

# *The Photographic Record of the Canadian YWCA, 1890-1930: A Visual Source for Women's History*

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From its inception as a field of legitimate historical enquiry, women's history has been plagued by a lack of surviving records produced by women. This problem has been aggravated in recent years by a shift from the study of "women worthies" to a focus on anonymous women, including factory workers, domestic servants, and housewives.<sup>1</sup> In the catalogue accompanying a recent exhibit of documents presenting the history of women in Canada, Jeanne L'Espérance comments:

Finding documents which can illuminate the lives of women, the "neglected majority" in our society, is not easy. Traditionally, archives have preserved the records of elite men who lived public lives of distinction. Only in the last twenty years have historians turned to the serious investigation of the lives of the poor, the powerless and those who lived privately within the family. Women, whose lives traditionally have been confined to the private sphere, and who were barred from acquiring education, employment and political power, make up a large portion of this group. To find documents in traditional repositories about their lives takes some ingenuity....<sup>2</sup>

Women's historians have engaged in a continuing dialogue on the problem of sources and have shown a particular openness to the use of non-traditional approaches and source

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\* I would like to thank the many archivists and librarians across the country who generously responded to my requests for assistance in locating photographs of the YWCA. I am also indebted to Andrew Rodger for commenting on a previous draft of this paper and for conversations about turn-of-the-century commercial photographers.

- 1 The term "women worthies" was first used by Gerda Lerner in "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges," *Feminist Studies* 3, no. 1-2 (Fall 1975), pp. 5-14. Three useful surveys of recent trends in Canadian women's history are: Eliane Leslau Silverman, "Writing Canadian Women's History, 1970-82: An Historiographical Analysis," *Canadian Historical Review* 63, no. 4 (1982), pp. 513-33; Margaret Conrad, "The Re-Birth of Canada's Past: A Decade of Women's History," *Acadiensis* 12, no. 2 (1983), pp. 140-62; and Sylvia Van Kirk, "What Has the Feminist Perspective Done for Canadian History?" in Ursula Martius Franklin et al., *Knowledge Reconsidered: A Feminist Overview* (Ottawa, 1984) p. 46-58.
- 2 Jeanne L'Espérance, *The Widening Sphere: Women in Canada, 1870-1940* (Ottawa, 1982), pp. 1-2.

materials.<sup>3</sup> Working within the limitations of traditional written sources that reflect the biases of male observers, some historians have recently demonstrated that a sensitive and imaginative re-reading of such materials can, in fact, yield a great deal of information about women's experiences and perceptions.<sup>4</sup> Others have undertaken the retrieval and reconsideration of women's "private chronicles," including numerous laconic accounts of the daily household routine, documents traditionally regarded as historically insignificant by both historians and archivists.<sup>5</sup> Still other women's historians have elected to explore the use of non-written, non-traditional sources and have played an active role in the attempt by social historians in recent decades to redefine the notion of what constitutes an appropriate and legitimate historical source. Oral history, for example, has been enthusiastically embraced by scholars engaged in documenting the experience of Canadian women in the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> A few pioneers have also begun to turn a critical eye to such objects as clothing, bedding, furniture, and household appliances, aspects of our material culture that promise to provide us with significant new insights into the female past.<sup>7</sup> Visual sources, however, remain curiously neglected by historians of women. To date, no published scholarly study of the historical experience of women in this country has based its conclusions primarily on visual evidence.

Among the richest of many visual sources untapped by historians of women are the thousands of photographs of nineteenth- and twentieth-century women now held in Canadian archives and related institutions. Women's historians, of course, are not unique in exhibiting a certain reluctance to draw upon the photographic source. It is only very recently that a few historians have begun to give the photograph serious consideration as a primary source, after years of regarding it as little more than an interesting visual accompaniment to a scholarly text, an afterthought to the "serious" research in traditional

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3 Veronica Strong-Boag, "Raising Clío's Consciousness: Women's History and Archives in Canada," *Archivaria* 6 (Summer 1978), pp. 70-82; Beth Light and Alison Prentice, eds., *Pioneer and Gentlewomen of British North America, 1713-1867* (Toronto, 1980), pp. i-ii; Nadia Fahmy-Eid and Micheline Dumont, eds., *Maitresses de maison, maîtresses d'école: Femmes, famille et éducation dans l'histoire du Québec* (Montréal, 1983), pp. 7, 12-13; Marie Lavigne and Yolande Pinard, eds., *Travailleuses et féministes: Les femmes dans la société québécoise* (Montréal, 1983), pp. 9-12; Alison Prentice and Susan Mann Trofimenkoff, eds., *The Neglected Majority: Essays in Canadian Women's History, Volume 2* (Toronto, 1985), p. 9; Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman, eds., *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History* (Toronto, 1986), pp. 4-5. See also, Eva S. Moseley, "Sources for the 'New Women's History,'" *American Archivist* 43, no. 2 (1980), pp. 180-90.

4 For example, Susan Mann Trofimenkoff, "One Hundred and Two Muffled Voices: Canada's Industrial Women in the 1880's," *Atlantis* 3, no. 1 (Fall 1977), pp. 66-82; and Sylvia Van Kirk, "*Many Tender Ties*": *Women in Fur Trade Society* (Winnipeg, 1980).

5 For example, Margaret Conrad, "Recording Angels: The Private Chronicles of Women from the Maritime Provinces of Canada, 1750-1950," in Prentice and Trofimenkoff, eds., *The Neglected Majority, Volume 2*, pp. 41-60.

6 Recent examples include Eliane Leslau Silverman, "Women's Perceptions of Marriage on the Alberta Frontier," in David C. Jones and Ian MacPherson, eds., *Building Beyond the Homestead: Rural History on the Prairies* (Calgary, 1985), pp. 49-64; Georgina M. Taylor, "The Women ... Shall Help to Lead the Way": Saskatchewan CCF-NDP Women Candidates in Provincial and Federal Elections, 1934-1965," in J. William Brennan, ed., *Building the Co-operative Commonwealth: Essays on the Democratic Socialist Tradition in Canada* (Regina, 1984), pp. 141-60; and most of the articles on the experience of immigrant women in Jean Burnet, ed., *Looking into My Sister's Eyes: An Exploration in Women's History* (Toronto, 1986).

7 For example, Hilary Russell, "'Canadian Ways': An Introduction to Comparative Studies of Housework,

written sources.<sup>8</sup> While women's historians readily acknowledge the legitimacy of the photograph as a document, they share with their colleagues in other fields an uncertainty as to how to approach and interpret it. Professional historians who have acquired considerable skills in the interpretation and analysis of written documents have, for the most part, received little training in the precepts and methodology of "visual history," a subject recognized by few university history departments. Women's historians, however, are doubly hampered by the burgeoning scholarship on the history of photography that virtually ignores women,<sup>9</sup> and by archival cataloguing systems that, reflecting an earlier historiography concerned primarily with documenting the activities of men in the public sphere, are sometimes not conducive to research on the experience of women.<sup>10</sup> It is thus understandable, if regrettable, that Canadian women's historians have been reluctant to undertake major studies that would exploit the full potential of the photographic source.

As a contribution to the preliminary process of identifying the types of surviving photographs of Canadian women and their potential uses for historians, this paper will focus on photographs documenting the activities and facilities of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), assembled from public and private collections across the country as part of an ongoing research project on the history of the YWCA in Canada between 1870 and 1930.<sup>11</sup> The visual records of a prominent women's organization such as the YWCA provide an appropriate starting point, for it was on the written records of such organizations that some of the earliest historical studies of Canadian women were

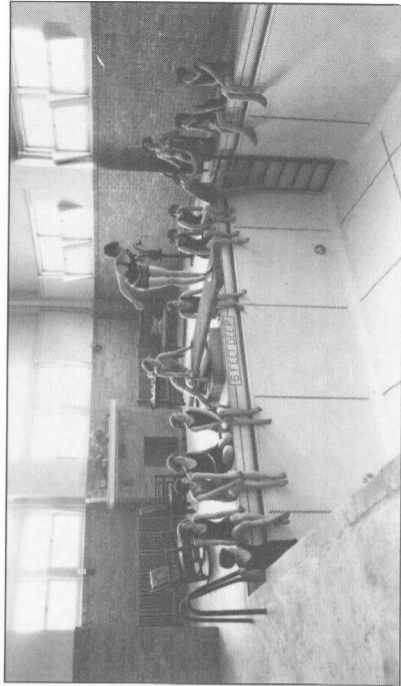
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Stoves, and Diet in Great Britain and Canada," *Material History Bulletin* 19 (Spring 1984), pp. 1-12.

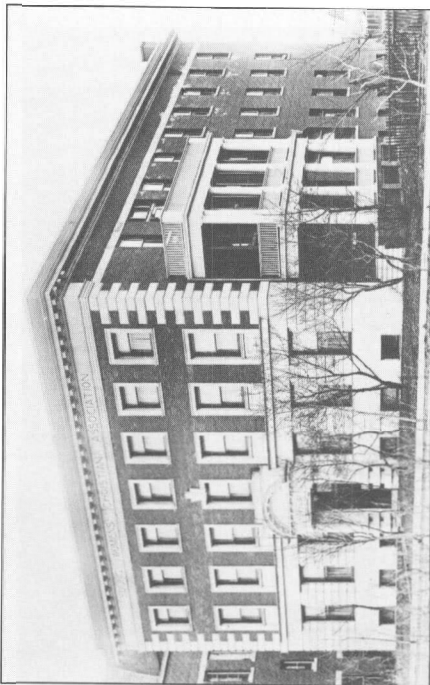
- 8 Some promising and suggestive approaches to using photographs as documents may be found in: Margaret Archibald, "Positive Evidence: Using Photographs as Documents in Structural History," Association for Preservation Technology, *Bulletin* 12, no. 3 (1980); Margaret B. Blackman, "Studio Indians: Cartes de visite of Native People in British Columbia, 1862-1872," *Archivaria* 21 (Winter 1985-86), pp. 68-86; Victor Greene, "Old Ethnic Stereotypes and the New Ethnic Studies," *Ethnicity* 5 (1978), pp. 328-50; Lilly Koltun, *City Blocks, City Spaces: Historical Photographs of Canada's Urban Growth, c. 1850-1900* (Ottawa, 1980); David Mattison, "In Visioning the City: Urban History Techniques Through Historical Photographs," *Urban History Review* 13, no. 1 (1984), pp. 43-52; Marsha Peters and Bernard Mergen, "'Doing the Rest': The Uses of Photographs in American Studies," *American Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (1977), pp. 280-303; Walter Rundell, Jr., "Photographs as Historical Evidence: Early Texas Oil," *American Archivist* 41, no. 4 (1978), pp. 373-98; Martin Segger, "Mirrors of the Architectural Moment: Some Comments on the Use of Historical Photographs as Primary Sources in Architectural History," *Material History Bulletin* 14 (Spring 1982), pp. 47-54; and articles in two special issues of *Archivaria* (5, 1977-78) and *B.C. Studies* (52, Winter 1981-82).
- 9 For further discussion, see Diana Pedersen and Martha Plemister, "Women and Photography in Ontario, 1839-1929: A Case Study of the Interaction of Gender and Technology," *Scientia Canadensis* 9, no. 1 (June 1985), pp. 27-52.
- 10 Strong-Boag, "Raising Clió's Consciousness." For some useful and relevant observations based on a search for historical images of domestic life in Canada, see Hilary Russell, "Reflections of an Image Finder: Some Problems and Suggestions for Picture Researchers," *Material History Bulletin* 20 (Fall 1984), pp. 79-83.
- 11 Diana Pedersen, "'Keeping Our Good Girls Good': The Young Women's Christian Association of Canada, 1870-1920," (MA thesis, Carleton University, 1981); "'On the Trail of the Great Quest': The YWCA and the Launching of Canadian Girls in Training, 1909-1921," Paper presented to the Canadian Historical Association, Ottawa, June 1982; "'Keeping Our Good Girls Good': The YWCA and the 'Girl Problem', 1870-1930," *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme* 7, no. 4 (Winter 1986), pp. 20-24; "'Building Today for the Womanhood of Tomorrow': Businessmen, Boosters, and the YWCA, 1890-1930," *Urban History Review* 15, no. 3 (February 1987), pp. 225-42.



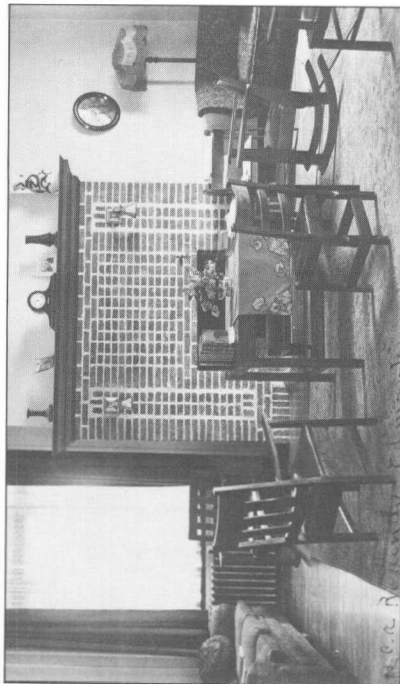
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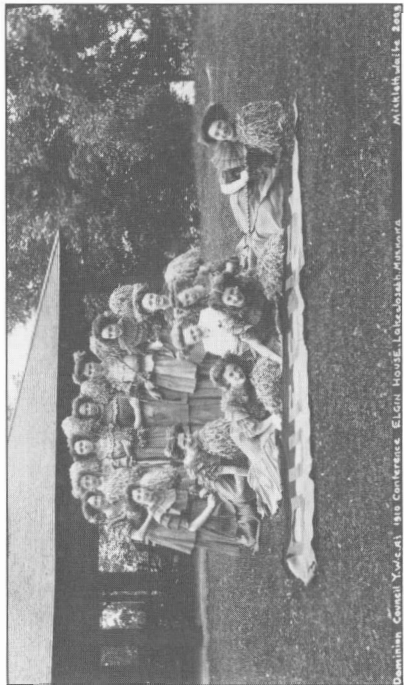


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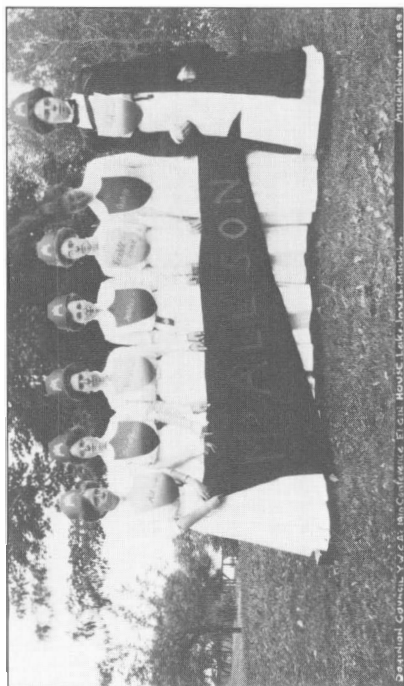
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Dominion Council Y.w.c.a.'s 1912 Conference Elgin House Lake Umbagog Vermont

Miriam Joslin Bates

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Dominion Council Y.w.c.a.'s 1912 Conference Elgin House Lake Umbagog Vermont

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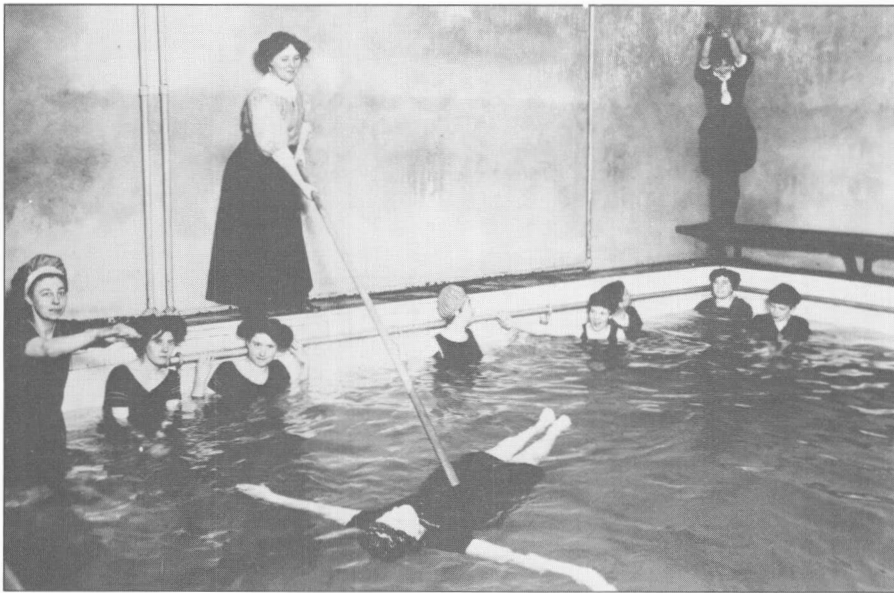
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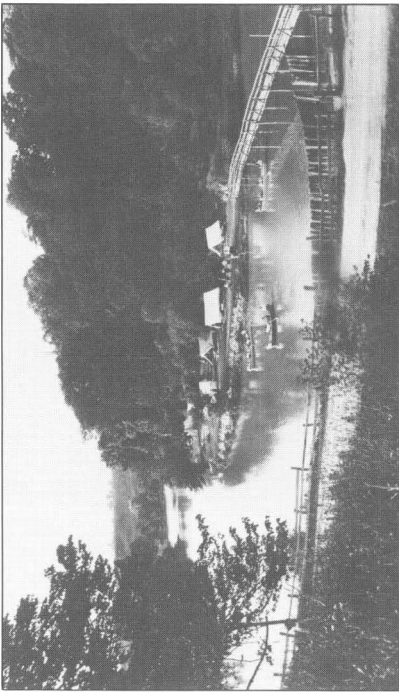
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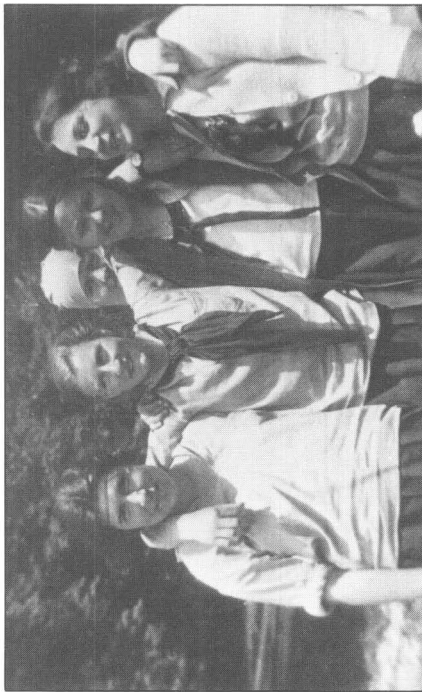
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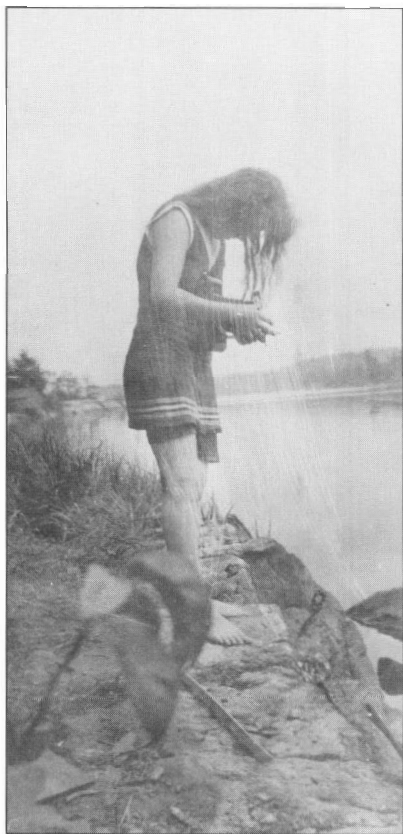
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based.<sup>12</sup> Women's organizations, after all, left records and, given the relative lack of surviving documentation on the lives of the majority of women, such collections constitute an obvious and accessible place to begin, particularly now that many, although by no means all, have found their way into public repositories. Photographs of women's organizations can generally be easily located using the existing systems of classification found in most photographic archives. The photographs used for this study generally formed part of collections deposited by the local YWCA or by the studio of a local photographer and, where catalogued, were readily retrieved from such categories as "Buildings," "Organizations," and "Sports and Leisure." Like the annual reports, minute books, magazines, and scrapbooks that constitute the written record of the YWCA, they merit consideration as documents in their own right.

It has been observed that "visual records are often the most abused and misunderstood of all archival documents because researchers do not attempt to learn more about the context of their creation or their creators."<sup>13</sup> Jim Burant's comments on the problems encountered in the use of paintings, drawings, and prints apply equally to photographs.

Like any other record, a picture must be read, interpreted, analyzed and understood as part of a larger context in order that it be utilized properly.... No professional historian would use written records or textual documentation lacking dates, signatures, or provenance as accurate sources of historical information, unless the handwriting of the document or the context of the creation of the record was somehow known or understood. In the same fashion, a visual record can only be understood fully by knowing something of the artist, his biases, the background and the context of the creation of the record.<sup>14</sup>

In approaching a photograph as a source of information, as is the case when using any written document, the historian must begin by asking by whom, under what circumstances, and for what purpose the image was produced. In the case of the YWCA photographs examined here, this necessitates a certain familiarity with the organization, its structure, history, and objectives, as well as a basic grasp of the state, conventions, and availability of photographic technology in the period being studied. Used in this way, it will be argued, photographs can not only complement and reinforce the written record but can also in some cases remedy its deficiencies. It is hoped that this brief examination of photographs generated by the YWCA will suggest some ways that photographs might be fruitfully employed in future studies of the historical experience of Canadian women.

Branches of the YWCA, which originated in England in 1855, were established in a number of Canadian cities, beginning in the early 1870s, by middle-class evangelical Protestant women responding to what they perceived as a growing "girl problem." Changing social conditions had resulted in the migration of large numbers of young single women to the cities in search of employment and educational opportunities. There they

12 For example, Linda Kealey, ed., *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s-1920s* (Toronto, 1979); Wendy Mitchinson, "Canadian Women and Church Missionary Societies in the Nineteenth Century: A Step Towards Independence," *Atlantis* 2, no. 2, Part II (Spring 1977), pp. 57-75, and "The YWCA and Reform in the Nineteenth Century," *Histoire sociale/Social History* XII, no. 24 (November 1979), pp. 368-84; and Veronica Strong-Boag, *The Parliament of Women: The National Council of Women of Canada, 1893-1929* (Ottawa, 1976).

13 Jim Burant, "Visual Records and Urban Development," *Urban History Review* 12, no. 3 (1984), p. 57.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 58.

lived unsupported and unsupervised by family, community, and church, experiencing a period of relative economic and sexual independence unknown to their mothers and grandmothers. Fearing that in these new circumstances the young women of Canada would become alienated from the traditional values of home and church, the founders of the first YWCAs argued that the physical and spiritual welfare of working women and students was an important issue invariably overlooked by the churches and social reformers who were more interested in young men, children, and the truly destitute. YWCA women viewed their organization as a "handmaiden" to the churches but chose to form an interdenominational women's organization as a way of providing themselves with both the resources to undertake a work too expensive for any one church and greater autonomy than women were allowed in church-controlled denominational organizations. With the goal of "keeping our good girls good," they sought to provide young women living independently with a substitute for parental and religious influences through practical assistance offered in a wholesome Christian setting.

To this end, YWCAs developed a wide range of programmes and facilities for working women, including boarding houses, employment bureaux, educational classes, clubs and social functions, cafeterias, Travellers Aid, recreational facilities such as summer camps, gymnasias and swimming pools, and religious instruction. Student YWCAs were also organized in Canadian colleges, universities, and normal schools between 1886 and 1920; offering religious and missionary meetings, talks and discussions, and social activities, they became one of the most popular vehicles for the expression of student life by Canadian women students. By the years of the First World War, the YWCA was also taking an interest in the adolescent schoolgirl, playing an active part in the founding of the Canadian Girls in Training programme and assuming a prominent role in the reception of female immigrants from overseas. After 1895 activities were coordinated by a Dominion Council of YWCAs of Canada, and by 1930, there were branches in a total of thirty-nine cities across the country.

Any understanding of the YWCA that purports to be comprehensive must reflect the fact that this organization was embodied in physical premises as well as in a group of organized women. YWCA women aimed to provide not only wholesome influences but also practical material assistance; only by possessing facilities of their own could they hope to attract working women and become an important factor in their lives. Beginning with rented rooms or converted boarding houses that inevitably proved inadequate — containing, for example, too few bedrooms or no space for physical exercise — YWCAs after 1890 aspired to construct their own buildings as quickly as possible. These were usually located on a quiet residential street close to the downtown business district, and in larger cities an extension facility was often constructed in a factory district. As soon as the initial boarding house and classrooms were paid for, the construction of a cafeteria, swimming pool or gymnasium was generally undertaken. YWCAs required substantial financial support on a scale that women's traditional fund raising methods such as teas and charity bazaars were unable to provide. Thus they became heavily dependent on public support, relying in particular on assistance from the business sector and local politicians. Fund raising was the most significant activity of YWCA boards of directors who regularly launched financial campaigns for new buildings and expanded facilities, and promoted the organization on an ongoing basis in brochures, printed annual reports, and articles in the local press.

The majority of “official” YWCA photographs produced during these four decades must be viewed in the context of the organization’s ongoing campaign to win public favour and financial support. Photographs, at least before the 1920s, were an expensive luxury for a women’s organization with limited resources, and there is every indication that they were seldom commissioned for frivolous purposes. It is interesting to note that in most archival photograph collections across the country, there are more surviving photographs of the local Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) than of the YWCA.<sup>15</sup> This discrepancy may be explained by the fact that YMCAs received considerably greater public support. In fact, one historian has noted that they “enjoyed the not unjustified reputation of having the most effective money-raising organization in many Canadian communities.”<sup>16</sup> Having a larger budget at their disposal, YMCAs consistently produced greater quantities of more expensive records such as published reports and photographs. In the case of the YWCA, on the other hand, there appear to be no surviving photographs taken before 1890, a period when YWCAs were still struggling to win public support and finances were so limited as to make hiring a photographer prohibitively expensive. The majority of images surviving from these decades were taken during the prosperous 1920s, when YWCAs across the country successfully raised large sums of money for the expansion of programmes and facilities. After 1930, as budgets were drastically cut with the onset of the Depression, photographs once again became a luxury that could be indulged in only rarely.

The taking of the first YWCA photographs during the 1890s coincided with several important developments. First, it was during this decade that YWCAs undertook the construction of buildings commissioned and designed to suit their particular purposes. Photographs, showing the hopelessly inadequate existing premises or, more frequently, the splendid new building, could serve a critical function in campaigns by YWCAs to raise funds for their increasingly elaborate and expensive facilities. Fortunately, it was also at this time that the new half-tone process, a photomechanical method of reproducing images cheaply and accurately on the printed page, permitted the first reproductions of photographs in newspapers and periodicals, resulting in what was “quite literally a revolution in communication.”<sup>17</sup> Photographs of YWCAs could now be reproduced in the annual reports printed for the benefit of actual and potential subscribers and, most importantly, in newspapers, as YWCAs after the turn of the century increasingly adopted the “whirlwind” financial campaign, a two-week blitz of a city that relied heavily on the support of the local press. Thus a YWCA building was no sooner completed than it was photographed. The opening of a new gymnasium or swimming pool, too, was generally viewed as an occasion for a photograph, particularly as new facilities were often opened years before they were paid for; photographs could help to marshal support for the ongoing campaign to clear the debt. Before 1920, the majority of photographs commissioned by the YWCA show the physical premises, and the usefulness of such images to the organization is reflected in the number that survive in archival collections today.

15 The YMCA and YWCA were founded in Britain as two separate and distinct organizations, in 1844 and 1855 respectively; the national organizations in Canada remain separate to this day. In some Canadian cities, particularly in smaller communities unable to afford two buildings, the organizations share a facility, an arrangement that began in Windsor, Ontario, in 1927.

16 Murray G. Ross, *The Y.M.C.A. in Canada: The Chronicle of a Century* (Toronto, 1951), p. 309.

17 Ralph Greenhill and Andrew Birrell, *Canadian Photography: 1839-1920* (Toronto, 1979), p. 170. See also Jim Burant, “The Visual World in the Victorian Age,” *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984-85), pp. 110-21; and Neil Harris, “Iconography and Intellectual History: The Half-Tone Effect,” in John Higham and Paul Conkin, eds., *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (Baltimore, 1979), pp. 196-211.



The turn-of-the-century decades were a period of rampant boosterism in Canadian cities when businessmen, professionals, and local politicians united in campaigns to promote their particular community as the fastest-growing, the most enterprising and prosperous, the most modern and progressive, and altogether the most desirable place in which it was possible to live.<sup>18</sup> Photography and photographers, many of whom were not incidentally highly successful businessmen, played an extremely important role in nineteenth- and twentieth-century boosterism that has only recently begun to receive attention from historians.<sup>19</sup> Prominent local photographers were commissioned by YWCA boards of directors and campaign managers to present their facilities in the best possible light. These skilfully crafted images supported many of the claims made by the YWCA in its fund raising campaigns which attempted to “sell” the building as an advertisement for the progressiveness of the community and a tribute to the enterprise of local politicians and businessmen. In keeping with the prevailing techniques and conventions of architectural photography that presented public buildings as “proud monuments,” symbols outside space and time,<sup>20</sup> YWCA buildings were portrayed as solid impressive structures fit to keep company in booster literature with the city hall, public library, and YMCA. One such image of the Regina YWCA was included in an album compiled by the local Chamber of Commerce in 1912 (Figure 1), along with forty-five other views of Regina’s leading hotels, churches, schools, businesses, city hall, and legislative building.<sup>21</sup> A modern YWCA building was, in this context, undoubtedly viewed as evidence of the progressiveness as well as the prosperity of the citizens of Regina.

Where finances permitted, YWCAs sometimes commissioned a series of photographs of their facilities that included interior views. In 1895 the Ottawa YWCA, one of the first branches in Canada to erect its own building, paid the substantial sum of nine dollars to prominent society photographer William J. Topley for views of its newly-opened facility that included a public reading room for women (Figure 2).<sup>22</sup> A similar series, including a view of the rotunda (Figure 3), was commissioned by the Edmonton YWCA in 1922 following the completion of its successful \$150,000 campaign for “A Building for Her;” these images were reproduced and sold as postcards, an arrangement that undoubtedly worked to the benefit of both the photographer and the YWCA. In 1926, the Edmonton branch completed construction of a new gymnasium and swimming pool. Before the opening of the facilities to the public, a number of young women were recruited to don appropriate costume and pose for a local photographer; in view of the absence of water in the pool, it can only be hoped that the swimming demonstration shown here proceeded no further (Figure 4). These views of YWCA interiors feature, on the one hand, gymnasias, kitchens, and dining rooms with the latest modern equipment and, on the other hand,

18 On boosterism in Canadian cities, see Alan F.J. Artibise, “Boosterism and the Development of Prairie Cities, 1871-1913,” in Alan F.J. Artibise, ed., *Town and City: Aspects of Western Canadian Urban Development* (Regina, 1981), pp. 209-35, and John C. Weaver, *Shaping the Canadian City: Essays on Urban Politics and Policy, 1890-1920* (Toronto, 1977).

19 Two useful Canadian sources are Koltun, *City Blocks, City Spaces*, and David Mattison, *Eyes of a City: Early Vancouver Photographers, 1868-1900* (Vancouver, 1986). For an excellent analysis of both the booster and reform styles of urban photography in the American context, see Peter B. Hales, *Silver Cities: The Photography of American Urbanization, 1839-1915* (Philadelphia, 1984). See also Timothy J. Crimmins, “Is a Picture Worth a Thousand Words? Illustrated Urban Histories,” *Journal of Urban History*, 13, no. 1 (November 1986), pp. 82-91.

20 Koltun, *City Blocks, City Spaces*, pp. 46-47.

21 Saskatchewan Archives Board, Historical Photographs Section, Chamber of Commerce Album.

22 Ottawa YWCA Records, *Annual Report, 1895-96*, p. 33.

cozy fireplaces, plants, lace curtains, and other “homey” and “feminine” touches as evidence that this was indeed “a building for her.” They reflect values that were undoubtedly shared by YWCA boards of directors and the photographers with whom they did business. Lacking professional status during the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, photographers aspired to middle-class respectability. It is not surprising to learn that William Topley, as a prominent businessman and respectable citizen, served for a time as president of the Ottawa YMCA, and that his wife was one of the founding “directresses” of the YWCA, contributing twenty-five dollars to the launching of its building fund in 1892.<sup>23</sup>

It was often the case that, given the emphasis on the physical premises and their symbolic value, photographers chose to show the YWCA’s facilities devoid of any occupants. Not infrequently, however, images were produced that provide a wealth of information about the design and furnishing of interiors, the activities that took place within them, and the clientele who used them. One such photograph, taken between about 1894 and 1898, shows a group of students at the Hamilton YWCA’s School of Domestic Science, established in 1894 as the first such school in the country (Figure 5). This photograph was undoubtedly published and used to elicit support both for the work of the Hamilton YWCA and for its campaign, spearheaded by its president, the redoubtable Adelaide Hoodless, to establish domestic science in the curriculum of Ontario schools and to promote domestic science teaching as a suitable career for female college graduates.<sup>24</sup> Far more vividly and informatively than surviving written descriptions, this image reveals how a small room at the YWCA was adapted for use as a school of domestic science and how it was furnished and equipped. In viewing this photograph, we are able to learn a good deal about the type of instruction provided and about the class of women who were enrolled in this teacher-training programme. Dressed expensively and in the latest fashion, these young women, despite their rather non-functional caps, cannot be mistaken for the domestic servants who were also provided with cooking instruction at several YWCAs during this decade. An equally informative photograph, one of a series taken at the Toronto YWCA some three decades later, shows us the Toronto branch’s newly opened cafeteria in about 1928, at what was probably the height of the noon rush (Figure 6). With a seating capacity of two hundred, this cafeteria, a direct result of the Toronto

23 *Ibid.*, 1892-93. I am grateful to Andrew Rodger for the information about Topley’s involvement in the YMCA.

24 Diana Pedersen, “‘The Scientific Training of Mothers’: The Campaign for Domestic Science in Ontario Schools, 1890-1913,” in Richard A. Jarrell and Arnold E. Roos, eds., *Critical Issues in the History of Canadian Science, Technology, and Medicine* (Thornhill, 1983), pp. 178-94; and Cheryl MacDonald, *Adelaide Hoodless: Domestic Crusader* (Toronto and Reading, England, 1986), pp. 40-58. MacDonald (p. 111) identifies this photograph as “Cooking class, Hamilton, ca. 1902,” apparently assuming that these students were attending one of the classes begun by the Hamilton Board of Education in that year. Internal evidence in the photograph suggests, however, that it was taken five or six years earlier. The fashionable dresses and coiffures of the women in the photograph indicate that it was probably taken in the mid-1890s. By the end of the century, the enormous puffed sleeves had collapsed and the tightly knotted hairstyle with the fringe on the forehead popularized by Princess Alexandra was being replaced with the pompadour associated with the “Gibson Girl.” These prosperous young women, who could afford expensive fur-trimmed fabrics, would have looked quite out of date in 1902 according to the Eaton’s catalogue. In the mid-1890s the only domestic science classes in Hamilton were offered by the YWCA. A quote by a guest at the opening of the YWCA School of Domestic Science in 1894 describes the kitchen as “simply perfect, with its three square tables for four pupils at each table” (MacDonald, p. 58). The school was renovated and expanded in 1900 also suggesting that the photograph was taken before that date.

YWCA's ambitious Jubilee Campaign undertaken in 1923, was the finest restaurant facility for the exclusive use of women to be found in the country. The photograph provides detailed information about the layout, furnishing, and equipping of this facility and confirms the evidence of written sources which suggest that YWCA cafeterias catered not to factory workers and domestic servants but to women who worked in occupations such as office work and retail sales where they were expected to dress well. Much of the information in these two photographs, particularly in view of the apparent loss of most blueprints and architectural drawings of YWCA buildings, simply cannot be obtained from any other source.

Some of the more prosperous branches of the YWCA in larger centres were able to afford additional photographs that present the young female clientele of the YWCA participating in some of its more popular programmes. Such images were obviously carefully posed and crafted by the photographer. The activities portrayed appear highly structured; there is little evidence of any spontaneity or lightheartedness. The demeanour of the young women in such photographs is serious, ordered, and disciplined. Their appearance, in fact, is quite in keeping with the purpose behind the commissioning of the photograph. Such images were not intended to serve as inducements to other young women to enroll in YWCA programmes. Rather, they were published in annual reports and campaign materials directed to potential financial supporters. These photographs reflect a shift in the YWCA's priorities that occurred between 1870 and 1900 as the organization gradually abandoned attempts to reclaim "fallen women" and dedicated itself to the welfare of the "respectable girl." In these images, groups of young women, whether attending a gymnasium class in Winnipeg (Figure 7) or a meeting of a working women's club in Toronto (Figure 8), are presented as advertisements for the YWCA. They appear as the good workers, mothers, and citizens of tomorrow who were, it was claimed, the final products of the programmes.

Not all photographs directly commissioned by the YWCA were intended to serve as blatant propaganda. Some do appear to have been taken strictly for the pleasure of the subjects, a purpose reflected in the more informal quality of these images. Special events such as gymnasium displays and pageants were often the subject of a commemorative photograph of the happy participants in appropriate costume. Most such images were taken indoors but a particularly attractive outdoor view of a group of schoolgirls was produced at a garden party held by the Hamilton YWCA in about 1919 (Figure 9). In this case, the photograph may have resulted from an initiative taken by the photographer who saw an opportunity for a profitable afternoon's work, or it may have been directly commissioned by the YWCA which sometimes purchased multiple copies of such photographs to allow each young woman to obtain a souvenir of the occasion at a reduced rate. It is noteworthy that such relatively relaxed portraits almost invariably feature the young clientele of the YWCA rather than its staff or executive. One extremely rare example of the latter category was located for this study. The Board of Directors of the Calgary YWCA posed for a portrait on the front steps of their newly opened building in 1911 following the completion of a successful financial campaign, an action that may be interpreted as evidence of the members' complete satisfaction with themselves and the results of their efforts (Figure 10).

During the first two decades of this century, North Americans were affected by a mania for collecting and sending picture postcards made from their own private photographs. Special reduced postage rates were introduced for privately printed postcards, and in 1902

Kodak issued postcard-sized photographic paper widely used by both amateur and professional photographers. Many of the latter operated concessions at resorts, amusement parks, and fairs, conducting a brisk business in the creation and sale of picture postcards.<sup>25</sup> Evidence for the popularity of this trend appears in surviving collections of YWCA photographs, some of which are in postcard format. In 1910, a series of photographs of the Dominion Council of YWCAs' annual student summer conference in the Muskoka District of Ontario, was taken by Frank W. Micklethwaite, a well-known Toronto photographer. Every summer, Micklethwaite moved to a hotel at Muskoka where he successfully supported himself photographing the throngs of tourists and vacationers. Exposed films were quickly dispatched by train to his studio in Toronto for processing and returned in the form of postcards in time to be mailed by satisfied clients to friends and relatives back home.<sup>26</sup> Micklethwaite's YWCA postcards, including one that captures an amateur photographer in the act of recording a maypole dance, show a series of skits performed in costume on "Association Day" by delegations from the various college and university YWCAs (Figures 11-13). Postcards of this type were purchased as souvenirs by YWCA campers and were sometimes reproduced in magazine articles or conference brochures as evidence that despite the serious purpose of a YWCA student conference, most of which was devoted to the study of the Bible, foreign missions, and social questions, an enjoyable time was had by all. These delightfully informal images present a marked contrast to the most common type of student YWCA photograph — the portrait for the college yearbook. In the earliest such photograph located for this study, the members of the executive of the Mount Allison YWCA posed for their portrait in the 1896 yearbook with a sober and dignified demeanour befitting future professionals (Figure 14).

The revolution in communication brought about by the invention of the half-tone process also resulted in the launching of the new profession of photojournalism, as publishers and editors acknowledged the power of images to boost sales of newspapers and magazines.<sup>27</sup> After the turn of the century, and particularly during the 1920s, photographs of YWCA functions began to accompany articles in local newspapers as photographers and editors recognized their ability to provide an element of "human interest." Such images were less a form of direct public relations for the YWCA than were the images that appeared during building campaigns, but the organization stood to benefit nonetheless from the free publicity. Large YWCA social functions for girls and working women, such as the Junior Girls' banquet held at the Montreal YWCA in 1921 (Figure 15), were frequently given extensive coverage in the newspapers. The *Montreal Herald* described the scene in this photograph as follows:

The gymnasium of the Young Women's Christian Association was the setting for a bright and pretty scene last evening, when the girls of the Junior Clubs had their annual banquet. Girls to the number of over 350, from twelve to eighteen years of age, sat at tables reaching from one end of the room to the other; the white-spread tables were decorated with mauve and yellow crepe paper, and vases of lilacs, tulips and other spring flowers. The girls

25 Hal Morgan and Andreas Brown, *Prairie Fires and Paper Moons: The American Photographic Postcard, 1900-1920* (Boston, 1981).

26 I am indebted to Andrew Rodger for the information about Micklethwaite's business.

27 Tim N. Gidal, *Modern Photojournalism: Origin and Evolution, 1910-1933* (New York, 1973).

were members of the eighteen clubs of the Association, and many of them are already out in the business world, finding in the Y.W.C.A. clubs opportunities for comradeship, and for social and physical recreation.<sup>28</sup>

Group portraits of YWCA athletic teams were a particularly popular subject for press photographs, especially during the 1920s which have been described as the golden age of women's sport in Canada.<sup>29</sup> One such photograph of the six "sweet bits of femininity" who played for the local YWCA in the Vancouver and District basketball league appeared in the *Vancouver Sun* on 10 February 1924 with the caption "And It's Leap Year!" (Figure 16).

A particularly appealing photograph was taken at the Toronto YWCA in about 1910 by pioneer photojournalist William James, who worked on a freelance basis and sold his photographs to local newspapers. James has been called "one of the first photographers to recognize the value and potential impact of unposed human interest snapshots." Not a muckraker or social activist, James

was a shrewd enough opportunist to know what would appeal to the newspaper editors of the time and selected his shooting accordingly to realize maximum profits and minimum waste. This resulted in a body of work that, while it lacks social bite, nonetheless exerts a strong appeal owing to James' ever-ebullient humor and eye for human interest.<sup>30</sup>

James' perspective obviously contributed to the charm and spontaneity of his photograph of the swimming class taught by the newly hired Mary Beaton of Scotland (Figure 17), considered newsworthy in her own right as a qualified instructor and author of *The Complete Swimmer*, impressing the citizens of Toronto with several exhibitions of life-saving and fancy diving.<sup>31</sup> Images such as this one by James were undoubtedly instrumental in shaping public attitudes toward the YWCA and probably contributed indirectly to the support it received during financial campaigns. Few images of this type are held in public repositories at present but it is possible that more will be unearthed in newspaper archives. It is tragic that such collections are often routinely destroyed because of a lack of storage space; all that remains of many YWCA press photographs is a yellowed clipping glued into a scrapbook.

The types of photographs examined thus far serve in many ways to illustrate and confirm many of the conclusions that may be drawn from the study of the written record. In this particular case, they help to shed light on the YWCA's relationship with the larger community and the strategies it developed to win public support, as well as on its goals for the young women of Canada. In addition, they provide many important details about the physical premises and the women who used them that often cannot be obtained from any other source. As in the case of the written record, however, there is some important information that they fail to provide. In the annual reports and other documents generated by YWCA executive and staff members, the organization's clientele of working women appear as shadowy figures at best. Surveys soliciting the views of the membership were

28 *Montreal Herald*, 18 May 1921, "Junior Club Girls of Y.W.C.A. Hostesses at Banquet Last Evening."

29 Jean Cochrane, Abby Hoffman, and Pat Kincaid, *Women in Canadian Life: Sports* (Toronto, 1977).

30 Gunter Ott, "William James — Pioneer Photographer," *Photo Life*, October 1981, pp. 36-38.

31 M.I. Pitters-Caswell, "Woman's Participation in Sporting Activities as an Indicator of Femininity and Cultural Evolution in Toronto, 1910 to 1920," (Master of Human Kinetics thesis, University of Windsor, 1975), p. 98.

conducted periodically but virtually all such documents appear to have been lost. In a study of the YWCA that relies primarily on written sources, it is often necessary to “read between the lines” to gain some understanding of the perceptions of the young women who used the facilities, the motives that brought them to the YWCA, and the nature of their contact with it. Similarly, the “official” photographs generated by the YWCA reveal much more about the concerns and perceptions of the organization’s leadership than about its young female clientele. Fortunately, however, one other type of image — the snapshot — was produced by amateur photographers among the YWCA’s membership. It helps to compensate in some significant ways for the deficiencies of the written record and suggests the potential of the photograph as a document that may further our understanding of the lives of anonymous women whose experiences and concerns were not preserved in more traditional sources.

The snapshot photographs that appear in the record of the YWCA, all taken after the turn of the century, resulted directly from changes in photographic technology that made cameras less expensive, less complex, and accessible for the first time to many young working women and schoolgirls. In fact, companies such as Kodak, with its famous slogan “You press the button, we do the rest,” directed much of their advertising at young women and encouraged them to incorporate photography into their leisure activities. Young women responded with enthusiasm and many, during their adolescence and college years, or in the interval of employment between school-leaving and marriage, compiled albums of images of their families, friendships, and activities such as a Sunday walk in the park, picnics, sports, or a stay at summer camp. Most snapshots by young women in this period show outdoor activities, partly because of the marketing of photography as a recreational pastime and partly because the simple cameras owned by most young women made indoor photography difficult or impossible under most conditions.<sup>32</sup> For these reasons, most surviving YWCA snapshots were taken at the various summer camps run by local associations across the country or at the Dominion Council’s annual summer conferences at Muskoka.

YWCA summer conferences and camps for schoolgirls, college students, and working women featured an organized programme of sports, hiking, picnics, swimming and boating, Bible study, and Twilight Talks around the campfire. The official literature promoting the camps, particularly those for schoolgirls, suggested that the idyllic pastoral environment facilitated religious conversion.

Since it is His handiwork, the very beauty of Nature calls us back to God, and takes our thoughts to the One who bade his followers “Consider the lilies”. So it is only natural that at the beginning of a happy day in God’s out-of-doors, little groups of girls with their leader should turn their thoughts God-ward, gathering by the shore, or in boats on the lake, to consider together the wonderful life and teachings of the Christ.<sup>33</sup>

This conception of the serious purpose of the camp experience is certainly evident in a 1928 photograph of the London YWCA’s Camp Orendaga, “Place of Magic” (Figure 18). Yet what we see in the delightful informal snapshots taken by the campers themselves are groups of young women who, in a remarkable contrast with most of the

32 Pedersen and Phemister, “Women and Photography,” pp. 37-42.

33 National Archives of Canada, YWCA of Canada Records, MG 28 I 198, vol. 21, Camping — Publicity Pamphlets, 1910-1925.

YWCA's officially commissioned photographs, appear to be thoroughly enjoying themselves (Figures 19-22). The twin themes of fun and friendship recur in all these images of life at camp, hinting at what the experience may have meant to the young women whose thoughts and concerns were not recorded in YWCA camp literature or other records. It is interesting to note that the YWCA recognized the appeal of these photographs and their potential usefulness in promotional materials, particularly those directed at young women themselves. At the Dominion Council's City and Student Summer Conference of 1914, a prize of two dollars was offered for "the best set of six photographs of groups and scenery at the Conference," with the Conference Department reserving "the right to keep all photographs submitted and to reproduce such as it desires."<sup>34</sup>

Some of these informal snapshots allow us glimpses of completely spontaneous behaviour in situations, at camp and elsewhere, that could never have been captured by a professional photographer. In one of a series of images taken at the Peterborough YWCA sometime around 1920, a pair of young women who are probably residents of the boarding home perform what may be a rendition of the "turkey trot" or some other popular dance of the period on the front steps (Figure 23). Another extraordinary photograph taken around the same time at a summer camp run by the Peterborough YWCA shows a group of young women, probably schoolgirls, in their nightclothes and indulging in some sort of "horseplay" (Figure 24). It is inconceivable that these young women would have posed in this way for a professional photographer, or any male photographer, at a time when women seldom let their hair down, literally or figuratively, in front of a camera. Only among themselves could they have been so relaxed and spontaneous; this image is a rare find indeed. In another extremely unusual image from the album of a young working woman, some young men and women fraternize at a party at the London YWCA during the First World War (Figure 25). This image is of particular interest both because these young people would undoubtedly have behaved very differently in front of a professional photographer and because such a photograph would never have been commissioned or published by the YWCA. During the First World War, YWCAs were beginning to experiment with mixed recreation, but these programmes were still very controversial and aroused opposition from conservative elements in the churches. In the unlikely event that a YWCA had decided to promote itself by advertising these programmes through photographs, it is certain that the interaction between the male and female participants would have been portrayed in a very different light.

The photographs left by the young female clientele of the YWCA contribute in some significant ways to correcting the one-sided presentation that has survived in the written record. They suggest, for example, the existence of a certain discrepancy between the stated objectives of the YWCA's leadership and the motives of the young women who participated in the programmes. The officially commissioned photographs portray an ideal type of young womanhood, healthy, wholesome, responsible, disciplined; the snapshots taken by those same young women suggest, however, that they were less interested in being made into good workers, wives, and mothers than in making friends and having a good time. From their perspective, the photographs remind us, the YWCA offered young women opportunities to participate in many activities to which they did not otherwise have access. Even in a major centre such as Toronto during this period, the YWCA provided the only opportunities for participating in swimming and team sports to working

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34 *Ibid.*, vol. 44, Scrapbook B, p. 1, "City and Student Summer Conference, June 23 to July 3, 1914," p. 10.

women who could not afford a membership in a private athletic club. For many working women, YWCA summer camps offered the only possibility of a low cost summer vacation in the country. For middle-class schoolgirls escaping parental supervision and many of the stifling constraints on the behaviour of female adolescents, often for the first time in their lives, camp life was frequently experienced as a new and glorious freedom.

Also offered, and indeed encouraged, were opportunities to form close and lasting friendships with other young women at a time when women placed a high premium on same-sex friendships, which they did not necessarily regard as a poor substitute for mixed company.<sup>35</sup> The snapshots they left behind suggest that the YWCA's young clientele clearly relished such opportunities and were fully prepared to take advantage of them. We must, of course, be wary of generalizing from this evidence to the experience of all young women who came in contact with the YWCA. There were many who refused to have anything to do with what they regarded as a group of "goody-goodies," but they did not leave photographs expressing their views. It is also important not to draw a rigid dichotomy, based on the photographs, between the concerns of the YWCA's leadership and those of their young clientele. YWCA women were not hostile to the idea of young women forming friendships and having fun in a wholesome supervised setting. Many genuinely enjoyed providing young women with such opportunities, wholeheartedly endorsing them as alternatives preferable to attendance at movie theatres or public dance halls. Fun and friendship were not emphasized in official YWCA photographs because they were unlikely to elicit financial support from conservative elements in the churches and the business community. The official photographs simply presented the YWCA in the way that its leadership knew would most effectively generate much-needed financial support and the endorsement of religious leaders; they showed the organization as it wished to be seen and not necessarily as it saw itself. The young amateur photographers among the membership, however, were governed by no such constraints; their images speak to us with a candour and directness that is both refreshing and revealing.

What conclusions may be drawn from this examination of a small sample of photographs generated by one women's organization? To begin with, the value of a photograph as an historical source is immeasurably enhanced if a genuine effort is made to understand its context. As David Mattison, among others, has noted, "It must be remembered that photographs are the conscious products of subjective people who make images in a specific way for a specific purpose. Knowing who took photographs, how they were taken, and why is as important as the subject of the photographs."<sup>36</sup> The images examined here suggest that the portrayal of women by the camera was affected by the identity and objectives of the photographer. Consideration should therefore be given to whether the photographer was male or female, professional or amateur, and to understanding the assumptions about women and female behaviour, often interacting with other assumptions about social class and ethnicity, that underlie the portrayal of women in a particular image. These photographs also indicate that the images of women produced during this period were influenced by the prevailing conventions of photography and by the state and accessibility of the technology, which contributed in some significant ways

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35 Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs* I, no. 1 (1975), pp. 1-29; and Alice Echols, "The Demise of Female Intimacy in the Twentieth Century," *Occasional Papers in Women's Studies*, No. VI (University of Michigan, 1978).

36 *Eyes of a City*, p. 7.



to determining what kinds of photographs of women were and were not produced. Dramatically different portrayals of women sometimes resulted when women themselves gained access to that technology, but even where they were not actually behind the camera, women with the financial resources to do so could still participate actively in the making of the image and use photography for purposes of their own by commissioning a photograph that met their requirements. Situating the YWCA photographs examined here within this larger context transforms them from mere representations of the YWCA to visual sources for women's history, suggesting that for social historians, the skills of photographic analysis are well worth the trouble that it takes to acquire them, and that women's historians could profitably follow the example of their colleagues in other fields who have begun to recognize the value of the photographic source. In women's history, as scholars move increasingly into new areas where the absence of traditional sources is often highly problematic, such as documenting the history of housework and childcare, the experiences of anonymous or illiterate women, or the existence of a distinct "women's culture" in the past, the potential of the unexploited photographic source becomes ever more evident.

### Photograph Captions

Figure 1: *Regina YWCA, ca. 1912*. Courtesy: Saskatchewan Archives Board.

Figure 2: *Reading room, Ottawa YWCA, 1894*. Photo by W.J. Topley. Courtesy: National Archives of Canada, PA 27406.

Figure 3: *Rotunda, Edmonton YWCA, 1922*. Courtesy: Provincial Archives of Alberta, 68.301 183.11.

Figure 4: *Swimming pool, Edmonton YWCA, 1926*. Photo by McDermid Studio. Courtesy: Glenbow-Alberta Archives, ND-3-3114.

Figure 5: *School of Domestic Science, Hamilton YWCA, ca. 1896*. Courtesy: Hamilton Public Library, Special Collections.

Figure 6: *Cafeteria, Toronto YWCA, ca. 1928*. Courtesy: National Archives of Canada, PA 123616.

Figure 7: *Gymnasium class, Winnipeg YWCA, 1929*. Photo by Foote. Courtesy: Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Foote Collection 1168.

Figure 8: *Working women's club, Senior Employed Department, Toronto YWCA, ca. 1928*. Courtesy: National Archives of Canada, PA 123613.

Figure 9: *YWCA garden fete, Hendrie Garden, Hamilton, 1920*. Courtesy: Hamilton Public Library, Special Collections.

Figure 10: *Board of Directors, Calgary YWCA, 1911*. Courtesy: Glenbow-Alberta Archives, NA-2315-2.

Figure 11: *YWCA student summer conference, Muskoka District, Ontario, ca. 1910*. Photo by F.W. Micklethwaite. Courtesy: National Archives of Canada, PA 129957.

Figure 12: *Queen's University delegates, YWCA student summer conference, Muskoka District, Ontario, 1910*. Photo by F.W. Micklethwaite. Courtesy: National Archives of Canada, PA 126258.

Figure 13: *Mount Allison University delegates, YWCA student summer conference, Muskoka District, Ontario, 1910. Photo by F.W. Micklethwaite.* Courtesy: National Archives of Canada, PA 126257.

Figure 14: *Cabinet, Mount Allison University YWCA, 1896.* Courtesy: Mount Allison University Archives.

Figure 15: *Junior Girls' banquet, Montreal YWCA, 1921. Photo by British & Colonial Press.* Courtesy: British & Colonial Press/National Archives of Canada, PA 138590.

Figure 16: *Basketball team, Vancouver YWCA, 1924.* Courtesy: Vancouver YWCA.

Figure 17: *Swimming class, Toronto YWCA, ca. 1910. Photo by William James.* Courtesy: City of Toronto Archives.

Figure 18: *Camp Orendaga, London YWCA, ca. 1928.* Courtesy: National Archives of Canada, PA 123615.

Figure 19: *Camp Yowocassa, Vancouver YWCA, 1913.* Courtesy: Vancouver YWCA.

Figure 20: *YWCA schoolgirls' camp, Muskoka District, Ontario, ca. 1917.* Courtesy: National Archives of Canada, PA 123627.

Figure 21: *Sailing on Lake Erie, London YWCA, ca. 1928.* Courtesy: National Archives of Canada, PA 123614.

Figure 22: *Detail of "Kodaking," Summer camp, Peterborough YWCA, ca. 1919.* Courtesy: Peterborough YWCA.

Figure 23: *Detail of Residents on front steps, Peterborough YWCA, ca. 1919.* Courtesy: Peterborough YWCA.

Figure 24: *Summer camp, Peterborough YWCA, ca. 1919.* Courtesy: Peterborough YWCA.

Figure 25: *Party, London YWCA, ca. 1914-1918.* Courtesy: Grace Copeman.