

Elizabeth Ziegler



Elizabeth Ziegler was a small woman with a large heart who touched the lives of more than 1,500 students during fifty-eight years as an educator. The career of this woman, who was the first female principal in Waterloo County, was so long that three generations of some families were taught by her. When she died, her gravestone was inscribed simply: “Elizabeth Ziegler. She loved children.”

“She was our idol when we were young. She did so much for other people. She was the most unselfish woman I ever knew,” said Elizabeth Devitt, a great-niece.

Ziegler was the daughter of Waterloo County pioneers Enoch Ziegler and Hannah Hallman. She grew up in Berlin, attending local schools before completing her teaching certificate at the Toronto Normal School when she was just sixteen. She was the youngest student to receive a certificate, which was signed by Ontario’s first education minister, Dr. Egerton Ryerson.

It is a great irony that Ziegler received only a four - on a scale of one to six, with one being the highest - for her “aptitude to teach.”

After teaching for one year in Breslau and two years in Bloomingdale she moved to Central School in Waterloo where she taught primary students.

She was remembered as a modest woman “slight in stature and possessed of a sunny disposition.” Ziegler employed amusing teaching methods that included asking her pupils to keep their hands above their heads to avoid using their fingers during arithmetic lessons. Her appreciation for how children are inspired was in evidence during a Teachers’ Association meeting in 1912. While some teachers wanted a clearly defined nature curriculum for each grade, Ziegler argued that children should be taught to observe and love all of nature at every grade level, and not be restricted to particular themes each year.

She taught at Central and Alexandra schools in Waterloo and served as the first woman principal at Alexandra school when it was a four-room school. Many years after they graduated, students would return to speak to their former teacher.

Ziegler retired in 1930 at the age of seventy-four. That same year the Premier of Ontario George S. Henry opened the new Elizabeth Ziegler School on Moore Avenue in Waterloo. At the time, the chairperson of the Waterloo Public School Board said that it was only after much persuasion that Ziegler permitted the board to use her name for the new school.

At the grand opening Henry said: “As to this splendid new building, it is a monument to the purpose, integrity and inspiration of a woman in this community who has helped to fashion the lives of its citizens.”

Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Ziegler Public School.