

Pioneers of Feminism and Unionism: Léa Roback and Madeleine Parent

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These transcriptions were extracted from footage shot during the filming of *A Vision in the Darkness* (1991), directed by Sophie Bissonnette.

Poverty in the Neighbourhood of Saint-Henri (1930s and 1940s) – Léa Roback with Madeleine Parent

Léa Roback: But there's one thing about Saint-Henri that you should keep in mind. It's the fact that the small businesses were happy about the unions. We would go there and chat, and they would tell us things like, "You know, there's this great guy who should join you, he could help you." So things like that were good. But the poverty . . . Let me tell you one story. One of the workers, before she went to work at RCA Victor with her sister, they had one pair of shoes between them. To go to church on Sunday mornings—she lived on Sainte-Émilie—well, she couldn't go to church with her sister. She had to wait for her sister to get back from church, so she could wear the same shoes to the following service.

Madeleine Parent: When I started doing union organization in Saint-Henri in '43, I visited many, many families. Later, when I thought about the people's housing, I was reminded of the image Gabrielle Roy had painted in *The Tin Flute*. It was a bit like that. Very dilapidated, with almost no utilities. The cold was penetrating, and it was very difficult to get rid of the vermin. The kids played in the street, because the parks had no facilities in those days. So they used sticks and a chunk of ice for the puck. And they played right in the street. In any case, when the mothers got home from the factories, they had to clean the house and make supper. They couldn't have the kids running around in the house. So that's how people lived, but it was very difficult, and the nights were cold.

Sophie Bissonnette: Did a lot of the children in those families work?

MP: Many of the children in those families worked. The homes would have one room shared by several children. If a home had two bedrooms, that was considered a lot. People managed as best they could, living in poverty, in the cold . . . in misery, really.