

Canada Between the Wars



PROHIBITION AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN

A. Prohibition



- the making and selling of alcohol was forbidden by law between 1915 and 1925 in various provinces
- the women's temperance movement had promoted prohibition since 1827
 - blamed alcoholism for social problems,
 - family violence,
 - poverty
- by the 1870s, hundreds of temperance groups formed to fight for prohibition
- leading organization was the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU)
- many members of these groups were subject to abuse and criticism for their work
- politicians were eventually forced to take action reluctantly
- prohibition was very unpopular and did lead to organized crime



Blind Pig Raided

Liquor barrels emptied into the lake at Elk lake, , during Prohibition

B. Bootlegging



- some people drank illegally, some go to other countries to buy liquor
- others resorted to **bootlegging** or a
- prohibition in the US lasted until 1933
- “rum-running” took place where bootleggers crossed the border in various ingenious ways
 - ships from the Maritimes and Quebec ran the rum
 - Cars raced across the frozen great lakes
- alcohol was the largest illegal export to the US
- prohibition led to the widespread power and wealth of organized crime families – Al Capone as an example in Chicago
- since prohibition, alcohol is still controlled by the government through stores and distribution



C. The Role of Women



- the role of women was changing rapidly
- the fashion industry promoted skinny “boyish” women with short skirts, pants and a short “bob” haircut – “flappers”
- fashion indicated the greater freedom of movement and time for women
- jazz music was sexually provocative



- women aspired for more equality, political power and social programs
- Agnes Macphail, elected in 1921, was the only woman MP until 1935



- for women doomed to stay at home, some new consumer goods made lives easier: refrigerators, vacuums, washing machines (if you could afford them!)





- unmarried women had limited career opportunities
 - nursing and teaching
- Only a rare few women became doctors, lawyers, professors or engineers, most schools barred women from the professions
- women and business were limited to secretary, telephone operator or sales jobs

D. The Persons Case



- 1929: Emily Murphy (a suffragist) was appointed magistrate (judge) to hear cases involving women in Alberta
- her appointment was challenged by another lawyer who said only “persons” could hold office
- women were not considered “persons” under constitutional law





- the Supreme Court of Alberta ruled in favor of Murphy, she could be a judge
- Murphy and four other women challenged Prime Minister King to appoint a woman to the Senate and clearly define the term “persons” under constitutional law
- in April 1928, the Supreme Court of Canada decided that women were not “persons” under the constitution
- these women appealed to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council of London in Britain (still our highest court yet)



- On October 18, 1929, the five Lords of the Judicial Committee came to the unanimous conclusion that "the word 'persons' in Section 24 includes both the male and female sex...." According to them, the exclusion of women from public office was "a relic of days more barbarous than ours."
- these women were known as the **Famous Five**

- Nellie L. McClung (1873-1951), novelist, journalist, suffragette and temperance worker.
- She was a member of the Alberta legislature, the only woman on the Dominion War Council, and the first woman on the CBC Board of Governors.



- Louise McKinney (1868-1931), politician and temperance campaigner.
- She was president of the Dominion Women's Christian Union and elected to the Alberta legislature in 1917 as representative of the non-partisan league.



- Emily Murphy (1868-1933), instigator of the "Persons" Case, writer and first woman magistrate in the British Empire.
- She pioneered married women's rights, was national president of the Canadian Women's Press Club, 1913-1920, vice-president of the National Council of Women and first president of the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada.



- Irene Parlby (1868-1965), suffragette and politician.
- She was elected president of the women's branch of the United Farmers of Alberta in 1916 and became a member of the Alberta legislature in 1921. She was still a member of Parliament at the time of the "Persons" Case.



- Henrietta Muir Edwards (1849-1931), journalist, suffragist and organizer, fought for equal rights for wives, mothers' allowances and women's rights.
- She started the Working Girls' Association in Montreal in 1875, a forerunner of the YWCA. Later, while living in Alberta, she compiled two works on Alberta and federal laws affecting women and children.



- See Backgrounder on Canada's First Woman Senator.
- **Cairine Wilson (1885-1962)**

