

A Pioneer Student at Western Michigan University

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Ella F. Aikman

Perhaps it's not surprising that Western Michigan University's first international student came to campus from Canada. Accessibility was an important issue in 1910. By today's standards the trek from Manitoba to Michigan was arduous and time consuming. You couldn't fly into Kalamazoo as there were no airlines functioning and only a handful of people in the world had even seen an airplane in flight. Automobiles were still a curiosity owned by few and designed largely for city driving. If you were lucky enough to own a car it wasn't an easy to drive to Western's campus as roads and highways were very poorly maintained and only existed as dirt ruts between many major cities. Within North America in 1910, airplanes and automobiles were not a factor in people's lives. So how did people get around? Largely, they didn't. Most people traveled only a few miles from their birthplaces over an entire lifetime. Those who traveled did so largely on foot, horse or ox cart or wagon, by steamship on rivers and lakes, or on a rapidly developing railroad system that was beginning to link major towns and cities across the continent. The revolution in transportation was just around the corner.

It is not known how Western's first international student traveled from her home in Winnipeg to Kalamazoo but it was likely a combination of sea voyage on the Great Lakes and rail travel from Chicago to Kalamazoo. The trip would have taken at least three days to complete. More remarkable was the fact that the first international student was a woman. Ms. Ella Francis Aikman was born August 21, 1888. Raised with her two sisters in a middle-class family in Winnipeg, Ella showed an early appreciation of art and literature. Higher education for women was rare and "going off to school," particularly in a foreign country, must have been a cause for wonder among friends and family. Miss Aikman, as she was called in 1910, was unlikely to have traveled alone to Kalamazoo. A member of her family probably accompanied her. Given the lingering attitudes of the Victorian Era there were many things "proper" women were not allowed to do, including: traveling without a chaperone, spending time alone with a man, living by herself, voting, holding property rights in most localities, or holding a job after marriage. But Ella was an unusual woman. She had already completed a year of higher education at Manitoba College when she decided to specialize in a relatively new area of children's education known as kindergarten. Her ambition would lead her to a Life Certificate in Education at Western and a career in the Free Kindergarten system in Winnipeg.

Ella's passion for universal early childhood education was certainly ahead of the common educational practice of the day. In 1910 a mere 30 per cent of the population in the United States had attended elementary school. Of these only a third graduated from high school. But the booming population in North America and the need for a literate workforce drove the creation of institutions like Western State Normal School, whose mission was to prepare teachers, particularly at the elementary and secondary levels. Ella considered enrolling at: Oberlin College, York University in Toronto, and Western. Ella's daughter, Mrs. Elizabeth A. Thompson of Montgomery, Alabama, believes the choice was made on the basis of propriety. Ella's "Auntie Sarah," Sarah Jane McKenzie, lived in Kalamazoo and would be able to provide housing and supervision for the twenty-two year old student. Ella also had an aunt and uncle in Big Rapids with whom she shared trips and weekend stays. After one such stay in 1910 Ella penned this observation, "There is one thing I do like about the American people, they are very friendly, and I do not think they are as formal as we Canadians."

Ella was clearly drawn to social issues. She served as Vice President of the club for future teachers of kindergarten. She was a devotee of Dr. Sigmund Freud, the Austrian psychoanalyst, who had published The Interpretation of Dreams ten years earlier in 1900. But an even greater influence on her life was the writings of German educator Friedrich Froebel, the father of the modern kindergarten. By 1909, kindergartens were well established in central Europe but still struggling for acceptance in North America. It was felt by many that the early education of children was the duty of the mother - not someone unrelated to the child. Ella's careful reading of Froebel, her notes, journal entries, and career choice are testimony to her devotion to the kindergarten movement that sought to establish itself in North America in the early years of the last century.

Ella was also active in the campus chapter of the Woman's Suffrage League, a part of the protest movement in the United States and Canada focused on winning the right of women to vote. In a journal reference Ella points to the influence the great social reformer Jane Addams had on her thinking and the need for electoral reform.

While living with Auntie Sarah, in the autumn of 1911, President William Howard Taft paid a visit to Kalamazoo. Flags and decorations that had been arranged by Western students working late into the previous evening adorned the school grounds. The President, speaking on the lawn adjacent to East Hall tipped his hat to the future teachers assembled before him. The Kalamazoo Telegraph reported, "In greeting President Waldo and the faculty, the president took occasion to remark on the striking situation of the institution on the brow of the high prominence overlooking the city and the remarkable beauty of the buildings' architecture." The Telegraph added, "During the course of his brief address, President Taft mentioned the part he had taken in the upbuilding of the school system in the Philippines [as military Governor] and outlined to some extent the role the normal school had played in that work ..." He continued, "teachers are now regarded in some ways as more important than physicians, lawyers, or even clergymen. Pedagogues are always notably underpaid, however, being in a way, employees of the government." President Taft's visit to the Western campus during his stay in Kalamazoo provided recognition and status for the fledgling institution and, no doubt, encouragement for Ella and other Western students preparing for careers in teaching.

Ella attended her commencement ceremony in June of 1911. She remained in Kalamazoo for another year, however, to gain further schooling beyond a basic teaching certificate to earn a Life Teaching Certificate. She was among the first North Americans to earn a degree in the specialization of kindergarten teaching.

Ella married Donald Stuart McKellar in 1916. This event was noted in the Western Herald, "Friends of Miss Ella Aikman, kindergarten 1911, will be interested in the announcement of her marriage ..." Mr. McKellar, a well-traveled home furnishings representative for Eaton's of Canada, rose to prominence as one of Winnipeg's leading citizens. Ella, of course, chose to teach kindergarten in the working class "slums" of Winnipeg. In a report written at the conclusion of her first year as a teacher Ella stated, "The Kindergarten is the right of every child and the Mission Schools and Free Kindergarten in this city, by providing such a training for children from needy homes are bringing sunshine to dark gardens and making roots grow which one day will yield plants called 'Good citizens of Winnipeg'." Now Mrs. McKellar, Ella rose quickly to a position of supervising several teachers in addition to teaching her own pupils.

As was common in those days, Ella's teaching career ended with the birth of her daughter, Elizabeth, in 1922. Her involvement with the welfare of children, however, continued throughout her life. Ella worked as a community volunteer for many agencies in Winnipeg but particularly in a leadership role at the children's hospital. In addition to wife and mother and community volunteer, Ella became an ardent golfer, skier, skater, and could even manage snowshoes. But Elizabeth, her daughter, looks back at her mother's caring spirit as her most prominent attribute.

Ella died in Clearwater Beach, Florida in 1964 with her daughter Elizabeth at her side. Her last conversations with her daughter were reminiscences of her kindergarten teaching days. Ella was always drawn to the "little ones." In the Eighth Annual Report of The Froebel Kindergarten in 1916, Ella had this to say, "Is there anything so very big about teaching a roomful of little ones how to live together? This work becomes big as soon as we remind ourselves how sadly the grown-up world still needs that lesson of living together ... person with person, group with group, nation with nation." How appropriately said during a year when the flower of Canada's youth was being killed and maimed on the battlefields of France.

Ella Francis Aikman was born of pioneer stock in Winnipeg, Canada. Today she stands as the pioneer international student at Western Michigan University, an institution that today welcomes students from 110 countries. But no matter how distant these lands lie from Kalamazoo, the most significant trip of all was made by a young woman traveling in the year 1910, in search of education and training to teach the children of the needy in her native Canada.

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