

'Living the Same as the White People': Mohawk and Anishinabe Women's Labour in Southern Ontario, 1920–1940

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Article abstract

Aboriginal women have a long history of paid labour in Canada, yet there is little scholarly writing examining their work experiences. Using enfranchisement case files for the Ontario Indian agencies of Parry Sound and Manitowaning, supplemented by oral histories from the Tyendinaga Mohawks, this article explores the work lives of Anishinabe and Mohawk women in the 1920s and 1930s. Aboriginal women's economic roles involved a continuum of labour ranging from non-cash-oriented subsistence production to commercially-oriented farming, handicraft production, and berry-picking, to wage labour in the capitalist economy. In response to increasing economic hardship on the reserves, First Nations men and women turned increasingly to off-reserve wage labour. While men around Georgian Bay had access to seasonal jobs in lumbering, sawmilling, transportation, and tourism, women faced much more limited employment opportunities in the area. Some responded by moving to towns and cities to work. Further south, the Mohawk women of Tyendinaga could take domestic service jobs and commute from the reserve, or they could move to larger cities to work. For both groups of women, as for women in general, domestic labour was the most common occupation. The Tyendinaga women also had considerable involvement in manufacturing and migrant farm labour. A few women from both groups were able to finish high school and obtain clerical jobs, which offered better pay and shorter hours. Aboriginal women's occupational distributions were similar to those of other women in the labour force, especially working-class, immigrant, and racialized women. Contrary to today's persistent media images of Aboriginal unemployment, their records and reminiscences reveal lifetimes of hard work, self-support, and self-respect.

ARTICLE

'Living the Same as the White People': Mohawk and Anishinabe Women's Labour in Southern Ontario, 1920–1940

Robin Jarvis Brownlie

In my years I spent among non-Natives, I worked very hard so I wouldn't be called a 'dirty, lazy Indian.' Because, you know, that's what they used to say. And when I'd have the president of the cheese factory to dinner once in a while, his wife would say to other people, 'You could eat off any one of her floors.' Then some of them would come in after we got a baby and say, 'Oh my, he's so clean.' Why wouldn't he be?! I worked hard so nobody could say bad things about Indians. But why would anyone want to eat off of floors!¹

THE COLONIAL IMAGE of Aboriginal women as idle, as non-workers and non-participants in the capitalist economy, has a long history. Like all images designed to justify colonization, it is a significant distortion of these women's lives. Unfortunately, through our general neglect of labour issues in Aboriginal history-writing, historians have been missing the opportunity to correct such misrepresentations. Indeed, as scholars we might ask ourselves whether colonial constructions of the indolent, improvident Indian have contributed to the paucity of scholarly writing on Aboriginal people's paid work. As Rolf Knight observed nearly 30 years ago, there is no shortage of records on this subject.² Documents generated by fur traders, government officials, missionaries, and others reveal a good deal about work lives. Aboriginal people's own historical accounts, both oral and written, refer constantly to paid and unpaid

1. Helen Brant Spencer, a Mohawk woman born in 1911, in Beth Brant, ed., *I'll Sing 'Til The Day I Die: Conversations with Tyendinaga Elders* (Toronto 1995), 51.

2. Rolf Knight, *Indians At Work. An Informal History of Native Indian Labour in British Columbia, 1858–1930* (Vancouver 1978), 9.

labour of all kinds. Yet the everyday contributions First Nations people have made through their work remain under-studied, leaving the popular conception of eternal welfare dependency uncontradicted. Thanks to the efforts of a small group of scholars, a critical mass of writings on Aboriginal labour history is finally beginning to accumulate.³ These studies, however, focus to a remarkable extent on British Columbia.⁴ This article seeks to shift attention to Aboriginal work experiences in southern Ontario, especially those of women.

Everywhere in what is now Canada, First Nations people have engaged in paid labour since the origins of contact with Europeans. Beginning with important roles for both women and men in the fur trade, they later worked in primary industries such as lumbering, commercial fishing, canning, and mining as resource extraction industries began to penetrate into their territories. In many places they did not become thoroughly integrated into capitalist modes and methods of production; instead they created a mixed economy by adding wage labour, independent production for local or international markets, and in some cases farming and/or gardening to their pre-contact subsistence activities.⁵ Steven High has argued that Aboriginal people participated in wage labour and other aspects of the capitalist economy “selectively

3. The only monograph on Aboriginal labour in Canada is still Knight, *Indians At Work*. Other important studies include James Burrows, “A Much Needed Class of Labor: The Economy and Income of the Southern Interior Plateau Indians, 1897–1910,” *BC Studies*, 71 (Autumn 1986), 27–46; Steven High, “Native Wage Labour and Independent Production during the ‘Era of Irrelevance,’” *Labour/Le Travail*, 37 (Spring 1996), 243–64; Stuart Jamieson, “Native Indians and the Trade Union Movement in BC,” *Human Organization*, 20 (1961/62), 219–25; Ron Laliberté and Vic Satzewich, “Native Migrant Labour in the Southern Alberta Sugar Beet Industry: Coercion and Paternalism in the Recruitment of Labour,” *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 36 (February 1999), 65–85; Alicja Muszynski, “Race and Gender: Structural Determinants in the Formation of British Columbia’s Salmon Cannery Labour Forces,” *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 13 (Winter–Spring 1988), 103–20; Andrew Parnaby, “On the Hook: Welfare Capitalism on the Vancouver Waterfront, 1919–1939,” PhD dissertation, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2001; and John Lutz’s various articles, including “After the Fur Trade: The Aboriginal Labouring Class of British Columbia, 1849–1890,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, 3 (1992), 69–93, and “Gender and Work in Lekwamen Families, 1843–1970,” in Kathryn McPherson, Cecilia Morgan, and Nancy Forestell, eds. *Gendered Pasts: Historical Essays on Femininity and Masculinity in Canada* (Don Mills, Ontario 1999), 80–105.

4. There are two important works for Ontario: Thomas W. Dunk, “Indian Participation in the Industrial Economy on the North Shore of Lake Superior, 1869 to 1940,” Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society, *Papers and Records*, Volume XV (1987), 3–13, and Julie Guard, “Authenticity on the Line: Women Workers, Native ‘Scabs,’ and the Multi-ethnic Politics of Identity in a Left-led Strike in Cold War Canada,” *Journal of Women’s History*, 15 (Winter 2004). Frank Tough’s monograph *As Their Natural Resources Fail: Native Peoples and the Economic History of Northern Manitoba, 1870–1930* (Vancouver 1996) contains a good deal of important analysis of Aboriginal work lives in what is now northern Manitoba.

5. For the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois), a group which includes the Mohawks, discussed in this article, growing extensive crops was an ancient practice. Some Anishinabek had also planted corn before contact.

in order to strengthen their traditional way of life.”⁶ This argument seems somewhat simplistic: on the one hand, it implies that partial participation was entirely the choice of Aboriginal people, despite evidence that racism affected their ability to obtain jobs. As Anishinabe trapper Edward Paibomsai wrote the Indian Department in 1930, “In a great many places of employment they will not employ an Indian to do their work....”⁷ At the same time, the claim that First Nations people were intent on “strengthen[ing] their traditional way of life” is effectively reductionist – does not every group seek to maintain its traditional ways?⁸ In any event, wage labour and market production were not part of the pre-contact way of life, and Aboriginal societies had both survived these innovations and been altered by them. My own research on the inter-war period has turned up little evidence that cultural preservation in itself was an objective for most of the Anishinabek and Mohawks living in southern and central Ontario. Indeed, though many of them maintained the older hunting and gathering practices as much as possible, it is not clear that they saw newer economic options as a threat to their cultural integrity. I sometimes wonder if the scholarly focus on cultural preservation reflects present-day concerns more than the motivations and world views of Aboriginal people in the past. Surely the maintenance of an acceptable livelihood was the pre-eminent objective, probably pursued with the family rather than the individual in mind. Wage labour was one means of making a living and contributing to family survival; the resulting cash income may also have helped people fulfil culturally prescribed obligations to elders, extended family members, or the community. While an economy structured around family needs was characteristic of Aboriginal cultures across the continent, this orientation was shared by most non-Aboriginal working-class families. As one young immigrant woman from the period explained it, “I was under the impression that when you live at home and get along with your family and work, what you earn you bring home and then you get what you need and the rest is for the family need.”⁹

In addition, while the analysis of “selective participation” applies well to some parts of Canada, including much of British Columbia and parts of Nova Scotia, for example, such a strategy was not an option for everyone. Using sub-

6. High, “Native Wage Labour and Independent Production,” 244.

7. Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), RG 10 (Indian Affairs), Series B-3, Volume 7225, File 8019-39, “Manitoulin Island Agency – Enfranchisement – Paibomsai, Edward,” Edward Paibomsai to Department of Indian Affairs (DIA), 15 March 1930.

8. Frank Tough has gone so far as to call this argument “inane”: “The assertion that Canadians as a whole sell their labour power in the capitalist system to strengthen their traditional ways, would be hard to dispute, but it would be inane nonetheless.” Frank Tough, “From the Original Affluent Society to the Unjust Society: A Review Essay on Native Economic History in Canada,” *Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development*, 4 (Fall 2005), 61.

9. Shirly Vessor, “Toronto Between the Wars,” typed transcript in Toronto Public Library, cited in Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919–1939* (Toronto 1988), 48.

sistence resources to avoid full integration into the capitalist economy was possible for Aboriginal people living in areas where the older resources of game, fish, and forest remained accessible. In inter-war Ontario, these areas would include some of the reserves around Georgian Bay and most of those further north. But in most parts of southern Ontario, roughly from Georgian Bay south, the game was long gone, most of the land was in private hands, and the crucial fish resource had been transferred to commercial interests and in some cases (for example, sturgeon) virtually destroyed.¹⁰ Here, by the early 20th century, independent production offered meagre rewards, subsistence resources were severely depleted, and survival required a considerably greater level of participation in the capitalist economy. Moreover, not all Aboriginal people sought to avoid integration into the economic mainstream. In southern Ontario, by the early 20th century, wage labour and market-oriented farming were the main sources of livelihood for most First Nations people.

An analysis that recognizes cultural difference is necessary, but it needs to be balanced by the understanding that Aboriginal people were driven as much as anyone else by rational economic calculations.¹¹ It is easy to overemphasize the role of culture and thus overlook important questions such as the extent to which capitalism and other external pressures altered Aboriginal priorities and social practices,¹² or the degree to which the incomplete integra-

10. See Victor P. Lytwyn, "Ojibwa and Ottawa Fisheries around Manitoulin Island: Historical and Geographical Perspectives on Aboriginal and Treaty Fishing Rights," *Native Studies Review*, 6 (Winter 1990), 1–30; Lise C. Hansen, "Treaty Fishing Rights and the Development of Fisheries Legislation in Ontario: A Primer," *Native Studies Review*, 7 (Winter 1991); John Van West, "Ojibwa Fisheries, Commercial Fisheries Development and Fisheries Administration, 1873–1915: An Examination of Conflicting Interest and the Collapse of the Sturgeon Fisheries of the Lake of the Woods," *Native Studies Review*, 6 (Winter 1990), 31–65.

11. Bruce Trigger has distinguished between two analytic tendencies in the scholarship relating to Aboriginal economic behaviour, the competing "romantic" and "rationalistic" explanations. The "romantic" approach sees culture as the main motivation for behaviour and asserts that Aboriginal people, especially in the fur trade, thought in terms of prestige and politics rather than economic gain on the European model. The "rationalistic" approach assumes that First Nations people seek to maximize economic benefits in the same ways that Europeans do. See Bruce G. Trigger, "Early Native North American Responses to European Contact: Romantic versus Rationalistic Interpretations," *Journal of American History*, 77 (March 1991), 1195–1215. As Trigger acknowledges, most scholars tend to fall between the two extremes.

12. For example, Patricia McCormack and Frank Tough have considered the ways that wage labour and fur trade credit tended to individualize production and, over time, reduce the sharing practices that were such a central feature of the traditional hunting and gathering economy. See Patricia McCormack, "Becoming Trappers: The Transformation to a Fur Trade Mode of Production at Fort Chipewyan," in Thomas C. Buckley, ed., *Rendezvous: Selected Papers of the Fourth North American Fur Trade Conference, 1981* (St. Paul, Minnesota 1984), 155–173; Frank Tough "From the Original Affluent Society to the Unjust Society," 38–9. David Newhouse has written about the contemporary cultural and social impacts of the market economy in his "Resistance is Futile: Aboriginal Economic Development in the Shadow of the Borg," *Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development*, 2 (Winter 2001), 75–82.

tion of Aboriginal people into the mainstream economic system was dictated by exclusion and marginalization rather than Aboriginal agency. Moreover, in many ways the aspects of Aboriginal economic life that at first sight may appear related to their culture and world view are not as different from non-Aboriginal life ways as is often supposed. For example, several historians have emphasized the importance for Aboriginal people of kin and family networks in shaping economic decisions such as choice and location of employment, the types of occupation pursued, and the timing and direction of migration.¹³ The sources examined for this study support such conclusions, but these patterns are far from unique to Aboriginal people.¹⁴ Similarly, mobility is an obvious feature of Aboriginal work lives from coast to coast, another pattern this study affirms.¹⁵ Yet again, mobility shaped many Canadians' work lives, not only those of immigrants, but also those of working-class people in the occupations where Aboriginal people were also found. Agricultural wage labour, the lumber industry, and many fish canneries required mobility as a condition of employment, regardless of race. The mixed economy that Aboriginal people developed during and after the fur trade and/or white settlement is often called "traditional" – in the early 20th century the Indian Department called it the "Indian mode of life." Frank Tough has described this economy as "the domestic mode of production articulated with European markets, subsistence activities and commercial pursuits."¹⁶ But if one examines the economic strategies of many non-Aboriginal people living around Georgian Bay in the 1920s and especially the 1930s, the differences are hard to discern, particularly among the men. Men of both groups pursued seasonal work in transportation, lumbering, and the tourist industry; both hunted and fished as part of their livelihood; some also trapped and sold furs. The women often maintained substantial gardens, which furnished an important part of the food supply. Pursuing very similar economic strategies does not necessarily mean that both groups were the same or that both operated from the same cultural assumptions.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the differences were overemphasized at the time and this tendency is too easily reproduced in current writing.

Another question worth pursuing is that of the social and economic impact

13. See, for example, Paige Raibmon, *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the Late-Nineteenth-Century Northwest Coast* (Durham 2005), 74–97; Harald E.L. Prins, *The Mi'kmaq: Resistance, Accommodation, and Cultural Survival* (Fort Worth 1996).

14. See, for example, Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled*, 50; Joan Sangster, *Earning Respect: the Lives of Working Women in Small-town Ontario, 1920–1960* (Toronto 1995), 113.

15. See, for example, Raibmon, *Authentic Indians*, 74–97; Frank Tough, *As Their Natural Resources Fail*; George Barker, *Forty Years a Chief* (Winnipeg 1979).

16. Tough, "From the Original Affluent Society to the Unjust Society," 38.

17. For the west coast, John Lutz has shown that Aboriginal workers did not necessarily spend their wages in the same ways as their non-Aboriginal counterparts; instead, a good deal of their earnings went towards sponsoring potlaches. Lutz, "After the Fur Trade," 69–93.

on Aboriginal people of paid work and of participation in capitalist markets. Alicja Muszynski has contended that the continuance of Aboriginal subsistence practices alongside the capitalist marketplace allowed employers to extract even more surplus value, since the employers did not have to pay the full cost of the production and reproduction of the labour power.¹⁸ This argument carries some weight for the situation around Georgian Bay, where employers in the lumber and transportation industries relied on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal seasonal workers, who supported themselves by other means, including subsistence activities, for the rest of the year. Those who lived on reserves or in the bush did not have to pay any rent or the purchase price for the land on which they lived, another theoretical cost saving for the employers. Aboriginal women were, of course, part of this process because of their own roles in contributing to family incomes through independent production (berry-picking, handicrafts), subsistence activities, and occasionally wage labour. Single adult women, in contrast, were probably less implicated in this system unless they lived with their parents or siblings. Those who moved to urban centres for work joined the urban working-class, paid rent, and purchased food and clothing in the marketplace.

Finally, an important overarching question in Aboriginal labour history is the impact of colonization and capitalism on women and gender relations in Aboriginal societies. While some scholars have concluded that colonization had beneficial effects for some women in some places, more often historical analysis seems to indicate a substantial decline in women's status and authority, thanks to the patriarchal emphasis of key influences such as capitalism, Christianity, and the state.¹⁹ For First Nations women around Georgian Bay, the local labour market undoubtedly helped promote asymmetrical gender relations. Men had far more wage-earning opportunities than women in the rural areas around Georgian Bay, while the towns typically offered women quite limited employment opportunities. In any case, most reserves in the area were not close to urban centres. Thus, the women had to accept men's greater role in cash procurement – and the enhanced authority it brought – or migrate to towns in search of jobs. The situation was somewhat more com-

18. Muszynski, "Race and Gender," 103–120.

19. See Lutz, "Gender and Work in Lekwammen Families," 80–105; Ellice B. Gonzalez, "An Ethnohistorical Analysis of Mi'kmaq Male and Female Economic Roles," *Ethnohistory*, 29 (Spring 1982), 117–129; Carol Cooper, "Native Women of the Northern Pacific Coast: A Historical Perspective," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 27 (Winter 1992–3), 44–73; Karen Anderson, *Chain Her By One Foot: The Subjugation of Native Women in Seventeenth-Century New France* (New York 1993); Jo-Anne Fiske, "Colonization and the Decline of Women's Status: The Tsimshian Case," *Feminist Studies*, 17 (Fall 1991), 509–34; Eleanor Leacock, "Montagnais Women and the Jesuit Program for Colonization," in Mona Etienne and Eleanor Leacock, eds., *Women and Colonization: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York 1980); Ron Bourgeault, "The Indian, the Métis and the Fur Trade: Class, Sexism and Racism in the Transition from 'Communism' to Capitalism," *Studies in Political Economy*, 12 (Fall 1983), 45–80.

plicated for Mohawk women living in southern Ontario, closer to cities that did have jobs for women. It is true that their wage-earning opportunities were limited in scope and pay by the gender-segregated labour market, but they did exist. In fact, it is not clear that women had fewer employment options than men. Further, to some extent the community's work patterns continued the pre-contact model of the family-based economy, not only the farm work but also the migrant fruit-picking work Tyendinaga women described, in which the whole family participated. Thus, in southern Ontario the job market probably did less to promote gender inequality and may even have helped reinforce indigenous family-based work economies, though women would have received considerably lower wages than men. Mohawk women may also have been insulated somewhat from the imposition of a patriarchal economic structure by the long tradition of women's economic and political authority in Mohawk society.²⁰

The Geographic and Historical Context

This paper focuses on the 1920s and 1930s and analyses some preliminary information about the work lives of Mohawk and Anishinabe women in southern Ontario.²¹ I have used Indian Affairs records relating to First Nations located around Georgian Bay,²² especially enfranchisement case files, and supplemented this information with the lively recountings of the Mohawk women of Tyendinaga interviewed by Beth Brant for her splendid oral history book, *I'll Sing 'Til the Day I Die*.²³ These sources complement each other quite well,

20. W.G. Spittal, ed. *Iroquois Women : an Anthology* (Ohsweken, Ontario 1990).

21. The Mohawks in this case include those of Tyendinaga interviewed by Beth Brant in *I'll Sing 'Til the Day I Die* and those found in the enfranchisement case files for the Gibson – now Wahta – Reserve located on Georgian Bay south of Parry Sound. “Anishinabe” (plural Anishinabek) refers to the group often known as the Ojibway, and often includes (as in this case) the closely related Ottawa and Potawatomi who also lived on reserves around Georgian Bay.

22. The reserves concerned are the following: in the Manitowaning Agency, Manitoulin Island Unceded, Point Grondine, Sheguiandah, South Bay, Spanish River #3, Sucker Creek, Sucker Lake, Tahgaiwenene, Whitefish Lake, and Whitefish River. Wahnapiatae is also included because many of its members lived in this Agency. The Parry Sound Agency consisted of these seven bands: Lower French River (amalgamated with Henvey Inlet in 1923), Henvey Inlet, Magnetawan, Shawanaga, Parry Island (Wasauksing), Moose Deer Point, and Gibson (Wahta). In addition to the enfranchisement case files, I have also used the general Manitowaning and Parry Sound Agency records for the same time period.

23. The case files involved are all the enfranchisement files I could locate for the Manitowaning and Parry Sound Agencies in the period from about 1918 to 1940, from Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Record Group 10 (Indian Affairs), Series B-3, Volumes 7230-7232. The agency records are the Manitowaning Letterbooks, 1915–1934, Volumes 10571–10631 (inclusive), held at the LAC, and the Parry Island Reserve Papers (Correspondence of Indian Agents in Parry

because the enfranchisement case files document the experiences of women who moved to urban centres, while the Tyendinaga women mostly remained based on the reserve and did not voluntarily become enfranchised (though some of them lost status through marriage).

As the comments above suggest, Aboriginal women around Georgian Bay were in a different position geographically and economically than their counterparts living at the Tyendinaga reserve to the south. In the early 20th century, the Georgian Bay region was an economic hinterland that supplied natural resources, especially forest products and fish, to distant markets and also provided tourism services to urban Ontarians and Americans. Employment was limited in scope, the population was not that large, and urban centres were small and relatively far apart. The region was Anishinabe territory, and most of the people living on reserves were Anishinabe (Ojibway, Potawatomi, or Ottawa), except for the Gibson (Wahta) reserve, which was home to a group of Mohawks who had left Kanehsatake (Oka, Quebec) in the 1880s. Although Gibson reserve remained populated, some of its members tended to drift back to their relatives in Quebec and southern Ontario (the Six Nations reserve), a move that sometimes led them to apply for enfranchisement. The Georgian Bay reserves were typically distant from cities and towns, with the exception of Parry Island (now Wasauksing), located near Parry Sound, and Wikwemikong on Manitoulin Island, which was close to the village of Manitowaning.

By contrast, the Tyendinaga reserve lay on the shore of Lake Ontario, close to the town of Deseronto and within easy travelling distance of the larger Belleville. Acculturation had proceeded further at Tyendinaga, judging from the oral history that describes the loss of the Mohawk tongue by children growing up in the period; on the Georgian Bay reserves, Aboriginal languages were still central to everyday life. Tyendinaga women who wanted paid labour had considerably more choice than women around Georgian Bay, particularly if they were willing to travel a little further afield to the larger cities. This option was open to Georgian Bay women too, of course, but it meant going much further from home and, above all, was usually incompatible with residing on their reserves. At Tyendinaga, it was possible to take domestic service jobs and commute from the reserve.

The inter-war period was a time of renewed political organizing, escalating administrative repression, and growing economic hardship for First Nations people, in Ontario as elsewhere. After contributing a high proportion of their men to the armed forces – especially in Ontario – and supporting Canada's war effort through financial contributions and volunteer work as well, many First Nations people believed they should be rewarded by increased self-determination and greater recognition of their rights. Aboriginal veterans were prominent throughout these years as advocates of self-government and

Sound), 1896–1939 (what I have usually designated the Franz Koennecke Collection) located at Wasauksing First Nation, Ontario.

treaty rights. This agenda made them active opponents of the Department of Indian Affairs' (DIA's) authoritarian administrative regime. In Ontario, British Columbia, and on the prairies, regional political organizations with national aspirations were founded and pressured the DIA to honour treaties, halt seizures of reserve land in British Columbia, and loosen the close control over reserve communities and resources exercised through the Indian agent system. The department responded with a series of repressive measures, culminating in the 1927 amendment to the Indian Act barring First Nations people from hiring lawyers to pursue their claims. Department control was greatly enhanced with the onset of the Depression, as large numbers of First Nations people were thrown out of work and became dependent on the DIA for relief. During this period, the department ceased to allow the use of band money for delegates to travel to political meetings, and at least one Indian agent took the opportunity to discipline some of his political opponents.²⁴ Organizing activities became virtually impossible without the money for transportation and communication, so they largely ceased, to be resumed after World War II.

Economically, the 1920s and 1930s were also challenging times. In British Columbia, Rolf Knight has shown that Aboriginal businesses and wage labour opportunities were both in decline in the 1920s, and that neither fully recovered after the collapse of the Great Depression.²⁵ Demographics were different in southern Ontario, since First Nations had been totally outnumbered much earlier. Still, DIA figures show a gradual, steady downward trend in their incomes throughout the 1920s and dire poverty in the 1930s.²⁶ Ontario's economic picture was shaped by a brief post-war boom, followed by a serious recession for the first years of the 1920s. The agricultural sector was particularly badly hit, suffering a collapse in prices after the inflation of World War I. Although it recovered slightly in the mid-1920s, the market remained basically depressed throughout the decade. Southern Ontario's many Aboriginal farmers were affected like all the others, especially the war veterans who had received government loans, bought farms and equipment at inflated post-war prices, and were expected to repay the loans in the poor markets of the 1920s.²⁷ Prices collapsed again with a vengeance in the 1930s. Another major source of income for First Nations people, especially around Georgian Bay, was wage labour in the forest, fishing, and transportation industries. These industries performed reasonably well in the 1920s, but were devastated by the Great Depression,

24. See R.J. Brownlie, *A Fatherly Eye: Indian Agents, Government Power, and Aboriginal Resistance in Ontario, 1918–1939* (Don Mills 2003), esp. 99–123.

25. Knight, *Indians At Work*, 8, 196–7.

26. For income figures for the two Georgian Bay Indian agencies, Manitowaning and Parry Sound, see Brownlie, *A Fatherly Eye*, 22–3.

27. See Robin Brownlie, 'Work Hard and Be Grateful: Native Soldier Settlers in Ontario After the First World War,' in Franca Iacovetta and Wendy Mitchinson, eds., *On the Case: Explorations in Social History* (Toronto 1998), 181–203.

especially the forest sector. Even in their old mainstay of trapping, the people faced heightened competition from white trappers, beginning in the 1920s and escalating in the desperate 1930s, when impoverished white people also turned increasingly to hunting and fishing to feed themselves. This competition further reduced the supply of game and fish the local Anishinabek had always relied on. For the Mohawks at Tyendinaga the Depression also brought serious hardship, reducing the availability of wage labour and decimating the agricultural sector. Eileen Green of Tyendinaga summed up the period for many: “Yes, it was hard, especially during the Depression. Oh, that was such a bad time here. No work, so little to eat. It was a bad time. But we made it through, didn’t we?”²⁸

In the split labour market, defined hierarchically by gender and typically by race and/or ethnicity as well, only certain kinds of work were available to First Nations men and women. Many had tried to follow the injunctions of Indian agents and missionaries to farm for a living, an effort whose success depended on the widely variable soil quality on reserves. To varying degrees, reserve residents around Georgian Bay farmed and sold agricultural produce (mostly on Manitoulin Island), as well as consumed their own field and garden crops. Many Tyendinaga residents also farmed for a living, grew gardens for domestic consumption, and took wage labour when they could get it, including seasonal farm labour, jobs at the local smelter, and work unloading iron ore.²⁹ Around Georgian Bay, men found jobs in lumbering and sawmills, in commercial fishing, and in transportation, while a few guided tourists in the summer. These occupations were gendered male, were highly seasonal in nature, and did not provide steady year-round work. A sense of these communities’ economic marginality can be gained from the descriptions of one Georgian Bay Anishinabe community authored by two anthropologists who visited Parry Island on separate occasions in the 1920s. Even though Parry Island reserve offered more wage labour than any other reserve in the vicinity, the anthropologists depicted it as an economically disadvantaged community. Frederick Johnson described the Parry Islanders’ housing and economy in terms that clearly suggested poverty, writing that some lived in log cabins, and a larger group in ‘poorly constructed’ tar paper shacks. Outlining their economic pursuits, he declared that fishing and hunting had been reduced to “sport” thanks to the depletion of stocks, and that in general, the people were “forced to rely on their small gardens, poor cows, and a few odd jobs that they can pick up about the towns in order to secure a livelihood.”³⁰ Curiously, Johnson did not mention other wage-earning opportunities in the lumber industry and in Depot Harbour, a lake port and railway depot located right on

28. Eileen Green in Brant, ed., *I’ll Sing*, 46.

29. See Eva Maracle, Susie Janes Lynch, and Eileen Green in Brant, ed., *I’ll Sing*, 19, 39, 45.

30. Frederick Johnson, “Notes on the Ojibwa and Potawatomi of the Parry Island Reservation, Ontario,” *Indian Notes*, 6 (July 1929), 194–195.

Parry Island. The other anthropologist, Diamond Jenness, mentioned these jobs while still depicting the community as relatively disadvantaged. He cited a wider range of jobs than Johnson, but added, "Steady employment all the year round practically does not exist." Jenness also stated that the people gardened and collected wild fruits, but that "for most of their food supply they depend, like their white neighbours, on the stores."³¹

The women also pursued a mixed economic strategy. Those who were based on reserves pursued a limited range of employments and maintained the strong contribution to family economies that their foremothers had always made. Women in farming families were, of course, vital to the success of agricultural operations. Even where there was little farming, women were probably largely responsible for the gardens maintained by most families, which produced a significant portion of their food. As Eileen Green of Tyendinaga remarked, "We always had a garden. How else could we eat?"³² In addition, many women undoubtedly continued non-cash activities such as fishing, obtaining small game, tanning hides, making moccasins and clothing, and so on. Some of these items could also be sold on a small scale if there was a local market. To earn money, however, women had limited options. Around Georgian Bay, sales of wild berries and handicrafts, mainly baskets and bark work, were almost their only sources of cash. Tyendinaga was close enough to Deseronto and Belleville to permit commuting to housecleaning jobs, but such an option was far more limited in the Georgian Bay area. Overall, Aboriginal women's economic options were restricted, especially for participation in the cash economy. The economic non-viability of many reserves, and particularly their locations far from markets and sources of employment, were the major factor spurring the reserve departures that began in this period. Along with their male counterparts, women who applied for enfranchisement often mentioned their inability to earn a livelihood on the reserves.

First Nations Women and Paid Work

The patterns of women's paid labour documented in the enfranchisement case files and the Tyendinaga oral histories are in many ways similar to those of their non-Aboriginal counterparts, particularly working-class, immigrant, and racialized women. Canadian women's participation in paid labour rose throughout the 1920s and 1930s, both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the total work force. Women throughout Canada faced limited employment options in a dual labour market that segregated women into a small number of relatively low-status, poorly-paid jobs. Veronica Strong-Boag lists the main women's occupations: "Most women were employed as factory hands and

31. Diamond Jenness, *The Ojibwa Indians of Parry Island, Their Social and Religious Life* (Ottawa 1935), 10.

32. Eileen Green, in Brant, ed., *I'll Sing*, 45.

small shop assemblers, clerks and salespeople, teachers and nurses, servants and waitresses, and typists and secretaries.” To a large extent, occupations were determined by class. For working-class women, this meant they were largely restricted to jobs in the manufacturing and service sectors, though a high school education could increase their choices: “For the daughters of many working-class Canadians, jobs meant personal service and blue-collar occupations. If they were among the growing numbers of poorer folk who were fortunate enough to possess a high school diploma, their prospects were more likely in these decades to include clerical and sales employments as well.”³³ Middle-class women could work in clerical or retail positions or pursue professional training to become teachers, nurses, or social workers. Though a few Aboriginal women managed to become clerical workers, presumably by obtaining a high school diploma, in this period they were rarely admitted to the middle-class occupations of teaching and nursing.

The Canadian census of 1931 included aggregate statistics compiled by “racial origin” and sex, and “Indians” were included in these charts.³⁴ Such statistics permit a comparison between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women’s employment distributions, though it is only a rough guide, since only 3019 Aboriginal women were enumerated. These Aboriginal women did have somewhat different employment patterns than Canadian women overall. They were much more likely to be counted as “gainfully occupied” (i.e. paid) in agriculture (14.24 per cent) and in fishing, hunting, and trapping (13.65 per cent) than the average Canadian woman (3.62 per cent and 0.07 per cent, respectively). These statistics for agriculture suggest the extent to which Aboriginal women performed migrant farm labour as opposed (or in addition) to work on their own farms. The two other major categories for Aboriginal women were the same as for “all races” of women, namely manufacturing and service, but their distributions within these categories were different. Thirty-three per cent of Canadian women worked in personal service and almost 18 per cent in professional service, with a total of 52 per cent working in service occupations.³⁵ By contrast, over 36 per cent of Aboriginal women were concentrated in personal service and less than 2 per cent in the professional category, with a total of almost 41 per cent working in the service sector. Aboriginal women were more than twice as likely to work in manufacturing, where over 27 per cent of them worked compared to only 13 per cent of women in general. They

33. According to Veronica Strong-Boag, there were 490,150 women workers in 1921, making up 15.45 per cent of the total Canadian work force; by 1931, the 665,859 employed women represented 16.96 per cent of the work force, and by 1941, there were 832,840 women workers representing 19.85 per cent of the work force. As she points out, these statistics probably understate the numbers of women in paid employment. See Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled*, 43, 53.

34. Such a chart is provided in the census for 1921 as well, but since only 656 Aboriginal women were enumerated for 1921, these statistics are of doubtful value.

35. The other two service categories were public administration and recreational service.

manufactured mainly animal products (almost 16 per cent), to a lesser degree wood products (almost 8 per cent), and had relatively low involvement in textiles (3 per cent). Women “of all races” were concentrated fairly intensively in the textiles sector and had comparatively low participation in any other type of manufacturing.³⁶

These statistics are consistent with the oral and written documentation used for this article, which show Aboriginal women working on their own and other people's farms, taking factory jobs, and working as domestic servants. Like many working-class women, they often combined several income sources, worked at different jobs, and grew some of their own food. Indeed, the census practice of assigning people to a single job category fitted poorly with many people's lived experience and oversimplified the picture of the actual occupations that sustained people and families. Aboriginal women's economic lives involved a continuum of labour ranging from non-cash-oriented subsistence production to commercially oriented farming, handicraft production, and berry-picking, to wage labour in the capitalist economy. Some might spend considerable time in the bush, others were based on reserves, and yet more spent part or all of their time in urban centres where they could earn money. In the inter-war period, the majority of First Nations people were based on reserves, though many were away for periods of time performing wage labour. But the urbanization trend that became apparent in the 1950s was in its early stages in the 1920s and 1930s, as some people shifted to off-reserve residence and in many cases became urban-based. At that point they became eligible for the new enfranchisement process that was enacted in 1918, a choice that offered significant short-term financial benefits, but led to the long-term loss of Indian status and rights. The enfranchisement case files lend some insights into the economic realities and lived experiences behind this movement.

Women and Enfranchisement

The enfranchisement procedure was first introduced with Upper Canada's *Gradual Civilization Act*, passed in 1857, and was adopted into federal policy with the first Indian Act of 1869. Because few First Nations people pursued enfranchisement in its complicated original form, a simplified procedure was added to the Indian Act in 1918. This measure, aimed at off-reserve residents, helped spur a minor wave of enfranchisements in the inter-war years, in which the First Nations of southern Ontario were over-represented.³⁷ The intent of enfranchisement was frankly assimilative: First Nations people would be “civi-

36. Dominion Bureau of Statistics Canada, *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931*, Volume 7, “Occupations and Industries” (Ottawa 1936), 30–31.

37. For more information on enfranchisement in Ontario, see R.J. Brownlie, “A better citizen than lots of white men: First Nations Enfranchisement: An Ontario Case Study, 1918–1940,” *Canadian Historical Review*, 87 (March 2006), 29–52.

lized” and dispersed into the general population. There was a major financial incentive involved, since enfranchisees received their per capita share of any treaty annuities and band funds that belonged to the bands where they were members. For some bands, these added up to substantial sums. In the 1930s, one share of the Gibson Band’s timber money was well over \$400 and in 1937 one share from the Sheguiandah Band was \$582.87.³⁸ A man with a wife and children received a share for each family member, so that even smaller per capita amounts could become a significant sum for a nuclear family.

The enfranchisement procedure enacted in 1918 stated that an Indian man, or unmarried woman over the age of 21, could apply to be enfranchised if he or she held no reserve land, did not live on a reserve, and did not follow the “Indian mode of life.” Applicants had to prove they were self-supporting, morally upright, able to compete with whites, and “of sufficient intelligence to hold land in fee simple and otherwise to exercise all the rights and privileges of an enfranchised Indian.”³⁹ If these characteristics were confirmed by declarations from suitable non-Aboriginal authority figures, the application was approved. The applicant then received her or his proportionate share of the band funds and any treaty annuities or other payments received by his or her former band (a married man receiving those of his wife and children, too). An enfranchisee then became, officially, an ordinary citizen of Canada with full rights and responsibilities.⁴⁰

At first glance, it would appear that enfranchisees (and their descendants) lost a series of rights and benefits. These included treaty rights entitling them to live on a reserve, to receive treaty payments and other forms of financial compensation, and to participate in the affairs of their home communities, as well as Indian Act protections such as the exemptions from taxation and from seizure of property for debt. They forfeited the small advantages stemming from the DIA’s paternalistic role, including the minimal amounts of relief and other social assistance it provided, which constituted a rudimentary safety net. They also lost any legal hunting and fishing rights they might have had. But for most applicants, such rights and benefits were mostly illusory in practice. Hunting and fishing rights, even when guaranteed in treaties, were a dead letter at this time thanks to provincial enforcement of game laws. Most of the other legal and financial benefits associated with Indian status were effectively limited to people living on the reserves. The Indian agents who made the decisions about status and benefits tended to view long-term off-reserve residents as non-Indian and consequently denied them departmental assistance and

38. LAC, RG 10 (Indian Affairs), Series B-3, volume 7231, file 8022–32, Parry Sound Agency; 1936–1937, and file 8022–35, Parry Sound Agency; 1932–1942; volume 7226, file 8019–105, Manitoulin Island Agency, 1937.

39. Canada, *Sessional Papers*, 1920, Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs (Ottawa 1920), 31–2.

40. *Sessional Papers*, 1920, p.31.

sometimes even the treaty and interest payments linked to band membership.⁴¹ Thus, those who left the reserve usually experienced no benefits from Indian status except the semi-annual treaty and band fund payments, if these were not also denied.⁴² The lump sum payment that accompanied enfranchisement provided a real, though one-time, compensation for this loss.

Because enfranchisement was primarily an economic decision for applicants, the case files it generated contain considerable information about work lives, general economic circumstances, and sometimes future plans. Virtually all the applicants had moved off the reserves, some of them as children, to take advantage of work opportunities that were not available if they remained there. The enfranchisement records reveal significant participation in the process by women. One-quarter of the enfranchisement applications from the two agencies (Parry Sound and Manitowaning) came from women (28 women in total). These were single or widowed women, because married women could only become enfranchised with their husbands.⁴³ They had a very high success rate in their applications, even higher than men: in fact, of the files located for this study, all the women who made formal applications were approved to become enfranchised.⁴⁴ **The women showed a distinct preference for larger cities: fully half of those investigated here were in the largest cities of the region, Toronto (seven), Montreal (five), and Ottawa (two).** This is in keeping with the gendered parameters of work availability, which dictated that women's jobs were concentrated in urban centres.

While a few files do not specify occupations, it is clear that most of these women were gainfully employed, except for one or two older widows and two women thrown out of work by the Depression. By far the most common occupation was domestic work. Of the 28 women who applied, at least sixteen were

41. Indian agent Robert Lewis of Manitowaning was particularly inclined to discount the band membership of off-reserve residents, as he recorded in the case of many residents of Killarney, a largely Aboriginal and Métis fishing community on the north shore of Lake Huron.

42. The specific kinds of payments varied according to the circumstances of each band. Some had substantial funds from selling or leasing land, timber or minerals. Non-treaty groups such as the Manitoulin Island Unceded Band and the Gibson (Watha) Band had no treaty money, which usually meant they had small band funds. But Gibson members received annual payments from the surrender of their timber resources on the reserve. Upon enfranchisement, Gibson people received a payout of the timber money.

43. **Many women became enfranchised with their husbands or as minors with their fathers.** Only a minority of First Nations people applied for enfranchisement, especially in this period. The overall average for the whole country was 2 per cent of the status Indian population, and though the percentage was four times higher – about 8 per cent – for the two agencies considered here, this was still a small minority. For more details, see Brownlie, “A better citizen than lots of white men,” 29–52.

44. Agency records, especially those of Robert Lewis in Manitowaning, show that some women who inquired about enfranchisement were discouraged from applying because they could not qualify or because the agent felt they were better off retaining their status. Such women usually did not file formal applications.

employed as domestic servants, and one or two others were former domestics. This is a higher percentage of domestic workers (57 per cent) than the 1931 census showed for Aboriginal women as a whole (36 per cent). It may be surmised that the 1931 census managed to enumerate some of the many rural Aboriginal women who did not work as domestics. The next most common occupation was work as clerks, mainly in stores but possibly also in other types of companies. There were a few women who seemed to be in better-paid clerical jobs, working as stenographers or in banks and government employment. In several cases only the names of companies, such as “Dominion Engineering Company” or “Parker Dye Works,” are listed, leaving the nature of the job unclear: either such women were involved in production or they had clerical support jobs. One woman worked in Toronto as an interior decorator and apparently made a good living.⁴⁵

The fact that more than half of the women applying for enfranchisement were confined to domestic labour is unsurprising, given how common this occupation remained, especially for working-class, immigrant, and racialized women. Indeed, in the 1930s more women were compelled to work as domestics because other employment options had shrunk so much, a situation that probably affected Aboriginal women even more than their non-Aboriginal counterparts.⁴⁶ One can be fairly certain that racism limited the options of visibly Aboriginal women, and there may have been a few who did not have a strong command of the English language, as Aboriginal languages were still spoken almost exclusively on most of the Georgian Bay reserves. But many of the women had lived in urban centres for years, sometimes for their whole lives, and must have spoken good English. Domestic work was always a low-status, poorly paid job, and Canadian-born, white women tried to avoid it.⁴⁷ The job entailed the performance of menial labour and personal service, poor pay, long hours, and close quarters with employers, in a relationship of obvious hierarchy and dominance. Disadvantages were magnified with live-in work, which also exposed women to sexual advances from the men in the household and the certainty of losing one’s home upon dismissal. Unfortunately, in most cases, the enfranchisement files do not show whether the women were day workers or lived in their employers’ homes, though in two cases they appar-

45. LAC, RG 10, Series B-3, volume 7232, file 8022–62, Doreen D. to DIA, 15 January 1940.

46. *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931*, Volume 7, “Occupations and Industries,” 12–13. See also Strong-Boag, *New Day Recalled*, 54.

47. See Genevieve Leslie, “Domestic Service in Canada, 1880–1920,” in Janice Acton, Penny Goldsmith and Bonnie Shepard, eds., *Women at Work* (Toronto 1974), 71; Varpu Lindstrom, “‘I Won’t Be a Slave!’ Finnish Domestic Workers in Canada, 1911–1930,” in Franca Iacovetta with Paula Draper and Robert Ventresca, eds., *A Nation of Immigrants. Women, Workers, and Communities in Canadian History, 1840s–1960s* (Toronto 1998), 166–185; and Sedef Arat-Koç, “From ‘Mothers of the Nation’ to Migrant Workers: Immigration Policies and Domestic Workers in Canadian History,” in Veronica Strong-Boag, Mona Gleason, and Adele Perry, eds., *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women’s History* (Don Mills 2002), 290–1.

ently were “live-in” domestics. The files also reveal little about the applicants’ feelings about this kind of work, except in the case of one woman, Lillias L. This woman had formerly worked for the Sun Life Assurance Company in Montreal, but had to resign due to illness. By the time she recovered, the company was unable to reinstate her because of Depression conditions, and she was forced to resort to domestic labour. Her letters make clear her preference for the job at Sun Life, and state that the company had promised “to put me back on the staff as soon as business picks up.” It appears that Lillias L. was a live-in domestic.⁴⁸

These women’s participation in clerical work, though small-scale, is in keeping with the expansion of this kind of work in the period and with its concurrent feminization. Clerical work was another relatively low-paying job ghetto for women, an industry that became feminized largely because employers could pay women so much less. At the same time, it paid considerably better than domestic service while offering shorter work hours and greater independence. These positions required relatively high levels of education, literacy, and facility in English, and would have carried higher status and salaries. Indeed, some of these jobs may have allowed women access to middle-class status, something most of their peers could hardly aspire to. DIA policy was not designed to move First Nations people into the middle class, but somehow these women had acquired more than the average education. One was even a stenographer, a position that had carried considerable prestige and unusually high salaries (compared to other women’s jobs) before World War I. Although this resulted in a rush to training schools and consequent glut of stenographers,⁴⁹ it probably did allow this particular Anishinabe woman to earn a reasonable living on the north shore of Lake Huron, where she lived.⁵⁰

Enfranchisement became attractive, in most cases, because the applicants had already made a permanent move away from the reserve and did not intend to return. They had pursued the course that federal Indian policy was designed to promote, integrating themselves into the wage labour economy and usually living in predominantly non-Aboriginal communities. The worsening economic conditions on reserves favoured this course, though it was still a minority choice at this point. Though the women applying for enfranchisement were probably not earning very large incomes, they seem to have been successful enough to support themselves and remain active in the urban

48. LAC, RG 10, Series B-3, file 8022–35, Lillias L. to DIA, 16 December 1933. Ms. L. gave her address as that of her employer, and when the employer moved, sent the new address as her own contact address. For a powerful account of the hazards of live-in domestic work, see Makeda Silvera, *Silenced: Talks with working-class Caribbean women about their lives and struggles as Domestic Workers in Canada* (Toronto 1989).

49. See Graham S. Lowe, “Women, Work, and the Office: The Feminization of Clerical Occupations in Canada, 1901–1931,” in Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Claire Fellman, eds., *Rethinking Canada. The Promise of Women’s History* (Mississauga 1991), 269–85.

50. LAC, RG 10, Series B-3, file 8019-46, Margaret R. to DIA, 3 May 1929.

wage economy. By applying for enfranchisement, they were choosing never to reside on-reserve again, and this choice seems to indicate some level of self-confidence, though it carried specific costs.

Race, Gender, and Self-Representation in Enfranchisement Case Files

Enfranchisement case files illuminate more than economics: they are also valuable sources for the analysis of “Indianness” and “whiteness,” permitting investigation of women’s strategic self-representation with respect to race, gender, and status. Applicants for enfranchisement had to prove their suitability to become enfranchised and to gain full Canadian citizenship. To be approved they had to show that they could “compete” successfully with “whites,” and more centrally that they had adopted Euro-Canadian and Christian values relating to gender, citizenship, and the importance of work. The files are replete with implications about the meaning of whiteness and the means by which an Indian could become white. They also reflect some of the contestation over these categories between government gatekeepers and First Nations people seeking a place in the new order.

Correspondence from DIA officials and other Euro-Canadians reflected the dominant assumptions about Aboriginal women in the period, assumptions that were clearly familiar to the women who applied for enfranchisement. In their own correspondence with the DIA, the women engaged carefully and assertively with Euro-Canadian discourses about women, Indianness, competition with whites, and the need for self-support. They also addressed Euro-Christian ideologies about the individualized worker as a symbol of self-reliance, responsibility, and moral worthiness. Hazel L. wrote the department in 1934, directly addressing her ability to navigate urban life and the dominant economy, “For the past 8 years I have been employed in Montreal in different positions and always managed to hold my own in competition with the white people.... In fact I was actually living the same as the white people and I am safe in stating that I was better off than a lot of them.”⁵¹ This woman’s statements directly confronted the issue of ambition and competition, central concerns in the construction of racial difference and in judgements about an Indian’s eligibility to receive “white” status. Not only was she able to participate in the dominant society and compete successfully with whites, she was actually more successful than some of them.

The words of applicants frequently suggest such a strategic self-representation and a clear understanding of the moral economy underpinning officials’ judgements about them. Both men and women often mentioned that they planned to make some sort of investment with their enfranchisement money, countering the image of “improvidence” that was a central feature of colo-

51. LAC, RG 10, Series B-3, file 8022-35, Hazel L. to DIA, 27 December 1933.

nial constructions of Indianness. In the case of women, the most commonly mentioned aspiration was educational advancement, although some hoped to start a business. **Women quite frequently made statements about their** desire to improve their financial security and obtain more satisfactory types of employment through education, while stressing their previous accomplishments in the work force. **Louise K., for instance, an older widow in poor health,** stated that she hoped to use her enfranchisement money to take a course in sewing and be in a better position to be self-supporting.⁵² **Agent Robert Lewis** reported of another applicant that she had “covered three years in high school” and had told him “that it is her wish to take a profession which in order to attain will require money and for that reason it would be to her interest to become enfranchised.”⁵³ Joseph L., the father of another applicant, wrote the department that his daughter “would like to get out all her share of the Gibson timber money” because “she would like to learn some thing better than what she is doing now. Some thing she can depend on later on.”⁵⁴

A noteworthy feature of the files containing letters from the women applicants is the tone of independence and self-assertion they take, their self-representation as ambitious, active, and self-reliant. **Mae R. confronted the** chronic delays of DIA administration forthrightly in her letters to Indian agent John Daly. In February, after an initial wait of four or five months for a response, she told him, “please write to the Dept. every week and wake them up, until I’ll get my money, and don’t let me wait another [unreadable] months.” Six months later, still without her enfranchisement and payout of band funds, she threatened to keep writing Daly until she received her money: “Mr. Daly I am sorry to trouble you so much. I am writing to you and will keep writing to you until I’ll get my money. P[h]one the Department I have been waiting to get the cheque sooner you sent my cheque sooner you get rest. I am troubling you, or will take a further step, more trouble.”⁵⁵ Clearly amused, Daly urged the department to complete her enfranchisement, noting “this young woman seems to know how to get after things.”⁵⁶

Other women, especially those with skills that gave them more financial independence, were emphatic about their earning power and ability to support themselves. Margaret R. wrote that she worked at “the C.R.R. [C.P.R.] Station and have been for the past years. I am a stenographer and quite capable of earning my own living.”⁵⁷ Another woman, who separated from her husband

52. LAC, RG 10, Series B-3, volume 7226, file 8019-91, Daly to DIA, 16 November 1936.

53. LAC, RG 10, Series B-3, volume 7226, file 8019-105, Agent R.J. Lewis to DIA, 22 September 1937.

54. LAC, RG 10, Series B-3, file 8022-35, Joseph L. to DIA, 12 November 1937.

55. LAC, RG 10, Series B-3, file 8022-32, Mae R. to John Daly, Feb. 5, 1937 and Aug. 16, 1937.

56. LAC, RG 10, Series B-3, file 8022-32, Daly to DIA, 17 August 1937.

57. LAC, RG 10, Series B-3, file 8019-46, Margaret R. to DIA, 3 May 1929.

shortly after their enfranchisement was completed, attempted to obtain her share of the money via the Indian Department. In the process she explained her ability to take care of herself financially: “since he has never supported me, and I am capable of supporting myself and also have a business by myself. I really can’t see why and how he could keep from me what is [duly] mine.”⁵⁸

These women were generally clear about what they wanted, and enfranchisement for them was virtually always about the money that accompanied the change in legal status. Quite often they did not even reference enfranchisement itself when initiating the process, but rather referred to band funds, interest money, or (in the case of Gibson Band members) timber money. Several applicants engaged lawyers to write the department on their behalf, and clearly explained the matter as being related to money. For instance, the Sault Ste Marie law firm MacInnis and Brien wrote in 1937, “The above named lady apparently has made application for her interest money from the Manitoulin Island unceded band.”⁵⁹ Hazel L. initiated her enfranchisement process because she was out of work, and began her first letter, “I am writing in connection with our Gibson Timber money I am asking the Dept to allow me get the money from the Capital funds,” explaining at the same time her desire to “start a little business of my own.”⁶⁰

First Nations women’s choices about enfranchisement at this time should be seen in the context of their limited employment opportunities, the desire to improve their financial circumstances, and the inaccessibility of band funds. Enfranchisement was the only mechanism by which individual First Nations people could gain access to their portion of the band funds, which belonged to the band collectively and were held in Ottawa under DIA control. Even for bands with fewer resources, the amounts received upon enfranchisement were high enough to be significant incentives. It may be, in fact, that enfranchisement was perceived as something analogous to a right, insofar as it was the only mechanism by which they could obtain their portion of band funds. Moreover, band members living off-reserve obtained little benefit from their band membership: they were denied many kinds of help that on-reserve residents were granted and in many cases did not even receive the annuities or other annual payments to which their band membership entitled them.⁶¹ Through enfranchisement, they could secure concrete, one-time financial benefits in a lump sum and offset the other benefits lost by leaving the reserve. Moreover, most of the money in band funds derived from compensation for the loss of Aboriginal lands and resources. Thus, when the enfranchisees acquired their per capita

58. LAC, RG 10, Series B-3, file 8022-62, Isabel D. to DIA, 15 January 1940.

59. LAC, RG 10, Series B-3, volume 7226, file 8019-91, MacInnis and Brien to DIA, 27 April 1937.

60. LAC, RG 10, Series B-3, file 8022-35, Hazel L. to DIA, 27 September 1932.

61. For a full elaboration of this argument, see Brownlie, “A better citizen than lots of white men.”

share of the band fund, they were effectively procuring the sole patrimony remaining to them from the ancestral territories and resources appropriated by non-Natives through the colonial process.

Women and Work at Tyendinaga

The oral testimonies of Tyendinaga Mohawk elders recorded by Beth Brant in the 1990s contain a good deal of information about women's lives and work in the 1920s and 1930s. These brief life histories are notable for their upbeat approaches and their tales of happy times, but they also bespeak material hardships and restrictions. In this way, the book helps provide a different kind of subjectivity than the carefully constructed self-representations in sources like the case files. It is true that these are stories told long after the fact, with the benefit of hindsight, the potential for nostalgia, and a human desire to create a positive evaluation of one's own life. At the same time, these stories address negative experiences and issues like discrimination that could not be broached at all in enfranchisement correspondence. They are also specific about money matters and provide more detail about the range of work women performed. The women tell of hard work and challenges that are clearly suggested but not detailed in the enfranchisement files, especially difficulties earning money, getting an education, and dealing with discrimination. Helen Brant Spencer commented on the ways that a lack of skills and qualifications affected employment opportunities: "People had to take jobs that were available. You see, they weren't educated to hold better jobs, and to have skills that paid better money. Oh no, they took whatever jobs were available."⁶²

The oldest elders generally speak of growing up on farms, so their mothers in the early years of the 20th century were probably largely homemakers and farmers. But the next generation branched out. Eva Maracle, the oldest of the women, worked at a munitions factory in Toronto during World War I, doing night shifts soldering the heads onto shells: "I got the same wages as the white folks. I did the same work they did."⁶³ Eileen Green's sister Edie put herself through nursing school and became a nurse working in Ottawa, a rare accomplishment for an Aboriginal woman of her time.⁶⁴ Helen Brant Spencer married a white man who worked in cheesemaking and learned related skills from him, becoming quite expert at making cheese and "forking the curds." She also "did all the books at the cheese factory."⁶⁵ Helena Pfefferle began her paid work as a child picking corn, berries, and other crops, a task she describes as largely Native-dominated in the area near Belleville: "It was mostly Natives

62. Helen Brant Spencer, in Brant, ed., *I'll Sing*, 52.

63. Helen Brant Spencer, in Brant, ed., *I'll Sing*, 23.

64. Eileen Green, in Brant, ed., *I'll Sing*, 45.

65. Helen Brant Spencer, in Brant, ed., *I'll Sing*, 53.

doing the picking. They'd send big trucks over here, and took the people to work the fields. Maybe I got paid 10 or 15 cents an hour." By the age of fourteen or fifteen she graduated to industrial work and for the rest of her life worked in factories or the local cannery.⁶⁶

For some, no single form of work predominated. Susie Janes Lynch describes a greatly varied set of work roles that included berry-picking as a child, mid-wifery and herbalism, fishing for mudcats and suckers, and cleaning and skinning the products of her brothers' hunts, as well as occasional stints cleaning white people's houses for pay. She also raised garden crops, including the "Three Sisters" (corn, beans, squash) which she grew according to the age-old Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) understanding of the value and efficiency of sowing these crops together: "I used to grow things – corn, beets, tomatoes. And squash and beans to go with the corn. You got to grow them together or it isn't any good."⁶⁷

Like the Georgian Bay women, the Tyendinaga Mohawk women undertook paid domestic work much more than any other form of wage labour. Such work began with their unpaid chores as young girls in their own homes, a need that in some families was seen to outweigh the value of schooling. Susie Janes Lynch, born into a family of two daughters and seven sons, began her household labours early: "We were crowded and right from the time I could work, I had to work.... I couldn't hardly even go to school, I had to stay home and work. They told me I can't sit on my ass in that schoolroom, I had to work."⁶⁸ Others, too, describe youths in which housework and farm chores played a major role.

Without training for more skilled types of employment, and raised to the gendered household tasks assigned to most girls, young Mohawk women quickly discovered that cleaning jobs were the easiest paid work to obtain. Eva Maracle, who was employed in the munitions factory during the war, spent most of her life performing paid (as well as unpaid) domestic labour. She started work at about fourteen or fifteen, as soon as she finished grade eight, obtaining her first job at a hotel in Belleville. At sixteen, she moved with her sister to Toronto and both took positions as live-in maids, managing to find employment in relatively close proximity. Apart from her wartime factory job, domestic labour occupied the rest of Maracle's life in the paid work force, including a period as a chambermaid at the King Edward Hotel in Toronto and a return to domestic work when her children were teenagers. Of the other five

66. Helena Pfefferle, in Brant, ed., *I'll Sing*, 88.

67. Susie Janes Lynch, in Brant, ed., *I'll Sing*, 38–9. The Haudenosaunee system of growing the Three Sisters involved sowing all three crops together on mounds, the bean plants twining up the cornstalks and the squash vines winding around the lower part of the mound, choking out weeds. The beans added nitrogen to the soil that benefited the other two plants.

68. Susie Janes Lynch, in Brant, ed., *I'll Sing*, 38.

women narrators born before 1914, three worked as domestics and a fourth had two sisters who did so.⁶⁹

These women's reminiscences shed some light on the subjective experience of cleaning other people's houses. Several comment on the way they were treated, in both positive and negative ways. Eileen Green, who cleaned houses in Belleville, said of her employers, "Some of the people were nice. Others, well ..."⁷⁰ Eva Maracle presented a more positive evaluation of her experience, some 80 years after the fact: "Oh, I used to clean the house and dust and get the meals. And that's where I learned to cook! My sister's employer was good to her too. We were lucky. I enjoyed it." She also enjoyed her time with the eleven or so other chambermaids when she was employed at the King Edward Hotel, visiting in the chambermaids' dining room in the evening where they would chat and trade jokes.⁷¹ Susie Janes Lynch, who received little schooling and taught herself to read and speak English, appears to have felt at least a certain amount of respect from her employers, though her words betray her suspicion of prejudice on their part: "Even the white people I cleaned house for thought I was pretty smart. Maybe they thought that Indians wasn't smart, and was surprised at how smart I was."⁷²

For the Tyendinaga women, wage labour involved travel, as there was virtually no paid work to be found on the reserve. Picking berries, tomatoes, and corn and performing other hired labour for local farmers was a summertime family occupation for many there, as well as at the Six Nations reserve where Ella Claus grew up: "My closest friends and families went to the berry farms, fruit farms around Niagara. They went in May and maybe didn't come back until late September because they worked picking fruit, or sowing and planting."⁷³ Such work could be performed as a family group, with the children contributing their labour, so that mothers as well as fathers of younger children were able to be involved.⁷⁴ To get jobs cleaning houses, travel was also required. For Eileen Green, the locus of work was nearby Belleville, where she could get a ride from a neighbour and be dropped off near the houses she cleaned. Helen Brant Spencer's two older sisters were maids, one of them working for the bank manager in Deseronto. This position included accompanying her employers on their summer holiday to look after their three sons. As noted,

69. The fifth, who was the only one to complete high school, does not recount anything about paid work.

70. Eileen Green, in Brant, ed., *I'll Sing*, 44.

71. Eva Maracle, in Brant, ed., *I'll Sing*, 22.

72. Susie Janes Lynch, in Brant, ed., *I'll Sing*, 39.

73. Ella Claus, 55–6; Susie Janes Lynch, 39, in Brant, ed., *I'll Sing*.

74. Helena Pfefferle: "Everybody worked, even the little kids. Picking berries, tomatoes, husking corn. When one place was finished, we'd go to the next. It was like that all summer long." (Brant, ed., *I'll Sing*, 87).

Eva Maracle and her sister began their careers in Belleville and then moved to Toronto, where Eva spent most of her time until she married eight years later. Finally, Susie Janes Lynch described meeting her husband in Hamilton “after I went up there to work.”⁷⁵

The remuneration for these kinds of labour was far from lavish, and several women described themselves as poor, at least in their childhoods. At the same time, they emphasized the relatively low cost of living and people’s ability to make do. Even men earned low wages for the unskilled labour they performed: Eva Maracle recounted that the Tyendinaga men used to unload ore boats “for a dollar a day, twelve hours a day. And that was a lot of money at that time, because you could buy six quart-boxes of strawberries for a quarter, and ten cents a dozen for eggs. And ten cents for a loaf of bread.” She also noted that she and her sister could “do a lot” with the eight dollars a month they earned as live-in maids in Toronto in the 1910s: “We used to send half our money home to mother because there was still younger kids at home. We would have enough money for ourselves, to buy clothes, to go see a show, vaudeville shows. My sister and I had fun.”⁷⁶ Nevertheless, this wage was well below the average of \$18–20 a month earned by domestic servants in Ontario in 1916.⁷⁷ Susie Janes Lynch, whose father was a poor provider, spoke of picking berries with her family as a child: “I never saw a cent of the money I made. My mother worked like a man, but my father was good for nothing. Oh, we were so poor.” Janes Lynch also received money or food from most of the women she attended in childbirth.⁷⁸ Helena Pfefferle noted the poor pay received for picking work: “Maybe I got paid 10 or 15 cents an hour. I went up finally to 50 cents an hour. It sounded pretty good back then. Times was bad then.”⁷⁹

More than just pay scales has changed since their youth, according to the women. Eileen Green discussed the work sharing practices that were common in her younger days, and the many kinds of work people performed for no pay: “We used to have quilting bees and then there’d be harvest time and the people would come and help. You’d get a big meal in the afternoon, but nobody got paid for the work. I don’t know if anyone would do that now! What a shame. I think I’ve probably made about a thousand quilts in my lifetime.”⁸⁰ Stretching scarce resources and obtaining necessities without cash were important skills under these circumstances, testifying to resourcefulness and ingenuity. Helen Brant Spencer spoke with pride and admiration about the ways her people

75. Brant, ed., *I’ll Sing*, 21–2, 49, 44, 39.

76. Eva Maracle, in Brant, ed., *I’ll Sing*, 19, 22.

77. Ceta Ramkhalawansingh, “Women in the Great War,” in Acton, Goldsmith, and Shepard, eds., *Women at Work*, 278.

78. Susie Janes Lynch, in Brant, ed., *I’ll Sing*, 38, 40.

79. Helena Pfefferle, in Brant, ed., *I’ll Sing*, 88.

80. Eileen Green in Brant, ed., *I’ll Sing*, 45.

handled poverty and lived an ethic of surviving with dignity: "And so, you were poor and you learned to cope, that's what we did.... The women back then didn't seem to let anything bother them. They had these really big families and we'd be poor and somehow, they'd make do and see that we had enough to eat."⁸¹

Race and Racism: Tyendinaga Women's Representations

The Tyendinaga women trod carefully when addressing issues of race and discrimination, but most had something to say on these subjects. Their remarks seldom speak directly to issues of work and economics, but more often refer to social interaction or experiences at school. Eva Maracle referenced the problem with respect to her work situation as a domestic, but claimed that she had fortunately escaped discrimination from her employers: "I didn't have any problems because I'm Native, but I was one of the lucky ones." Clearly such discrimination was a common experience for other Aboriginal women. It is also significant that, if her memory of her wage is accurate, she and her sister were being paid less than half what was common for domestic labour around this time.⁸² Other women told of experiencing discrimination, mistreatment, and ostracism at high school, where non-Aboriginal students were the majority. Helen Brant Spencer stated, "But the Native students were treated different from the white students. I don't like to say, it was so long ago, but we persevered."⁸³ Ella Claus went into more detail: "Being a Native was hard at school, pretty hard. My high school days were not happy ones. I had no social contact with the people in town, but I didn't care, because all my friends were on reserve.... There were a few of us Natives, so we stuck together. So, I wouldn't let the discrimination bother me." Claus did, however, make friends with two white girls and kept in touch with them for many years after. She was resilient and completed high school, with strong encouragement from her parents.⁸⁴

It is worth highlighting that the issue of discrimination was most often raised in connection with schooling. In part this arose from the fact that attending high school brought these Mohawk girls into contact with non-Aboriginal children and thus confronted all the students with the issue of race and difference. But the effect of racism was to make it considerably more difficult for the Mohawk students to finish their schooling, and thus to acquire the skills and qualifications they needed to obtain better-paid work. Such contention around education is no accident: colonialism requires the establishment of hierarchical distinctions that are maintained in part by differentials in income, status,

81. Helen Brant Spencer, in Brant, ed., *I'll Sing*, 51–2.

82. Eva Maracle, in Brant, ed., *I'll Sing*, 22.

83. Helen Brant Spencer, in Brant, ed., *I'll Sing*, 51.

84. Ella Claus, in Brant, ed., *I'll Sing*, 57.

and knowledge. Education has proven the Achilles heel of colonial regimes in Canada as in many other places, as it taught colonized peoples the skills to fight back. But these were hard-won skills, gained either in the painful experience of residential schools or by persisting at high school despite mistreatment from other students, and often from teachers as well.

Another issue that loomed large in women's accounts was the Mohawk language and the role of schooling in eradicating it. All had parents **who had** spoken the language, and all but two lost it themselves because of the government policy of punishing Mohawk language use in classrooms. They expressed strong regret about this loss and anger against the government for its policy. Eva Maracle explained, "in my generation we were not allowed to say one word of Mohawk language. If you did, you got the strap. And that was the government did that. So this is why we don't understand the Mohawk language, and that's a shame."⁸⁵ Susie Janes Lynch, one of only two women in the book who retained the Mohawk language, directly linked this fact with her inability to attend school as a child: "Maybe it was good I didn't get schooling or I might've lost my language too. It's a dirty shame how they've lost the language. I always said I'd never lose it, even though I married a white man once. That didn't make me turn white."⁸⁶

Conclusion

Comparing the evidence in the case files with the oral testimony of the Tyendinaga women, many parallels with regard to work experience, social realities, and world views are obvious. Both groups of women stressed the importance of education levels in shaping their opportunities. Acquiring much education was unusual for First Nations people at this time – attending high school was a minority experience, and it always required leaving the reserve to go to school. Off-reserve schooling meant extra costs, and often entailed boarding with a non-Aboriginal family in a town (or attending a residential school, but in this period only a small minority of southern Ontario Native children were placed in these institutions). Moreover, the DIA's official policy of ensuring some education for its clients did not typically extend to the provision of high school, much less any kind of professional training. These realities were significant factors in the women's work experiences. Both groups testify to limited opportunity and financial hardship, as well as racial discrimination. Those applying for enfranchisement often spoke of trying to attain more education, although the files do not show whether or not they were able to do so.

The case files generated through the enfranchisement process provide a

85. Eva Maracle, in Brant, ed., *I'll Sing*, 19–20.

86. Susie Janes Lynch, in Brant, ed., *I'll Sing*, 39. The other woman who retained the Mohawk language learned it by listening to her parents, speaking it with her husband, and finally by going to school to perfect her knowledge (Ada Doreen, in Brant, ed., *I'll Sing*, 95).

window on the occupations and experiences of a small group of First Nations women who left Ontario reserves in the 1920s and 1930s to find work. As part of a significant minority of Aboriginal women participating in the movement off reserves and into urban centres, these women revealed a set of strategies for escaping the poverty, marginalization, and government domination they experienced on reserves. They tended to move to larger cities, and were successful enough in their economic and social integration to choose enfranchisement, a decision that made their reserve departure irreversible.

The reminiscences of the Tyendinaga women also reveal considerable mobility, related largely to the availability of work for themselves and, in some cases, their husbands. Mobility itself, then, was not the sole reason for enfranchisement; in fact, it was the norm for a sizable portion of the Aboriginal population. Leaving the reserve did not necessarily mean a choice to become enfranchised, nor was it necessarily a permanent departure. People pursued the opportunities that presented themselves and moved on and off reserve accordingly. In the general population, urbanization slowed considerably during the Great Depression, and for many First Nations people this period of hardship may well have meant a return to the reserve, where one at least did not have to pay rent. The trend to urbanization of First Nations people, however, definitely began in this period, and it expanded after 1945 for the same reasons: lack of employment, services, and amenities on-reserve.

First Nations women in the inter-war years demonstrated great tenacity in obtaining work and education, as well as coping with discrimination. Contrary to today's persistent media images of Aboriginal unemployment, their records and reminiscences reveal lifetimes of hard work, self-support, and self-respect. These women and their male counterparts participated actively in the economy of southern Ontario. In their interactions with the Indian Department, they showed a thorough understanding of the racial constructions shaping non-Aboriginal perceptions of them and sought to counteract racial mythologies about Aboriginal idleness and improvidence. Enfranchisement applicants proved their record of steady, successful employment and outlined their plans for maximizing the benefits of their enfranchisement money. These women had success at least to the extent that they achieved their goal of obtaining enfranchisement and the cash payout that accompanied it. Those who retained their Indian status (or regained it through Bill C-31, like one of the Tyendinaga women) were able to combine active work force participation with their attachment to the reserve community. Mobility was the key to many of these attainments. Whether reserve departure was permanent or temporary, both groups experienced periods of urban residence while also, in many cases, maintaining a place in the reserve community. These were the factors that helped preserve stable reserve communities while ensuring a sufficient economic base for the people as a whole. On this foundation were built the socially and economically sound reserve communities of present-day southern Ontario.

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