



# Sara Williams



A Teaching Legend

Written by:  
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# Sara Williams - A Teaching Legend

By Robert LaFrance

Anyone who went to school in southern Victoria County between about 1925 and 1966 knows the name Sara Williams. We shall not attempt to say she was universally loved, but she surely was respected, and everyone has an opinion about this small but mighty woman who arrived in Victoria County for a two-week stay when she was in her early twenties.

Over three quarters of a century later she is still here, now a resident of Victoria Glen Manor nursing home where she continues to teach the staff to spell.

Sara Hilda Williams was born July 7, 1903 to Frederick Thomas Brundage Williams and Margaret Ann (Ingraham) Williams of Royal Road, in what is now Fredericton. She was the youngest of 12 children, attended grade school in Fredericton and graduated from the Provincial Normal School (the teachers' college) in 1923.

A few years later she came to Perth, probably to visit her sister Elizabeth Graham and Elizabeth's husband Gordon Graham, for a short visit and has been a Victoria County resident ever since. Sara Williams' mother died when she was young and her older sibling brought her up. She lived with Elizabeth and Gordon Graham until she bought her Warren street house in 1974. Upon her graduation her first teaching job was in the quiet community of Beaverdam, NB. She received a BA and MA through summer schools and home study late in her career.

"Sara often said she came up here to visit for two weeks and never went back," explained Miss Williams' friend Helen Miller of Perth-Andover when interviewed last week. "Her first school in Victoria County was at South Tilley." From that beginning in this area, Miss Sara Williams went on to teach at several other small schools, including Block X School in North Tilley and the South Tilley School. A look at some Block X records from 1939 shows that Sara Williams was designated a 'Class II' teacher at a salary of \$280 per annum. Among her 33 students ages six to 15 were Clement Goodine, Ida and Leitha St. Peter, Leila Goodine, Thomas McAllister, Graydon Goodine, Roland St. Peter, Shirley Goodine, Chesley Kinney, Herb Goodine, Philip LaFrance, and Nelson Paris. After teaching at various schools she took a job in September 1953 that was to last the rest of her career, until she retired in 1966. The newly built Southern Victoria Regional High School in Andover opened its doors for the first time with G.E. Malcolm MacLeod as its principal and Mrs. Maybelle Titus, who was to become one of Sara Williams's lifelong friends, as vice principal. Miss Williams was listed as an 'academic' teacher, but taught English almost exclusively throughout her career at SVRHS.

The school, now called Southern Victoria High School, had 14 teachers and 325 students in September 1953 and offered only academic subjects. The next year it introduced commercial, home economics, and shop subjects.

## **FEW STUDENTS FORGOT HER**

She is remembered. Jim Pickett of Perth-Andover has a few stories to tell, including the one about the 'shop boys' who tried to explain to the small English teacher that the big 1957 Plymouth car she was about to buy wouldn't be a good idea because of some mechanical problems. As one who had owned cars for many years - some of them without automatic starters and which she had to crank by hand - she thought she knew enough to overcome any problems.

"In 1956 as I remember she was going to get that new Plymouth," Pickett said in a telephone interview. "She was always talking to the boys in the shop about the brand new car she was going to get and they said: "Miss Williams, a Plymouth is not a good car to get this year, it has a weak crankshaft. They're having problems with the crankshaft."

"Oh, she said, the car I get, it will have a starter so I don't have to crank it." Jim Pickett said Sara Williams' new car might have ironically resulted in a lack of incentive for his doing well in class. "She taught me in grades nine to 12, and in grade 10 I had just turned 16 and had my driver's license. We drove tractors on the farm but I was always looking for a chance to drive a car. When I didn't do my work she would keep me after school and she knew we lived way down on the farm (in Hillandale, below Andover). She'd say 'now Jimmy, you just get right in that car and you drive me to your place. It was almost an incentive to stay in after school to get this chance to drive her nice new car," he laughed.

He, like many in the county, must feel as if Sara Williams taught everyone from the turn of the century on. "My mother died in December at the age of 86, and Sara Williams taught her," he said.

## **TOOK NO PRISONERS**

Although small in size, Sara Williams almost always kept perfect order in her classroom. One of the reasons was the fact that her temper could erupt at a second's notice and a book, ruler or pointer could descend upon the miscreant before he or she could react. Irma Irving of North Tilley recalls an event that took place at Block X School about 1933. "Roland St. Peter was sitting at the back of the room and Miss Williams was asking the student in front of Roland a question. The girl didn't know the answer - Sara got mad and threw a big book at her and missed. He had his head down, studying, and when the book hit him on the head he came to his feet swearing.

All the class just about died laughing, but it's a wonder it hadn't

broken his nose or something because it was a heavy book. I can see that going yet."

Irma said her brother James LaFrance used to sneak back and pinch Shirley Goodine on the leg, then crawl back. "Of course Shirley Goodine would have been busy studying and she'd yell and get punished, but one day Sara caught James and gave him a strapping."

There are many and varied stories about Miss Sara Williams and her famous temper when she was faced with a student with whom she was exasperated. Chalk, books, and other missiles were likely to come flying at one's head in those days when teachers in the classroom seemed to have a free rein to punish as they saw fit. Dennis Campbell of South Tilley, a 1965 SVRHS graduate, remembers not only the risk of getting hit, but her repetition of certain poetic passages that had about as much effect as a teaspoon trying to drain the Tobique River.

"She used to hit us in the back of the head with a book if we didn't have our homework done and she'd say: "Rest is not fitting a busy career; rest is fitting oneself to one's fear."

Another one recalled by this writer, who also graduated from SV in 1965, is this one: "Ours is not to dream, to drift; we have big dreams to dream, hard loads to lift." In the morning Miss Williams would always ask how I was and if you answered "good" or "fine" she would say: "No, Robert, you are neither GOOD or FINE. You are WELL!"

In response to the recent announcement that we were looking for information on Sara Williams' life, the response was enthusiastic to say the least. Everyone had a story or an anecdote about her. Vaughan DeMerchant called with three stories that he said were not printable, and they weren't, about things students had said to her in class.

"She used to sing - or try to sing," said James LaFrance of North Tilley. "What I remember most was that my seat was right in front of her desk and when she got mad at someone behind me she'd push her desk back hard and push mine right into my stomach every time," recalled Joan (LaFrance) Laverdiere, of Welland, Ontario. "I liked Sara. The funny things she used to do like throwing the books. You just had to duck in time. She'd get so mad, but it might be for just a few seconds. I think most of the kids liked her."

Murray Paris (born 1921) of Churchland Road, North Tilley, remembers Sara Williams, his grade one teacher at Block X School. Miss Williams, who was single and would remain so all her life, boarded at Reuben Goodine's house near the school. "She wasn't bad but she made you mind," he recalled. He remembered one student whom she would often 'beat on the side of the head with a book'. "But I didn't blame her," he laughed. "He was as dumb as an ox.

"She used to get awful mad at Hiram Kinney. Hiram used to swear a lot of course. One day she was going to beat Hiram for swearing and she sent my brother Nelson down behind the school to get a little switch and he brought one off the apple tree. It had little sharp things on it and

when she beat Hiram on the hands and brought the blood. She said she was real sorry and handed him her handkerchief, saying, 'here dear, clean them off'. He said you clean them off yourself, you (expletive deleted). You made them bleed."

## LOVED TO TRAVEL

"She loved to travel," remembers Helen Miller of Perth-Andover. "She went to Florida numerous times after she retired, to the coast, to Alaska by ship, she and her close friend Maybelle Jackson (Mrs. Maybelle Titus) and others.

Her organizations were important to her too. She belonged to a sorority called Delta Kappa Gamma from the University of Maine. I think they were all teachers. They went on a big trip to Europe one time, another summer they went down around the states to California."

One of these trips caused some anxiety to her friends and to the family of her traveling companion Maybelle Titus whose daughter Karen, now Perth-Andover mayor, remembers: "They were going to go on a trip to Florida but there weren't any seats. At the last moment - after the tour had left Presque Isle - Maybelle and Sara caught the bus from Presque Isle to Boston to meet up with the tour. We didn't know they were going; they just left at the last minute. I can't remember who drove them to Presque Isle. They had a credit card and \$20 between them.")

Mrs. Miller said Sara Williams was a member of Perth-Andover Round Table Literary Club, the ACW and the Altar Guild of Trinity Anglican Church, Andover, The Women's Institute, Delta Cappa Gamma, Retired Teachers' Association, and was acting secretary of the Perth Library Board when it opened in 1972.

"I knew her very well because her sister Elizabeth was married to my uncle Gordon Graham who ran Graham's Funeral Home (and harness shop), the first one in the area, which was located near the present Bank of Montreal in Perth. I always felt like a member of her family. She was always hospitable, I always felt free to drop in any time."

In 1974 Miss Williams bought her Warren Street house and lived there until going to the Manor in the late 1990s. Chris (Anderson) Hargrove of Perth-Andover, is now 86. Sara Williams was her teacher in grades 7 and 8 (1928-1930) at the Andover Grammar School which taught grades one to 12 in the building now occupied by Haines Manufacturing. Miss Williams taught all subjects to grades 5-8.

"We had Red Cross every Friday afternoon and she taught some of the children to do tatting, including Bob MacIntosh, later a doctor in Fredericton." Asked if Miss Williams sometimes exhibited her temper, Chris Hargrove replied: "Not with the girls - with the boys maybe." Chris' son Donald was taught English by Sara Williams in the 1960s.

Sara Williams did have a sense of humour. When the Price family

history book - where the Williams family is mentioned several times - was placed in the Perth library she said she didn't want to buy one "because the Williamses married back and forth so much that I'll probably turn out to be my own grandmother". Miss Williams now lives in room 8A in the nursing home and in spite of decreased mental capacity she continues to 'teach' English, particularly spelling, these days. "A lot of times her teaching is spelling," said Betty Fournier, a Licensed Practical Nurse at VGM. "She spells all the time. She reels the words right off and if she sees you're not paying attention she'll say: "I told you to spell!"