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The Montreal YWCA and Its Role
In The Advancement of Women:
1920 - 1960

Elaine Mary Davies

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
History

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

July 1991

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Abstract

**The Montreal YWCA and Its Role In the Advancement of Women:
1920 - 1960**

Elaine M. Davies

The writing of Canadian women's history came into its own in the early part of the 1970s and since then it has been, and remains, the most exciting area of study through its exploration of new areas, its theoretical approaches and the manner in which it has challenged how history is recorded. Canadian women's history does contain, however, many gaps in it and these gaps have served to perpetuate stereotypes about women in the past.

No stereotypes are perhaps more entrenched than those about women between 1920 and 1960. In the little literature that touches upon this era, it appears that a male model of success and failure has been most often employed to judge women's activities and achievements. By exploring the Montreal Young Women's Christian Association in these years, this thesis challenges these beliefs and stereotypes on a number of levels.

This study groups the 1920 and 1930s together, with the 1940s and 1950s acting as another unit, a division which reflects women's changing involvement in the paid work force. By exploring the YWCA's educational, health and social programmes and its evolving responsiveness to the demands and expectations placed upon it by larger societal forces, this

examination provides details about the activities of women in these four decades, as well as, the range of obstacles that made women's advancement such a difficult and frustrating process.

What emerges from this narrow window into Canadian women's lives is an insight into the powerlessness of women as they were pushed and pulled by societal and economic forces which they lacked any control over. Yet, the existence of the Montreal YWCA, a women's space, with its persistent public and private advocacy of women's rights demonstrates that one can not and should not perceive women in these decades as victims. Instead, one learns to appreciate the continuity which exists between these decades, the suffrage activity preceding 1920 and the women's movement of the 1960s and onwards.

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Writing this thesis has been a long process and there are a number of people who must remain unnamed because the list would be far too long if everyone were included. A selective list will therefore have to suffice.

First of all my thanks to Dr. Mary Vipond for her communication, support and patience with a student who was on the move, province to province and country to country.

My heart-felt thanks also goes out to Randy, Eileen and Jacques for their varied kinds of support ---- particularly with the dreaded Computer!

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INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the late 1960s, a major evolution started to occur in Canadian historiographical literature. Rather than simply recording 'great' men's lives and major political changes, historians, in response to the social pressures of the 1960s, started to embrace those groups and processes previously either ignored or regarded as historically unimportant. This new and large field is now known generally as "social history"; although it originally included the study of women, with the tremendous outpouring of works on women particularly after 1970, women's history has subsequently become a field unto itself. ¹

Much like the larger field of social history, the accumulated literature on Canadian women's history has until recently focused primarily on the social reform era, a time period extending approximately from the 1870s and through to the early 1920s. ² Women's lives after 1920, however, have

¹ Linda Kealey explains that the original aim of social history was "to study the popular base of politics and to trace its relationship to politics . . . [and] to investigate the conditions of everyday life in the past." Taken from, "Introduction," Janice Acton, Bonnie Shepard and Penny Goldsmith, eds., Women at Work: Ontario, 1850-1930, (Toronto: Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1974): p. 2.

² The social reform movement, or progressive era, was a complex and diverse collection of individuals and causes that essentially sought to adapt society to the numerous changes brought about by industrialization and modernization. For some diverse readings see: Richard Allen, The Social Passion: Religion and Social Change in Canada, 1914-1918, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973); Christopher Armstrong and H.V. Nelles, The Revenge of the Methodist Bicycle Company: Sunday Street Cars and Municipal Reform in Toronto, 1888-1897,

been largely unexplored, a neglect which has been only somewhat alleviated by the surge of current works which detail women's lives from the 1960s onwards. Because of this weakness in Canadian historiographical literature, stereotypes and misconceptions about women between 1920 and 1960 remain unchallenged and are inadvertently strengthened by a lack of documentation.³

This work addresses this overall lack of knowledge about women between 1920 and 1960 by considering one aspect of women's lives: the changing role of paid employment. Women's waged labour is, however, an extremely broad topic whose cross-Canada complexities can by no means be adequately explored within the limitations of this work. Therefore, one particular women's institution, the Montreal Young Women's Christian Association, chosen primarily because of its interest and involvement in this aspect of women's lives in Montreal, is the focus of this examination.

Some background information is necessary to explain this choice. The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) began in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century and came to Canada in

(Toronto: Peter Martin Associates Ltd., 1977); Ramsay Cook, The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985); Alison Prentice, The School Promoters: Education and Social Class in Mid-Nineteenth Century Upper Canada, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1977).

³ There is likewise a lack of material on colonial and pre-confederation women, another weakness that is also partly a result of too much energy having been devoted to the social reform era.

the 1870s. Its development was one response to the influx into Canada's urbanizing areas of young women in search of the new employment openings generated by industrialization and modernization. ⁴ The first Canadian branch was formed in 1870 in Saint John (New Brunswick), closely followed by one in Toronto in 1873 and in Montreal in 1874. ⁵

The YWCA in Montreal developed in much the same manner as the other Canadian associations, providing for the housing, employment and moral needs of young women. One of the unique aspects of the Montreal YWCA is the fact that it was an anglophone institution within a larger francophone world. However, in the time period under consideration, this is not so unique (the Sherbrooke and Quebec city institutions were in a similar situation) nor is the question of language a central issue in this thesis. This is not to deny that in terms of paid work, language was a crucial factor in Montreal in terms of what kinds of employment a worker could obtain and overall

⁴ New areas of work which opened up to women included those of clerical, sales and hotel/restaurant positions as well as a variety of other white-collar employments. There was also an increased demand for female workers in a wide range of blue-collar jobs.

⁵ Between 1870 and 1930, thirty-nine YWCAs were established, including ones in Quebec City, Halifax, Kingston, Hamilton, London, Ottawa, Vancouver and Winnipeg among others. For a more detailed list, see Diana Pederson, "The Young Women's Christian Association in Canada, 1870-1920: 'A Movement to Meet A Spiritual, Civic and National Need'" (Ph.D. diss., Carleton University, 1988): pp. 49-52.

income level. ⁶ Yet, though the YWCA, particularly after 1920, did serve women of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, it was an anglophone institution which specifically served that community; therefore, any exploration of its programmes and activities and what they say about women and work, is necessarily primarily about English-speaking women and does not take into account the different factors in French-speaking women's lives. Nonetheless, keeping all that in mind, one can argue that the changing role that work played in women's lives is a commonality of experience that to a large degree transcends ethnic and racial lines and that, moreover, one can and should (due to the dearth of material that currently exists) make some across-Canada generalizations. ⁷

The YWCA is an interesting women's organization to examine because in works that have explored the social reform period it has been generally negatively portrayed as simply a white, middle class institution whose sole purpose was to impress middle class values onto the working class.

⁶ See, Ron Rudin, The Forgotten Quebecers: A History of English-Speaking Quebec, 1759-1980 (Saint Pierre: IQRC, 1985).

⁷ For an expose on some of some of the different factors in French-speaking women's lives, see Marta Danylewycz, Taking the Veil: An Alternative to Marriage, Motherhood, and Spinsterhood in Quebec, 1840-1920 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987) and, Marie Lavigne, Yolande Pinard and Jennifer Stoddart, "The Federation Nationale Saint-Jean-Baptiste and the Women's Movement in Quebec," in Linda Kealey, ed., A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880-1920 (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1979): pp. 71-88.

Furthermore, amongst women's historians, the YWCA's overall efforts, specifically during the social reform era, are seen as having held back women's advancement.⁸ Whether this dismissal of the YWCA's work prior to 1920 is valid or not, the reality is that the development of the organization after the social reform era is largely undocumented. This gap in the historical record coincides with the overall dearth of literature on women's lives after 1920 through to 1960.

But what is the connection between the Montreal YWCA and women's changing relationship to waged work and how can one explore the development of this institution and learn about women's lives? Montreal in the 1920s, like the other developing urban centres of Canada, did not have many of the social services that we take for granted today. And though this lack of services affected both men and women, women were particularly without support systems, including employment aid, safe and affordable housing, and recreational facilities, clubs or social activities designed for and welcoming of women. The importance of the YWCA stems from the fact that its various programmes and activities were developed as a

⁸ See, Wendy Mitchinson, "The YWCA and Reform in the Nineteenth Century," Social History / Histoire Sociale November 1979: pp. 368-384, and Veronica Strong-Boag, " 'Setting the Stage': National Organizations and the Women's Movement in the Late 19th Century," in Susan Mann Trofimenkoff and Alison Prentice, eds., The Neglected Majority: Essays in Canadian Women's History (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977): pp. 87-103, and, Diana Pederson, " 'Keeping Our Good Girls Good:' The YWCA and the 'Girl Problem,' 1870-1930 " Canadian Women Studies (Winter 1986): pp. 20-24.

direct response to the needs of young working women and, therefore, its development as an association provides a great deal of insight into the changing role of paid employment in women's lives.

The Montreal institution has been chosen as a focus of this study as a means to move beyond simple generalizations about women and their lives from 1920 to 1960. This particular institution is an ideal choice for a number of reasons. First, it has one of the fullest and best documented collections of all the YWCAs in Canada.⁹ Secondly for much of the time period under consideration Montreal was the largest and fastest developing city in Canada. As such, Montreal was a focus of immigration for women coming from other countries and from rural Canada. Thirdly, by examining the Montreal YWCA this thesis will further address the lack of literature about English-speaking women in Quebec.¹⁰ That such a lack exists was pointed out in 1985 by Ron Rudin, The Forgotten Quebecers: A History of English-Speaking Quebec,

⁹ The Montreal YWCA collection from 1874 to the mid 1970s is maintained at the Public Archives in Ottawa, as are the documents of the National YWCA which is also a fairly complete collection.

¹⁰ The English-speaking minority made up 16% of Quebec's population in 1921 and 1931, 15% in 1941 and 1951 and 14% in 1961. In terms of the Montreal region, English-speaking Quebecers in 1901 were 27% of the population, 25% in 1931 and 22% in 1971. Finally, the percentage of English-speaking Quebecers who resided in Montreal, out of the total number of Anglophones, rose from 58% in 1921 to 73% in 1961. Figures derived from Ron Rudin, The Forgotten Quebecers (op.cit.): pp. 37 and 179.

1759-1980, who lamented that he was unable to do more than mention English-speaking women due to "the general absence of literature on the subject."¹¹ This gap in the field of Canadian history that Rudin highlighted has by no means been overcome at this time.¹² The main reason why so little literature looks at women's lives between 1920 and 1960 is that these four decades are considered by many historians and theoreticians as a 'dead' time in terms of women's advancement. Olive Banks, a leading proponent of this theory, suggests the label of "intermission" for what she sees as the period between one phase of female political activity and

¹¹ Ibid.: p. 279.

¹² The lack of knowledge, or the deliberate dismissal, of the important contributions of English-speaking women to Quebec society is evident in a number of works. Micheline D. Johnson, History of the Status of Women in the Province of Quebec, manages to not mention English women at all in her fifty-five page document outlining women's fight to obtain the vote and other rights in the province of Quebec (Ottawa: Studies of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, 1970). Likewise, the more recent Clio Collective's Quebec Women: A History which is otherwise an excellent work devotes very little space to the English-speaking women of Quebec, perhaps feeling that they should be dealt with in a work about English-Canada (Toronto: Women's Press, 1987). Yet, a broader based overview of Canadian women's history, Canadian Women: A History by Alison Prentice et al., to a large degree also largely neglected the English-speaking minority in Quebec (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988). Whatever logical explanations can be forwarded as to the politics of these absences, nonetheless, it is simply an historical inaccuracy which promotes division and a limited view of history. Ironically, women's history has at its core the determination to address these very elements in male mainstream history.

another.¹³ The present work suggests, however, that there is an alternative framework to explore women's roles and activities between 1920 and 1960, one which primarily recognizes that women's lives and achievements between 1920 and 1960 are as important as in the decades that preceded them and the ones following. Not only will a detailed exploration of the activities of one particular women's organization dispel the lingering idea that "nothing" happened between those years, but also, by filling in the gap of historical knowledge about women, the 1960s upsurge of feminism can be understood, not as an anomaly, but rather as a continuum of women's efforts right through the preceding years.¹⁴

The theoretical structure which will be utilized to explore the Montreal YWCA's programmes and activities is a relatively recent development in Canadian historiographical thought. The changes that this theoretical framework has

¹³ Olive Banks, Faces of Feminism: A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1981).

Note that Banks describes 1870 to 1920 as "The Golden Years," 1920 to 1960 as "The Intermission" and 1960 onwards as "The Modern Movement."

¹⁴ See, Dale Spender, Time and Tide ... Wait For No Man (London: Pandora Press, 1984). Spender argues that the idea that women retired to "hearth and home" after winning the vote is simply "fiction." Ibid.: p. 1. She proposes that not only does this "fiction" leave a hole in women's history but, more importantly, it is a fiction created by a male-dominated society determined that women who are politically active today remain unaware that "women's protest [is] normal." Ibid. This ignorance of past women's feminist activity leaves women, Spender argues, exposed to doubts and vulnerabilities.

See also, Dale Spender, There's Always Been a Woman's Movement (London: Pandora Press, 1983).

brought to the study of women's history can perhaps be best understood by first detailing the conceptual frameworks that have been, and continue to be, employed to look at women and feminism. Then to illuminate these ideas further, the literature that does exist on the Canadian YWCA will be reviewed and placed within these dominant themes. It must be borne in mind, however, that both the frameworks and the literature on the YWCA are primarily of the social reform era. Yet, due to their continuing domination of the writing of Canadian women's history they remain relevant to this examination of women's lives between 1920 and 1960.

The first conceptual framework which dominated Canadian women's historiographical literature through the 1970s (and remains strong still) is that women in the social reform era, individually and in their organizations, were activists primarily because of their desire for social control. Social reformers are portrayed as middle class people who, feeling threatened by the potential power of the working class, sought to extend their dominance by introducing social reform ideals. By emphasizing the pragmatism of the social reformers, historians of this school have argued that the fight for female suffrage was generated by the wish for another tool of social control and should not, therefore, be seen as a feminist achievement.¹⁵

¹⁵ Much of the work concerning the social reform movement produced in the 1970s represents this school of thought. Some outstanding Canadian examples include the majority of the

The second framework, or school of thought, posits that feminism did exist up to 1920 but through a combination of reactive forces, poor economic times and general instability, the women's movement lost its forward drive. The 1960s are, therefore, seen as the period of revival for ideas that had been lost since the early twentieth century. ¹⁶

The third school of thought is one that essentially allows for the existence of feminism between 1920 and 1960, but does not consider it to be 'true' feminism. Instead, historians and theoreticians have distanced the post 1960 period from earlier decades by labelling earlier female activities and achievements as "welfare feminism" or "domestic feminism." ¹⁷

The body of literature which exists on the Canadian YWCA during the social reform era is representative of these three dominant themes. Veronica Strong-Boag was one of the first

documents in Linda Kealey, ed., A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform, 1880-1920 (Toronto: Women's Press, 1979), and Carol Lee Bacchi, Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of the English-Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983).

¹⁶ See, Carol Ruth Berkin, "Not Separate, Not Equal," in Carol Ruth Berkin and Mary Beth North, eds., Women of America: A History (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1979): pp. 273-288, and Olive Banks, Faces of Feminism (op. cit.).

¹⁷ See, Veronica Strong-Boag, "'Ever a Crusader': Nellie McClung, First-Wave Feminist," in Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman, eds., Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1986): pp. 178-190, and Strong-Boag, "Writing About Women," in John Schultz, ed., Writing About Canada: A Handbook for Modern Canadian History (Scarborough: Prentice Hall Inc., 1990): pp. 175-200.

historians to look at the YWCA, albeit, within a wider survey of women's organizations. In her Ph.D thesis, The Parliament of Women: The National Council of Women of Canada, 1893-1929 and in another work of a similar nature, Strong-Boag argues that the YWCA, like the other major women's organizations of this era, helped to perpetuate middle class values that stressed home and family above all for women.¹⁸ Moreover, the continuing dominance of traditional ideas about women helped to establish "an influential tradition of 'maternalistic' intervention, a tradition few Canadian feminists would entirely escape."¹⁹

Wendy Mitchinson, in "The YWCA and Reform in the Nineteenth Century," likewise emphasizes the essential conservatism of the YWCA traditions.²⁰ Mitchinson explains that "the YWCA was interested in maintaining the domestic role of women as much as possible in the face of the challenge presented by working women."²¹ But she hesitates to condemn the YWCA as solely a vehicle of social control and acknowledges instead that "the importance of the YWCA lay in

¹⁸ Veronica Strong-Boag, The Parliament of Women: The National Council of Women of Canada, 1893-1929 (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1976); Strong-Boag, " 'Setting the Stage'," (op. cit.).

¹⁹ Strong-Boag, The Parliament of Women, (op.cit.): p. 92.

²⁰ Wendy Mitchinson, "The YWCA and Reform in the Nineteenth Century," (op. cit.).

²¹ Strong-Boag, The Parliament of Women (op. cit.): p. 369.

its recognition that the working woman was not a transitory phenomenon." ²² Though Mitchinson credits the YWCA with aiding women in their struggle to achieve economic independence by providing them with cheap lodging, she remains firmly in the social control school of thought by arguing, like Strong-Boag, that "the ladies of the YWCA conformed to the domestic ideal of womanhood which insisted that women should not work and be independent." ²³

Of all Canadian historians, Diana Pederson has over a ten year period looked most extensively at the YWCA movement in Canada. Moreover, her work is particularly interesting as its progression demonstrates a clear shift in her thought. Specifically, in the tradition of Strong-Boag and Mitchinson, Pederson's M.A. thesis, " 'Keeping Our Good Girls Good': The Young Women's Christian Association of Canada, 1870-1920," emphasizes the middle class origins of the women who organized and ran the Canadian YWCAs. ²⁴ Moreover, she asserts that

²² Ibid.: p. 377.

²³ Ibid.: p. 384.

In these opinions, Mitchinson is drawing on one of the earliest critical works on the YWCA, Josephine Harshaw's When Women Work Together: A History of the Young Women's Christian Association in Canada (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1966).

For an enlarged list of women's organizations dating from the late nineteenth century as well as her larger exploration of the early YWCA see, Wendy Mitchinson, "Aspects of Reform: Four Women's Organizations in Nineteenth-Century Canada" (Ph.D. diss., York University, 1977).

²⁴ Diana Pederson, " 'Keeping Our Good Girls Good:' The Young Women's Christian Association of Canada, 1870-1920" (M.A. thesis, Carleton University, 1981).

the goal of the YWCA was to raise "the moral standards of the working-class woman . . . by imposing [its] own standards upon her." ²⁵ In an article derived from her M.A. thesis, Pederson more clearly states her opinion of the movement, vis-a-vis the advancement of women, by arguing that "YWCA's actually helped to reinforce the view that women were only temporary workers who deserved to be paid less than more permanent and committed male workers." ²⁶ She further criticizes the YWCA as ultimately having worked towards uniting women in "a relationship that was hierarchal and class-based." ²⁷

In her 1988 Ph.D. thesis, "The Young Women's Christian Association in Canada, 1870-1920: 'A Movement to Meet a Spiritual, Civic and National Need'," Pederson shifts her focus from the social control aspects of the YWCA to one that illuminates the contribution that the institution made to the advancement of women. ²⁸ Though she does not explicitly contradict her earlier work, Pederson's dissertation is, nonetheless, fundamentally different. This is largely because

²⁵ Ibid.: p. 16.

²⁶ Diana Pederson, " 'Keeping Our Good Girls Good': The YWCA and the 'Girl Problem,' 1870-1930," Canadian Women Studies (Winter 1986): p. 23.

²⁷ Ibid.: p. 24.

²⁸ Diana Pederson, "The Young Women's Christian Association in Canada, 1870-1920: 'A Movement to Meet a Spiritual, Civic and National Need'" (Ph.D, diss., Carleton University, 1988).

she employs a structure which emphasizes the evangelism which inspired the female reformers and, thereby, presents the actions of YWCA women in a more positive, or at least a more neutral, light:

in promoting an ideal of an active organized evangelical womanhood they were attempting to make women central to the process of reform, and that their vision of a Canada transformed according to the teachings of Jesus Christ had, they believed, profound implications for all women.²⁹

Though Pederson praises the work the YWCA did on behalf of women, she is noncommittal as to whether or not the YWCA was a feminist institution. Instead, she simply avoids the question by stressing the religious motivations of the YWCA women.³⁰

Collectively, Strong-Boag's, Mitchinson's and Pederson's works focus primarily upon women and the YWCA prior to 1920. One can argue, however, that the frameworks they utilize and the types of pictures that they create of women prior to 1960 continue to dominate the writing of women's history, not only of the period they write of (1870-1920), but also literature concerning women's lives after 1920.

²⁹ Ibid.: pp. 467-68.

³⁰ See also Pederson's article, " 'Building Today for the Womanhood of Tomorrow': Businessmen, Boosters and the YWCA, 1890-1930," Urban History Review, (February 1987): pp. 225-242. In this article Pederson likewise stresses the evangelism of the YWCA while also distinguishing between the YWCA's public face, one born out of financial necessity, and its private face of strongly held ideas and values about women.

* * *

This work posits that an alternative framework exists in which women's roles and activities can be examined. Of greatest importance is that the actions and efforts of women during this period, whether they can be described as strictly feminist or not, must be considered within the structures, terms and limitations of the decades in which the women lived and must be equally valued as women's activities prior to 1920 and those following 1960.³¹ By valuing and learning from women's achievements and failures between 1920 and 1960, one also avoids perceiving them as simply victims of the larger society but, rather, as agents of their own destinies.

The argument that the uniqueness of women's lives between 1920 and 1960 has been undervalued is an idea that draws upon recent evolutions in feminist thought. In essence, this new conceptual framework developing within women's history rejects using women's position in the Western world today as a model in which to judge women's activities in previous decades. It is a framework which seeks to reevaluate assumptions held about women in the past and to address periods which have up to now been neglected by women's historians. For example, in "Feminist Approaches to Women in Politics," Canadian political

³¹ It is important to note in the context of this study of the Montreal YWCA that Quebec women did not gain the right to vote provincially until 1940, making Quebec the last province to 'give' this right to women. This in itself undercuts the idea that 'nothing' occurred between 1920 and 1960 concerning the advancement of women.

scientist Jill McCalla Vickers proposes that a new framework exists in which one can more fairly consider the political activities of women after achieving suffrage.³² Vickers challenges the dismissal of women's post-suffrage efforts on the grounds that they were "non-political."³³ She argues that such a negative judgement is one in which a male political model is used to measure the 'success' of women's activities. Vickers points out that women's activities in the 1920s and onwards differed in crucial ways from malestream politics. These differences included women's unique view of politics, their participation in the political process, and, how they perceived political change.

Vickers' arguments echo earlier works by American women's historians, such as Carol Ruth Berkin's opinions as expressed in "Not Separate, Not Equal."³⁴ Berkin likewise emphasizes that, while it is legitimate to question what happened to feminism after 1920, one should be careful not to isolate the women's movement from the larger context of American society. Berkin further asserts that "in laying the blame of the unfinished revolution on their shoulders, historians have invested these women with the very control over events and

³² Jill McCalla Vickers, "Feminist Approaches to Women in Politics," in Linda Kealey and Joan Sangster, eds., Beyond the Vote: Canadian Women and Politics (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989): pp. 16-36.

³³ Ibid.: pp. 16-23.

³⁴ Carol Ruth Berkin, "Not Separate, Not Equal," (op. cit.).

their own destinies that they had long been seeking." ³⁵ In a similar vein, Estelle B. Freedman, in "The New Woman: Changing Views of Women in the 1920s," laments the lack of attention to post-1920s women because this neglect has "fostered the repetition of a standard image of American women in the 1920s." ³⁶ This image dominates the literature to such an extent that historians have overemphasized the importance of the power of the vote, while down playing the social and cultural barriers that continued to exist against women's advancement. Freedman argues that this skewed record has resulted in women after 1920 being portrayed as weak and uninspired people who simply threw away the power that came with suffrage. ³⁷

* * *

This thesis will first explore the literature that does examine women in the western world between 1920 and 1960, particularly works that inquire into the role of work in

³⁵ Ibid.: p. 273.

³⁶ Estelle B. Freedman, "The New Woman: Changing Views of Women in the 1920s," in Lois Scharf and Joan M. Jensen, eds., Decades of Discontent: The Women's Movement, 1920-1940 (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983): p. 21.

³⁷ Ibid.: pp. 36-37.

For another recent and very valuable Canadian work, see Ruth Roach Pierson's "Introduction" in Pierson and Beth Light, eds., No Easy Road: Women in Canada 1920s to 1960s, Volume 3 in the series of Documents in Canadian Women's History (Toronto: Hogtown Press, 1990). Pierson argues that while these years were not ones of "uniform or steady progress for women," there was an immense diversity of experiences for women with "paths dead-ending as well as branching out in new and challenging experiences." Ibid.: p.15.

women's lives. The focus will then turn upon the Montreal YWCA in these years, with the 1920s and 1930s as one chapter and the 1940s and 1950s serving as another. This is a logical division because in the 1920s and 1930s the dominant work trend for women was to engage in paid employment prior to marriage. The pattern started to change in the 1940s and 1950s when women began returning to paid employment after their children had reached school age. The Montreal YWCA's programmes reflected these shifts in the four decades under study.

Finally, by examining women's lives between 1920 and 1960, one can comment on the role of the YWCA in terms of women's advancement, including political, economic and with civil rights.³⁸ Specifically by utilizing a positive framework, this exploration of the Montreal YWCA and its connection to women and paid employment will enable one to determine whether the association enforced dominant male values concerning the acceptable and traditional place of women. Or, as a female space in an androcentric world, whether it worked against malestream thought and aided women to advance.

³⁸ In terms of women's advancement, I take a very pragmatic stance. I believe that women are able to achieve greater political and civil liberties only when they have enough economic power to demand them and that economic power can only be achieved when women are no longer dependent on men's good will to survive.

Chapter 1

A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL SURVEY

Though there is an overall lack of literature about women following 1920, there are some very notable exceptions to this rule. The majority of the works that do exist are in the field of American history with both Canadian and British historians displaying a tendency to follow the American lead in the topics they choose and the frameworks that they employ. This review of current literature will, therefore, focus primarily upon American works about women from 1920 through to 1960, looking in detail at several major works before turning to explore the Canadian field.³⁹ As outlined in the previous chapter, it is women's changing relationship to work that is of particular interest; therefore, works have been primarily selected which look at women and paid employment or the sections of larger works which deal specifically with this topic have been highlighted.⁴⁰

* * *

Though the American historiographical field is just

³⁹ British sources have been omitted because a search of this field came up virtually empty. One exception, however, are the excellent works by the British historian Jane Lewis, particularly Women in England: 1870-1950 (Sussex: Wheatsheaf Books, 1984). Lewis' special strength comes through in her exploration and definition of the differences between the lives of middle-class and working-class women.

⁴⁰ For general works on women and work see, Robert W. Smuts, Women and Work in America (New York: Columbia University, 1971) and, Louise Tilly and Joan W. Scott, Women, Work and Family (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978).

developing in terms of examining women's lives between 1920 and 1960, the historians and theoreticians who have been attracted to this topic have touched a broad range of aspects concerning women's waged labour. Women's participation in the political process and what criteria can be used to judge women's "success" or "failure" is one major area of concern. Another is whether the decades between 1920 and 1960 can be judged as feminist or not and how one can measure women's advancement in these decades. A number of historians touch upon the dual nature of women and the organizations which represented them and discuss the divisions between private and public roles. Finally, almost all the works examined below discuss the ideology surrounding women's right to engage in paid employment and to what extent women in past decades should be portrayed as malleable victims of the larger society, or, alternatively as agents of their own destinies.

American historian Judith Sealander, in As Minority Becomes Majority: Federal Reaction to the Phenomenon of Women in the Workforce, 1920-1963, offers a well-documented account of the United States government's Women's Bureau, tracing its development from its creation in 1920 though to 1963.⁴¹ In doing so Sealander presents one of the first analytical

⁴¹ Judith Sealander, As Minority Becomes Majority: Federal Reaction to the Phenomenon of Women in the Work Force, 1920-1963, (London: Greenwood Press, 1983).

Sealander ends her study in 1963 because that was when Equal Pay Legislation began to be introduced in the United States.

documents to detail the activities of this Bureau and, thereby, provides a wealth of information about women and their working lives derived from the Bureau's collection of statistics and reports. Sealander also outlines the Bureau's links with other women's organizations and demonstrates how this network enabled it to wield a degree of political influence.

Sealander does not, however, conclude that this political influence, or the Women's Bureau in general, was a positive element in terms of women's advancement. Rather, she presents the Bureau as primarily an instrument of social control. For instance, Sealander points to the Bureau's virulent opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment, an opposition which continued right into the 1970s, versus its attachment to protectionist principles, a stand that Sealander believes demonstrates the distance that existed between Bureau women and working class women: ⁴²

They were middle-class working women who sought not a revolution in women's roles but programs and legislation that they justified primarily as being in the best interests of lower-class women. ⁴³

Moreover, Sealander contends that though the agency was essentially powerless to affect government policy towards women, its dedication to the protection of working class women in blue-collar employments both reinforced the image of the

⁴² Ibid.: p. 76.

⁴³ Ibid.: p. 8.

woman worker as a victim and ignored the growing numbers of women in new white-collar jobs. ⁴⁴

While Sealander's work is a fascinating and helpful document in understanding United States' government policy towards women workers between the 1920 through to 1963, nonetheless, her conclusions are somewhat contradictory. For instance, Sealander links government policy directly with the Women's Bureau; yet, this is not borne out by her own evidence which shows that the Bureau lacked any real power to create, or even amend, government policy. Another problem with Sealander's work is her apparent lack of appreciation for the time period in which the Bureau was operating. She condemns the Bureau for neglecting middle-class women workers because its published reports simply emphasized blue-collar situations of "gross exploitation and danger," yet she makes little effort to explain its motivations in doing so, beyond acknowledging that public opinion could only be swayed by dramatic cases of abuse. ⁴⁵ Given the economic and cultural constraints of the time period, Sealander's omission of the question of the public face versus private values of a women's

⁴⁴ Ibid.: p. 155.

See also, Christina Simmons' review of As Minority Becomes Majority: Federal Reaction to the Phenomenon of Women in the Workforce, 1920-1963 in Atlantis, 2, 1: pp. 171-174. In this review she proposes that the maternalistic bent of the Women's Bureau made the agency simply incapable of responding to relatively better-off female workers.

⁴⁵ Sealander, As Minority Becomes Majority, (op. cit): p. 155.

organization appears to condemn the Bureau women unjustly. ⁴⁶

A further weakness in Sealander's work is her assertion that the women's movement dates specifically from 1963. Whether this date is correct or not, Sealander does not adequately theorize about the reasons behind the government's policy changes in the 1960s. Was the 1963 Equal Pay Act truly "a major change in federal posture toward[s] female workers," as Sealander states? ⁴⁷ Was the government truly accepting women's right to work by outlawing discrimination on the basis of sex? If Sealander had only explored the work of the Women's Bureau such a theoretical neglect might be acceptable; however, because she does link government policy with the women's movement (and seemingly suggests that positive government policy was directly a catalyst for the latter!), this substantially weakens an otherwise excellent study.

In To Work and To Wed: Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression, Lois Scharf provides a very stimulating discussion of the changing ideology behind women's 'right' to work and in doing so addresses some issues that Sealander

⁴⁶ See, Ernest Forbes, "The Ideas of Carol Bacchi and the Suffragists of Halifax: A Review Essay on Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of the English Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918," Atlantis 10 (2): pp. 119-25, and Diana Pederson, "'Building Today for the Womanhood of Tomorrow': Businessmen, Boosters, and the YWCA, 1890-1930," Urban History Review XV (3): pp. 225-242.

⁴⁷ Sealander, As Minority Becomes Majority (op. cit.): p.9.

neglects.⁴⁸ Scharf explores the activities of women during the 1930s and analyzes the arguments about paid employment during these years. Scharf proposes that until the Depression began, a feminist consciousness existed, specifically about women's (married or unmarried) right to work:

Above all, [women activists in the 1920s] argued that women required financial compensation for productive labour, since economic independence lay at the foundation of freedom and equality.⁴⁹

Scharf argues that this feminist consciousness dissipated with the onset of the depression and was replaced by a defensive posture which sought to protect the economic status, specifically of unmarried women, which had been so far attained. The rhetoric of women's organizations stressed women's economic need to work -- a departure from the feminist ideal which had argued that women had a right to paid work. Scharf asserts that by choosing such arguments to maintain in the short term women's place in the workforce, feminists ignored the fact that the underlying discrimination against women's economic determinism was no different from what had existed in the 1920s. What had changed in the 1930s were the economic conditions which now made it necessary to cut back on workers, a reduction which was achieved by exploiting an ideal of womanhood that emphasized women's social responsibilities.

⁴⁸ Lois Scharf, To Work and To Wed: Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980).

⁴⁹ Ibid.: p. 42.

Therefore, by stressing women's economic need for employment and down playing women's right to work, feminists in the 1930s adopted a male ideal about the role and position of women in society.

Even though the needs of capitalism enabled women to regain their place in the economy after the 1930s, Scharf argues in her "Epilogue" that this failure of feminist thought continued on into the 1960s because, "progress . . . [was] more apparent than real."⁵⁰ The "cultural ideals" about the place of women in society remained dominant; therefore, while people's behaviour changed, values did not.⁵¹ Scharf touches on the contradictory messages which women received about engaging in paid labour by explaining that a whole new code of ethics appeared in the 1940s and 1950s which essentially allowed for the presence of women in the work force but laid down numerous guidelines to maintain women's proper place:

Gone was the erroneous equating of gainful employment with female emancipation and equality . . . because female employment, all evidence to the contrary, was an anomaly.⁵²

Scharf's To Work and To Wed is particularly engaging because of the strong theoretical basis to her work. In her conclusions she insightfully argues that, even with the

⁵⁰ Ibid.: p. 163.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

resurgence of the women's movement in the 1960s and beyond, the ideal of womanhood, versus the right of women to engage in paid employment, still predominates. The persistence of this ideal allows the continued ghettoization of women's work to occur, the disparity between men's and women's incomes to be maintained, and the belief that home and household are ultimately the responsibility of the woman to persist. To Work and To Wed's real strength comes from its theoretical basis and the evidence Scharf offers in her overall argument that the 1930s was the period when the opposition to the women having a right to work became consolidated and this illuminates the long lasting effects that economic downturns have upon women. ⁵³

Alice Kessler-Harris, in Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women, also addresses the connection between society's advocacy or denial of women's right to work and the changing

⁵³ See also, Ruth Milkman, "Women's Work and Economic Crisis: Some Lessons of the Great Depression," The Review of Radical Political Economics, 8, 1 (Spring 1976): pp. 73-97. In this work, Milkman argues that the idea of women as a reserve army of labour is only partly true and that when one looks closely at employment patterns during the 1930s depression, an era of intense criticism of women working, one can see that women's jobs were more protected than men's. Milkman proposes that the explanation for this was the increasing sex-typing, with attendant differences in pay and status, of different jobs; therefore, women workers should be seen not simply as a reserve labour force but also as a second class of labour. Milkman's evidence gives added weight to Scharf's arguments about woman's place in capitalist economy.

needs of capitalism.⁵⁴ However, her work, particularly the later chapters which explore the decades from World War I through to the present, departs from the social control emphasis of Sealander's and Scharf's works through her assertion that a form of feminism existed after the 1920s and 1930s.

Kessler-Harris asserts that women's waged work has never been accepted as a 'right.' Rather, the pull and push of women in and out of the work force is determined not by social roles, which in her view have remained constant, but by the changing needs of the capitalist economy. Kessler-Harris argues that, with the "postwar end to massive immigration and a consequent increase in male wages" women's labour became more and more attractive as it was cheaper and easier to exploit.⁵⁵ By emphasizing a traditional ideal of womanhood, capitalists were able to maintain this large, cheap labour force by "regulat[ing] women's aspirations" through a policy that promoted few women and fired women upon their marriage.⁵⁶ Moreover, economic downturns benefited employers by providing them with the excuse to further

⁵⁴ Alice Kessler-Harris, Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

⁵⁵ Ibid.: p. 230.

Kessler-Harris explains that "the earnings gap [had] widened [by the end of the 1920s] with . . . women's wages averag[ing] only 57% of men's." Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.: p. 231.

restrict women's wages, benefits and advancement -- all justifiable in the name of greater social good. Kessler-Harris explains that during the depression decade this resulted in the contradiction of women being forced to work out of family need and yet being constantly condemned for doing so:

. . . . To explain why a slowly rejuvenating economy could not provide jobs for men required a scapegoat. Who better than women who seemed simultaneously to be taking jobs away from the male breadwinners and destroying the family? ⁵⁷

This pattern repeated itself during the years of World War II, a time when the perception of women workers suddenly changed from them being 'pariahs' to one which stressed their "positive contributions to the labour force needs," simply because an expanded labour force was now required. ⁵⁸

Throughout Out to Work, Kessler-Harris stresses the inability of women to proclaim and enforce their own ideas about their lives. Unlike Sealander or Scharf, however, she does not blame this weakness on women themselves but, rather, upon the capitalist economy which has been fine tuned to exploit the weakest groups in the workforce. Moreover, contrary to Sealander, Kessler-Harris praises such bodies as the Women's Bureau for its efforts, effective or not, to fight against the continued subordination of women to capitalist

⁵⁷ Ibid.: p. 251.

⁵⁸ Ibid.: p. 274.

needs.⁵⁹ In doing so, Kessler-Harris acknowledges that some sort of feminist activity existed between 1920 and 1960 and indicates that the 1950s was the decade in which the renewed women's movement was launched:

. . . slowly a new mentality was dawning. As government policy began to encourage women to move into the labour market, women began to accept their status as permanent workers with the right to a job, they became eager for the rewards of that status.⁶⁰

With the long-sustained economic development that followed the war, Kessler-Harris argues that women's position in the work force improved to a point where they achieved some measure of real economic and political strength and were then able to demand real social changes.⁶¹

Out to Work is an extremely valuable document because of its broad historical scope and its thoughtful theoretical discussion of women, their relationship to waged labour, and the larger social pressures and ideals that constantly inflict contradictory tensions upon women. Out To Work's weakness, however, lies also in its broad sweep. By attempting to bring her work right up to the present, Kessler-Harris offers an interesting but overly simplistic assessment of the 1950s and beyond. This is evident just from the number of pages devoted to the later decades. Unlike the earlier chapters, with one

⁵⁹ Ibid.: pp. 304-5.

⁶⁰ Ibid.: p. 308.

⁶¹ Ibid.: p. 311.

dedicated to each individual decade, Kessler-Harris attempts to summarize the years from 1950 to 1980 in one single chapter and therefore fails to provide a strong conclusion.

A further problem with Out To Work concerns its portrayal of women as victims of a larger system which sought to control them and their labour through the use of a large pervasive ideology. In this presentation, Kessler-Harris is drawing on a combination of Marxist and feminist thought which collectively emphasize society's control of women. Kessler-Harris, however, also presents material that moves beyond a social control framework by her positive exploration of the activities and achievements of women after 1920. But by presenting women as both victims and, yet, as also affecting change, Kessler-Harris' theoretical framework is lacking in clarity and this weakens another wise powerful work.⁶²

In Decades of Discontent: The Women's Movement, 1920-1940, editors Lois Scharf and Joan Jensen and the other contributors argue that women's situation was changing a great deal in these decades but, like Kessler-Harris, they stress the existence of economic, social and cultural barriers which coalesced to hinder women's progress and made these years ones of "discontent."⁶³ Building upon the earlier work of

⁶² Kessler-Harris' theoretical bind demonstrates the difficulties of combining a Marxist and/or socialist analysis with a feminist one.

⁶³ Decades of Discontent: The Women's Movement, 1920-1940, Lois Scharf and Joan M. Jensen, eds., (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983).

Scharf and Kessler-Harris, Decades of Discontent stresses the contradictions surrounding women and waged work and further addresses the divisions between working women on the basis of age and marital status, the latter as touched upon by Scharf in To Work and To Wed.

In their "Introduction," Jensen and Scharf explain that one factor preventing women's unity was the contradictory images presented to them:

. . . The old monolithic image of women broke into two distinct images -- the first a model of public activity for the single woman, the second a model of domesticity for married women.⁶⁴

Moreover, they argue that the public debate about married women working indicates the growing gap between the different realities of single and married women's lives. Scharf and Jensen assert, however, that the right of married women to work was not debated. Instead, such issues as the acceptable types of work married women could undertake, the pay they would receive and the work's contribution to the economy formed the nucleus of the debate.⁶⁵ In other words, the public outcry itself further divided single and married women from each other by emphasizing the potential competition that the latter posed to the former if the rules concerning married women's paid labour were relaxed.

The main theme running through all the essays in Decades

⁶⁴ Ibid.: p. 5.

⁶⁵ Ibid.: p. 6.

of Discontent concerns the contradictions between the image of women's lives in the 1920s and 1930s and the realities in which women lived. Mary P. Ryan, in "The Projection of a New Womanhood: The Movie Moderns in the 1920s," explains that the movies of the 1920s demonstrate clearly the increasing division of women from each other.⁶⁶ Nearly all movies had women searching for the "right" man to marry; yet, their lives as single women were not portrayed as miserable. Though the jobs undertaken by heroines were monotonous and without interest, the opportunity for companionship through waged work and shared living quarters was appealing. Although central characters were ultimately successful at finding the perfect man, movie marriages involving women in minor roles often turned out badly with the women definitely worse off by being married.⁶⁷

In "The Economics of Middle-Income Family Life: Working Women During the Great Depression," historian Winnifred D. Wandersee looks at the contradictory messages directed at

⁶⁶ Mary P. Ryan, "The Projection of a New Womanhood: The Movie Moderns in the 1920s," in Scharf and Jensen, eds., Decades of Discontent (op. cit.): pp. 113-130.

⁶⁷ See also, Mary P. Ryan, Womanhood in America: From Colonial Times to the Present (New York: New Viewpoints, 1979), particularly "A Kaleidoscope of Roles: Twentieth-Century Women at Work and In the Home:" pp. 183-218. In this work Ryan talks about the contradictions that can be found in the movies of the 1930s. For instance, she points to the underlying subversiveness of the heroines who were often not obedient or 'good' women. Rather, characters like Scarlett O'Hara were immensely popular with audiences and yet were the opposite of the female ideal.

women in the 1930s.⁶⁸ Much like what Scharf noted in To Work and to Wed, Wandersee explains that the weight of public pressure against married women engaged in paid employment increased in the 1930s with the onset of poor economic times. That this public outcry was becoming increasingly hypocritical is evidenced by the fact that on one hand women were told to stay at home and immerse themselves in wifedom and motherhood, while, on the other hand, extra income provided by waged women workers was necessary in order to maintain a family's position in the middle class:

Thus many American families owed their middle-class status [in the 1930s] not to adequate wages for one person, but to the presence of several wage earners in the family. . . .by 1940, married homemakers were more likely to be making an economic contribution through paid employment than were their children.⁶⁹

Though there are other important essays in Decades of Discontent, the general theme of the volume are conveyed by Ryan's and Wandersee's works.⁷⁰ All the works agree that

⁶⁸ Winnifred D. Wandersee, "The Economics of Middle-Income Family Life: Working Women During the Great Depression," in Scharf and Jensen, eds., Decades of Discontent, op. cit.: pp. 45-58.

See also, Winnifred D. Wandersee, Women's Work and Family Values, 1920-1940 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

⁶⁹ Ibid.: pp. 51-2.

⁷⁰ See also, Lois Scharf, " 'The Forgotten Woman': Working Women, the New Deal, and Women's Organizations," in Scharf and Jensen, eds., Decades of Discontent, (op. cit.): pp. 243-259. Though much of Scharf's arguments appear in her larger work, To Work and To Wed (op. cit.), this essay is a valuable as a synthesis of Scharf's ideas and it also shows

the years between the two world wars (and by extension into the 1940s and 1950s) were not stagnant ones for women. Yet, with a wide range of cultural, economic and social factors arrayed against them, women were largely powerless to effect change. The inherent contradictions of the time, however, were important catalysts in the eventual breaking of the traditional mould in which women lived.

Decades of Discontent is a strong and well-balanced document which gives space to discussions of class, race and the different lifestyles of women. While some pieces are stronger than others, they work together smoothly to provide a good snapshot of women's varied lives in the 1920s and 1930s. One significant criticism of Decades of Discontent is that it provides little or no material for after 1939. While ending with 1939 was obviously Jensen and Scharf's intention, nonetheless, an essay which addressed issues of the 1940s in general terms would have enabled the reader to realize that "the discontent" did not end with the outbreak of World War II. Moreover, it would have allowed for connections to be drawn with the present day situation of women.

As it is apparent from the preceding literature, women's

the progression of her thought. See also, Ruth Schwartz Cowan, "Two Washes in the Morning and a Bridge Party at Night: The American Housewife Between the Wars," in Scharf and Jensen, eds., Decades of Discontent, (op. cit.): pp. 177-196. Cowan argues that the feminine mystique, identified by Betty Friedan in 1963, dates from the 1920s and 1930s when it developed as an ideology to insure the continued maintenance of the home.

lives in the 1940s and 1950s have received the least attention. Fortunately, there are two important works in the American field which examine these years: Susan M. Hartman's The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s and Eugenia Kaledin's Mothers and More: American Women in the 1950s.⁷¹

These monographs are strikingly different from the works that have been reviewed up to this point. For instance, while acknowledging that things were happening in women's lives after 1920, Decades of Discontent does not portray these events as part of an overall women's movement; however, both Hartman and Kaledin describe women's lives and activities in these years as feminist.⁷² In addition, neither historian

⁷¹ Susan M. Hartman, The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982) and Eugenia Kaledin, Mothers and More: American Women in the 1950s, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984).

These two volumes are of the series, Barbara Haber, ed., American Women in the Twentieth Century:

. . . American Women in the Twentieth Century is the first series to provide a chronological history of the changing status of women in America. Each volume presents the experiences and contributions of American women during one decade of this century. Kaledin, Mothers and More, (op. cit.): title page.

Forthcoming volumes will explore women in the 1920s and in the 1960s.

⁷² For a similar viewpoint, see also Susan D. Becker, The Origins of the Equal Rights Amendment: American Feminism Between the Wars (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981). Becker argues that the women's movement carried on past 1920; however, it was less visible because of an increasingly hostile environment and of the inherent problems in defining women's advancement. Becker makes particular note of the National Women's Party's stress on women's right to work but

apologizes for the fact that women's goals in these decades were different from those of women in the 1960s and onwards; instead, they both offer a positive evaluation of women's activities and achievements in the 1940s and 1950s.

In Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s, Hartman pays particular attention to the effect that the Second World War had on women's lives. Hartman explains that though the Depression era of the 1930s put women (particularly married women) on the defensive, the gains that they made in the 1940s were essentially never lost again. These gains included broader employment opportunities, government programmes addressing women's special needs and, most importantly, a growing societal acceptance of women's right to work. Moreover, as the "ideological consensus that women belonged at home" began to break down, so did the justification for the "inferior status and low pay of women when they did leave home."⁷³ Hartman also indicates that it was in the 1940s that women began to return to waged employment after their children had reached school age. This trend of experiencing a second period in the labour force was a product of the women marrying at a younger age, a change which enabled them to complete their child-rearing duties

elucidates their difficulty in honouring equally women's roles as wives and mothers. The problems that the National Women's party encountered in advancing the cause of women is very reminiscent of the ongoing struggles within the present day woman's movement.

⁷³ Hartman, The Home Front and Beyond, (op. cit): p. 19.

earlier in their lives. ⁷⁴ The trend of incorporating a second period of waged labour in women's lives was, in Hartman's opinion, of tremendous importance because of the affect it had upon women's view of themselves. ⁷⁵

Hartman, however, does not portray the 1940s as a period in which women advanced with ease. Rather, she points to the "backlash" against women following the war, which "constituted a major effort of social control" over women's lives and personal choices. ⁷⁶ Moreover, the family remained the central feature in the majority of women's lives, a factor which reinforced the secondary position that waged labour played in their lives. Nonetheless, Hartman proposes that "the military crisis did create an ideological climate supportive of woman's movement into the public realm" and it was within this climate that later successes would grow. ⁷⁷ Moreover, Hartman asserts that the increasing "tension[s] between private and public claims" eventually created an

⁷⁴ The average age at which women married fell from 21.05 to 20.3 in the 1940s while men's marriage age dropped from 24.3 to 22.7 in the same years. Ibid.: p. 165. [American figures]

⁷⁵ See also, Louise Lamphere, From Working Daughters to Working Mothers: Immigrant Women in a New England Industrial Community (London: Cornell University Press, 1987). Lamphere argues that the undertaking of waged employment by women for a second period in their lives, constitutes one of the most important social transformations to occur in the twentieth century.

⁷⁶ Ibid.: p. 212.

⁷⁷ Ibid.: p. 12.

urgency in which change had to occur.⁷⁸

In Mothers and Beyond: American Women in the 1950s, Eugenia Kaledin takes an even more positive view than Hartman towards the activities of women in the 1950s. Kaledin immediately affirms that she judges 1950s women on their own terms and, rather than seeing them as a lost generation left-behind by the advances of women in the 1960s, she intends to illuminate the "set of values designed [by them] to confront or assuage their powerlessness."⁷⁹

Like Hartman, however, Kaledin does not over emphasize or simplify the distance that women in the 1950s still had to advance. Yet, for all the difficulties that women encountered, as well as their continued disunity, Kaledin believes that the 1950s should be seen as feminist:⁸⁰

Fifties 'feminism,' never so labelled, was for the most part a social ideal, the antecedent of that androgynous feminism that expects men to be more like women,

⁷⁸ Ibid.: p. 180.

⁷⁹ Kaledin, Mothers and Beyond, (op. cit.): p. ii.

See also, Leslie Woodcok Tentler, Wage-Earning Women: Industrial Work and Family Life in the United States, 1900-1930 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979). Like Kaledin, Tentler argues that women in the 1920s and 1930s had their own priorities and values that should not be judged by male standards. For instance, young working women put a much higher value on female solidarity and a workplace that gave them the opportunity to be social, rather than on wages, individual advancement or cross-industrial unionization.

⁸⁰ The reality that the present-day women's movement is a long way from being one unified force adds weight to Kaledin's assertion that the 1950s can be likewise judged as a feminist period.

not women to be more like men. ⁸¹

Kaledin asserts that, by not recognizing the positive links between women's lives in the 1950s and the feminist activity of the 1960s, "a more complex view of American feminism" is prevented from developing. ⁸²

Kaledin first explores the myth, as she terms it, that women in the 1950s simply returned to their homes at the conclusion of the Second World War. Much like Hartman's work on the 1940s, she points to the incompleteness of this image, particularly the fact that it ignores the increasing numbers of married women re-entering the marketplace later on in their lives. Kaledin asserts that the 1950s has been overlooked as the era when the debate about married women working ceased to be relevant and became " a fact of American life." ⁸³ Moreover in terms of the ideology behind women working, though families remained central to their concerns, women began to perceive the positive aspects of waged labour by appreciating that their waged labour was "helping [their families] by raising their standard of living." ⁸⁴

Due to the overall lack of literature on women in the 1940s and 1950s, one should be cautious in criticizing Hartman's and Kaledin's works too sharply; however, there are

⁸¹ Kaledin, Mothers and Beyond, (op. cit.): p. 218.

⁸² Ibid.: , 220.

⁸³ Ibid.: p. 63.

⁸⁴ Ibid.: p. 64.

some problems with their general approach which should be addressed. While the frameworks they employ create a positive image of women in the past rather than one which casts women as incomplete or as victims, nonetheless, this approach is fraught with difficulty and open to attack. This vulnerability stems from the fact that neither historian, particularly Kaledin, appears to have considered and incorporated the arguments of Scharf, Kessler-Harris and others. This is especially evident through the lack a theoretical underpinning which was the foremost strength of the majority of the earlier works reviewed. For instance, neither Hartman nor Kaledin adequately address the issues of women as a reserve or secondary labour force, women's 'right' to work, and, how the ideal of womanhood interacts with both aspects. Because of this theoretical neglect, Hartman's Home Front and Beyond and Kaledin's Mothers and More often appear to be simply descriptive literature. And while descriptive literature tends to be the first work upon which others grow, it is, however, disappointing that neither Hartman nor Kaledin tried harder to create a composite of description and theory.

A body of American literature about women from the 1920s to the 1960s is obviously just emerging; therefore, it is unfair to be too critical of the works that have been produced up to this point as many of their weaknesses are derived from the fact that they are pioneers moving across uncharted ground. Moreover, with the continued storms over the

direction and goals of the present-day women's movement, women's historians cannot help but be influenced by current feminist discussions as they set about to recreate the past. Yet, with the work of strong historians like Scharf and Kessler-Harris, combined with the dawning recognition of the neglect of the history of women between 1920 and 1960, American women's history can only become richer in the years to come.

* * *

Although it is about ten years behind the American field in development, a body of Canadian literature is likewise beginning to form. At this time very few works exist which examine women's lives in this period, while women's waged labour has merited even less attention.⁸⁵ However, a few significant works have been produced and they are important both in what they have chosen to emphasize and what they have left out.

On the whole, Canadian historical works have not employed the theoretical frameworks that are evident in American literature. Theory is, of course, something that builds up over time and due to the newness of this Canadian historiographical field it is not surprising that the works that do exist tend to be descriptive in nature rather than

⁸⁵ See, Veronica Strong-Boag, "Working Women and the State: The Case of Canada, 1889-1945," Atlantis 6 (Spring 1981): pp. 1-10.

critical.⁸⁶ Works that have been produced stress the difficulties that women encountered in obtaining equitable wages and decent working conditions. Likewise, they also differentiate between working class women's employment experiences and middle class women's, emphasizing that the middle class ideal of a wife dedicating herself exclusively to her home and family bore little resemblance to the reality of working class women's lives.⁸⁷ Another dominant theme in Canadian literature about women in this period is the ghettoization of working women into specific sex-typed occupations.

The distance between the middle-class' ideal of womanhood and the reality of women's lives is explored by Margaret E. McCallum, in "Keeping Women in Their Place: The Minimum Wage

⁸⁶ An exception is the recent work by Joy Parr, The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men, and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880-1950 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990). This is a fascinating and insightful document which is very strong in its theoretical underpinnings; however, the uniqueness of the work situation for women of Paris, Ontario, makes it impossible to use it to explore women's relationship to work. What is important to note is that this recent Canadian work, and others by historians such as Ruth Roach Pierson, are beginning to ground their explorations in theoretical frameworks, a trend which portends well for the future.

See also, Joan Sangster, Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left, 1920-1950, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1989).

⁸⁷ For an analysis of what the 'proper' woman was and how this image was solidified in the late nineteenth century see, Deborah Gorham, The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

in Canada, 1910-1925." ⁸⁸ McCallum argues that regardless of the economic realities that women experienced, minimum wage levels were based upon a cost-of-living budget whose underlying assumption was that "a woman could look for support to a man." ⁸⁹ Moreover, these wage rates blatantly "ignored statistics that [demonstrated that] married women worked" largely because, McCallum asserts, the legislators could not accept the notion of a married woman working. ⁹⁰

McCallum's work is augmented by Nancy M. Forestell's, "Times Were Hard: The Pattern of Women's Paid Labour in St. John's Between the Two World Wars," in which Forestell explains that women's paid employment was directly related to their age and class. ⁹¹ Forestell proposes that for the majority of women in the 1920s and 1930s, "paid employment

⁸⁸ Margaret E. McCallum, "Keeping Women in Their Place: The Minimum Wage in Canada, 1910-1925," Labour/Le Travail (Spring 1988): pp. 29-58.

⁸⁹ Ibid.: p. 55.

⁹⁰ Ibid.: p. 55.

See also, Catherine Macleod, "Women in Production: The Toronto Dressmakers' Strike of 1931," in, Janice Acton, Bonnie Shepard and Penny Goldsmith, eds., Women at Work: Ontario, 1850-1930 (Toronto: Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1974): pp. 309-329. In this article Macleod proposes that the ease with which women were exploited was due to the fact that they were perceived by society and by themselves as being merely temporary or transient workers. She does not, however, blame women for this situation and, instead, argues that this weakness on their part was due to their youth and small numbers, as well as a general lack of union support for women workers.

⁹¹ Nancy M. Forestell, "Times Were Hard: The Pattern of Women's Paid Labour in St. John's Between the Two World Wars," Labour/Le Travail 24 (Fall 1989): pp. 147-166.

outside the house was just a temporary interlude . . . between leaving school and getting married." ⁹² Forestell, however, distinguishes between a woman's class and her working experience in a number of ways. First, working class daughters worked prior to marriage specifically because of their families' economic need. There was, however, less urgency for middle class women, whose reason for engaging in waged labour was usually only to gain pocket money for themselves. Secondly, a woman's class position often determined the waged work she managed to obtain, as better paid white collar jobs or the professions depended on a woman having "education, time and money," luxuries that only middle class women could afford. ⁹³ Thirdly, whereas both middle and working class women normally left full-time employment upon becoming married, working class women were often forced by economic need to seek part-time waged work that they could combine with their domestic responsibilities. However, as is obvious from McCallum's discussion, the two-staged nature of working-class women's lives was generally not appreciated by census-takers or acknowledged by legislators and public policy makers.

Graham S. Lowe's work on women and clerical employment, Women in the Administrative Revolution: The Feminization of Clerical Work, is important in understanding the development

⁹² Ibid.: p. 148.

⁹³ Ibid.: p. 155.

of sex-typed work or female job ghettos.⁹⁴ Lowe explains that from the beginning of the 1900s, women, particularly of the middle class, increasingly moved into the workplace and into new fields opened up by industrialization and modernization. Yet, concurrently, these rapidly expanding areas of employment themselves underwent a process of becoming sexually segregated. For instance, clerical work changed from being a male domain, with attendant good wages, high status and mobility, to the reverse as a female-typed employment. Lowe suggests that "the newly created jobs at the bottom end of the office hierarchy" brought about a demand for a large number of unskilled labourers.⁹⁵ The recruitment of women, a cheap and malleable source of labour, fitted the demand perfectly. Moreover, by employing women to undertake these routine and dead-end jobs, the temporary nature of women's employment was re-enforced as the work afforded little economic independence or mobility. This in turn ensured the continued existence of a large, unskilled labour force which could be drawn upon in economic prosperity and dispensed with in economic poor times.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Graham S. Lowe, Women in the Administrative Revolution: The Feminization of Clerical Work (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).

⁹⁵ Ibid.: p. 53.

⁹⁶ Ibid.: p. 2.

For an exploration of how the sex-typing of occupations occurred in the professions as well as blue and white collar jobs, see, Marta Danylewycz, Beth Light and Alison Prentice, "The Evolution of the Sexual Division of Labour in Teaching;

Two large works which have explored women between the 1920s and the 1950s are Veronica Strong-Boag's, The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English-Canada, 1919-1939 and Ruth Roach Pierson's 'They're Still Women After All': The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood.⁹⁷ Both monographs draw upon earlier Canadian works and present relatively little new material ('They're Still Women After All' is new simply because virtually nothing else has been written on Canadian women in the 1940s), yet, their size and format set them apart from other works on the field and taken together they form a unit.⁹⁸

The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English-Canada, 1919-1939, is a very accessible and richly

A Nineteenth Century Ontario and Quebec Case Study," Histoire Sociale/Social History 16 (May 1983), pp. 81-109.

⁹⁷ Veronica Strong-Boag, The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English-Canada, 1919-1939 (Markham: Penguin Books Canada: 1988), and Ruth Roach Pierson, 'They're Still Women After All': The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986).

See also, Gail Cuthbert Brandt, " 'Weaving it Together': Life Cycle and the Industrial Experience of Female Cotton Workers in Quebec, 1910-1950," in Alison Prentice and Susan Mann Trofimenkoff, eds., The Neglected Majority: Essays in Canadian Women's History v.2 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985): pp. 160-173, and James D. Mochoruk and Donna Webber, "Women in the Winnipeg Garment Trade, 1929-1945," in Mary Kinnear, ed., First Days, Fighting Days: Women in Manitoba History (University of Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1987): pp. 134-148.

⁹⁸ There is sadly no major published work at this time which looks at Canadian women in the 1950s. However, this situation will hopefully soon be changing as Veronica Strong-Boag has a work in progress entitled, Home Dreams: Women and the Suburban Experience in Canada, 1945-1960.

detailed text.⁹⁹ This is a unique addition to Canadian women's historiography as it is thematically divided, with each of its six chapters tracing a life-cycle or stage in women's lives. In light of the direction of this study the chapter which looks at women's paid employment, "Working For Pay," will be explored.

Much like Lowe, Strong-Boag emphasizes the increasing ghettoization of women's occupations from the 1920s onwards. Strong-Boag argues that this sex-typing of occupations, whatever the class that a woman originated from or whether she obtained a blue or white-collar job, effectively prevented women from securing economic independence:

. . . [employers] did not just designate women as short-term labour, they [also] designated as women's jobs those without possibilities of advancement, without benefits, and with no incentive to stay.¹⁰⁰

Recognizing this reality of women's employment, Strong-Boag is sympathetic to women's continued idealization of marriage which was one way out of full-time paid employment.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ See also, Veronica Strong-Boag, "The Girl of the New Day: Canadian Working Women in the 1920s," Labour/le Travailleur, 4 (1979): pp. 131-164.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.: p. 57.

¹⁰¹ This touches on the theoretical point of whether marriage and heterosexuality are enforced through the inability of the majority of women to do otherwise or risk living permanently in poverty and insecurity. See, Sheila Jeffreys, The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality, 1880-1930 (London: Pandora Press, 1985), and Martha Vicinus, Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985),

Not only did women have very little incentive (either in the matter of pay, mobility or working conditions) to continue waged work but, as Strong-Boag points out, because society expected women to be responsible for all domestic tasks, "once wedded, work outside the home, for whatever reason, meant that they held down two full-time jobs:" ¹⁰²

It was this reality, just as much as misogynous opposition, that encouraged married women to leave the paid work force as soon as it was financially feasible. ¹⁰³

Strong-Boag explains that early twentieth-century feminists did have high hopes that, once having achieved the vote, women's economic equality would follow. These hopes, however, were doomed by the "sexual politics of the labour market," a market which essentially consisted of two classes of waged labourers divided from one another on the basis of sex. ¹⁰⁴ Due to the sex-typed nature of labour there was always an oversupply of women for any particular work female-typed, be it teaching, factory or office work. The result of this division of labour was that women had so few avenues of employment open to them that the sheer numbers of women

and Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 5, 4 (1980): pp. 631-660, and, Cicely Hamilton, Marriage as a Trade (London: Women's Press Ltd., 1981).

¹⁰² Ibid.: p. 50.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.: p. 71.

applying for similar positions reinforced their overall vulnerability in the labour market.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, the maintenance of discriminatory labour practices was justified by society's overall refusal to acknowledge either women's need of paid employment (married or not) or their right to such work:

Working women were accused of lacking appropriate qualities -- leadership, tolerance, seriousness, etc. -- of undermining male dedication and opportunity -- by everything from flirtation to low wages -- and of needing only 'pin money.'¹⁰⁶

Strong-Boag, however, concludes her exploration of women and waged labour on a positive note. She proposes that though women in the 1920s and 1930s achieved little or none of the economic equality that had been hoped for when suffrage was achieved, nonetheless, women were increasingly able to "gain access to sources of information and influences external to the family" through their involvement in the paid labour force. It was this access that eventually led women towards greater unity and politicization and in turn to demand political and economic advancement.¹⁰⁷

Strong-Boag's New Day Recalled gives a great deal to the

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.: p. 51.

Strong-Boag points out that women in trade occupations received only 44% of male salaries in 1921 and 40% in 1931. Ibid.: p. 61.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.: p. 45.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.: p. 71.

field of Canadian women's history, particularly through its thematic organization which delineates the phases of women's lives and acknowledges the different stresses and priorities of women depending on their age and marital status. Nonetheless, New Day Recalled is disappointing both because of the little new material that it presents on women in the 1920s and 1930s and also because of its omission of much of the theoretical work of American historians, such as Scharf, Kessler-Harris and the contributors to Decades of Discontent, who have looked at the lives of American women in the same decades. For instance, while Strong-Boag explores in detail the ghettoized nature of women's work, she neglects to give similar weight to questions about women's right to work and the contradictory tensions between the ideal of womanhood and the realities of women's lives. Moreover, the positive note on which she closes catches the reader unprepared as she offers little prior evidence to support such sentiment.

Ruth Roach Pierson's 'They're Still Women After All': The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood, is one of the few existing works in recent Canadian literature to examine the role of work in women's lives during and immediately following World War II. ¹⁰⁸ Pierson argues that it is assumed that "the employment of women in the labour force during World War II greatly advanced the emancipation of women" and that these gains were subsequently lost in the years following the war as

¹⁰⁸ Pierson, 'They're Still Women After All', (op. cit.).

women obediently returned to their traditional roles. ¹⁰⁹
The central question that Pierson asks of her sources is: "did the war 'liberate' Canadian women from patriarchal divisions of labour and conceptions of proper womanhood?" ¹¹⁰

Pierson's data challenges on a number of levels the belief that the war had a liberating effect upon women. For instance, she argues that the ideal that a woman's rightful place was in her home remained constant throughout the war years and therefore, wartime participation in the public sphere was always perceived as simply a temporary departure from the norm. This is evidenced by the fact that married women, with or without children, were only asked to take up employment outside of their homes in 1942 and 1943, a time when the reserve of single women had nearly run out. ¹¹¹ This timing reinforced the notion that married women's place was in their own homes and that it was only due to the war emergency that they were being asked to engage in waged work.

Pierson further argues that government measures, such as the special income tax changes and the Dominion-Provincial Day Nurseries Agreement, were designed only to encourage married women to enter the workforce for the duration of the war. The temporary nature of these incentives is evidenced by their

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.: p. 22.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.: p. 9.

¹¹¹ Ibid.: pp. 27-28.

almost immediate cancellation at war's end.¹¹² Pierson points out that surveys of mothers who used the nurseries in Toronto demonstrated that "fifty percent of the women were working full time out of economic need."¹¹³ These results, however, were ignored and this indicates that the measures enabling women to undertake waged labour were not designed to help them fulfil a right to work but were simply a response to a short term emergency.

As final evidence of the inaccuracy of the belief that women truly advanced during the war, Pierson argues that the ideal of womanhood was never seriously challenged by women's war-time participation. Instead, this ideal was re-enforced by the war-long "preoccupation with the 'femininity' of the women in uniform" and, therefore, society easily translated the image of women back into "a full-skirted and redomesticated post-war model" dedicated to traditional female values at the war's close.¹¹⁴

Pierson also contradicts the belief that women willingly returned to their traditional lifestyles. Rather, government legislation, such as new income tax laws, actively dissuaded women from working.¹¹⁵ In terms of women's own ideas about

¹¹² Ibid.: pp. 48-55.

¹¹³ Ibid.: p. 57.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.: p. 15; p. 200.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.: p. 49.

As of January 1, 1947, if a wife's income exceeded \$240.00, the married status of the husband's exemption would

engaging in paid employment, Pierson proposes that, though the numbers of women in paid employment was considerably reduced after the war, it is a fallacy to believe that married women simply left the workplace:

the fact that 30% of Canada's waged and salaried women in 1951 were married indicated that one wartime trend was not reversed: married women continued to make up a large proportion of the female labour force.¹¹⁶

Pierson concludes, however, that though the percentage of married women in the labour force increased in the war years and continued to do so in the 1950s, this in itself did not constitute an advancement of women because patriarchal assumptions about the division of labour and what constituted a 'proper' woman had **not** changed.¹¹⁷

'They're Still Women After All' is an interesting and well documented, ground-breaking work in the Canadian historiographical field. Yet, as it is really a collection of essays published through the late 1970s and early 1980s it lacks an evenness in tone and weight from one chapter to the

be reduced for every dollar over that limit. Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.: p. 216.

Alison Prentice and her co-authors, in Canadian Women: A History, contend that "the decline in the period immediately after the war appears to have been caused less by the withdrawal of women already in the workforce than by a lower participation rate of younger women." (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jobanovich, 1988), p. 316.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

Pierson points out that women simply had to shoulder a double load of domestic and paid labour which was not in itself "liberating." Ibid.

next. And though the year of its publication, 1986, is misleading because the majority of the book was written much earlier, one cannot help but be critical of Pierson's lack of reference to American works whose theoretical frameworks and the questions they considered could have strengthened the overall impact of 'They're Still Women After All'. For example, Kaledin's Home Front and Beyond was published in 1982 and would have been an interesting counterpoint to Pierson's study if she had referred to it. Kaledin, for instance, asserts that women made gains in the 1940s --- gains which ebbed to a degree at the war's end but were never truly lost. Pierson, however, argues that no measurable gains were made by women at all, even though she briefly acknowledges that married women were in the work place to stay following the war. Pierson does not perceive this development as positive as she argues that the ongoing division of labour and the continued dominance of an ideal of womanhood negates the positive impact of women's involvement in the paid work force. Yet, while one would not hesitate to agree overall with Pierson as to the fact that the division of labour and ideal of womanhood do undercut women's real advancement in society, do these facts cancel out the positive benefits enjoyed by women who have achieved economic independence? One has to question whether Pierson, in perceiving women simply as victims, is falling into the trap of judging women's public and private lives by male standards, a theme suggested by Jill

McCalla Vickers in "Feminist Approaches to Politics." ¹¹⁸

Like the American literature which examines women between 1920 and 1960, the Canadian field is only beginning to develop. And, as in the criticism of the former, it is perhaps unfair to be overly critical of what does exist. Moreover, recent Canadian works, though not applicable to this study, are beginning to incorporate a substantial amount of theory and this will hopefully address the weaknesses of the literature produced thus far.

¹¹⁸ Vickers, "Feminist Approaches to Politics," Kealey and Sangster, eds., Beyond the Vote (op. cit.).

CHAPTER TWO

THE MONTREAL YWCA IN THE 1920S AND 1930S

Like the rest of Canada in the 1920s and 1930s Montreal travelled on a boom and bust economic roller coaster, falling victim to the onslaught of the Depression in 1929 and not really regaining economic stability until the opening salvos of World War II. Many of the developments and changes that the Montreal YWCA experienced were connected to these larger political and economic forces occurring in Canada; however, its most fundamental transformations occurred because the needs of its constituents, women, were likewise undergoing tremendous changes in these decades.¹¹⁹ And it is the different needs of women from one decade to the next, specifically in regards to the age at which they married and the role of work in their lives, which enable a dividing line to be drawn, however blurred by common themes, between the YWCA of the 1920s and 1930s and the organization of the 1940s and 1950s.

It was in the 1920s, an era when there was some optimism that with women having finally won the franchise they would achieve full equality, that the Montreal YWCA began to

¹¹⁹ The use of terms should be clarified at this point. "Girls," really meaning any unmarried woman, is a term used consistently by the YWCA in its records, therefore, I use this term in any direct quotes. However, if it is not a direct quote I use "woman" to describe all female above the age of 15. Likewise, the use of the term "business girl" is employed in its 1920 - 1960 context and is essentially equal to today's terminology of "secretary."

articulate ideas about women and waged work.¹²⁰ To the YWCA working women were generally unmarried and predominantly between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. While it did not publicly argue that women had a right to waged employment, the YWCA perceived that the income a job provided was one means for women to gain independence and advancement.¹²¹ Therefore, throughout the 1920s and the 1930s the association focused on the social, recreational and educational needs of women engaged in the paid labour force. It also attended to longer-range goals, including that of decent wages for women, better housing and protection against unemployment.

The YWCA, however, was hindered on a number of levels from actively promoting change. The first and most obvious hindrance was the belief system in which it operated, that being that a woman's true place was in the home. There is no question that the YWCA accepted this principle overall; yet, its interest and promotion of women engaged in the paid labour force indicates that the YWCA did perceive other realities, though limited by age and marriage, for women. The second and less readily obvious hindrance to the YWCA's promotion of other visions of women was its own financial dependency on the good will of the community. The YWCA was one of a number of

¹²⁰ Quebec women, of course, did not achieve the provincial franchise until 1940.

¹²¹ See, for example, NAC MG 28 I 240 V 38 Annual Report and Departmental Annual Reports 1931: "Education Department Annual Report," 1931, p. 1.

organizations funded by the Financial Federation (later known as Montreal Council of Social Agencies), which was based upon public donations, and as so many of its efforts were free or non-revenue producing, the organization was almost completely dependent on the larger community in order to exist. Moreover, funds for specific YWCA projects were raised with the help of the YWCA's Advisory Board which was made up of businessmen. The existence of such a board was necessary as the YWCA had to gain access to the financial sector of Quebec which was firmly under the control of such businessmen.¹²² Therefore, the YWCA had to move cautiously within a larger constraining world and it had to justify each action on behalf of women with publicly acceptable platitudes. Although its tangible successes were therefore few and far between, its actions and concerns indicated an ongoing understanding, though fractured at times in terms of class and race, of the reality of working women's lives.¹²³

* * *

In the 1920s and 1930s the main departments of the Montreal YWCA were those of Education, Health Education, Travellers' Aid, Public, Rooms Directory, and Senior,

¹²² The records demonstrate, however, that the Advisory Board had almost nothing to do with the daily operation of the YWCA, with the Executive Committee only calling its assembly when the YWCA had need of financial aid or legal advice.

¹²³ It must be again emphasized that any exploration of the Montreal YWCA and the insights that this gives into working women's lives will be mainly limited to Anglophone, white middle-class women.

Intermediate and Junior Girls Work Departments. Because most of the institution's programmes were designed and run by women volunteering their time (as opposed to people hired full time), many of the daily operations of the YWCA were run by committees attached to each department. The woman ultimately in charge of the daily operations of the YWCA was the general secretary, a position that was full-time and paid by the mid-1920s and re-named as "Executive Director" in the revised constitution of 1935, and she answered only to the elected Board of Directors.

Of all the departments of the Montreal YWCA, the Education Department was the key component of the YWCA's position and actions towards helping women obtain a better position in the working world and, therefore, its development in these decades is of particular importance. The Department's programmes were divided into the sections of "domestic art," "domestic science" and "academic." Each section was in large part designed as a means to open a wider range of opportunities for women in the labour force. The domestic art section included classes on millinery, dress making, needlework, china painting and basketry, and while the latter two offerings were for recreational purposes, the others were labour force oriented.¹²⁴ The domestic science section consisted of cooking classes, while the Academic

¹²⁴ One should not overlook that these skills could be also used to gain extra income through home and/or piece work.

programme focused upon French and English language training and Matriculation work. Other educational offerings were the Trained Attendants and Home Nursing programmes which were conceived for employment purposes and as training for women caring for their families and relatives. In addition, the YWCA offered occasional classes designed to meet the particular needs of waged women workers. One such class was Public Speaking, which ran from 1923 through to 1926. The class was promoted as a "key to [employment] success" with women learning how "to express [themselves] effectively, with clearness, confidence and force."¹²⁵

This is not to suggest that all of the YWCA's programmes were designed purely to help women advance in the work force. On the contrary, some efforts were obviously intended to socialize and Canadianize women as well. For example, from 1925 through to 1928, groups of young girls were sent to the YWCA by the Montreal Ladies' Benevolent Society and Children's Bureau for cooking classes. This learning experience included the "properties of food" and a strict outline of where everything belonged in a kitchen.¹²⁶ Further, the 1924 "Training School for Popularity: A Course in Personal Charm and Etiquette," with its description as teaching "social customs" and "correct social manners at public affairs"

¹²⁵ NAC MG 28 I 240 V 14 Educational Department Reports 1922-25: "Public Speaking Class" 1923.

¹²⁶ Ibid. V 13 Cooking Classes 1925-27.

appears to have been aimed more at working-class women, be they YWCA members or not, rather than for the average middle class YWCA participant. ¹²⁷

The YWCA's involvement with 'socialization' type programmes was, however, very limited one at this time. Instead, its commitment to the positive advancement of women is what dominates its records. One example of this commitment was the YWCA's Matriculation programme. ¹²⁸ In 1924 the Matriculation class was made up of twenty-seven students and, as the annual report from the Education Department stated, "it [was] certainly filling an urgent need:"

When we consider the standard of work undertaken by these pupils and the serious handicap -- lack of time for preparation (many of the girls are employed during the day) -- we can look upon this class with the greatest

¹²⁷ Ibid. V 14 Educational Department Reports 1922-25: "Public-Speaking Course" 1923.

Up until 1943 classes, clubs and the overall YWCA facilities were open to all women whether they were actually YWCA members or not. However, it is virtually impossible to determine the social and economic class (problematic terminology particularly when applied to women as their 'class' is predominantly determined by their father's and/or husband's social stature) of either YWCA members or non-members who participated in its programmes.

¹²⁸ Matriculation courses included: Physiography, English, History, Algebra, French, Latin, Mathematics, Greek, German, Geometry, Physics, Chemistry and Botany. The YWCA's idea was that women would divide their matriculation work into two years, the first given to the English subjects and the second to languages and Mathematics, though this often took longer in practice. Upon completion of each block of work, the students were directed to undergo the McGill examinations.

satisfaction. ¹²⁹

* * *

TABLE 1YWCA EDUCATION DEPARTMENT CLASSES 1922 - 1928 ¹³⁰

Year . . .	1922	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928
ADVERTISING	--	--	--	6	--	--	--
CHARM SCHOOL	--	--	--	80	--	--	--
CHINA PAINTING	6	--	--	--	--	--	--
COOKING	40	29	35	50	XX	28	52
DISCUSSIONS	--	--	--	--	XX	XX	XX
DRESSMAKING	40	119	108	91	XX	59	44
ENGLISH	25	80	83	128	XX	36	--
ETIQUETTE	--	--	--	--	XX	--	--
FRENCH	18	31	28	42	XX	8	--
GOOD HEALTH	--	--	10	5	--	--	--
HANDICRAFTS	12	18	29	20	XX	6	13
HOME NURSING	34	7	14	25	XX	13	21
MATRICULATION	6	22	27	15	--	--	--
MILLINERY	172	401	266	194	XX	104	89
NEEDLEWORK	10	XX	15	5	--	--	9
ORCHESTRA	--	--	--	--	XX	18	10
SPEAKING	--	--	--	--	--	5	--
T.A.	8	31	36	21	XX	39	26
WAITRESSING	--	--	--	--	--	21	20
WOODWORK	--	--	--	--	XX	--	--
YEAR TOTALS	812	728	678	687	466	372	294

* * *

¹²⁹ NAC MG 28 I 240 V 14 Educational Department Reports 1922-25: "Annual Report 1924," p.1.

¹³⁰ Ibid. Volumes 13, 14, 38 and 39.

These are the years for which information, some more complete than others, is available for the 1920s. For 1922, 1927 and 1928, figures are for only one term though totals are for the entire year. "XX" indicates class held but figures not located and "--" means that no such class was held that year. Totals are for the whole year, individual class registrations were incomplete and therefore do not often add up to year total. "T.A." stands for the Trained Attendants course.

At this time, and right up to 1943, Quebec did not have compulsory education laws and this lack of enforcement, combined with economic forces, resulted in many people receiving little or no education beyond the elementary level. As adults there were very few possibilities for people to pursue a matriculation certificate on a part-time basis and it was even more difficult for women as the few programmes which existed did not begin to admit women until the mid to late 1920s. The YWCA's Education Department's declaration is not, therefore, an idle boast in regards to the urgent need for education facilities. ¹³¹

A letter by an Edith Chapman, a member of the YWCA pursuing her matriculation certificate part-time, demonstrates the enthusiasm on the part of many young working women to improve their formal education. In 1924, having learned that the YWCA was unsure about its ability to offer courses the following term, Edith Chapman decided to take it upon herself

¹³¹ Ibid.

The YWCA did more than just organize educational classes and locate space for them to be held. It also repeatedly tried, in a number of ways, to make sure that women were not prevented because of poverty from undertaking further education. One example of this type of effort is the general plea sent out by the Educational Secretary in 1925 to various schools:

Most of the girls who attend these classes are working girls and they find the required books a great expense. The Educational Committee recommended me to write you and ask if you could procure some of the following books for us . . .
 (Ibid. V 13 English Department Correspondence 1925-26: "Letter" Oct. 1 1925)

to ensure that a Mr. Crawford, the instructor for the previous year's class, would be available and willing to continue giving instruction:

We were anxious to get in touch with you, to see if some arrangement could be made about the class next year. Eight girls tried the exams . . . I am pleased to say we all passed in the latter subject . . . Personally, I had much more self-confidence this time, and that helps a great deal. ¹³²

Miss Chapman explained that she and her friend, Miss Higgs, wished to cover French, Latin and Geometry, and upon hearing from Mr. Crawford, would take it upon themselves to gather the women of the last year's class together and carry out the necessary arrangements. ¹³³

Another illuminating example of the Montreal YWCA's support and encouragement of waged women workers was its sponsorship of a vibrant and long-lived club movement, which was set in place in the latter part of the 1920s and dominated the social life of the organization right up to through the 1950s. This coming together of women, both YWCA members as well as non-members, was an extremely popular activity which expanded rapidly to include clubs at the Junior, Intermediate

¹³² Ibid. V 14 Educational Department Correspondence 1923-27: "Letter" August 20 1924, p.1.

¹³³ Ibid. V 14 Educational Department Reports 1925-26: "Annual Report," 1926, p. 2.

Edith Chapman was enrolled in matriculation classes in 1923 through to and including 1926. As a reflection of its commitment to not duplicating services offered elsewhere, the YWCA stopped providing Matriculation courses in 1926 after the YMCA's Sir George Williams College opened its doors to women.

and Senior levels: ¹³⁴

The purpose of all club programmes and activities is to help a girl achieve her full development . . . A girl's mental growth, her bodily development, and her consciousness of herself . . . ¹³⁵

The YWCA conceived of the clubs as one way to provide friendships and entertainment for working women, many of whom were new to Montreal. Also, club membership was derived from the nature of waged work that women were employed in, with separate clubs for store-clerks, business girls, industrial workers and so on. ¹³⁶ The clubs' formats were designed in response to the needs of working women, meeting in the evenings after work and focusing upon issues and activities that were of importance to them.

* * *

¹³⁴ The respective Girls' Work Departments provided necessary support and direction for the Junior, Intermediate and Senior clubs.

¹³⁵ NAC MG 28 I 240 V 38 Annual Report and Departmental Annual Reports 1927: "Intermediate Department Annual Report," 1927, p.1.

¹³⁶ Ibid.: "Senior Department Annual Report," 1927, p.2. Though most clubs were organized around work occupations, there were exceptions to that rule. For instance, there was a club called the "Cosmopolitan Club" (not to be confused with the later Cosmopolitan Club in the 1940s) which was formed in 1927 for foreign-born women in conjunction with the setting up of a "Foreign-born Department" in June of that year. The other exceptions were the Junior clubs which were more school-oriented in nature.

TABLE 2**YWCA CLUB MEMBERSHIP 1925-1935** ¹³⁷

YEAR	# OF CLUBS			# OF WOMEN			AGE RANGE		
	J	I	S	J	I	S	J	I	S
1925	X	X	X	total = 516			X	X	X
1926	8	8	6	205	200	215	X	X	X
1927	X	5	5	270	182	238	12-15	15-19	19+
1928	X	X	X	251	255	207	X	X	X
1929	X	X	X	204	240	240	X	X	X
1930	7	4	5	186	182	187	12-15	15-20	18-40
1931	X	6	X	X	192	263	X	X	X
1932	X	7	8	X	142	285	14-20	X	18-40
1933	X	8	7	X	201	235	X	15-20	18-40
1934	X	8	7	X	148	367	X	15-20	X
1935	X	8	8	X	176	450	X	X	X

* * *

¹³⁷ Ibid. Volumes 14, 38 and 40

"J" is for Junior Department clubs, "I" is for the Intermediate Department clubs and "S" is the clubs of the Senior Department clubs.

Judging by the large numbers of women who came together to form the various clubs, the kinds of activities and fellowship that the clubs generated was obviously of great importance to the working women of the YWCA community. This is demonstrated by the large degree of continuity in club membership with clubs graduating from one department to another, as well as the individual membership of any one young woman extending up to five years or beyond.¹³⁸ In 1926, there were eight clubs with 130 registrants in the Junior level, eight in the Intermediate with 200, and, the Senior level was made up of six clubs with 215 registrants.¹³⁹ The total number of club members in that year was 620, an addition of 104 over the previous year's total.¹⁴⁰ In 1927, with the increasing involvement of the Education Department, the clubs were restructured with the introduction of the positions of President, Secretary and Treasurer and a leader.¹⁴¹ Further structure was implemented through the creation of a

¹³⁸ Ibid.

In 1927 a Miss Winnifred Kean, the leader of the Goodwill Club, was on her seventh year. This, however, was longer than the usual two to three years.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid. V 38 Annual Report and Departmental Annual Reports 1927: "Senior Department Annual Report," 1927, p. 2.

The leader was usually in her early to mid twenties', whose role was as an observer and facilitator. The leaders' reports, particularly in the 1940s when they followed a set format, are illuminating as to the inner workings and motivations of these clubs. See, Ibid. Volumes 1 and 2.

Club Council (later known as Members' Council), composed of the leader, president and one representative from each club, which met once a month to discuss the concerns of "membership, records, committees, programmes and the arrangement of special dates and events." ¹⁴²

The YWCA club movement provided working women with a very important social network. And though club activities were almost all social or service oriented, the continuing popularity of these programmes for more than twenty years indicates that the club movement was answering a community need. One can moreover argue that the YWCA, through its facilitation of social activities, recognized the loneliness and isolation of working women who were pioneers in their choice of lifestyles and lacked role models to encourage and sustain them. The club movement, therefore, appears to have provided waged women workers with a supportive network made up of other women in similar situations.

* * *

Beyond attending to women's educational, social and recreational needs, the YWCA was also interested in longer term issues which affected waged workers. In both the 1920s and 1930s it monitored and worked for the larger issues of housing, wages and unemployment.

The Montreal YWCA repeatedly searched for the means to

¹⁴² Ibid. V 38 Annual Report and Departmental Annual Reports 1927: "Senior Department Annual Report," 1927, p. 2.

provide more temporary housing for women. In terms of providing temporary shelter, the institution was particularly concerned with women travelling alone. For instance, in 1928 the YWCA accommodated 169 permanent and 5,707 transient guests, while the Public Department and Rooms Directory found rooms for 6,347 women and inspected 258 houses. Altogether 12,323 women looking for rooms passed through the YWCA's hands in 1928.¹⁴³ There is no evidence that the YWCA was critical of this relatively new phenomenon of women travellers; rather, it simply emphasized the need to provide more rooms as a safe and cheap alternative to hotels:

Changes in economic conditions mean that women are travelling from place to place in increasing large numbers. Many of these are very nervous and like to come to the Association where they feel safe, particularly if they are from small places.¹⁴⁴

The YWCA also addressed the issue of women's wages in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1925 the YWCA supported the idea of a minimum living wage of \$14.50 a week based upon its studies into the expenses of a working woman in Montreal. The association advocated that a Provincial Wage Commission be formed "before which we [the Board of Directors] could present

¹⁴³ Ibid. V 38 Annual Report and Departmental Reports 1928: "Annual Report 1928."

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. V 38 Annual Report and Departmental Reports 1927: "Annual Report," 1927, p. 2.

our information." ¹⁴⁵ In a continuation of these efforts, the association also supported the work of the Montreal Council of Women in carrying out a thorough survey of women's wages in 1928. ¹⁴⁶ This ongoing concern with women's wages re-surfaced in the minutes of a 1935 Board of Directors meeting when the need for the creation of a Provincial minimum wage rate was re-emphasized as one means "to protect girls and young women from exploitation by unscrupulous employers." ¹⁴⁷

It is now generally accepted that a set minimum wage often become a wage trap for unorganized workers engaged in relatively unskilled employments -- a situation that women often find themselves in. In the YWCA's defense, however, its records at no time suggest that the organization perceived \$14.50 a week as a valid wage on a permanent basis. With their recent exposure to Montreal's depressed economy in the early years of the 1920s combined with their overall knowledge of the often exploitative nature of women's waged work, it is clear that they were proposing not a wage ceiling but, rather, a base level with which no woman would sink into poverty.

The YWCA likewise recognized the need for a formal

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. V 30 Board of Directors Minutes 1925-29: April 14, 1925, p. 150. There is no evidence that the YWCA was ever taken up on this offer.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. V 33 Executive Committee Minutes 1925-34: 1928.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. V 30 Board of Directors Minutes 1935-39: May 10 1935, p. 2.

employment bureau for women which would screen both employers and employees, as well as the jobs the former was offering.

¹⁴⁸ It instituted this free service in the mid-1920s, with the bureau only open for half days. In 1927 alone, it placed 1,245 women and conducted 7,162 interviews (employers and employees), an increase of 1,094 over the year before. ¹⁴⁹

This large demand for the employment service, combined with the beginnings of the Depression, made it necessary for the YWCA to open the bureau full time in 1929, a year in which it dealt with 3,768 applications from prospective employers, 3,318 from prospective employees and managed to place 1,549 applicants. ¹⁵⁰

Acting on behalf of unemployed women became the main focus of the Montreal YWCA in the 1930s and its concern about women's unemployment dominated its overall efforts on behalf of waged women workers. These changes are particularly evident in the directions that the Education Department took in this decade. The Department recognized that one of the

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¹⁴⁸ There is no record that this bureau set a standard of wages or working conditions, but by providing such a service it must nonetheless have screened out the most exploitative of situations.

¹⁴⁹ NAC MG 28 I 240 V 39 General Reports 1927: p. 2; Ibid. V 38 Annual Report and Departmental Reports 1928: "Annual Report 1928," p. 6.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. Annual Report and Departmental Reports 1929: "Statistical Report 1929," p. 1.

TABLE 3
YWCA EMPLOYMENT BUREAU STATISTICS 1926-1934 ¹⁵¹

YEAR	EMPLOYERS		APPLICANTS		PLACED	
	D	I/M	D	I/M	D	I/M
1926	Total = 2971		Total = 2299		Total = 1133	
1927	2566	697	1859	946	607	880
1928	2940	914	2205	1103	743	880
1929	Total = 3768		Total = 3318		Total = 1549	
1930	Total = 3298		Total = 4557		Total = 1668	
1931	2539	740	3799	1793	995	687
1932	X	X	3533	2619	2153	710
1933	X	X	4578	897	1639	775
1934	5236	833	3911	2169	1467	1334

* * *

¹⁵¹ Ibid. Volumes 38 and 40.

"D" is for domestic and "I/M" is for Industrial and Miscellaneous employments. The statistical breakdown indicates type of worker searched for by prospective employers, the form of work wished for by women searching for work, and, the type of positions actually located by the employment bureau. The figures that are available for 1931 through to 1934 (1933 excepting) include a breakdown for the separate business bureau. However, for the sake of clarity, these numbers are included under Industrial and Miscellaneous. The specific numbers are as follows (in the same order as the table with employers, applicants and placed):

1931: 30; 481; 22
1932: --; 1667; 197
1934: --; 1341; 387.

only sources of employment was in the domestic field [see table 3], though it likewise recognized that, while unemployed women were prepared to fill out applications for domestic employment, it was the least preferred choice of employment due to its low social status. The YWCA, moreover, acknowledged the reality that if unemployed women "do domestic work it may mean that they [would] not be received in the business world again."¹⁵²

In response to these social realities, the Education Department attempted in the early 1930s to raise the social status of household employment by instituting formal courses for household workers, including courses for Cook Generals, Housemen, Chambermaids, Waitressing and Household Helpers.¹⁵³ It also began to award diplomas, check up on its domestic placements and provide clubs to support women who were otherwise isolated. The records on the three years that the Cooks General Course was held, 1933, 1934 and 1935, are the most complete of all the courses offered ; therefore,

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¹⁵² Ibid. V 8 Educational Committee Minutes 1928-40: February 3 1932, p. 1.

For secondary sources on the stature of domestic employment see, Helen Lenskyj, "A 'Servant Problem' or a 'Servant-Mistress Problem'? Domestic Service in Canada, 1890-1930," Atlantis 7 (Fall 1981): pp. 3-11, and, Ruth Roach Pierson, " 'Home Aide': A Post-War Solution to Women's Unemployment," Atlantis 2 (Spring 1977, Part 2): pp. 85-97.

¹⁵³ The Housemen's course was to be held in 1931 but this never came about.

TABLE 4YWCA EDUCATION CLASSES 1930 - 1936¹⁵⁴

Year . . .	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936
BRIDES	6	6	--	6	--	--	--
CHAMBERMAID	--	--	XX	--	--	--	--
CLUB LEADERSHIP	XX	--	--	--	--	--	--
CAMP COUNCILLORS	XX	50	--	--	--	--	--
COOK GENERAL	--	--	--	44	37	XX	--
COOKING	84	58	XX	86	XX	XX	XX
DISCUSSIONS	--	XX	55	118	XX	XX	XX
DRAMA	8	4	--	--	XX	--	--
DRESSMAKING	26	27	XX	36	XX	XX	XX
ECONOMY	--	--	--	9	XX	--	--
ENGLISH	25	XX	--	48	--	--	--
FIRST AID	9	5	--	4	--	--	--
HANDICRAFTS	7	XX	29	--	--	--	--
HOME NURSING	6	7	14	--	--	--	--
HOUSEHOLD HELPERS	7	12	10	--	XX	XX	XX
INTER-Y DISCUSSIONS	--	45	XX	50	--	--	--
INTERIOR DECOR.	5	10	XX	70	--	--	--
MILLINERY	--	--	--	XX	XX	--	--
NEEDLEWORK	10	5	15	42	XX	--	--
OFFICE COURTESY	--	--	--	83	XX	--	--
ORCHESTRA	XX	20	--	18	--	18	10
PUBLIC SPEAKING	--	21	10	8	--	5	--
SEX EDUCATION	--	20	XX	13	--	--	--
SING-SONGS	--	--	65	50	--	--	--
TRAINED ATTENDANTS	47	32	XX	46	XX	XX	XX
TRAVEL TALKS	--	--	55	--	--	--	--
VOCATIONAL GUIDANCE	--	--	--	25	--	--	--
WAITRESS TRAINING	28	17	22	21	XX	XX	XX
WOODWORK	--	9	--	--	--	--	--
YEAR TOTALS	346	379	793	824	--	--	--

* * *

¹⁵⁴ NAC MG 28 I 240 Volumes 13, 14, 15, 16, 38 and 39.

These are the years for which information, some more complete than others, is available for the 1930s. Individual figures rarely add up to the year total as they were generally incomplete. Year totals are not available following 1934.

this course will be looked at most closely:

It is felt that by offering a course of this kind that not only will employment be provided for girls who would otherwise have no work, but that by careful selection of girls the standard of domestic service will be raised and more satisfactory relationships be brought about between mistress and maid. ¹⁵⁵

The Cooks General Course consisted of a month long intensive training in cookery, table service, household care, cleaning, laundering, and work methods. In 1933, forty-three women applied for admission to the course with their ages ranging from fifteen to thirty-eight. The majority were single and almost all explained that they wished to take the course "to earn a living." ¹⁵⁶ Of this number, sixteen indicated that their predominant work experience was household oriented, seven as business occupations, six as industrial, one hotel, two restaurant, one hospital and two as sales clerks. Six of them were fresh out of high school or business college and had no formal work experience, while five others did not indicate clearly what their previous occupations, if any, had been. ¹⁵⁷

It is, however, somewhat inaccurate to use the applicants' past work experiences to typify the work category to which they belonged. Rather, the toll of the depression

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. V 13 Cook General Course Outline 1933-34: p. 1.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. V 13 Cook General Applications 1933.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

was such that many of the applicants had been engaged in types of work strikingly different from what their education background had clearly prepared them. An illuminating example is the situation of one 18 year-old woman whose formal education included one year of high school and some time at a business college.¹⁵⁸ This young woman listed her previous work experience in an obvious depression-linked order: three months as a stenographer, then six weeks as a waitress, six months as a nursemaid, and, finally, six months as a housemaid before becoming completely unemployed. Her predominant work experience was, therefore, household oriented. Yet, it is clear from her education and earliest work experience, that her ambition was to be employed in the business field. [See Table #5 for statistics on applicants to this course.]

This pattern of downward mobility was typical of many of the other applicants for the Cook General Course, particularly business or industrially employed women as they experienced unemployment and, more likely than not, poverty for the first time in their lives. The information that Phyllis Charbot provided on her application form illustrates the reality of women's downward mobility during the depression.¹⁵⁹ She was twenty-four years old and listed "livelihood" as her motivation for engaging in the YWCA course. Charbot, whose educational background included two years of high school and

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.: Applicant # 17.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.: Applicant # 12.

a diploma from a Business College, further explained that she had spent the last year in housework, with the previous five and half years in secretarial work. Her letters of reference from previous employers indicate her business competence and illuminate the economic realities for white collar businesses and employees in the 1930s:

Miss Charbot is a rapid and very accurate stenographer and typist and is a very capable office assistant, being thoroughly conversant with filing, switchboard operating, and general office routine . . . We regret that it is not possible to offer her permanent employment. . .

The Writer found Miss Charbot a loyal and industrious employee, and it was with regret that owing to business conditions we were forced to dispense with [her] services. . ¹⁶⁰

In 1934 the number of applicants for the Cook General Course had increased to forty-seven, but it fell to eighteen in 1935. There is not a clear record of how many of these applicants actually took the course, or how many went on to pursue this line of work. There were, however, four classes held in 1933 with a total of forty-four graduates who were all placed into positions with the exception of one woman. ¹⁶¹ In 1934, thirty-seven women are registered as

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¹⁶⁰ Ibid.: "Reference Letters."

¹⁶¹ NAC MG 28 I 240 V 14 Educational Department Reports 1933-34: "Annual Report 1933," p. 2.

TABLE 5
APPLICANTS FOR YWCA COOK GENERAL COURSES ¹⁶²

YEAR		1933	1934	1935
		%	%	%
	15-19	58	64.4	44.4
A	20-24	25.7	24.4	16.7
G	25-29	7	6.7	22.2
E	30-34	4.7	2.2	11.1
	35+	4.7	2.2	5.6
SINGLE		90.5	95.6	83.3
MARRIED		2.4	4.3	16.7
WIDOW		7.1	---	---
E	ELEMENTARY	51.3	43.5	58.9
D	HIGH SCHOOL: 1 YEAR	23.1	17.4	5.9
U	HIGH SCHOOL: 2 YEARS	12.8	23.9	5.9
C	HIGH SCHOOL: 3 YEARS	---	2.2	5.9
A	HIGH SCHOOL: 4 YEARS +	---	2.2	11.1
T				
I				
O	FURTHER EDUCATION ¹⁶³	12.8	10.9	17.6
N				

* * *

having taken the course, while seventy-nine graduates joined the YWCA's Cook General Club which was organized that year:

Salaries range from \$15.00 to \$35.00 a month and most girls seem happy in this work. Two out of twenty were out of

¹⁶² Ibid. V 13 Cook General Applications: 1933, 1934 and 1935.

¹⁶³ Figures come from people pursuing further education (most often business and commercial courses), beyond elementary school other than that of high school. It should be noted that some women pursued both forms of further education beyond their elementary schooling; however, those situations have been counted as simply high school.

positions. This club is formed for good fellowship and to keep in touch with the group.¹⁶⁴

Hindsight again enables one to argue that the YWCA's advocacy of domestic employment helped to trap women in a very traditional, and often exploitative, field of employment. The high levels of unemployment, however, combined with the low levels of relief and little overall government concern for women in the 1930s, perhaps prevented the YWCA from seeing the long-range effects of their short-term goals. Or, perhaps, the Montreal YWCA, being a community-based organization sensitive to local needs, simply felt that the most important thing was for unemployed women to have some manner of employment:

One of the sad things about the Bureau is to see the numbers of girls who have used up all their savings in helping dependent relative and who carry as heavy a responsibility as any married man but do not get the same consideration. . . . A lot of character is being built these days and some, I am afraid, in discouragement and despair, lost.¹⁶⁵

Moreover, its provision of relief services indicates that the YWCA was genuinely concerned with the plight of unemployed women but, to a large extent, it simply lacked the resources to promote anything other than household work as a solution.

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¹⁶⁴ Ibid. V 41 Monthly Reports 1934 Part 1: "Home Economics Department Annual Report 1934" and "Education Department Report" January 1934.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. V 38 Annual Report 1931: p. 8.

With the development of government-operated employment bureaus and Municipal relief services in the mid-1930s, the Montreal YWCA was relieved of some of its burdens.¹⁶⁶ Yet, the fact that the special needs of women continued to be a low priority for all levels of government meant that the YWCA's role as a voice for women did not diminish. Nonetheless, the final years of the 1930s were quiet ones for the Montreal association, with the co-sponsorship of a 1938 survey of housing in Montreal for women one of its only large undertakings. One should not assume, however, that the YWCA willingly chose such a low profile in the late 1930s. Rather, much like other service-oriented organizations (and the municipal government), the continuing tight financial times and large debts incurred over the previous years effectively muffled the YWCA's voice. This remained the situation until the association's rejuvenation with the early years of the 1940s and the economic prosperity brought about by World War II.

* * *

The Montreal YWCA of the 1920s and 1930s was an institution largely dedicated to responding to the needs of women, particularly those social, recreational and long-term economic needs of unmarried waged women workers primarily in

¹⁶⁶ See, Terry Copp, "Montreal's Municipal Government and the Crisis of the 1930s," in, ed., Michiel Horn, The Depression in Canada: Responses to Economic Crisis (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1988): pp. 145-161.

the age group of 18 to 30. Though the YWCA never explicitly stated that the support it offered to women engaged in the paid labour force was to help women gain economic independence, nonetheless, its programmes and proposals about women had that effect. And though some of what the YWCA advocated and worked for either proved detrimental in the long run to women, or simply was unsuccessful, that does not take away from the fact that the organization was working for the positive advancement of women.

CHAPTER THREE

THE MONTREAL YWCA IN THE 1940S AND 1950S

1939 found the Montreal YWCA tired and gasping from ten years of searching for solutions to the massive unemployment of women and from coping with the depression's attendant problems. The sudden shift from being surrounded by the desperate voices of unemployed women to needing to respond to national demands of support for World War II, found the YWCA largely unprepared and ill-equipped to provide a rapid response. Though the official employment bureaus and distribution of relief had been taken out of its hands in the mid-1930s, the association had continued to offer a range of free services to needy women.¹⁶⁷ However, because these services were supposedly being offered elsewhere, the YWCA was unable to obtain proper financial reimbursement for the aid it provided. At the end of the 1930s, therefore, the association was tottering on the edge of financial ruin. One example of

¹⁶⁷ See, Terry Copp, "Montreal's Municipal Government and the Crisis of the 1930s," in, ed., Michiel Horn, The Depression in Canada: Responses to Economic Crisis (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1988): pp. 145-161. Copp explains that relief was based on strict residency requirements which affected transient women, a large constituency of the YWCA's efforts and this fact, combined with the striking off of the municipal relief rolls of female heads of families in 1936, placed a great strain on the YWCA. See also, Clio Collective, Quebec Women: A History (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1987): pp. 202-03. The collective explains that Quebec did not begin taking over charity work until 1937 when it passed a law providing assistance for needy mothers, making it one of the last provinces to do so. The law itself was very restrictive in nature, however, and left many women without help. In addition, actual aid did not begin to flow until 1938.

these financial difficulties was the loss of the YWCA's Rosemount property in 1939, estimated value of \$19,000, to the city in lieu of \$5000 in taxes. ¹⁶⁸ This financial instability prevented the development of much war-related efforts on the part of the YWCA until 1941 or 1942.

The 1940s and 1950s were decades of immense change for Canadian women and these changes were reflected on a micro level in the Montreal YWCA. Though the YWCA continued to focus on women and their varied needs, in particular concerning the role of waged work in their lives, changing demographics and larger social forces limited the YWCA's ability to be truly a vehicle for change. One of these larger social forces was that, in addition to the financial constraints in which it operated in the 1920s and 1930s, there was a tremendous amount of social pressure in the 1940s and 1950s, especially after World War II, upon women to maintain traditional roles. And this social pressure forced the YWCA's support for women's advancement to become much more covert or private than it had been in the earlier decades.

Besides these external pressures upon the Montreal YWCA, the association was also experiencing a process of internal change. The YWCA records in the 1920s and 1930s, and even into the 1940s, demonstrate that a remarkable degree of consensus decision-making was employed by the various YWCA

¹⁶⁸ NAC MG 28 I 240 V 35 Executive Committee Minutes 1935-39: 1939.

committees to delineate YWCA policy and direction.¹⁶⁹ However, the professionalization of all such institutions in the 1940s and 1950s helped to fracture the cohesion that had formerly existed between its members and the YWCA leadership.¹⁷⁰ The cohesion gradually dissipated with the records demonstrating that women volunteers had less and less of a say in the running of the Montreal YWCA as the daily operations of the association and the creation of long-term goals were increasingly taken over by full-time YWCA employees and staff. And this internal fracturing arguably further prevented the YWCA from acting as a single unit to resist the external pressures placed upon it.

The YWCA of the 1940s and 1950s was, therefore, strikingly different from that of the 1920s and 1930s. Its place in the community had shifted, yet, one should be careful not to interpret these changes as meaning that the YWCA's

¹⁶⁹ Even as late as 1943, minutes indicate that the Board was really much more strictly concerned with administration and was not the primary initiator for ideas and/or directions of the YWCA. Moreover, Staff Committee Minutes in the early to late 1940s bear testament to their relative powerlessness to make decisions or initiate programmes in relation to the power of the departmental committees. Ibid. V 12 Staff Committee Minutes 1939 - 1949.

¹⁷⁰ See, James Struthers, "A Profession in Crisis: Charlotte Whitton and Canadian Social Work in the 1930s," in Michiel Horn, ed., The Depression in Canada: Response to Economic Crisis (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1988), 229-244, and, Barbara Riley, "Six Saucepans to One: Domestic Science Versus the Home in British Columbia, 1900-1950," in Barbara Latham and Roberta Pazdro, eds., Not Just Pin Money: Selected Essays on the History of Women's Work in British Columbia (Victoria: Camouson College, 1984): pp. 159-181.

support for women's advancement was not as strong as in the 1920s and 1930s. On the contrary, the organization's records in these two decades demonstrate a renewed commitment to women which included an even greater flexibility in accepting and adjusting to the changes that Canadian women were experiencing. Moreover, a large part of that commitment entailed finding new and creative ways to promote women's advancement within the constraints imposed by the larger Canadian society which appeared to only be able to accept a very traditional position for Canadian women.

* * *

Beyond the important ramifications of World War II, including the incorporation of married women into the work force, the larger Canadian society was experiencing a downward trend in the age at which women and men married and this meant that the traditional constituency of the YWCA, primarily 18 to 25 years of age and unmarried, was shrinking. [See Table 6]. The YWCA therefore began to expand its programmes to include both married women, younger women as well as acknowledging and adapting to the role that men had in women's lives before marriage.

One example of this last change is the YWCA's offering of a "sex education project," obliquely described as "necessary in view of the war and the situations which always arise under

* * *

TABLE 6
AVERAGE AGE OF WOMEN AT MARRIAGE ¹⁷¹

	WOMEN	MEN
1921	25.5	29.9
1931	24.9	29.2
1941	24.4	27.6
1951	23.8	26.6
1961	22.9	25.8

* * *

war conditions." ¹⁷² This project was based on questions, under the general heading of "Men and Women in Wartime," that had been raised at the Eastern Ontario and Quebec regional YWCA conference in May 1941. ¹⁷³ It was followed up by a

¹⁷¹ 1921 and 1931 figures from Series B75-81 "Number of Marriages and Rate, Average Age at Marriage for Brides and Bridegrooms, Number of Divorces and Rate, Net Family Formation, Canada, 1921 to 1974," in Historical Statistics of Canada 2nd Edition (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1983). 1941 to 1961 figures are from Table 2.2 "Age at Marriage of Persons Never Previously Married, Brides and Grooms, Canada 1941-73," in Gail C.A. Cook, ed., Opportunity For Choice: A Goal For Women in Canada (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1976): p. 18.

It should be noted that the 1921 and 1931 figures are somewhat different than the later figures as it was only in 1941 that Statistics Canada began to differentiate between the average marriage age of "Never-Married Persons" and the overall average age at marriage.

¹⁷² NAC MG 28 I 240 V 8 Education Committee Minutes 1928-40: November 27 1940, p. 1.

¹⁷³ Ibid. V 27 Regional Conferences 1939-44; 1946-48: Montreal, May 3-4 1941, p. 1.

The other two main topics were "Education and Christian Citizenship" and "Working Conditions -- Overtime -- Recreation."

course on relationships between men and women in 1943.¹⁷⁴ These courses and other similar actions demonstrate the YWCA's increasing acceptance of the role men played in women's lives, particularly in the period before women were married. These kinds of programmes were quite a departure for the YWCA and the discussion surrounding them indicates how unique they were for the time period in which they occurred. For instance, the Education Committee decided to focus on health issues in its 1943 course on relationships, a focus desired by their members, but "that the discussion would not be publicized in this form."¹⁷⁵ This decision about how to advertise the course indicates the possible public opposition to such discussions as well as the somewhat staid public position which the YWCA obviously felt it needed to maintain. Yet, the fact that the YWCA was offering such a course at all hints at the association's private side which supported progressive

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. V 8 Education Committee Minutes 1941-51: January 6 1943, p. 1.

The topics covered were: "A Sound Mind in a Healthy Body," "the Physical Aspects of Sex," "Friendships with Men," "Friendships with Women," "What Marriage Involves with Special Reference to Marriages in Wartime," and, "Religious Living as a Reality."

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.: pp. 1-2.

The YWCA also maintained an interest, but a low profile, in regards to venereal disease, a problem exacerbated by the war. In 1941 it was decided that the disease should be one area of study for the YWCA, particularly "what was being done in this province and in others and how the Y.W.C.A. might co-operate." Ibid.: January 16 1941, p. 2.

Later in that same year the YWCA began to also place an emphasis on health in clubs and programmes, including fostering the discussions of "socialized medicine, venereal disease and sex education." Ibid.: November 19 1941, p. 2.

actions and ideals.

In a further acknowledgement of the larger shifts in marriage and work force participation by women and the subsequent impact on YWCA membership, the institution also began to introduce services designed primarily for married and older women.¹⁷⁶ There are a number of clues to these changes. For instance, the Education Department began to offer a Nutrition Project which stressed "marketing and budgeting" with the Program Planning Committee visualizing the participants in this project as "young employed [as well as] young married women."¹⁷⁷ In 1941 a full Home Making programme was also initiated. Unlike the Household Helpers courses of the 1930s which had been developed as a means for women to locate employment, the 1940s Home making course was designed to appeal to a broad cross-section of married and unmarried women, regardless of their involvement in the paid labour force. Moreover, its topics demonstrate the variety of needs experienced by women at different times in their lives, with such offerings as "Sewing for Mothers-to-be" and "Working Girls Must Eat," as well as "Wartime Cookery and Budget

¹⁷⁶ This change does not exclusively belong to these decades as the earlier club movement had included women aged 14 to 40.

¹⁷⁷ NAC MG 28 I 240 V 8 Education Committee Minutes 1928-40: "Programme Planning Committee Meeting," June 26 1940, p.1.

Meals." ¹⁷⁸ In 1944 the Home Making course was further adjusted to include discussions on the legal aspects of marriage, budgeting, parenthood, and the anticipated personal adjustments that women would have to make in the post war period. ¹⁷⁹ In that same year, following an Education Department decision that general cooking classes should be cut as they were duplicating similar services offered elsewhere in the city, the principle of "teaching of courses which will be of practical aid to homemakers . . . [based on] the increasing need of economy" was announced. ¹⁸⁰

The other emphases in the YWCA's educational offerings in the 1940s and the 1950s can be seen in Table 7. Though the record has a number of gaps in it, the trend towards offering arts and crafts type classes, combined with an increasing focus upon physical education programmes, is clearly evident

¹⁷⁸ The other topics were "Elementary and Advanced Dressmaking," "Learn to Cook" and "Christmas Cookery." Ibid. V 8 Education Committee Minutes 1941-51: "Home Making: Home Economics 1941," p.2.

One note under dressmaking indicates the new inclusion of home makers:

"For those unable to attend evening classes, similar instruction will be offered in a morning class when special attention may be given to the making of children's clothing and the remodelling of adult garments to fit children." Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.: "Education Committee Meeting," Feb 16 1944, p.1.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. "Education Committee Meeting," May 20 1942, p.1. Another idea for a new course was a "Fix-it" class for an "aid in making small repairs about the house. . .[and which] would be interesting both to housewives and girl members." Ibid.: "Education Committee Meeting," April 12 1944, p.1.

* * *

TABLE 7YWCA EDUCATION CLASSES 1941 - 1957 ¹⁸¹

YEAR...	1941	1942	1950	1951	1953	1954	1956	1957
BRIDGE	--	--	XX	XX	58	95	102	89
CHARM SCHOOL	--	--	--	--	89	60	--	--
COOKING	52	XX	XX	XX	95	136	177	60
DRAMA	--	--	--	--	15	28	36	40
DRESSMAKING	--	--	XX	XX	93	148	182	101
ENGLISH	XX	12	XX	XX	85	153	170	101
FRENCH	--	25	XX	--	65	147	161	87
HANDICRAFTS	75	XX	XX	XX	15	64	61	48
INT. DECOR.	--	--	XX	XX	25	26	63	39
LADIES' DAY	--	--	--	--	10	25	XX	XX
MILLINERY	--	--	--	XX	42	95	103	36
MUSIC	--	--	--	XX	16	13	--	--
NEEDLEWORK	107	XX	111	--	9	4	--	--
ORATORY	--	17	XX	XX	29	46	37	15
PAINTING	--	--	XX	--	66	125	147	70
POTTERY	--	--	--	XX	63	145	250	123
SEX ED.	XX	--	XX	XX	--	--	--	--
T.A.	60	41	--	--	--	--	--	--
WEAVING	--	--	XX	XX	14	46	--	--
YEAR TOTALS	--	--	293	824	746	1361	1954	--

* * *

from the available records. By 1943 the Health Education Department had replaced the Education Department as the largest department in the YWCA and its programmes over the years included a wide range of dance, fitness and swimming

¹⁸¹ Ibid. Volumes 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 38 and 40.

These particular years were chosen according to the availability of data and to demonstrate trends, rather than provide all the details. The 1953 figures (barring the total) are for fall term only and the 1957 figures are for just the spring term; yet, as most of the individual figures are not absolutely accurate, the year total rarely agrees with the numbers registered each individual course. Finally, by the 1950s, "Handicrafts" included things like metal craft and silver jewellery.

classes, as well as the organized sports of badminton, basketball and so on. The Education Department continued to shrink in relative importance throughout the 1950s, focusing increasingly upon the needs of women working at home, while the Health Department took over its former role of responding more specifically to the needs of waged women workers.

The YWCA's shifting focus towards age groups both older and younger than women aged 18 to 25 and particularly towards married women working at home, as well as the shrinking in importance of the Education Department, does not mean that the Montreal YWCA lost the interest in waged women workers that it had shown in the 1920s and 1930s. It recognized that women's involvement in the work force was increasing, with a second stage experienced by married women once their children had reached school age, and, therefore, it continued to devote much of its energies and activities to women engaged in paid employment.¹⁸² Yet, in order to appreciate this support, one must divide the 1940s and 1950s into two phases. The first phase was during World War II and in the immediate after years when the association's advocacy of women's advancement was very public, while the second phase became prominent after the end of World War II and consisted, as outlined above, of a more private or covert support of women's advancement.

¹⁸² The percentage of married women in the female labour force rose from 30% in 1951 to 49.8% in 1961. See my own work on this topic, "The Feminist Mystique in Canada: The Image of Women in Popular Magazines, 1950-1960," in Groundworks: The Women's Studies Textbook (Winnipeg: 1991).

The years of World War II were ones of intense public activity on the part of the organization concerning women and larger employment questions. The association delineated some longer-term goals for women's employment and attempted to influence political decisions made about women and waged work:

A new emphasis in the work of the Y.W.C.A. seems to be shaping, that of a definite plan for a program with industrial workers, and that emphasis will be used not only in war-time but in post-war rehabilitation.¹⁸³

One effort was the formation of a YWCA committee in 1944 with the sole purpose of studying the employment of women, a decision made in order "to arouse public opinion on the subject of Employment in the Transitional and Post-war periods, especially that of women."¹⁸⁴ In June of 1944 and in January of 1945, the YWCA also co-sponsored employment conferences in Montreal, both of which addressed a whole range

¹⁸³ NAC MG 28 I 240 V 31 Board of Directors Minutes 1940-49 Part 1: October 27 1942, p. 1267.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid. V 8 Education Committee Minutes 1941-51: February 16 1944, p. 2.

The study was to be carried out in co-operation with the Local Council of Women, the League of Women's Rights and the Business and Professional Women's Club. It is interesting to note that the YWCA had first spoken to a Mrs. Johnson of the International Labour Office for advice. At the 1944 Quebec and eastern Ontario YWCA regional conference, held in Montreal, various figures were published about women working:

Normal Employment in industry in Canada	750,000
Number of Women employed in industry	270,000
Number of Women who will continue working	180,000
Number of Women in Services	20,000

Total Number of Women to be Employed in Peace Time..200,000
Ibid. V 27 Regional Conferences, 1939-44; 1946-48: "Regional Conference, Montreal," 1944, p. 1.

of issues concerning women and employment. [see Appendix 1 and 2.]

With the cessation of World War II, the association increased its pressure on behalf of working women, petitioning the Federal and Provincial governments on a whole range of issues that touched on women's lives. In June of 1945 the Montreal YWCA lobbied both levels of government for the establishment of a Government Housing Registry to control rents and in 1947 it formally objected to the new income tax regulations which it believed to be "prejudicial to married women workers."¹⁸⁵ In addition, the Montreal YWCA repeatedly asked for government involvement and overall government direction vis-a-vis women and post-war employment. Yet, even while the organization's pleas remained unanswered, it did not admit defeat and continued to work out its "main areas of attack:"

Employment of women is only achieved when there is adequate employment of everyone. Therefore, full employment is a cardinal

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. V 31 Board of Directors Minutes 1940-49 Part 2: June 26 1945, p. 1416.

These changes included the cancellation of income tax concessions for men whose wives worked. Ibid. V 33 Executive Committee Minutes 1946-48: February 17 1947, p. 3.

Such direct political action on the part of the Montreal YWCA was not new. In 1941, they had sent resolutions to the Quebec legislature advocating compulsory education (October 28) and raising the rate of allowance for needy mothers (December 5) Ibid. V 33 Executive Committee Minutes 1940-41.

And in 1943 they tried to persuade the Federal Government to recognize the YWCA's "Travellers' Aid and Immigration Department as the logical agency to handle immigrants at ports of entry and across Canada." Ibid. Board of Directors Minutes 1940-49 Part 2: September 28 1943, p. 1324.

point. . . . Support of possible forthcoming Dominion-Provincial schemes of training or urging that these be established would be part of our responsibility.¹⁸⁶

The focus of these "attacks" included the promotion of unionization and of female membership in unions, as well as networking with other women's action groups, and supporting any "national action [on employment], or elbow-jogging when necessary."¹⁸⁷

These activities of the Montreal association were clearly designed to have the issue of employment, particularly women's, become part of public discussion. Not only was the misery of women in the 1930s still fresh in their minds, but the YWCA of also strongly believed that waged employment was a healthy aspect of women's lives. This is not to argue that in the 1940s and 1950s the YWCA specifically promoted the idea that women had the right to work for pay; however, the opinion had been advanced from the 1920s onwards that the YWCA perceived economic independence as the key to equality and security. Moreover, it is clear from the YWCA's public advocacy of government planning for employment at war's end that they were aware that the governments' lack of action would effectively make peace time employment, particularly

¹⁸⁶ Ibid. V 33 Executive Committee Minutes 1946-48: February 17 1947, pp. 1-2.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.: p. 2.

women's employment, a non-issue.¹⁸⁸ From their efforts it is obvious that the women of the YWCA were able to see far enough ahead to grasp that, without public discussion and positive government action, waged women workers stood to lose the gains they had made during World War II.

As outlined above, the social forces that existed after World War II and into the 1950s worked directly against these public stands concerning the position of women in Canadian society, that the YWCA took in the early and mid 1940s, and which drew on precedents set in the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁸⁹ There was a tremendous amount of social pressure at the end of World War II for things to return to pre-war conditions and this pressure particularly affected waged women workers, who one could argue had experienced the greatest changes of all waged workers in the war years.¹⁹⁰ And so it appears that these dominant conservative forces were directly connected with the fact that such a level of public agitation and pressure on the part of the Montreal YWCA did not continue

¹⁸⁸ This is not to argue that the YWCA saw this as a deliberate action on the part of the two level of Canadian governments. That was for historians to later perceive. See, Ruth Roach Pierson, "They're Still Women After All" op. cit., and Susan M. Bland, "'Henrietta the Homemaker,' and 'Rosie the Riveter:' Images of Women in Advertising in Maclean's Magazines, 1939-50," Atlantis, 8/2 (Spring 1983): pp. 61-86.

¹⁸⁹ See my own work on public roles or reality versus image, "The Feminine Mystique in Canada" (op. cit.).

¹⁹⁰ This is not to say that women working at home did not also experience massive changes. They were also certainly greatly affected by social pressures of the late 1940s and 1950s.

much beyond 1948 and only re-emerged in the 1960s.¹⁹¹ The record unequivocally demonstrates, however, that support of waged women workers continued as a major tenet of the Montreal YWCA's efforts throughout the 1940s and 1950s and included a wide range of programmes and activities directed towards waged women workers.¹⁹²

Early in the 1940s the Education Department recognized that waged employment was now a full time activity for the majority of unmarried women, as well as increasingly for married women, and it therefore decided to act more closely with the Health Education Department in order to provide activities and programmes that would relieve women of work-related stress.¹⁹³ In 1941, these efforts included the joint offerings of tennis, badminton, basketball, swimming, modern dancing, beginners gymnastics, as well as courses in cooking, dressmaking and different kinds of crafts:

. . . the Health Education Department has provided exercise, sports and gala events that give relaxation from nervous

¹⁹¹ This renewed agitation started with a seminar in May 1961 entitled "Women at Work." NAC MG 28 I 240 V 44 "Women at Work 1961."

¹⁹² There were a number of situations when the YWCA polled working women directly to find out exactly what they wanted. See for instance, NAC MG 28 I 240 V 9 Members Council Committee Minutes: "Industrial Project of an Open Night for Girls Working in Industry," January 5 1942.

See also, Ibid. V 33 Executive Committee Minutes 1946-48: "YWCA Questionnaire," January 17 1947.

¹⁹³ Both physical and mental stress caused by long work shifts which were often carried out in cramped quarters and stationary positions.

tensions, as well as health. Crafts have given young women opportunities for refreshment through the use of imagination and growing skill.¹⁹⁴

Another example of the YWCA's commitment to meeting the needs of women engaged in paid employment was the ongoing importance of its club movement. The club movement which had developed in the 1920s and 1930s, flourished in the 1940s, and peaked in popularity in the beginning of the 1950s. One reason that the YWCA fostered club development was because clubs were a means by which a young woman, particularly young working women, could be introduced to the YWCA. A letter from the Fort William (Ontario) YWCA to the Montreal YWCA concerning one of their members who had recently moved to Montreal demonstrates this fact:

One of our business girls from the club department has been transferred to one of the Montreal banks. I told her I would contact the 'Y' there and ask the club secretary to get in touch with her . . . Hoping you will invite her to one of the clubs.¹⁹⁵

Yet, even though the clubs did serve a larger purpose for the YWCA, the clubs' popularity makes their study particularly interesting because of what that popularity says about young working women in these decades and their need for a strong, supportive and long-term social network. As indicated by

¹⁹⁴ NAC MG 28 I 240 V 39 Annual Reports/Pamphlets 1937-52: "Annual Report 1941," p. 8.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. V 1 Agoca Club 1945-50: "Letter from Fort William YWCA," Feb 19 1946.

Table 8, YWCA clubs came into existence and then vanished from year to year; however, members of one defunct club often reformed into another so there was more continuity than initially appears.¹⁹⁶

The primary role of the clubs for women was that they acted as social networks, in a manner like that which unions, legions and other gatherings played in men's lives.¹⁹⁷ Moreover, in the rapidly changing world of the 1940s and 1950s, clubs gave young women a forum in which to ask questions and discuss ideas that were important in them:

. . . I asked them if they would like to start off with a discussion on relationships [between] girls and boys. They liked this idea and were really quite keen . . .¹⁹⁸

* * *

¹⁹⁶ One example is the Merry Makers Club, some of whose members went on to become the Tuesday Club and then later as the Cosmopolitan club. Unlike the earlier clubs of the YWCA, however, the clubs' membership in the 1940s and 1950s was not necessarily derived from the type of employment women were engaged in.

¹⁹⁷ For a discussion about women's social networks and their class consciousness in an earlier period see, Wayne Roberts, Honest Womanhood: Feminism, Femininity and Class Consciousness Among Toronto Working Women, 1893-1914 (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1976), and, Leslie Woodcok Tentler, Wage-Earning Women: Industrial Work and Family Life in the United States, 1900-1930 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979). It is interesting to note that women's centers and women's collectives began to develop in the 1960s, a decade which followed the demise of such clubs as the YWCAs.

¹⁹⁸ IBID V 1 Agoca Club 1945-50: "Agoca Club Leaders' Weekly Group Record," January 21 1946.

TABLE 8

YWCA CLUBS 1941 - 1954¹⁹⁹

Year . .	1942	1943	1946	1948	1949	1950	1951	1954
AGOCA	--	--	17	XX	XX	XX	--	--
CAREER GIRLS	--	--	5	XX	XX	XX	--	--
CO-ED	XX	1200	XX	XX	XX	XX	XX	XX
COSMOPOLITAN	--	--	--	XX	--	--	--	--
DUAL CIRCLE	--	--	--	--	XX	XX	XX	--
EXCELSIORS	XX	XX	--	--	--	--	--	--
MEET-A-PAL	--	--	--	--	--	20	XX	XX
MERRY MAKERS	18	XX	--	--	--	--	--	--
ONAWAYS	XX	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
PGU	XX	--	27	--	--	--	--	--
STAR GAZERS	--	--	--	--	--	15	XX	--
TANGENTS	XX	XX	--	--	--	--	--	--
T.M.T.M	XX	XX	--	--	--	13	XX	--
TROOPERS	--	--	10	XX	XX	XX	XX	--
TUESDAY	--	--	XX	--	--	--	--	--
20th CENTURY	--	--	--	--	--	XX	XX	--
U.T.T.M	XX	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
VAGABONDS	19	28	--	--	--	--	--	--
WO HE LO	XX	69	15	--	--	XX	XX	--
Y DEBS	XX	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Y TEENS	--	--	--	--	--	--	XX	XX
YOUNG MODERNS	XX	XX	--	--	--	XX	XX	--
YEAR TOTALS	600	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

* * *

The co-ed club, the most popular club, was specifically designed as a 'mixer' club for men and women, and its social gatherings provided women with the opportunity to meet men in a safe, community environment. One, however, should be careful not to judge women's clubs as simply potential marriage markets. Though the Co-Ed Club was undeniably very

¹⁹⁹ NAC MG 28 I 240 Volumes 1, 2, 13, 14, 38, 39 and 40.

These particular years were chosen because the greatest amount of data exists for them. The Meet-A-Pal club was for ex-Tuberculosis patients, male and female, aged 18 and over.

popular, individual women only attended its functions twice a month and belonged to a women's club and participated in its activities for the rest of the month. The majority of the YWCA clubs, therefore, acted as important female networks -- a predecessor perhaps of the more elaborate and extensive networks that developed amongst women in the 1960s and 1970s.

Another interesting insight that an examination of the YWCA clubs highlights is that, though questions about marriage were obviously important to women in the 1940s and 1950s as demonstrated by the discussions that took place, the standard image of 1940s and 1950s women being completely preoccupied with this concern is not borne out by the evidence. For example, the introduction of "Interest Nights" (a once a week general meeting of all clubs) and the possible topics put forward for them are illustrative of the wide range of interests of young working women in the 1950s. Given ten choices for group discussions, with club members indicating their top three choices, only five of the thirty-five polled put the discussion of Marriage (discussion of inter-marriage, in-laws, family etc.) as their first choice. This is compared to nine who chose Touring (visiting interesting places in Montreal), with Handicrafts, Public Speaking and Music Appreciation tying for third place with four votes apiece.

200

²⁰⁰ Ibid. V 8 Art Workshop and Education Classes Committee Minutes 1950-61: "Interest Group Survey," Fall 1951. There were three votes each for Interior Decorating,

* * *

The club movement, health discussions, health education programmes are all indicators of the Montreal YWCA's continued support of women's advancement, particularly in regards to waged labour. The fact that it managed to maintain such support in the face of much societal opposition indicates a level of creativity and persistence that has not been appreciated. One can further extend this and assert that this support for a form of independence and equality for women in the 1940s and 1950s is even more significant when one considers the association's overall isolation, in Montreal, in the larger Canadian society and, perhaps more significantly, from the greater YWCA movement.

Of the latter case, the isolation of the Montreal YWCA is very evident when one compares its position on women and waged labour to the public position of the larger YWCA movement, nationally and internationally, which appears to have acted as a conservative rein on the Montreal association. In 1943, for example, after attending the World's YWCA conference which had taken place in Washington, D.C. a Miss McRae reported back to the Education Committee about the

Hostessing and Psychology. The other choices were Dramatics and Children's Social Services which nobody picked as their first choice. Handicrafts led by eight votes in the second choice, with Interior Decorating receiving six votes and five to Dramatics (one person did not indicate second choice). Marriage and Children's Social Services tied with seven votes as a third choice, followed by Public Speaking and Hostessing with five votes each (two people did not indicate third choice).

conference. Its theme had been "The Place of Women in War-Time" and one of the formative decisions taken at this conference was that the individual YWCAs should place "more emphasis . . . on homemaking, budgeting and preparation for motherhood" and that associations "should bring the challenge to our girl members of what home values should be preserved for life."²⁰¹ Though women's waged work was discussed, it is evident that the focus was upon women in the home:

Miss McRae gave a telling resume of the conference meetings . . . four needs were recognized for the normal woman -- adventure, recognition, social security, personal response in affection and companionship; and the proper interplay and balance of all four can be found only in spiritual life. The disintegration of the old home life is not due entirely to the war. The Y.W.C.A. should train its girls in Mother craft, budgeting, child training and realization of true home ideals.²⁰²

This decision on the part of the world YWCA appears to suggest that, if "disintegration of the home life" was not all due to the war, women learning about "home values" would end this "disintegration." That the world YWCA should argue that this direct connection existed, illuminates the pervasiveness of the belief in the 1940s and 1950s that waged women workers were responsible for the supposed breakdown of the home and

²⁰¹ Ibid. V 8 Education Committee Minutes 1941-51: December 8 1943, p. 2.

²⁰² Ibid. V 31 Board of Directors Minutes Part 2: December 14 1943, p. 1336.

Note that waged work was not included in the "needs" of the "normal woman."

family. The dominance of this belief system is especially acute when one considers that this is a conference of women speaking to women.

Though it is impossible to measure the actual effect that such conservative sentiments of the larger YWCA movement had upon the Montreal YWCA, or, to gauge whether the world YWCA had also a private and public personae, arguably the overall strength of conservative sentiments did muffle opposing views of society. And the vision of women's place in society put forth by the Montreal association was certainly a dissenting view. The Montreal YWCA, except for the support of some other women's organizations in Montreal, was therefore largely isolated in its advocacy of paid employment as a healthy and positive component of women's lives. This isolation, as well as its ongoing dependence on the goodwill of the community to survive and continue on with its work, did apparently force the YWCA's support of waged women workers to become the much more muted stance that is evident in its records of the late 1940s and 1950s. ²⁰³

* * *

The tragedy, however, of being so successfully muffled by the strong forces which dominated these two decades lies in the fact that the Montreal YWCA's support and promotion of

²⁰³ It is important to note the increased financial dependence of the Montreal YWCA's, in the late 1940s and into the 1950s, because of its building campaign to raise the funds to construct a new YWCA building (its present one) which opened in 1952.

women's advancement has been hidden and therefore unappreciated. It is clear that the Montreal YWCA was committed to women's advancement throughout the 1940s and 1950s, as it had been in the 1920s and 1930s. Its programmes, its wide range of activities and the various kinds of support it offered were all part of a continuing responsiveness to the changing needs of a broad spectrum of women. Canadian women

* * *

TABLE 9

YWCA MEMBERSHIP: LATE 1950s ²⁰⁴

	1958	1959
	%	%
Under 16	13.1	13.6
16 - 25	35.5	34.0
26 - 35	27.4	28.1
35 +	24.0	24.2
In Paid Employment	96.4	63.7
Housewives	1.8	18.7
Students	1.7	17.4
Unemployed	.1	.1
Total Membership	9847	8631

²⁰⁴ NAC MG 28 I 240 V 39 Annual Reports/Pamphlets 1955-1960 etc.: " 'Y' Family Portrait," 1958 and 1959.

1958 and 1959 were the two years when the YWCA's annual reports categorized its membership in this manner. Previous years gave a breakdown of the membership by creeds, languages, nationalities and age.

* * *

were marrying at a younger age than in previous years and the YWCA's new emphasis on daytime programmes reflected this diversification in the make up of its membership. Moreover, married women were making up a larger and larger share of the female labour work force in these two decades. This was occurring because women in the 1940s and 1950s were completing their child bearing and rearing tasks at a younger age and for many this meant that, once their children reached school age, they re-entered the paid work force that they had left at marriage or at the time of their first pregnancy. Again, the Montreal YWCA recognized these changes in Canadian women's lives and adapted its programmes to the new kinds of needs that these trends engineered. This flexibility is reflected in the make up of the association's membership in the late 1950s (see Table 9) which demonstrates the institution's continuing appeal to waged women workers.

In conclusion, through recognizing and appreciating the Montreal YWCA's difficult position in the 1940s and 1950s, one can distinguish the link with the YWCA's feminism and support of women's issues in the 1960s and onwards. The irony of the late 1940s and 1950s, as evidenced by this exploration of the Montreal YWCA, is that women's institutions, much like women overall, were trapped by the dominant image of womanhood which forced them to deny the changing reality of women's lives as well as their role in privately aiding it to mature. And,

also much like Canadian women in general, it would not be until the 1960s that the Montreal YWCA would be able to break out of the confines of this burden of maintaining public and private identities.

CONCLUSIONS

This exploration of the activities and efforts of the Montreal YWCA between 1920 and 1960 definitely dispels any ideas that nothing worthy of note occurred in women's lives in these decades. Beyond creating important links with the current women's movement, this examination of the Montreal YWCA has detailed some of the neglected nuances and the real achievements of YWCA women which tell us so much about women's lives between 1920 and 1960. For instance, by not dismissing the club movement as a superfluous social activity, one gains an insight into the isolation of waged women workers and the social and support networks that they needed to form. Moreover, by recognizing the validity of the women's clubs, one gains an insight into the development of the women's centres, collectives and various women's groups that developed in the 1960s and continue to exist today. Similarly, the importance of higher education to women, partly for the employment paths it opened to them but more significantly for the self-confidence it gave to women, is also highlighted by this discussion of YWCA's educational programmes.

This glimpse that the Montreal YWCA's records gives into women's lives between 1920 and 1960 further provides insight into the turmoil wrought in women's lives, particularly in regards to waged employment, by larger political and economic events. Pulled into the work force in the 1920s by a booming

capitalist machine, thrust out again in the depression years of the 1930s with the pattern repeating itself with World War II and the late 1940s and 1950s, clearly indicates the secondary and insecure nature of women's place in the waged workforce. The constant onus placed upon women to adjustments themselves and their lives to the needs of the larger society is reflected by the Montreal YWCA's own changes and adjusts to the fluctuating needs of its membership. It is also fascinating to observe the ever-adjusting ideology which dominated women's lives, sharply insisting on women's place in the home, then swiftly transforming itself to allow a woman's 'home' to include a war-time factory and then, again, shifting and shrinking the boundaries of women's lives to the narrow confines of her home once more. Likewise the flexibility demonstrated by the YWCA in its rapid adjustment of its programmes and activities as well as its maintenance of separate public and private personae reproduces in microcosm the resilience that women displayed as they were pushed and pulled by forces that they had very little control over or say in.

Yet, whether women had little real control over their lives or not, the evidence provided by the Montreal YWCA about women throughout the four decades under consideration demonstrates that they cannot, and should not, be seen as victims of the larger society. Instead, the ongoing determination and persistence of the YWCA in its fight for

women's advancement gives weight to arguments that women in the past were agents of their own destinies --- within the constraints of the world that they lived in. By recognizing the positive efforts of women and their institutions between 1920 and 1960, one can moreover shift the onus of responsibility from the women who were attempting to gain power onto the male centres of power for not giving it up. With the advantage of hindsight, one can argue that many of the YWCA's efforts were too meek, too tame and that more revolutionary activity should have been the path they took. Yet, hindsight was not a gift enjoyed by the YWCA women and therefore such criticism of their actions, or non actions, is not completely legitimate.

Another important and connected theme which emerges from this exploration of the Montreal YWCA, particularly from evidence of the late 1940s and 1950s, is the need of a women's organization, and women overall, to maintain two separate faces, or identities as it were, in order to continue to exist in the larger community, a fact which further illuminates the confining nature of the world in which women lived. What is particularly fascinating is the fact that the YWCA apparently recognized and, therefore, catered to the imperative of not offending the community (large and small) upon which it depended for its survival. Moreover, one can only marvel at the ability and enduring patience that the YWCA displayed in its maintenance of community confidence and how it,

nonetheless, continued to quietly provide services and support for waged women workers. This private persistence on the part of the Montreal YWCA certainly bears out Eugenia Kaledin's positive assessment of women in the 1950s who she perceives as having quietly but determinedly defined a place for themselves in society.²⁰⁵

Beyond providing a window into women's lives between 1920 and 1960, this examination of the Montreal YWCA provides much evidence that calls into question many basic assumptions about women and women's organizations between 1920 and 1960. First, it is impossible after exploring the YWCA's records during these years to judge its actions as having intentionally retarded or slowed women's advancement, as suggested by various Canadian historians such as Veronica Strong-Boag, Wendy Mitchinson and Diana Pederson. On the contrary, the records of this institution demonstrate that the Montreal YWCA was cognisant of the obstacles that hindered women from achieving real equality and actively worked to eliminate or at least diminish such obstacles through its educational courses, recreational facilities and social networks. In addition, the YWCA's constant public lobbying on behalf of women, including the issues of compulsory education, the provincial vote, allowances for needy mothers, employment services, and female representation on everything from government decision-making

²⁰⁵ Kaledin, Mothers and More: American Women in the 1950s (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984).

committees to representatives at important public events, all formed part of its determined and unwavering zeal to aid women's advancement -- specifically by not allowing women's wishes and needs to be shoved into the background and forgotten.

Certainly the Montreal YWCA's unbounded optimism and enthusiasm that its actions could bring about rapid advancement for women appears in retrospect somewhat naive. The institution in these decades also to a large measure accepted many of the tenets of traditional womanhood, including the promotion of the nuclear family as women's final goal, and never publicly advocated that women had a right to waged labour. These and other aspects of the Montreal YWCA are disappointing to any feminist historian searching for models of activism comparable to today's women's movement. Nonetheless, to be ultimately fair to the YWCA one must try to judge the institution as much as possible within the limitations of the times in which it operated. In addition to the constraints already mentioned, the YWCA in these years lacked networks of communication through which it could share with other women knowledge of effective past and present strategies.

* * *

At no time has it been suggested that this study of women's lives in these decades effectively describes the lives of all women across Canada regardless of race, class and

language. This study of the middle class, English-speaking women of the Montreal YWCA provides a window, if only a narrow one, on the lives of all Canadian women between 1920 and 1960. It has raised questions that others may flesh out in the future as more works on this unexamined era appear. Through employing a framework that avoids measuring women of the past against the achievements and position of women today, this discussion has highlighted the validity of the struggles and achievements of the Montreal YWCA. By doing so, the positive foundations which the association helped to lay for the current women's movement have been revealed. One can finally, therefore, assess the aims and activities of this Montreal association between 1920 and 1960 as having countered dominant male values concerning the acceptable and traditional place for women and, as a women's space, worked against malestream thought and aided women to advance.

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Appendix 1RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FULL EMPLOYMENT ²⁰⁶

1. That the Government should undertake a planned economy to obtain full employment.
2. That the principal of equal pay for equal work should be adopted.
3. That the Government be congratulated for proposing a bill granting children's allowances next year.
4. That the Marsh Report or a similar plan for Social Security should be adopted.
5. That steps be taken now to continue a National Employment Service after the war.
6. That National Employment service and Dominion Employment Service be merged.
7. That vocational guidance bureaux be set up under the National Employment Service or a similar organization.
8. That before a war plant closes down National Selective Service should be interview the workers and place them in other jobs or training schools.
9. That the organization of training schools should be accelerated and expanded now.
10. That the number of scholarships for training, provided by the Government, should be increased.

²⁰⁶ NAC MG 28 I 240 V 31 Board of Directors Minutes 1940-49 Part 2: June 27, 1944, p. 1371.

11. That, where scholarships are not available, loans at low interest be given.
12. That, when war jobs are finished, vouchers should be provided to enable the employee to return home if so desired.
13. That the Unemployment Insurance Act and the Workmen's Compensation Act be broadened to include more groups of women workers.

Appendix 2HOUSEHOLD WORKERS ²⁰⁷

1. That a standard of proficiency should be set by a training program sponsored and financed by the Dominion and Provincial Governments.
2. That training schools be established.
3. That there should be a standard signed agreement between employer and employee made through National Selective Service (or some such organization) in co-operation with the training schools.
4. That labour legislation be amended to include Household workers.
5. That Social Insurance, Unemployment Insurance, Workmen's Compensation should include Household Workers.
6. That an organized supply of part-time workers should be made available.
7. That the cost of providing training should largely be borne by the Government, and loans at low interest rates be given.
8. That annual blood test and T.B. tests should be made on employee and employers (adult members of the employer's household).
9. That a trade union for household workers be formed and

²⁰⁷ NAC MG 28 I 240 V 31 Board of Directors Minutes 1940-49 Part 2: June 27, p. 1371.

recognized.

10. That the category "Domestic Service" be removed from the census (classification title) and that "household workers" be put in its place.