

About Mary Sheffield...

Mary Sheffield was born Mary Telfer Forster in Quebec in 1846, the daughter of an Irish immigrant. She died at the age of 91, in 1937. She earned a teaching certificate as a young woman and when the family moved to Ontario, she taught in one-room schoolhouses throughout Ontario. In 1870, at the age of 24, she married Thomas Rossington Sheffield whose first wife and son had died, and he brought with him a young daughter. Thomas died two years after marrying Mary and so, Mary became a single parent.

In 1872, after her husband's death, Mary and her daughter moved to Toronto and lived on George Street right around the corner from Fred Victor Centre's main building today, and sometime later moved to Gould Street where Ryerson University is now. Although 1873 marked the beginning of a worldwide depression that persisted into the 1890s, Mary was hired as a stenographer by the Methodist Book and Publishing Company. She must have impressed them with her intelligence, skills and drive.

Mary held what she called an "intense yearning" to do something about a social condition she found unacceptable, young boys, mostly orphans or unparented boys, wandered the Toronto streets during the daytime. They did not attend school and their prospects did not look good. So in 1886, when she was 40, she persuaded the Chair of the Board of the Orange Hall (at Queen and Berti) to donate a second floor room on Sunday mornings to start a Sunday School, heat included.

"Not being the wife of a wealthy businessman, Mary Sheffield could not satisfy her desire to serve by making a large donation to the Women's Missionary Society or by sitting on a committee where her social connections would be useful. But even if she could have, Mary's yearning was so passionate as to be of a different order from most other people... Mary Sheffield had

an extraordinary combination of sternness and compassion, ambition and humility, pragmatism and vision." (from The Fred Victor Mission Story by Gary Fagan)

Social conditions in Victorian Toronto were bad for people with little or no income, and apart from charitable or evangelistic missions, there was little help available. According to historian J. M. S. Careless, newcomers to Toronto and poor people were those without adequate capital or on poor land, surplus labourers (transient men from farms and logging camps), small town hopefuls, sons without property to inherit and young single women. They formed the low cost labour force and were easily laid off from their positions during down-turns in the economy.

By 1888, Mary's mission, had moved to Church Street and was known as the Church Street Mission. The new space was donated and was again an example of Mary Sheffield's ability to inspire others to support her vision. The mission had grown to 100 regular participants not including volunteers and was busy with activities for adults and children every night of the week: temperance meetings, night classes, Gospel meetings and entertainment. People sent money to support it, donations from Baptists, Anglicans as well as Methodists. By 1891, 150 people attended the Sunday morning church service.

While Fred Victor Centre, previously Fred Victor Mission, was named after the eminent industrialist Hart Massey's son because Hart Massey generously put up the money to house Mary Sheffield's mission, Fred Victor Centre today, the impetus for social change it expresses, the responsive programs and services it provides, are the direct lineage of the vision and actions of a single parent, a widow, and a passionate Victorian woman called Mary Sheffield who said to herself: What I see around me is not right. I can do something about it. And I will.