

Being Margaret Haley, Chicago, 1903

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As I consider the question of “The City as a Light and Beacon?”—the leading question of this International Standing Conference on the History of Education in Birmingham—I keep wondering what it means to live in a city, both in my own experience, and in the experience of my biography subject, Margaret Haley, a woman teacher union leader who lived and worked in a great American city—Chicago—one hundred years ago.¹

I am thinking partly about the material things that cities have always offered women – things like work, culture, anonymity and social freedom -- but I am also thinking about cities and how they can shape identity. Living in a city allows people to re-create themselves. The attraction of a city is not merely the physical experience, or the fact that there are quantitatively more things to do there than in a small village, but it is also the way that cities allow a change in a person’s way of *being*. In my own experience, city life has been like a particular relationship that I have had with another side of myself. I feel different when I’m in a city. My pulse

¹ For help with this paper, I thank Marna Suarez, Tom Poetter, Wright Gwyn, John Bercaw, and Jessie Rousmaniere. I am grateful also to Ian Grosvenor and Ruth Watts for inviting me to present this keynote address.

quickness; I feel a bit more electric and sharp edged. City living makes me, or allows me, to become stronger, tougher, more ambitious, and more self-contained.

I have lived in a number of cities—Toronto, Chicago, Minneapolis-- but I usually define New York City as my primary urban experience—the city that, in effect, shaped my identity. I lived there on and off for some of my youth, and then for five years when I was in my early thirties. Many people who have lived in a city might say they liked it, or they hated it, or it was just a place where they once lived. But my experience of living in the center of New York City for an uninterrupted period of time is one of the most formative experiences of my life. In those years, the City taught me a number of things that I have incorporated into my identity to this day.

I lived in New York City between 1987 and 1992. I was a graduate student and a part-time worker. I lived alone, while sharing this particularly congested space with six million other people. Because of those living conditions, I learned how to be somewhat self-centered and oblivious to others. I learned how to be indifferent to the common disasters and tragedies that I passed daily on the street. I also learned how to deal with conflict that I saw every day on sidewalk interactions, city politics, and the evening news broadcasts. Like many New Yorkers, I learned how to work and live with a focused intensity that drove me like a high-speed drill; for about a year I held down four jobs in four different parts of the city. Everything was quick: the subways, the news, the work, and me. I talked fast, worked fast, moved fast.

For all that speed and impersonality, in those years I also learned how to care deeply about people and about politics. I developed a commitment to social change that might seem incongruous when facing the immensity of problems of a place like New York. Like many New Yorkers, I donated goods and time to the poor; one day a week, I helped a woman who had AIDS; I fought against the Gulf War, and against President Bush's (senior) policies against

women's rights. This period became the most politically active time in my life, while at the same time I lived in a somewhat reclusive and self-centered way.

I believe that the things that I learned in New York helped me to get to where I am today. I was never exactly a shy or fearful person, but my years in New York taught me a kind of toughness that has been helpful in my life and career. The city taught me things, and supported my growth as a professional woman.

When I think of Margaret Haley, America's first teacher union leader, active in Chicago during the first three decades of the twentieth century, I wonder to what extent her city helped her shape her identity and professional life. What did city living teach her? I wonder, more broadly, to what extent an identity of "city-ness" helps people, especially women, foster a kind of independence and intensity that helps them step outside of their socially prescribed roles.

In this paper, I use Haley's relationship with her city as a window to view her as a person. I think about what it meant to *be* Margaret Haley in the course of one year—1903,-- in one city—Chicago. I focus on a set time period and a set location to try to understand Margaret Haley's personality, because she herself offered very little information about her own personal life. An enormously active and public woman, Haley wrote hundreds of pages of political autobiography including in them, as she wrote, "as little of my own personality as is humanely possible."² She kept no diary, and she recorded only a few fragmentary stories about her childhood, and literally nothing about a personal life, friends, family or feelings. Probably Haley's most reflective moment was when she wrote that she was *not* a reflective person.³ As a political figure, she was highly invested in her public image, and her surviving papers represent

² Robert L. Reid, ed., *Battleground: The Autobiography of Margaret Haley*, (Urbana, Illinois, 1982), p. 270.

this: they read as a litany of public activities and accomplishments in the halls of government and political organizations. Her autobiography, significantly entitled “Battleground,” is a rapid-fire account of campaigns, meeting, arguments, and political triumphs and failures. But as a woman and a personality, she remains a mystery to me, and my research on her has always felt a bit like shadow boxing.

By focusing on her relationship with the city in which she lived in a set period of time, I can, in a way, ask the city to report on Margaret Haley. The city itself provides the kind of impressionistic, personal evidence that she refused to record-- addresses, descriptions of communities, weather reports. And the city also provides a kind of universal relationship that I can reflect upon with my own life. As a social historian of teachers, I have often framed my understanding of teachers’ work in the past with my own experience as a classroom teacher. So, too can I frame my interpretation of Haley’s city life through my own experience of city life.

Here I try to do just that by centering on evidence from one year—1903—and on three “lessons” that I believe Chicago taught Margaret Haley. They are, not coincidentally, the same three lessons that New York City taught me: the ability to be self-centered and oblivious to others, the ability to work intensely and quickly, and the ability to deal with conflict.

Margaret Haley, Chicago, 1903

Margaret Haley was born and raised in a working class Irish American family in rural northern Illinois. She began teaching school at age 16, attended a variety of teacher training institutes in the state, and moved to Chicago where she taught for over a dozen years in a school in the infamous meatpacking stockyards district. In 1897, at age 36, she joined the Chicago

³ In her 70s, Haley referred to herself as a young woman in this way: “I was even less

Teachers' Federation, a group recently formed by women elementary teachers to protect their recently won pension. Almost immediately, Haley took on a leadership role in the Federation and she remained its most visible and powerful leader until her death in 1939.

The year 1903 marked a turning point in Margaret Haley's career, and in her public identity. By 1903, she was in the final years of the famous tax crusade—a three year long legal challenge by the Federation of illegal tax deductions made by major Chicago corporations. Because of these deductions, the Federation charged, 4000 women teachers were denied a \$50 a year salary increase, what would have been a 5-10% raise for some teachers.⁴ Haley had led this lawsuit through dozens of city and state courts, political rallies, and public information campaigns. She had also spun the case to represent a larger movement of citizens fighting to control corporate greed and improve public funding, so that by 1903 she was immensely popular at the local and national level among a broad group of municipal, economic, and educational reformers. In 1903, Haley was also in the national news because she had just negotiated the affiliation of the teachers with the Chicago Federation of Labor, stunning the nation with the bold association of white-collar women teachers with men laborers. Also in this year Haley confirmed her leadership in the education community with a bold challenge to the administrator dominated National Education Association, and with her continued resistance to administrative school reform in Chicago. Through the year, she toured the country, speaking out for teachers, women, and tax reformers on these issues in highly popular public speeches.

introspective than I am now.” *Battleground*, p. 22.

⁴ In 1903, first year primary and grammar teachers earned \$550 a year. The scale rose \$25-\$50 a year until the 10th year, when both levels earned \$1000 a year. Secondary teachers, most of whom were men, earned more, but they were excluded from the Federation which was an association for teachers of the pre-secondary grades. “Schedules of Salaries, 1903,” Box 37, Folder August-December 1903, Chicago Teachers' Federation papers, Chicago Historical Society [hereafter: CTF].

As Haley's name entered the national press, her identity as a Chicagoan became increasingly prominent. Her residence in Chicago, and her battle against Chicago's notorious urban politics simultaneously gave her credence as a tough fighter, and confirmed her humble existence as a woman schoolteacher who was simply trying to do her job for city children. Like Joan of Arc, with whom she was sometimes compared, she was inevitably described by reporters by both her femininity as a schoolteacher, and by her inherent masculinity as a Chicagoan.⁵ She was one of Chicago's "Five Maiden Aunts," wrote one reporter, while another reporter called her the "woman who stirred Chicago upside down until she had her way."⁶ Her life and identity literally *became* the city in which she lived; she was both *of* Chicago and fighting *for* Chicago. Covering the news beat of Margaret Haley, wrote the *Chicago Times* reporter Richard Finnegan, "a newspaper man was privileged to observe and to write one of the great stories of Chicago."⁷

Chicago had its share of great stories in 1903. A city of two million residents, it was known for its industry, transportation, and its infamous meat packing stockyards, all of which gave the city air a constantly rotten, smoky odor. Its infrastructure strained by its mammoth population, Chicago's roads were poorly paved, its water unclean, and its transportation system congested and poorly managed.⁸ Whole districts of the city were so noted for the desperate poverty of their immigrant and African American populations that middle class women like Jane Addams had devoted their lives to trying to resurrect them in community settlement houses. Organized labor was particularly active in Chicago, and through 1903 organized men and women

⁵ "A brave little woman" who was nothing less than a "modern Joan of Arc." *The Daily Eagle* Marinette Wisconsin, August 4, 1903.

⁶ William Hard, "Chicago's Five Maiden Aunts," *American Magazine* 62 (September 1906), pp. 481-489; "Margaret A. Haley in Boston," *Journal of Education* 65, (November 7, 1901).

⁷ Richard Finnegan, *Margaret A. Haley Memorial Booklet* (Chicago, 1939), p. 17.

workers in the transit, coal delivery, laundry, restaurant, and hotel industries went on strike. The Labor Day parade in September of that year drew 75,000, the largest labor crowd ever gathered in an American city.⁹ Leading the political news of the year was the municipal ownership movement—a grass roots campaign to authorize the city to deprivatize the city transit system.¹⁰ As part of a broader reform movement to control corporate monopoly and give citizens power over public services, the Federation was deeply involved in this campaign, unabashedly handing petitions to schoolchildren to deliver to their parents back at home. The Federation took an opposing stand on the other major Chicago issue of the year—an Education Bill that was designed to centralize school administration in a powerful superintendent.¹¹

Behind these political battles loomed the daily crises of the city: hundreds of Chicagoans froze to death during a coal shortage in the middle of a particularly harsh winter, and six months later hundreds more were killed by a summer heat wave, storms, and a typhoid epidemic.¹² And still plaguing the city was Chicago's nemesis—fire, which had ravaged the city in the notorious disaster of 1871. Fires broke out in a number of locations during the year, including the downtown business area.¹³ Then, on the last day of 1903, in the newly built Iroquois theater in the heart of downtown, a spark lit on a stage curtain during a matinee performance. Within 15

⁸ Harry Platt Judson, "The Municipal Situation in Chicago," *American Monthly Review of Reviews* 27, (April 1903), p. 434.

⁹ "Labor's Parade Breaks Record," *Chicago Tribune* September 8, 1903.

¹⁰ Thomas R. Pegram, *Partisans and Progressives: Private Interest and Public Policy in Illinois, 1870-1922* (Urbana, Illinois, 1992), pp. 121-150.

¹¹ The best sources on Federation politics in this period remain Wayne Urban, *Why Teachers Organized* (Detroit, 1982); Julia Wrigley, *Class, Politics, and Public Schools: Chicago, 1900-1950* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1982); and David Hogan, *Class and Reform: School and Society in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Philadelphia, 1985).

¹² "Bitterest Cold of Winter Here," *Chicago Tribune* January 12 1903; "Heat Takes Toll," *Chicago Tribune* July 2, 1903; "Severe Gales End Heat," *Chicago Tribune* July 5 1903.

¹³ "Downtown Fires Harass Musham," *Chicago Tribune* May 4, 1903.

minutes, almost 600 people were killed in the blaze— twice the number lost in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. Most of the victims were women and children who had flocked to the theater for a Christmas show, including 96 public school children and 38 Chicago schoolteachers.¹⁴

Before the Christmas-time fire, Chicago schools had already suffered a rough year. The affiliation of the Federation with organized labor the previous December had intensified the war between school administrators and teachers that had begun with the tax fight. While teachers accused politicians and administrators of manipulating the city for their own needs, school administrators in turn accused the Federation of using illegal and undemocratic political influence in their work. Meanwhile, school enrollments rose, old school buildings were found to be in disrepair, and educators wrestled over the issue of child labor and the education of handicapped children.

In April, 1903, the Federation members voted to hire two full-time paid officers—both experienced political leaders in the Federation. Margaret Haley, an elementary teacher with sixteen years of tenure in a south side Chicago school, was appointed Business Agent, and Catherine Goggin, an elementary teacher and one of the founding members of the Federation, became Financial Secretary.¹⁵ The appointments were significant in that they confirmed the importance of the Federation as a political institution in Chicago. With a membership of 4000 elementary teachers which accounted for two-thirds of all the city's teachers, the Federation was an unprecedented and powerful presence in the city.

¹⁴ Marshall Everett , The Great Chicago Theater Disaster (Publishers Union of America, 1904), p. 36.

¹⁵ “Miss Haley, Business Agent,” *Chicago Tribune* April 12, 1903.

In the remainder of this paper, I will present the three lessons that I believe Margaret learned from the city that shaped her leadership in the Federation in 1903. First, a lesson about what I call “The City Self.” Second, a lesson about working in a city. And third, a lesson that cities teach about conflict.

Lesson One: The City Self

In 1903 Margaret Haley was 41 years old. She lived in a house owned by an elderly Irish American couple on Wabash Avenue at 34th St. on the south side of Chicago. Haley shared this residence with four other younger working women, one of whom was a teacher and Federation member. The residence was notable because it was located in one of the few interracial communities in Chicago. On her daily walk to the streetcar, she passed the Keith School—the poor and overcrowded elementary school that enrolled the highest African American student population in the city.

It would be nice to imagine that Haley lived in this community out of a commitment to inter-racial politics. But that would be pure imagination. In her life-long career as a teacher activist, Margaret Haley resolutely ignored the problems faced by African American students and teachers in Chicago’s increasingly racially divided school system. This was not an unusual stand, even for otherwise progressive white people. As an Irish-American teacher, Haley was part of a labor community that was hostile to the largely poor, African American community in Chicago in these years, fearful about the extent to which employers would use African Americans as strikebreakers to undermine the larger labor movement. Nor did she have any personal relations with African American people, and she never made any effort to recruit to the Federation the African American teachers who were hired to work in congested and under-

serviced schools like the Keith School. By 1906, when the neighborhood of Wabash Avenue and 34th St. became so populated by African American families that it was commonly referred to as “The Black Belt,” she moved away. Margaret Haley never recorded any of this information; my data comes only from the city: the census that records her residence, a map that tells me where the school, home, and streetcar line were, and accounts of racial politics in the city. Those records, plus Haley’s silence about race in a period of increasing racial tension in the city, tell their own story about how she conceived of the emerging shape of the occupation of teaching, the scope of organized teachers’ responsibilities, and her own personal commitments and ideologies.¹⁶

The city provides information on another of Haley’s frustrating silences. Margaret Haley never married, and she never mentioned a primary personal relationship or how she lived her daily life for the full forty years that she was involved in the Federation. Nor do any of her contemporaries mention personal relationships when describing Margaret Haley. For many years, Haley was politically paired with Catherine Goggin who shared the leadership of the Federation with Haley in the image of a parental unit: Haley was the tough and hard-driving labor leader; Goggin was the more sensitive and intelligent organizer and manager. But however close, theirs was apparently a sexless “marriage.” Haley shared Goggin’s residence for a few years, but Goggin also lived with other women, as did Haley, and no surviving correspondence or data from any source suggests other than an intense, political alliance. About Margaret Haley’s personal life—her home life, her emotional supports or intimate friends—there is silence.

¹⁶ Chicago 1900 Census (Ed 83, Sheet 8, Line 98); Kate Rousmaniere, “White Silence: A Racial Biography of Margaret Haley,” *Equity and Excellence in Education*, 34 (September 2001).

Feminist scholars would rightly urge me to question these silences and to suspect that they represent Haley's belief that she needed to be intensely private about her personal life. Perhaps she was hiding something in that house on Wabash Avenue, with those women roommates, and in all the other houses she lived in.¹⁷ Alternately, I can see the silence as something quite literal. In the surviving records, the absence of intimacy in Margaret Haley's life seems neither forced nor unusual; perhaps her silence speaks to the truth that personal issues, relationships, and private living arrangements carried little particular interest to her.

My own perspective is that Margaret Haley *did* have a primary emotional relationship all these years-- and that it was to her work. Her life revolved around the Federation and everything else was simply a necessary living expense. By the time she turned 41, Margaret Haley was deeply and inextricably involved in her public life as a teacher activist. Her public life *was* her private life.

Perhaps she chose the living arrangement on Wabash Avenue because it offered convenience and impersonality. She had left her family home in a suburb of the city only a few years before, leaving her widowed father in the care of two younger siblings. Her move north, into a boarding house, offered her closer access to the city and freedom from the domestic chores and emotional responsibilities that she had undertaken as eldest daughter for most of her adult life. As a place, the residence on Wabash Avenue probably meant little to her; but as a mechanism to further her own distinct political identity, it was a necessity. Not expected to be a good neighbor, a daughter, a sister, or even a contributing household member, Margaret Haley was free to devote herself to a new passion—her work with the Teachers' Federation.

¹⁷ Martha Vicinis, "Lesbian History: All Theory and No Facts or All Facts and No Theory?" *Radical History Review* 60 (1994).

Although many people move to cities to find romance, or better connections with different kinds of people, others move to experience that strange solitude of standing alone in a crowd. It is easier to be single in a city, and it is easier to throw oneself unapologetically into passionate work. It is easier to do all this, because so many other people in the city are doing it too. One of the attractions of a city, after all, is the way it allows for anonymity and impersonality. We can be rude to our neighbors and indifferent to our housemates. We can live in places that provide only a bed and a door that leads into the city that first attracted us.

These qualities, in fact, reflect my experience of living in New York City. I went to New York to work, and there I did work, finding a freedom from social and family responsibilities that I could not find in my small hometown. I could stay home alone on Saturday night and write; I could eat and drink alone in my pajamas; and since I rented my apartment, I could treat it with an indifference that I found liberating. In the five years I lived in that apartment, I barely spoke to my neighbors. And while I socialized with friends and colleagues in those years, I had no primary relationship. That is, beyond my primary relationship to the city and to my work there. The freedom to be alone, to be indifferent, and to be selfish about ones time is in many ways, a freedom that is not afforded to most women, particularly women in small sheltered communities. A relationship with a city offers that kind of freedom. Cities teach us how to be on our own, to keep to ourselves, and to focus on our own paths.

Lesson Two: City Work

But for both Margaret Haley and me, the way in which the city offered a kind of social detachment simultaneously offered us the opportunity to become deeply involved in political

work. Free to not care about our private life and local communities, we became free to become active in larger causes. Work for the city became the center of our lives.

Margaret Haley exuded energy. A small woman, with black hair and bright blue eyes, she dressed nicely, in formal, feminine clothes, and she often wore hats. She had enough vanity to believe that her appearance could help her political work. Or, as a woman contemporary wrote: “she was a most attractive little woman who knew how to use her dainty femininity effectively.”¹⁸ Although petite and feminine, she was hardly demur. Contemporaries often noted that more striking than her physical appearance was her energy. All descriptions of Margaret Haley note her as brave, spirited, resolute, and courageous-- what turn-of-the century Americans called “pluck.”¹⁹ A friend praised her widely for her “stimulative leadership” among the teachers in Chicago, and one reporter described her as “a vigorous, energetic little body fabricated mostly of nerves.”²⁰ She was, by all accounts, obsessive about her work, driving herself so hard, day and night, that once or twice a year she collapsed for a few days, then rebounded and went back to work.

The Federation office was located in the heart of the city in an office building on Dearborn Street at one of the busiest intersections in the inner city. The central location of the

¹⁸ Mary J. Herrick, *The Chicago Schools: A Social and Political History*, (Beverly Hills, 1971), p. 108.

¹⁹ Jane Addams refers to Haley as having “pluck and energy,” Jane Addams to Anita McCormick Blaine, November 20, 1903, Anita McCormick Blaine papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Haley is described as “plucky” in “Woman Bears Chicago’s Franchise Tax Dodgers,” *Buffalo Courier* August 10, 1901. Her energy was infamous over the years: in 1915 Carl Sandburg praised Haley as “a little woman, but a dynamic living force,” (Carl Sandburg, “Margaret Haley,” *Reedy’s Mirror*, 24 (December 1915) p. 445. And in 1928, the educational professor and activist George Counts referred to her as “energetic.” (George S. Counts, *School and Society in Chicago* (New York, 1928), p. 88.

office spoke to Haley's commitment to move the Federation physically and ideologically into the center of city politics. This was not to be a nineteenth-century women teachers' club, a reform association in a ladies' parlor, or a settlement house in a poor residential neighborhood. Rather, Haley envisioned the Federation to be central to city politics, government and economics. She saw the Federation as a city office, organized on city terms, both implicitly and literally stepping onto men's turf.

Well aware of women teachers' lack of power in a man's world, Haley's political tactics centered on the principles of relentless publicity. Through mass mailings, public meetings, speeches, and the very location of the Federation office, Haley tried to wedge the teachers' politics onto the front page. Describing her own political tactics, Haley twisted President Theodore Roosevelt's imperialist and masculine dictum, "Speak softly and carry a big stick" into her own version of public leadership: "I didn't have a big stick," she recalled, "But I had a little one with nails in it."²¹

The nails of this dangerous little stick were in the Federation office. A tiny room filled with women in a large office building filled with men, it was the boiler room of teacher politics. Much of the office furniture was donated by teachers and by 1903, the teachers had also acquired a stenographer and some office equipment, including a telephone-- # Central 3904-- a typewriter and a mimeograph machine.²²

More than material goods, the little office was filled with activity, and with a sense of importance that most women workers in 1903 never experienced. Haley herself was surprised

²⁰ Franklin Spencer Edmonds to Margaret Haley, May 9, 1903, CTF box 37, folder January-July, 1903; David Swing Ricker, "The School-Teacher Unionized" *Educational Review* 30, (November 1905), p. 344.

²¹ *Battleground* p. 230.

²² "Miss Haley, Business Agent," *Chicago Tribune* April 12, 1903.

by the extent to which the Federation had become a regular part of city operations. As she wrote to her friend Franklin Edmonds of the Philadelphia Teachers Association that Spring:

The funny thing about all this is that the business world with which we are daily coming into contact takes the whole thing for granted as if there were nothing unusual about it. The office of the Teachers' Federation and the Federation itself is as much an accepted fact and as essential a part of the business of Chicago now as the Board of Trade, the City Hall, or even the Board of Education itself.²³

Teachers, reporters, politicians, and school administrators jammed the Federation office on a daily basis. They came in with questions, advice and complaints.²⁴ The organization's bookkeeping demands alone were overwhelming. In the single year of 1903, the Federation collected the dues of 4000 teachers members, and led at least three fundraising drives.²⁵ The tiny office also published *The Chicago Teachers' Federation Bulletin* which came out weekly during the school year—a 4-8 page journal packed with information about legal proceedings, Federation meetings, teaching tips, and entertaining stories about schools. The office also mailed out scores of informational flyers to Federation members about upcoming events regarding the contentious education bill that the Federation opposed and the municipal reform bill that the Federation supported. In June 1903, The Federation sent out post cards to *every* Chicago teacher and principal in the city—over 6000 people-- reminding them to attend a special meeting to support the re-appointment of a favored school trustee.²⁶

²³ Margaret Haley to Franklin S. Edmonds, June 2, 1903, CTF box 37, folder January - July, 1903.

²⁴ Margaret Haley's unpublished autobiographical fragment, Allerton, Massachusetts, 1910, installment 9, p. 6. CTF files, box 32.

²⁵ Report of the Educational Department of the CTF, April 2, 1903, CTF box 37 folder January -July, 1903.

²⁶ "Out to Aid Gallagher," *Chicago Tribune* June 14, 1903.

As part of Haley's tactic to keep the Federation in the public eye, she planned each monthly Federation meeting as if staging a play, supplying handouts and charts to help clarify her legal and financial points, and presenting breaking news about the local political scene with the passion of an investigative reporter.²⁷ Haley served as the Federation's main correspondent, typing her own letters to Federation lawyers and to political allies, including the suffragist matriarch, Susan B. Anthony, and labor leaders Samuel Gompers and John Mitchell, as well as teacher activists and organizers from around the country. She responded to a flood of correspondence from teachers around the country who wrote her for guidance as they started up their own organizations. Because Haley promoted her cause so publicly and spun its message so broadly, Federation activities attracted a wide range of interest. Male tax reformers wrote with financial tips; teachers wrote for advice; young girls wrote for a souvenir to present at their local clubs; mothers wrote with hopes that Haley might come speak in their town to enlighten their community; and in the middle of February, Haley received a letter from a bachelor working man requesting if any of the Federation teachers were available for marriage.²⁸

Her daily work was pitched fast and furious. There were unending problems to solve: from boring bookkeeping tasks, to the irritating harassment of bill collectors, to the deeply personal losses of the tragedy of the Iroquois fire. In all of her political work, Haley had to maneuver and interpret urban political bureaucracies and the mysterious networks of a city political machine. And to accomplish all of this, she had to physically traverse the city on a transit system plagued with problems and enter public city halls and offices where she was often

²⁷ Herrick, *Chicago Schools*, p. 108.

²⁸ Charles Viana to Chicago Teachers' Federation, February 11, 1903, CTF box 37 folder January-July 1903.

the only woman, while suffering the regular handicaps of stultifying heat and the famously bitter Chicago winters.

Margaret Haley never described any of this work. She did not attend to such mundane details, and by 1903 her worklife had probably come to be so second nature to her that she didn't even notice it. Cities teach us to speed up, and then to believe that such speeding up is normal. In my own life in New York City, it was normal to expect that a one-hour commute on a subway would turn into a two-hour trip of inexplicably delayed trains, while I stood, jammed in a stifled and overheated subway car with hundreds of other silent, fuming people. On my way to one of my four jobs, in one of the four distant corners of the city, I thought about these situations as the life of the normal city dweller: we work like dogs and live like rats.

It was only when I moved to the country, where I live now, that I realized how hard I had worked in the city. This revelation shocked me for the first few months of that strangely peaceful and pastoral existence. I remember the thrill of simply sitting down in my garden-- a garden! -- listening to silence, and doing nothing. I remember arriving at all my appointments early because I hadn't realized how easy it would be to move around in the country in my comfortable and self-contained car. And I remember having to adjust all my old habits when I sat down to work. At first I found it *hard* to work in the midst of such peace and quiet. The author Jessica Mitford describes New Yorkers, and perhaps all city dwellers, well when she writes that they are "forever on their toes, violently, restlessly involving themselves in the slightest situation brought to their attention, always posing alternatives, always ready with an answer or an argument."²⁹ We seem to feed off of the city, and the city feeds us.

Lesson Three: City Conflict

Margaret Haley began her autobiography with the simple phrase of a humble schoolteacher: “I never wanted to fight.” But whether she ever wanted to or not, fighting turned out to be what Margaret Haley did best, and she seemed to enjoy doing it. Battle imagery pervades her writing. “When I look back over my seventy-five years,” she continued:

I realize that, like all crusaders, I have stormed in where kings and courtiers feared to tread. I have beaten my fists, and sometimes my head, against stone walls of power and privilege. I have railed at mayors, at governors, at legislators, at presidents of great universities. I have banged machine-guns in defense of certain basic principles. . .³⁰

When describing the teachers’ first victory over a despised education bill, she wrote that the women teachers in the Federation “had tasted blood, and we liked the taste.”³¹ And on the necessity of the teachers affiliating with the Chicago Federation of Labor, she wrote “We had to fight the devil with fire.”³²

Haley’s visceral imagery highlights her flair for the dramatic, as well as her powerful ego that kept her fearless (or helped her mask her fears) in the face of conflict. On the battleground of city politics, she launched a standard mode of argument: to press her point, and then flatly argue that anyone who disagreed with her was simply wrong, sorely misguided, or ignorant. Opponents testified to her abrasive and volcanic personality, and to her tendency to be controlling and manipulative. Furthermore, she liked to pick a fight. Her own lawyer once

²⁹ Jessica Mitford, in *Quotable New York: A Literary Companion* (New York, 1992), p. 66.

³⁰ *Battleground* p. 3; Haley’s alternative title to her autobiography was “Forty Fighting Years.”

³¹ *Battleground* p. 40.

³² *Battleground* p. 90. Later commentators continued this violent imagery. George Counts described Margaret Haley as “the thorn in the flesh of the board of education” and

warned her to moderate her “delight in contest,” and friends often advised her to “keep cool” and “level-headed.”³³ She was known as a bit of a loose cannon: when a friend tried to help her schedule a special engagement, he teasingly begged her to be quiet, not irritate anybody, and do “exactly as I say.”³⁴ Haley described herself as someone who her own colleagues often had to restrain because she was like “dynamite.”³⁵

She may have needed to feel like dynamite, given the heavy weaponry that was hurled at her by her enemies. In the twelve months of 1903, Haley experienced the kind of public conflict that few women then, or now, could even imagine. Her affiliation of the teachers with organized labor in December 1902 opened up a wave of vitriol against the teachers. The *Chicago Tribune* claimed that unionized teachers were so evil that they would instruct students in “sedition, revolt against authority, disrespect for law, and subversion of private and public rights,” and another newspaper claimed that a teacher in a labor union could only teach “hatred of other classes.”³⁶ And she didn’t have a rosy relationship with her labor allies either. In April, she attended a Chicago Federation of Labor meeting that broke into a fistfight until she jumped up on a chair and rallied the men to calm down. The experience filled her with deep frustration about the Federation of Labor, which she described as “turbulent, disorganized . . . full of suspicion of one another, hatred, discord, self-seeking, coarse, crude, and almost anarchistical.”³⁷

the Federation as 5000 women who were “welded into a powerful fighting unit.” Counts, *School and Society in Chicago*, pp. 54 & 89.

³³ Isaiah Greenacre to Margaret Haley, December 4, 1902, CTF box 36, folder June-December 1902; Josephine C. Locke to Margaret Haley, July 14, 1903. CTF box 37 folder January -July.

³⁴ E.W. Krackowizer to Margaret Haley, October 7, 1903. CTF box 37, folder August-December 1903.

³⁵ Unpublished Haley autobiography dictated 1935, CTF box 34.

³⁶ Quoted in Herrick *The Chicago Schools*, p. 108.

³⁷ Margaret Haley handwritten fragment, April 19, 1903. CTF box 37, folder January-June 1903.

Conflict followed Haley to Boston in July, when she attended the National Education Association meeting. She had organized classroom teachers into a lobby against the Association leadership that was dominated by men administrators and university presidents, and at the meeting she delivered a stinging public challenge to that leadership.³⁸ While some admirers praised the little school teacher from Chicago who had “met and vanquished two of the leading university presidents of the country, ” others charged her with being a demagogue who was too ambitious and conceited. “Give her enough rope and she will hang herself and ruin her cause all right” was one comment.³⁹

Within her own organization, Haley was often accused of political chicanery. Not all teachers agreed with her push to affiliate with labor, and the leader of that opposition publicly accused Haley of being a “dangerous leader” who “hypnotized” her membership into acquiescence.⁴⁰ In February, the *Tribune* broke a story that the Federation had threatened its members with punishment if they did not contribute to fundraising drives, one of the many public barbs that kept the Federation in a constantly alert and defensive mode.⁴¹ And to Haley’s claim that the centralization of the school system would lead to a school superintendent with dangerous one-man power, a former member of the Federation retorted that what teachers *really* feared was the “one woman power” of Margaret Haley.⁴²

Haley set up a fire wall against such hostility, never publicly betraying any doubts in her own abilities or vision. She responded by aggressively promoting the Federation’s cause in

³⁸ Marjorie Murphy, *Blackboard Unions: the AFT and the NEA, 1900-1980* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990), p. 57.

³⁹ Charles Cornell Ramsay, “Impressions of the NEA Convention for 1903,” *Education* 24, (September 1903), p. 44-49.

⁴⁰ “Teachers Differ on “Unionizing,” *Chicago Tribune* November 12, 1902.

⁴¹ “Charges School Holdup,” *Chicago Tribune* February 10, 1903.

⁴² “Nohe Strikes at Chicago Schools,” *Chicago Tribune* March 13, 1903.

public talks around the country. In 1903, Haley was constantly on the move; she left Chicago for no less than 35 days on Federation business. In 12 months, she traveled over 7500 miles, most of those miles by train, outside of the state. Seven thousand miles is an enormous amount of ground to cover by train, even today, and she traveled alone, which was especially unusual for a woman.

On the stage, Haley was a great actor in a great part. She spoke quickly and extensively—she spoke for two hours at a Labor Day march in Wisconsin—and she used no notes. Known for her dramatic flair, she spun the Federation’s tale of injustice, resistance, and redemption with theatrical passion.⁴³ Because she usually talked to teachers about school administration, or to citizens about taxes, she often mocked the people who held power over her audience. A reporter in Milwaukee described her talk there in December 1903 as being “full of sarcastic flings” and delivered in her “usual caustic, vigorous manner.” It was true, she admitted in that speech, that some people believe that school administrators are educators, but it was also true that some people still believe that “the sun moved around the earth.” It was teachers who knew best how schools should work. Administrators “ought to stimulate the teacher and not irritate her,” because “Irritators are not educators.” As for those sincere school reformers who wanted to centralize the school system and take power out of the hands of parents and teachers, they are “the sincerest idiots that I have ever known.”⁴⁴

Public talks brought more than simple applause and ego-gratification. Her friends and colleagues in the movement knew her for her sparkling charm and great wit. “I do have such a good time with you,” wrote the editor of a major journal of education in March,⁴⁵ The organizer of a meeting where Haley spoke in August wrote that her speech was “great, everybody loved

⁴³ “Labor Unions Parade in the Pouring Rain,” *The Daily Eagle Marinette*, Wisconsin, September 8, 1903.

⁴⁴ “Election will be held today,” *Milwaukee Sentinel* December 30, 1903.

it,” and she herself wrote with delight about her talk in Philadelphia where she had “a great time” talking to fifteen hundred teachers who turned out even though it “rained cats and dogs.”⁴⁶ It appeared that when she was in her stride, as she was in 1903, nothing could get in Margaret Haley’s way. She swung through her city and other cities, merrily slicing down opponents, receiving applause from her admirers, and enjoying a wild laugh with her friends.

Certainly, Chicago alone did not teach Margaret Haley how to develop this combative and grandiose style. She was a labor leader, after all, and by entering men’s public world of politics, she was forced to fight by their rules. Her working class background had taught lessons about conflict that differed from the lessons of polite negotiation that middle class women reformers learned. She was also a teacher, who was used to standing up in front of people and inflicting discipline. Her own unique personality, and what she herself called a family trait of stubbornness, also played a part in shaping her sharp and dynamic personality.

But I believe also that the city both taught Haley about conflict and allowed it. Cities can be dangerous places, and city residents learn how to protect themselves and they learn how to fight back. My most difficult memories of my years in New York are of moments when I snapped at my boss, sneered at a colleague, and brushed off the pleas of the beseeching tourist or homeless person. I learned how to wear a lot of black, and how to walk with a stoney, tense face. I was rigid in my beliefs, and often argumentative and irritated.

But the city also gave me moments of intense happiness and friendship too. My friends and I talked passionately, debated politics, examined our work and enjoyed ourselves with an intensity that I have rarely felt since. As New Yorkers, we shared the common understanding of

⁴⁵ A.E. Winship to Margaret Haley, March 17, 1903. CTF box 37, folder January to July, 1903.

our circumstances and the common belief that what we were doing, and how we were living, was right, even if it meant standing in a jammed and suffocating subway for two hours.

Cities teach us to fight for our right to live there. It can be so hard to live in a city where our senses and humanity are threatened so often that we learn how to fight to convince ourselves that it is all worthwhile. We learn grit and spark and irony and sarcasm to deal with the daily conflicts, and we learn how to make those attributes part of our very being.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have tried to interpret the life of one woman, a teacher leader, through the lens of the city—both her city of one hundred years ago, and my city—a different American city—of ten years ago. I have tried to see the city not only as a *resource* that provides historical data, but also as an *influence*, a presence in our lives, that nudges us to move and act in certain ways. I believe that we have relationships with the places where we live. Like our relationships with humans, our relationships with places teach us things, and influence us to act, and feel, and even *be* a certain way.

For women in particular, life in a city can teach lessons that contradict the normative lessons of femininity. For Margaret Haley and for me, our cities taught us how to be self-centered and oblivious to others, how to be passionately involved with our work, and how to deal with and engage in conflict. Like all lessons, these were not universal in their implementation or reception: not every woman or man learns the same things from the city teacher. But it does seem to me that the character of your relationship with where you are live can play a significant

⁴⁶ George W. Hanley to Margaret Haley, August 20, 1903. CTF box 37, folder August to December, 1903; Margaret Haley to E.W. Krackowizer, October 12, 1903. CTF box 37, folder August to December, 1903.

part in your own development, the way that you are, your way of being. The places where we live become part of our own personal story, and part of our history,