

The YWCA and the First World War

During World War I, women worked in munitions factories while men went off to war. There was an increase in women working in all sectors— factories, offices, and stores. Not all women had equal access to work – employers’ preferred single women; many postings read: “mothers and wives need not apply”.

Despite its unprecedented carnage and irrevocable losses, World War I ironically enabled women to participate in and contribute to Canadian society in a more significant way than ever before. Individually, and in all groups, Canadian women were united by a single purpose and offered those energies and services to the cause of war. The visibility of their contributions through paid and voluntary work helped to alter the existing attitudes towards women’s positions in society – attitudes that ultimately viewed women as inferior to men. While World War I cannot be credited fully with this change it did help to accelerate the trends, which began earlier.



Female machinist, Sawyer-Massey Limited. Special Collections, Hamilton Public Library.



Female railway workers. Steel Company of Canada. Special Collections, Hamilton Public Library.



YWCA Hamilton underwent significant changes as a result of World War I. For the first time, the Canadian government called upon the organization to assist in a national effort. This fostered a new spirit of cooperation and unity of purpose. The YWCA worked closely with the Red Cross to send money and packages of goods overseas. In addition, the YWCA was directly responsible for assisting female munitions workers to find suitable housing. They played a major role in developing and supervising camps for female farm labourers. The YWCA provided Hostess Houses where servicemen, waiting to be called to the front, enjoyed recreation and socialization with members before embarking on active duty. Perhaps more important was the fact that the YWCA, during this confusing and emotional period, continued its regular programming.

Innocent Travellers: The YWCA Travellers’ Aid

Travellers’ Aid was a major YWCA project during the war years, serving immigrant women and children prior to World War I, country girls coming to the city for employment, and service men’s wives and dependents after the war. This important work began in 1911, with one worker. In 1912 a second worker and in the next ten months had a third person working part time.

In 1926, Mrs. Gordon Henderson who had been Convenor of Traveller’s Aid since its inception in 1911 resigned. In the 15 years she had been in charge she had handled all the raising of the finances for the work. She turned over \$5,500 in reserve fund in Nation Trust (bequest for work of T.A.) and \$1,349.60 in the current amount.

Following the First World War, the Hamilton Traveller’s Aid met and welcomed war brides as they came from the United Kingdom. Most who settled in Hamilton were kept in touch with. When Mrs. Henderson retired the Board gave a reception for these girls and Mrs. Henderson - 60 young women were in attendance.



Left: Traveller’s Aid at work, Toronto, Ontario, 1928. National Archives of Canada/PA 123618.



Right: West Hamilton Street Railway Station. Department of Labour Studies, McMaster University.