

Denison, (Flora MacDonald) papers

Letters, memo books, memorabilia, scrapbooks and clippings relating to the women's suffrage movement, mainly Canadian, 1898-1918. Letters, documents and note-books relating to Denison's summer resort in Hastings County, Bon Echo, where the Whitman Club of Canada met. A small amount of modern ephemera on the Women's Lib. movement, and tapes from seminar "Challenge for Change," 1969.

Extent: 10 boxes ( 5 feet)

Gift of Cyril Greenland and Merrill Denison, 1966.

Mrs. Rachel Grover  
January 1986

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Flora MacDonald Merrill was born in 1867 in a mining community near Bridgewater, Ont., the sixth of eight children of George Merrill and his wife. Her father, the former master of the Picton grammar school, had decided to seek his fortune in a mining venture. Like most of his undertakings, it was doomed to failure. His daughter, Flora, was educated in Belleville and Picton schools leaving school at fifteen. She tried teaching in a rural school but finding life in a small community stultifying, she moved to Toronto. Here she took a business course and worked in an insurance company. In the late 1880's she moved to Detroit.

Her life changed considerably in Detroit. While working in an office, she began her career as a journalist, writing for The Detroit Free Press. She married Howard Denison in 1892. Her son Merrill, later a well-known Canadian writer, was born in Detroit in 1893. The family moved back to Toronto shortly afterwards, and Mrs. Denison took up the occupation of dress-maker.

After a short period on her own, she worked for Simpson's, managing their custom dress department. While she was there, she began to write for Saturday Night, and the exploitation of women working in the clothing industry was one of her main topics. When in 1905 she went into business on her own as "Mrs. Denison-Costumer," her position as champion of women's rights became ambiguous. As she was herself employing seamstresses, she was caught between the need to support her family and any socialist convictions which she might have had. She avoided the problem by stressing the dignity of labour, and adopting a Whitmanesque belief in equality. This interest later caused her to establish the Whitmanite Fellowship of Canada.

Denison had met Emily Howard Stowe not long before Stowe's death in 1903. Stowe introduced her to the women's movements and befriended her in the rather elitist atmosphere of the Toronto of the day. By 1906 she was secretary of the Dominion Women's Enfranchisement Association, and was the official Canadian delegate to the Third World Conference of the International Suffrage Alliance. She became aware of the strength of the suffrage movement, and advocated militancy among women demonstrators, something she had never done before.

Her most important contribution to the cause was as a journalist. In 1906 she began to contribute articles to the Toronto Sunday World, a "people's" newspaper with a large circulation. In 1909 she became a weekly contributor, writing on women's suffrage and other social issues. She was instrumental in bringing the noted suffragettes, Anna Howard Shaw and Emmeline Pankhurst, to Toronto. She contributed financially to the cause, paying her own way to conferences, providing or paying for suffrage office headquarters.

Denison's social status may have contributed to her eventual loss of leadership of the Canadian suffrage movement. Up until 1910 the leading suffrage workers in Toronto were women doctors, and Denison was accepted by them partly through her initial friendship with Dr. Emily Stowe and her

daughter, Dr. Augusta Stowe-Gullen. However most women's activism was related to social reform rather than to the cause of equal rights. Temperance and aid to the poor through private and public charities were the usual goals. At times this conservative group could work with the feminists, and an uneasy alliance was formed in the National Council of Women of Canada. The Local Council of Women in Toronto did not espouse suffragism until 1910. Denison had criticised its conservatism in her journalism, and her hostility to it brought about its rejection. She however remained president of the Canadian Suffrage Association for another 4 years. She was forced to resign in 1914, having become a member of the Women's Social and Political Union. As the latter's militancy was at its height, she was rejected by her Toronto supporters.

Her finances appear to have foundered at about the same time. 1914 saw her working as a seamstress in Napanee to help support her son at University. In 1916 she moved to New York State and worked as a paid speaker and organizer for the New York State Women's Suffrage campaign.

After her return from N.Y. in 1916 she turned much of her energy to her northern property, "Bon Echo". She turned it into a summer hotel and a spiritual community dedicated to the memory of Walt Whitman. Her interests in Whitman and Theosophy at this point began to predominate. She had avoided anything more than a cautious interest in socialism until this time but was influenced by Horace Traubel and other socialist Whitmanites. In 1918 she helped to organize the Social Reconstruction Group of the Toronto Theosophical Society. She was honorary president and attended the 1918 Convention that launched the Ontario section of the Canadian Labour Party. In 1918 and 1919 the Canadian Labour Party advertised her as an official speaker.

Denison died in 1921 of pneumonia. Her career as a writer and speaker had greatly helped the cause of feminism; and her force and enthusiasm had popularized the suffrage movement, ironically, so that it came to include the people who later rejected her.

MS.  
COLL.  
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DENISON (FLORA MACDONALD) PAPERS

CHRONOLOGY

- 1867 Born in a mining community near Bridgewater, Ontario; educated in Belleville and Picton schools; later took a business course in Toronto
- 1880's Moved to Detroit; began writing for The Detroit Free Press
- 1892 Married Howard Denison
- 1893 Her son Merrill born
- 1890's Moved to Toronto where she worked for Simpson's, and began to write for Saturday Night
- 1903 Met Emily Howard Stowe who introduced her to the women's movements
- 1905 Set up her own business
- 1906 Secretary of the Dominion Women's Enfranchisement Association and official Canadian delegate to the Third World Conference of the International Suffrage Alliance; began to contribute articles to the Toronto Sunday World; became a weekly contributor in 1909
- 1914 Forced to resign from Canadian Suffrage Association because of membership in the Women's Social and Political Union  
Worked as a seamstress in Napanee
- 1916 Moved to New York State and worked as paid speaker and organizer for the New York State Women's Suffrage Campaign  
Returned from New York, and made "Bon Echo" into a summer hotel and spiritual community dedicated to the memory of Walt Whitman
- 1916-20? Edited The Sunset of Bon Echo (K-10 28)
- 1918 Helped to organize the Social Reconstruction Group of the Toronto Theosophical Society  
Attended the Convention and founded the Ontario section of the Canadian Labour Party; advertised as an official speaker for the Party
- 1921 Died in Toronto

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DENISON (FLORA MACDONALD) PAPERS

Holograph and typed stories, homilies and speeches, and correspondence chiefly concerning women's suffrage and the Walt Whitman Club, Bon Echo, Ont. 1904-1921, plus modern material.

**EXTENT:**

10 boxes, 1 v. & oversize in mapcase.

**CONTAINER LISTING**

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|-----------------|--|
| Box<br>1        | Material re Bon Echo and the Walt Whitman Club. 1917-1921.   |
| Box<br>2        | Letters, cards, programs, etc. relating to the women's suffrage movement. 1898-1918.   |
| Item<br>2A      | Canadian Suffrage Association. Address presented to Flora MacDonald Denison, retiring president of the Canadian Suffrage Association. Toronto: 1914. Designed by A.H. Howard.                |
| Box<br>3A<br>3B | Unpublished manuscripts, only one of which touches on Women's suffrage. <i>Very fragile.</i> <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">Use Box 3B.</span><br><i>Photo copies.</i> |
| Box<br>4        | Letters from family and friends. Unsorted.   |
| Boxes<br>5A & B | Work books and memo books, chiefly relating to women's suffrage and the Whitman Club. 16 v.  |
| Box<br>6        | Material from the Bain family, uncatalogued. Partly on psychic phenomena.  |
| Box<br>7        | 3 scrapbooks, one consisting almost entirely of F.M. Denison's columns from the Sunday Sun.  |
|                 | Mfm<br>Dup.<br>77  |
| Box<br>8A       | Collection of newspaper clippings relating to women's suffrage, 1890-1919. (xerox copies)  |
| Box<br>8B       | Articles and writings, 1907-1918. (Clippings, xerox copies)  |

*Mfm  
dup 60*

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DENISON (FLORA MACDONALD) PAPERS  
CONTAINER LISTING

- Box 9 Miscellaneous additions, chiefly modern Women's Lib. ephemera.
- Box 10 7 tapes from a seminar titled, "Challenge for Change, Women's Program", January - April 1969.
- Box 11 2 more tapes from the seminar plus cassettes for those tapes. List describing contents is in this box.
- Not to be xeroxed* Oversize newspaper clippings and articles are located in the Map Case.  
Items 1-5 are in the catalogue.  
A xerox copy of the Catalogue cards is available in the NOTES on Mss. file.