

## JAMES SHAVER WOODSWORTH 1874-1942

James Shaver Woodsworth's lifetime of work affected the life of every Canadian during his career as a church minister, as a social worker and as a Member of Parliament. Moral courage, a social sympathy, a passion for clarity and an intellectual prowess are the qualities that make J.S. Woodsworth a pioneer in the social movement of Canada. He was raised in a Methodist household, which instilled moral values into his life.

James Shaver Woodsworth came from a Loyalist background. His maternal ancestors, the Schaeffers, were part of an eighteenth century mass migration from the Palatine region of Germany, who fleeing their homeland because of religious persecution, territorial wars and exorbitant taxes settled in Sussex County, New Jersey.



“Applewood”  
The James Shaver Woodsworth Homestead Foundation

After the end of hostilities, about 1793 Wilhem Schaeffer's son, John (1739-1796) who had fought with the Royal Yorkers, came to Niagara Falls in Canada. The family anglicised the name from Shaeffer to Shaver. His son, William (1771-1830), married Mary Catherine Book (1776-1845). They had thirteen children. Their sons, John and George, purchased land in Etobicoke in 1820 and 1824. In 1830, their eighth son, Peter (1809-1890), purchased nearby land which became known as Applewood. Two years later, he married Esther Vansickle (1813-1870) whose ancestors had come from the Netherlands. Their daughter, Esther Josephine (1846-1925), was one of their seven children.

Josephine (as she was known) met James Woodsworth while he was a young Methodist circuit rider who boarded at the Shaver home. When they were married in 1868 he had become an ordained minister. Their first child was James Shaver Woodsworth born 1874. In 1883 the family consisting of James and three more children travelled by train to Fargo in North Dakota Territory, by steamboat to Winnipeg and then by buckboard to the parsonage in Portage la Prairie. In 1905 after the formation of the two Provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta and a time of great expansion in the West, James was moved to Winnipeg as Superintendent of Missions responsible for the growing Methodist empire extending from the Great Lakes to the Rocky Mountains.

For J.S. Woodsworth, his evangelistic background made him critical of society and his Loyalist background made him aware of the importance of tradition. Nevertheless, Woodsworth saw at an early age that there were things in Canada that needed to be fixed. Woodsworth was educated in Winnipeg at Wesley College. He then went to Toronto to study theology at Victoria College. He went to Oxford, England in the fall of 1899 for a year to complete his studies and to reflect on life and the role he was to play in life. While at Oxford, he did not register as a student but sat in on some of the classes and participated in the conversations of the students. While he was there the Boer War broke out enabling him to be privy to the discussions that occurred about the moral values of imperialism. The next year, the British Labour party was founded and again he was able to hear many conversations about social-reform.

His moral background was enlightened during travels around Europe. Attempting to see "English life" rather than the tourist view, he lived at a university social-service settlement that was situated in one of the most poverty-stricken areas of London.



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*Family of James and Esther Josephine Woodsworth, 1898*

*Back Row, l-r, Joseph, Mary, Richard. Front Row, l-r, F. Harold, James Sr., Edith, Esther Josephine, James Shaver*  
*Library and Archives Canada*

Woodsworth returned to Canada in July, 1900 and went on to Brandon Manitoba where on August 26 he was ordained as a Methodist minister. Even at the beginning of his evangelical work Woodsworth was troubled. He began to question whether or not he could accept the dogmas of the Methodist "Discipline" and whether the continual effort to "save" the individual, while ignoring his social context, was really practical Christianity. In 1902, he wrote his first letter of resignation from the church. He brought it to the annual conference but never submitted it because he was convinced by others that the time was not right.

The conference appointed him assistant pastor to Rev. R. F. Bowles of Grace Church, Winnipeg. He threw himself into his pastoral work and began visiting young people's organizations. He finally began to feel a working basis within Methodism.

In 1904, he married Lucy Lillian Staples whom he had met during his years in Toronto. Their home in Winnipeg became a gathering place for young people. His wife became a great confidante throughout his troubles with the church. As many of his letters prove, she was very supportive of any decision he felt that he had to make.

His second resignation, along with an accompanying statement of explanation was given to the Manitoba Methodist Church Conference in 1907. The conference struck a special committee that later rejected Woodsworth's resignation.

He was then offered and accepted the post of the Superintendent of the Methodist City Mission Winnipeg along with a free hand to reorganize and revitalize it. The All People's Mission was supported financially by the Methodist General Board of Missions, the Women's Missionary Society, contributions from Winnipeg Methodist Churches, collections at Mission church services and special collections. Though it had many contributors and had grown somewhat during its nine years of existence, it had not grown in its philosophy and played only a small role in Winnipeg's charities.

Woodsworth changed the whole operation of the People's Mission and in turn, improved its contribution to the city of Winnipeg. He first concentrated on unifying the scattered branches of the mission and on expanding the facilities and staff. He later moved his family into the mission and felt comfortable that it was adequate for the assimilation of foreigners. His daughter, Grace MacInnis, described the house as always being an open and welcoming environment to any traveller that passed by its door. (She was a Member of Parliament from 1956 to 1974.)

Woodsworth came to realize that Winnipeg's social problems were due to the huge numbers of immigrants. Not because they were moving from rural settings to urban settings, as was the case in England, but it was far more complicated because of the new and very different population. Woodsworth directed the mission's work to be primarily focused on this problem. Through his work and research, Woodsworth became the foremost authority on Canadian immigration as well as one of the leading sociologists in the country. His work at the mission lasted six years and he continued his social work by becoming the Secretary of the Canadian Welfare League in 1913. He was made Director of the Three Prairie Provinces Joint Bureau of Social Research in 1916. He travelled throughout the West during these years investigating social conditions, writing reports on them with the result that he became a nationally known lecturer.

In the winter of 1916-17 he decided that he must publish his objections to conscription. He objected to the church becoming places to recruit men and where ministers communicated to the worshippers that it was their duty to serve. He was opposed to war on a moral basis and could not condone the church as a vehicle of recruitment. He was instantly closed down at the Bureau of Social Research.

In 1918, Woodsworth decided that the time had come to again resign from the church. In his resignation he stated his opposition to the church becoming more commercialized, that the control of the church did not lie in the hands of the people; rather it was invested in the control of the men who controlled the wealth. He also pointed out his disagreement with the church and the position it had taken on the war. "I thought that as a Christian minister I was a messenger of the Prince of Peace." His resignation from the church was accepted.

Without a job, he moved on to the Pacific Coast and found work as a longshoreman. During Woodsworth's time there, he joined the longshoremen's union, helped organize the Federated Labour Party of British Columbia and wrote for the labour paper. He became a regular speaker at labour meetings and was sent on a speaking tour of Western Canada in 1919. By the time he arrived in Winnipeg, he found that the strike had escalated into a citywide sympathy strike (Winnipeg General Strike). Immediately upon arrival in Winnipeg, Woodsworth began addressing the massive striker meetings.

He helped edit the workers' strike bulletins when the chief editor was arrested and charged with libel. Woodsworth was arrested a week later but the charges were later dropped. His identification with the labour movement later gave him a seat in Parliament. He was elected to Parliament in the federal election of 1921 as the member for Winnipeg North Centre, a seat that he kept for twenty years. His first resolution was one on unemployment insurance. He kept pressing the King government on the obstacles of the constitution when it came to presenting changes in the social reform policy until he succeeded in getting a committee struck to examine constitutional difficulties in 1935.



J.S. Woodsworth c 1921  
Library and Archives Canada

During the 1920s and 1930s, the House of Commons had many different parties represented in its chamber. The Progressive Party became more splintered after every election and soon an independent group nicknamed the "Ginger Group" broke away from the Progressives. This Group was mostly farmers from Alberta. Woodsworth and Agnes Macphail from Ontario began to work with the group of farmers and became the founding nucleus of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (C.C.F.) in 1932. They found that it was possible for farmer and labour representatives to work together because they agreed on every main issue that came up and shared a common belief that what was needed in Canada was a far-reaching change in the whole economic and social system. His work in the House of Commons and beforehand as a social worker made J.S. Woodsworth the inevitable first leader of the C.C.F.

J.S. Woodsworth was a pioneer of his time. His moral courage was evident in his willingness to make sacrifices for his principles. This was demonstrated in his struggle to remain with the church. His social sympathy is best demonstrated through his many years as a social worker and with identifying himself with the unfortunate and the exploited. Woodsworth possessed a passion for clarity that forced everyone to face up to the unpleasant issues that confronted the Canadian society.

Lastly, he was an intellectual pioneer because he had an understanding of and a new approach to the issues that confront us. From The All People's Mission, to Unemployment Insurance Legislation, Woodsworth projected new ideas and solutions to the people of Canada when it came to solving social problems. In his career, he made changes to our system that, in the end, affect the life of every Canadian during his time and those to come. He made the first steps in improving the Canada that we have come to know and appreciate today. He was truly a pioneer of his time.

Sources: NDP Website in Saskatchewan,  
Shirley Shaver Cranston U.E. Hamilton Branch UELAC  
60 Maryland Street- by Sheila Grover (1981) (Winnipeg Historic Buildings Committee)



The Woodsworth House at 60 Maryland Street in Winnipeg was built in 1907 and purchased upon completion by Woodsworth's father. Between 1908 and 1917, the younger Woodsworth and his growing family shared the house with his aging parents. As the family lived in Ottawa from 1921 until 1942, 60 Maryland served as a home base

