NDP
3. WILPF
4. NPA

Lesson Activity 2

Lesson: Helena Gutteridge

Teaching Suggestions: Suggestions for addressing the questions

The following questions are either for individuals or for groups of students to read, to discuss, to record the key points in that discussion and finally, to report back to the whole class. There are many ways of doing this, so use the following as a couple of guides.

Each student should keep her /his own notes according to the protocol used in the classroom. A two or three column model would be useful here.

Organize the reading and discussion so that each group has a designated organizer/chairperson, a formal recorder and a presenter. Another role might be that of perception checker, to ensure that group members understand the material. Given class size and time constraints, reading will likely have to be silent.

Or, the article is divided into subsections A-E to provide for a jig saw approach to reading and presenting information within both 'expert' and 'home' groups.

There are six "quick" questions, allowing for assignment to groups in any way and in any numbers that the teacher chooses.

Teacher's Resource: Seven Quick Questions

1. Some women achieved the right to vote in 1917. Who were they? What specific groups were excluded? What reasons might have been given at the time for this exclusion?
2. What was "radical" in 1911 about the idea that women should have the right to vote?
3. Provide some reasons for women's wages being low, both during the time when Gutteridge was organizing and now.
4. Interpret the following remark. "The tide of suffrage is coming and the idea of holding back the wave won't work."
5. Helena Gutteridge once said: "Women are working for what can hardly be called a living wage. A dying wage is more like it." This remark could be regarded as inflammatory. What might Gutteridge have intended to accomplish with this particular word choice?
6. Even in 2014, nearly one hundred years after the passage of BC's Minimum Wage Act in 1918, debate about such legislation persists.
 - a. What is the current minimum wage in the province?
 - b. Provide reasons for supporting such an Act. Refer both to the past and to the present.
 - c. Why might some politicians oppose minimum wage legislation, both in the past and at present?
 - d. Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each position.

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7. How are Helena Gutteridge's main causes; unionism, the peace movement, votes for women, and the politics of the CCF, related? You might use a chart or diagram, organizing it to show the relationships.

Teacher's Resource: Significant Questions for further research, examination and discussion.

1. Although it may be shocking to 21st century British Columbians, most trade unionists in the province in the early 1900s favoured an Anti-Asian policy. What might have motivated this position?
(Fears? Ignorance? Ideas current in the era? Provide details.)
2. At the turn of the twentieth century, the worldwide labour movement used a stirring slogan to rally workers. It was "An injury to one is an injury to all." How, in the face of this expression of solidarity, could labour leaders justify the Anti-Asian policy and the injuries it invariably resulted in?
 - a. What forces eventually helped to overturn such a policy? How?
3. Helena Gutteridge often defied the restricted and unequal status of women, from the 1920s right through to the late 1950s. Yet she also talked about women's "special qualities." Using your own knowledge as a starter, list / describe some these "special qualities." How might such qualities have a. advanced / contributed to or b. hurt her various causes? A challenging question here is "Where do these 'special qualities' come from? Are they entirely constructions of particular societies, or are they innate? Describe some 'qualities' still attributed to women and discuss the challenging question.
4. From the point of view of an Asian hotel worker, dispute the Anti-Asian advice given by Gutteridge in her presentation to Vancouver City Council in 1915. Prepare a speech and then, deliver it to either the class or a small group.
5. Describe the London experiences that might have helped Helena Gutteridge in the many kinds of work she did in Vancouver. How precisely, did they help?
6. In what specific ways did joining a union advance women's equality?
7. Many women's suffrage activists claimed that getting the vote would help protect women against social inequality, including "prostitution arising from poverty." How might this work? This particular example remains a significant issue today. Describe and explain what is going on and why.