If you were walking quietly through the third floor corridor of Calgary’s Western Canada High School back in 1938, you might have got a surprise at what you heard coming through the open door of a certain classroom. One voice was that of a teacher speaking French with an impeccable accent; the other was the slow, faltering reply of a student answering the teacher in the same language. If you were actually in the class, as I was, you alternated between reading the lines of a thin blue book called *Le Voyage de M. Perrichon* and raising your eyes to look at the teacher when she addressed you, en français of course.

The teacher stood in front of the class but more often than not, she was down beside someone’s desk, as if to be on the same level. A slender woman of medium height, her most striking feature by far was her hair – flaming red like iron in the forge. In keeping with her poise and overall neatness, her beautiful long hair was carefully coiffed and held in place with green plastic combs.

Her second most noteworthy feature was a business-like but warm and generous approach to teaching the language she loved. But she did mo than teach French -- she revolutionized the teaching of the language – and the revolution has never stopped. Today in the schools of many cities and towns throughout Alberta students can enroll in “French Immersion” programs. Up until then, they memorized vocabulary and learned verb conjugation, but couldn’t say much more than “Bonjour.” Catherine Barclay firmly believed the language was meant to be spoken, and speak it she did. She started off with simple questions like “Comment allez-vous, Michael?” and after a few sessions Michael was able to respond “Très bien, merci.” During her 18 years (1937-55) as a high school teacher at Western, she taught hundreds of “Michaels.”

But Cathie Barclay did far more than excel in the classroom. Her “horizons” spanned the world. For example, she was a great believer in the brotherhood of nations and after 1948 did her best to support the United Nations. She helped establish the French section of the Banff School of Fine Arts and the Alliance Française in Calgary. A great promoter of student exchanges, her efforts provided the main thrust for France-Canada exchanges and a Summer School Scholarship that sent a student from Calgary to Quebec.

Perhaps her greatest feat, accomplished in partnership with her sister, was launching the first Youth Hostel in North America. At Bragg Creek in 1933 these two adventurous ladies used a rented 12’x 14’ tent to found a Canadian organization that would enable young people to enjoy out-of-door experiences while staying in a hostel for 25 cents a night. Cathie was appointed the first president and remained active until 1937 when the movement was on its feet. In less than ten years hostels had spread across Canada from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

For this pioneering feat Mary and Cathie Barclay were named Calgary’s “Citizens of the Year” in 1973. On that Friday morning in March the two sisters, now in the twilight years, stood at the front of the Alberta Room in Calgary’s Palliser Hotel where a crowd of over 120 were on their feet applauding. Ted Butterfield, president of the Junior Chamber of Commerce, conducted the noon luncheon meeting, and had shared with the gathering some of the achievements of the two remarkable sisters.
Among the guests were a few of the “originals” who had assisted Cathie and Mary with work parties: Joe and Mary Clitheroe, Laura Wenger, Bob and Betty Loudon. Rabbi Ginsberg gave a short talk on “Values” and made several references to the two sisters.

Ted Butterfield pinned a corsage on each of the sisters and presented them with an engraved silver tray and an illuminated scroll. In her usual modest but business-like manner Mary graciously offered words of appreciation while saying that a lot of other people should be there with her. Sadly, Cathie who had been stricken by Alzheimer’s, was capable of offering only a couple of sentences before drifting off. President Ted rescued her with a couple of gracious and appropriate comments.

Two outstanding ladies had received the tributes they deserved. And on a large side table the “evidence” was on display supporting the decision of the J.C.s. Someone had gathered artifacts, mementoes and numerous pictures of the Canadian Youth Hostel Association dating from 1933.

Less easy to measure was Cathie’s influence on her students and those that she “invited” to help with work parties at the growing number of Youth Hostels. I remember taking a part unwillingly in a play she directed called “La Femme Muette” and struggling to learn my lines because she had such confidence that I could do so. She would never give up on any of us. Thanks to her, I not only took part in work parties and plays but also hiked in the mountains around Canmore, something that was far beyond my reach as the son of a single mum. She gave many of us the precious gifts of hiking and love of mountains, gifts that have remained fresh and enduring over many decades.

Cathie Barclay changed lives — and one former student was able to write about it years later in Canada’s largest newspaper. Published in the Toronto Star under the title “The Teacher who changed My Life,” the Dec.11, 1988 article by Doris Anderson told how her life’s direction and purpose took a sharp turn under her teacher’s influence. In those days women received little encouragement to pursue a career and develop their talents. From humble beginnings and few aspirations, Doris went on to positions of prominence, including the editor of Chatelaine magazine and president of the National Advisory Council on the Status of Women.

Cathie Barclay died in 1985 but has not been forgotten. The E. Catherine Barclay Scholarship was established by a group of friends, colleagues and former students of Cathie’s for the purpose of “honoring the memory of this outstanding educator and world citizen.” The scholarship provides funds to enable a Calgary university student to study in France for a year in his or her chosen field. At a recent gathering in Calgary, several scholarship winners of past years all testified that “their lives had changed for the better” by the experience in France. Those words would have brought joy to the heart of Cathie Barclay, the teacher with flaming red hair and a burning passion for education.

2005