

Remember Those Who Have Helped You So Nobly Through the Fight: A Profile of Roberta MacAdams

By Debbie Culbertson © 2005

Second Place: Wondrous Western Women Story Contest to Celebrate Alberta's Centennial Famous 5 Foundation (www.famous5.org) and Light Hearted Concepts (www.lightheartedconcepts.com)

Inside a folder at the Glenbow Archives is a yellowing election flyer. At its centre is the photograph of a distinguished looking woman in a military nurse's uniform, circa World War I. Thin wisps of hair emerge from under her veil. But it is her eyes that capture your attention—they look into the lens of the camera with a gaze as sharp as the blade of a bayonet. The woman's name is Roberta MacAdams. The words that frame her photograph read:

*"Soldiers and Nurses from Alberta! You will have two votes at the forthcoming Election under the Alberta Military Representation Act. **Give one vote to the man of your choice and the other to the sister.** She will work not only for your best interests but for those of your wives, mothers, sweethearts, sisters and children after the war. **Remember those who have helped you so nobly through the fight.**"*

In August 1917, 7,000 copies of this campaign flyer were distributed to over 38,000 Alberta soldiers and 75 military nurses serving overseas. They must have liked what they saw and read about MacAdams. On September 18, they elected her to the legislature with 4,000 votes, 700 more than her nearest rival.

MacAdams's path to victory had its roots in two measures taken by the Province of Alberta. The first was the legislature's decision to extend the vote to women in 1916. The second was the "Alberta Military Representation Act," a measure to separate Alberta soldiers and nurses overseas into a separate constituency with two representatives. Since soldiers tended to vote Conservative, the Liberal government of the day wanted to limit the impact that military personnel might have if they voted through their home ridings. The Act was passed in May 1917, just in time for the provincial election.

That election yielded a number of surprises. Louise McKinney was chosen as the country (and Empire's) first woman representative. However, what few people remember today is that the soldier's vote, held a few months after the province-wide poll, rendered an equally spectacular result. Not only was another woman elected—Roberta MacAdams—but over 90% of those who elected her were men. She had also defeated *nineteen* male soldier candidates.

MacAdams not only deserves to be remembered for this remarkable victory, but for the contributions she made to Canadian society before, during, and after the war. MacAdams was a domestic science graduate from Ontario's Macdonald Institute. In Spring 1912, the Alberta government hired her to criss-cross the province to meet with rural women and learn about their needs. MacAdams became concerned about the loneliness of these women and wrote a report that led to government funding for the Alberta Women's Institutes, a rural women's support network.

MacAdams went on to establish the domestic science program of Edmonton's public schools. However, the Great War would interrupt that career. In 1916, she joined the Canadian Army Medical Corps, given the rank of lieutenant, and assigned to one of the largest Canadian military hospitals in Britain.

In 1917, Beatrice Nasmyth, a suffragist on staff of the Alberta Agent General's office in London, learned about McKinney's victory. She knew that the province's soldiers and nurses would soon be allowed to vote for two representatives. Nasmyth asked MacAdams to run. Although she initially rejected this offer, MacAdams reconsidered after asking herself "Is this an opportunity for good that I ought to seize?" Her answer was an emphatic "yes."

After her election, MacAdams became the first woman in the British Empire to introduce legislation. This bill, to incorporate a veteran's organization, reflected her commitment to soldiers and their dependents. MacAdams advocated for soldier's rights at a time when governments were just beginning to establish soldier pensions, benefits, employment and rehabilitation measures. Between legislative sessions, MacAdams returned to Britain where she joined the staff of the Khaki University, an extension program for military personnel.

After the war's end, MacAdams chaperoned British war brides enroute to Canada. She was later appointed to the Alberta Soldier Settlement Board with responsibility for the needs of these women—many of whom found themselves homesteading on the most inhospitable farmland in the country. MacAdams also ensured the establishment of a teacher training school in Edmonton and pressed the government to support arts education and public health care.

MacAdams declined to run again in the 1921 election. It was believed she did not wish to align herself with a particular political party. However, another factor may have affected her decision. MacAdams had married during her legislative term and had lost at least one pregnancy. Whatever the reason, MacAdams left behind a political, educational, social, and military legacy that we continue to benefit from today.