

# 'We always had things to do': The Paid and Unpaid Work of Anglophone Children Between the 1920s and the 1960s

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

By the 1920S child labour and school attendance legislation had almost eliminated the full-time labour of those under fifteen. However, interview data show that both middle- and working-class Canadian children continued to do a great deal of work in their households. Many young boys and girls also worked at regular and irregular part-time paying jobs. The earnings of working-class children often stood between their families and real economic hardship, while those of middle-class youngsters reduced pressure on tight family budgets. In addition to its contribution to family economies, children's work played a considerable role in developing the gender identities of both girls and boys.

## 'We always had things to do':

### The Paid and Unpaid Work of Anglophone Children Between the 1920s and the 1960s

Neil Sutherland

WHATEVER ELSE CHILDREN HISTORICALLY have done as they grew up, most have spent some of their waking hours as workers. Although historians probably have always known this to be true, when they examined the topic of children at work they focused their interest on the efforts of those who wanted to control or prevent the most visibly-exploitive forms of child labour. Traditional accounts of child labour gave little attention to the place that work itself played in the life course of boys and girls in all social classes.

In recent years, however, historians have begun to describe the ways in which families interwove the work and education of their young in practical and long-term apprenticeships for adulthood. In preindustrial times, learning by doing, mostly in the family setting, the work at which they would spend their lives formed the core of youthful education. Thus, although industrialization and large scale urbanization did not introduce child labour, they added to the locations in which it took place. Many boys and girls moved from family farms and out of small (often family) workshops into mines or large factories. Others were exploited in family sweatshops as their homes became outposts of large enterprises.<sup>1</sup> As members of the

<sup>1</sup>In "Orphans, Idiots, Lunatics, and Historians: Recent Approaches to the History of Child Welfare in Canada," *Histoire sociale/Social History*, 18 (mai-May 1985), 133-45, John Bullen has noted and commented on much of the Canadian and other appropriate international literature on these and other topics in the recent history of childhood. In addition to the accounts of child labour referred to in Bullen's article, a number of studies have added to our knowledge of boys' work in mining and other industries. For mining, see Ian McKay, "The Realm of Uncertainty: The Experience of Work in the Cumberland Coal Mines, 1873-1927," *Acadiensis*, 16 (Autumn 1986), 3-57; Lynn Bowen, *Boss Whistle: The Coal Miners of Vancouver Island Remember* (Lantzville, B.C. 1982); Robert McIntosh, "Canada's Boy Miners," *The Beaver*, 67 (December 1987-January 1988), 34-8; his "The Boys in the Nova Scotian Coal Mines: 1873-1923," *Acadiensis*, 16 (Spring 1987), 35-50; and his "Patterns of Child Labour: Victorian Labour Markets for Colliery Boys in Nova Scotia and British Columbia," Unpublished paper to the Seventh Atlantic Studies Conference, Edinburgh, May 1988. For a first-hand account, see Dan J. MacDonald (with Ed Payne), "Into the Mines — as a Child," *Atlantic Advocate*, 57 (August 1967),

Neil Sutherland, "'We always had things to do': The Paid and Unpaid Work of Anglophone Children Between the 1920s and the 1960s," *Labour/Le Travail*, 25 (Spring 1990), 105-141.

family wage-unit, their incomes, as Lorna Hurl explains, continued to make an important and sometimes an absolutely essential contribution to the economic survival of their families.<sup>2</sup> In addition, as the late John Bullen has shown, many children continued to work in and around their homes.<sup>3</sup> By the mid-1890s, however, a major restructuring of many work places led to significant decline in demand for full-time child labour. The accompanying rise in the purchasing power of factory workers permitted an increasing proportion of working-class families to withhold their children from the labour force. Only then were many children able to take full advantage of formal schooling, itself on the verge of major transformation by new ideas about child-rearing, and about the kind of schooling necessary to produce an efficient work force. Nevertheless, a certain amount of conflict persisted between some families' need for the full-time labour of their children and the state's demand that all children attend school.<sup>4</sup> By the 1920s, however, the state had triumphed over most Anglophone families; most children enrolled in school, and, when compared with their predecessors of a generation before, they attended more regularly, and stayed in school longer.<sup>5</sup>

Full-time schooling, however, absorbed much less of children's time than had full-time work. Voluntary and parochial organizations, the children themselves, and most importantly, parents devised activities to fill those hours available before and after school, on weekends, and during school-vacation periods. In particular, between World War I and the 1960s and even beyond, Anglophone urban parents insisted that children spend a lot of time contributing to the family economy.<sup>6</sup>

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21-23. In two fine papers, Jessie Chisholm discusses child labour and youthful strikes: "'Hang Her Down': Strikes in St. John's, 1890-1914," paper to the Seventh Atlantic Canada Studies Conference, Edinburgh, May 1988; "Organizing on the Waterfront: the Longshoremen's Protective Union (LSPU) St. John's, Newfoundland, 1900-1914," paper to the Canadian Historical Association, June 1988. For a current account of the nature of children's work around the world see Elias Mendelivich, *Children at Work* (Geneva 1979).

<sup>2</sup>Lorna F. Hurl, "Restricting Child Factory Labour in Late Nineteenth Century Ontario", *Labour/Le Travail*, 21 (Spring 1988), 87-121.

<sup>3</sup>John Bullen, "Hidden Workers: Child Labour and the Family Economy in Late Nineteenth-Century Urban Ontario," *Labour/Le Travail*, 18 (Fall 1986), 163-87. The work of children in a family setting is also described in Joy Parr, *Labouring Children: British Immigrant Apprentices to Canada, 1869-1924* (Montreal 1980), and Jane Sygne, "The Transition From School to Work: Growing Up Working Class in Early 20th Century Hamilton, Ontario," in K. Ishwaran, ed., *Childhood and Adolescence in Canada*, (Toronto 1979), 249-69.

<sup>4</sup>John Bullen, "Children of the Industrial Age: Children, Work and Welfare in Late Nineteenth-Century Ontario," PhD dissertation, University of Ottawa, 1989, ch. 7.

<sup>5</sup>Neil Sutherland, *Children in English-Canadian Society: Framing the Twentieth Century Consensus* (Toronto 1976), 164-6.

<sup>6</sup>Even today, and especially in rural and in immigrant communities, children are still an important element in family economies. In February 1987, for example, a Vancouver family initiated a lawsuit in the death of their 14 year-old daughter in a schoolground accident. The parents claimed that she "did most of the cleaning, cooking and household duties in the family home and just before her death had planned and coordinated the purchase of a grocery store operated by the family." *Vancouver Sun*, 4 February 1987, A3. A 1979 study of children in Nebraska showed that the vast majority of those sampled were required to do chores. Lynn K. White and David B. Brinkerhoff, "Children's Work in the Family: Its Significance and Meaning," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 4 (November 1981), 789-98.

Relative prosperity in the 1920s brought larger houses and more yards for children to work in. The Depression forced parents to incorporate children's work into the "make-do" requirements of the time. Although growing prosperity in the late 1940s and 1950s began to change the working lives of children, not until the 1960s did a variety of social and economic changes end deeply-rooted patterns of children's work. Since children's work was grounded in ideology as well as necessity, it was as important in the upbringing of middle-class children throughout this period as it was in that of their working-class contemporaries. This paper describes children's work as young people themselves saw it, and how they (and their parents) fitted it into the structure of their lives. The paper distinguishes between the unpaid work that children did within households, and the paid work they did outside the family. Both in working-class and middle-class families, boys and girls alike made their greatest contribution to the functioning of their families through household work. Nonetheless, in many working-class families the paid work of boys and girls also helped provide basic necessities. Within the middle class, and after the Second World War, in an increasing proportion of working-class families as well, the paid work of children also contributed in a less direct but still important way. Finally, children's work had more than merely economic consequences. It played a central role in shaping the adult identities which youngsters of both classes eventually assumed.

This paper is one in a series prepared under the general heading of "growing up in modern Canada."<sup>7</sup> Much of the evidence presented here and in companion articles comes from interviews with those who belong to cohorts whose members grew up in one east-side and one west-side neighbourhood of Vancouver and which serve, in this investigation, as case studies for Anglophone urban Canada as a whole. Those interviewed spent all, or nearly all, their childhoods in Canada. Although some spoke other languages at home, they attended public or parochial schools in which English was the language of instruction and, as adults, they speak it with complete fluency. Although both neighbourhoods displayed the mix of social classes which characterized much of Vancouver during the study period, middle-class families predominated in west-side Kerrisdale, in contrast with the prevailing incidence of "respectable" working-class families in east-side Cedar Cottage.<sup>8</sup> In addition, some interviews with people who grew up in other parts of

<sup>7</sup>For an overview of the project as a whole, an explanation of the nature and selection of the case studies, and a discussion of the historiographic problems posed by employing the memories of adults to recreate the history of childhood see Neil Sutherland, "'Listening to the Winds of Childhood': the Role of Memory in the History of Childhood," *CHEA Bulletin*, 5 (February 1988), 5-29. How these subjects experienced their schooling and took part in the culture of childhood are described in "'The triumph of formalism': Elementary Schooling in Vancouver from the 1920s to the 1960s," *B.C. Studies*, 69-70 (Spring-Summer 1986), 175-210, published simultaneously in R.A.J. McDonald and Jean Barman, eds., *Vancouver Past: Essays in Social History* (Vancouver 1986), and in "'Everyone seemed happy in those days': the culture of childhood in Vancouver between the 1920's and the 1960's," *The History of Education Review*, 15 (1986), 37-51.

<sup>8</sup>For a fine analysis of the social and economic nature of Vancouver's neighbourhoods in these years,

Vancouver and elsewhere in Canada provide a standard against which the representativeness of Kerrisdale and Cedar Cottage experiences can be tested.

From their twelfth to their fifteenth birthdays, young people crossed a number of watersheds in their lives which, taken together, marked the end of their childhood. Specifically, the onset of puberty, passing their "entrance" examinations or otherwise completing "public" (later "elementary") schooling, reaching the legal school leaving age, going to work full-time, starting high school (later junior high school), combined in a variety of ways for child, family and society to recognize that youngsters had embarked on a new stage in their lives.<sup>9</sup> In this examination of the part-time and full-time work of children, the school-leaving age is the most appropriate indicator of the end of childhood. Together with child-labour legislation, the school-leaving age set legal limits to the full-time work of children and young people. In 1921, British Columbia passed new legislation that provided free education to all children from ages 6 to 16 years, and compelled all children "from over seven to under fifteen" to attend school.<sup>10</sup> Although, as late as 1930, the federal Department of Labour explained that child labour usually meant "the work for pay of children under 14", these conditions in British Columbia make under 15 years the appropriate dividing line and, in this paper, "child labour" will be that undertaken by boys and girls before their fifteenth birthdays.<sup>11</sup>

By the 1920s, most working-class and middle-class families had structured themselves into what is sometimes described as a family consumer economy.<sup>12</sup> In both classes, fathers earned the family income. In both classes, mothers worked

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see Jean Barman, "Neighbourhood and Community in Interwar Vancouver: Residential Differentiation and Civic Voting Behaviour," *BC Studies*, 69-70 (Spring-Summer 1986), 97-141. In her paper Dr. Barman uses "working people" rather than "working class" because she found that the term had become a self-definition by the 1930s. However, since those interviewed by the CCHP tended to describe themselves as "working class," I have employed their term in this paper. ("We were all working-class in that area you know," reported one; "[Cedar Cottage] was a working-class community," stated another.) Nonetheless, it is clear that most employed the term in a non-ideological way. Thus, in this paper, I follow Dr. Barman's use of people's self-definition as the principal indicator of their class. "Working-class" families generally refers to those in which the father was an artisan, or a skilled or unskilled labourer. "Middle-class" families refers to those in which the father engaged in commercial, managerial, professional, educational, clerical and other "white-collar" occupations. Further, since all but the very poorest and richest of Vancouver neighbourhoods were marked by a mixture of classes, there seems to have been little sense of a "class-appropriateness" to children's domestic tasks and means of employment.

<sup>9</sup>While Jane Synge is correct in noting that for working-class adolescents, "there was no stage before marriage at which they experienced a formal rite of passage," for many boys and girls these events shared many of the characteristics of a formal rite of passage. Synge, "The Transition From School to Work," 266.

<sup>10</sup>British Columbia, *Statutes*, 1921, cap 56; see also Harold Fabian Underhill, "Labor Legislation in British Columbia," PhD dissertation, University of California, 1936, ch.6.

<sup>11</sup>Canada, Department of Labour, *The Employment of Children and Young Persons in Canada* (Ottawa 1930), 36, 6.

<sup>12</sup>Gillian Crees, "The politics of dependence: Women, work and unemployment in the Vancouver labour movement before World War II," in Gregory S. Kealey, ed., *Class, Gender, and Region: Essays in Canadian Sociological History*, (St. John's 1988), 121-42; Louise A. Tilley and Joan Scott, *Women, Work, and Family* (New York 1978), 228-9.

full-time at housekeeping and child care. As a Cedar Cottage woman pointed out, "our life was very ordered. Mom stayed at home, Dad went to work, and kids did 'kids' things.'" In both classes, "kids' things" included attending school regularly.<sup>13</sup> As early as the end of World War I, middle-class families commonly expected children to complete junior matriculation at least. "There was," reported one woman, "a Kerrisdale tradition of a lot of high school graduates [and] about a quarter going on to university." In the 1920s, working-class families generally expected their children to complete their "entrance" examinations. Then, as they approached school-leaving age, they and their parents began the search for a job.



*A youth - perhaps just old enough to leave school - cuts tobacco at the Jack Canuck Tobacco Company: Vancouver, September 1931. (Vancouver City Archives)*

<sup>13</sup>For a careful examination of the changing relationship between working-class Vancouverites and their schools, see Jean Barman, "'Knowledge is Essential for Universal Progress But Fatal to Class Privilege': Working People and the Schools in Vancouver During the 1920s," *Labour/Le Travail*, 22 (Fall 1988), 9-66.

As soon as they found jobs, they left school. As a Cedar Cottage man explained, "I went to work for \$6 in 1927 when I was fifteen." In the years following World War II, working-class families increasingly came to view high-school graduation as the natural end of schooling.<sup>14</sup>

In families of both social classes, gender, class, and ethnic values, individual family circumstances, and the idiosyncratic notions of parents determined the work that children did. Nonetheless, in both classes, custom — partly determined by the ideology of a patriarchal society — indicated that families should divide household duties into one set for women and girls and another set for men and boys.<sup>15</sup> In practice, however, families divided up the work into two different categories. In one category was work done mostly by girls, and in the other, work done by both girls and boys. Only children's paid work discloses a category of activities that only boys engaged in. In most families, the cumulative effect of this division of labour meant that parents, and especially the heavily-burdened mothers, demanded a greater proportion of their daughters' time than of their sons.

Most of the duties custom assigned women and girls took place inside the home. These included all the tasks involved in rearing children from birth until they started school and beyond; the purchase, storage, and preparation of food; caring for the sick and the elderly; cleaning the house and its furnishings; and caring for and cleaning the family's clothing.<sup>16</sup> As two brothers, speaking of their three sisters in an entirely matter-of-fact way, reported, "The girls worked around the house a lot, cleaned, cooked, and stayed with Ma." A Kerrisdale woman reported that, by the primary grades, "I was responsible for myself after school and to prepare vegetables for dinner before my Mom came home from work." She also made her bed, tidied up the house, and helped with the other house work. "Our family had five girls," reported a working-class woman. "I was the oldest . . . I was a mother hen with the other kids."

Certainly, being a "mother hen" to other children was so central a part of many girls' experience that being a girl and child-minding are bound together inextricably in the memories of many women. In their preschool years many girls helped to care for younger siblings; they fetched and carried, they watched over them in the

<sup>14</sup>By 1958, the Dominion Bureau of Statistics estimated that just over half of British Columbia pupils completed Grade 12. See British Columbia, *Report of the Royal Commission on Education* (Victoria 1960), 43-9. By 1988, "Ministry of Education statistics showed that approximately 60% of students who enter Grade 9 graduate from Grade 12." British Columbia, *A Legacy for Learners: The Report of the Royal Commission on Education, 1988* (Victoria 1988), 104.

<sup>15</sup>For an account of how gender determined the ways in which people worked in an earlier era, see Bettina Bradbury, "Gender at work at home: Family decisions, the labour market and girls' contributions to the family economy," Unpublished paper to the Australia-Canadian Labour History Conference, Sydney, Australia, December 1988.

<sup>16</sup>Although girls played some part in each of the five categories into which Veronica Strong-Boag has divided women's work in the home, my own somewhat-different arrangement reflects the way in which children perceived what they did. Veronica Strong-Boag, "Keeping House in God's Country: Canadian Women at Work in the Home," in Craig Heron and Robert Storey, eds., *On the Job: Confronting the Labour Process in Canada* (Kingston and Montreal 1986), 126-7.

bath or as they played. As they got older, responsibilities increased proportionately. By the time they were 10 or 11 years old, girls often found themselves in full charge of younger brothers and sisters for long periods. As one woman, third in her family of ten children, lamented, "there were so many children, so much to do, and so little to do it with."<sup>17</sup> Elder children changed, bathed, dressed, fed and amused younger ones. One woman "had a younger sister who never walked. She died when she was seven .... I looked after her .... She was just like a baby." Another, whose single-parenting mother worked, "had to look after my younger brother" unassisted by an older brother. Girls took their charges outside and watched their play, and took them to parks and beaches. Caring for children outside the house sometimes could be a pleasant, even a social occasion. Thus a Kerrisdale woman reported that, "when I got older, I could take my brothers and sisters to the beach ... that was really good because I didn't have to do chores if I took them." In large families, older sisters gradually were able to share out the duties with younger ones, but seldom escaped completely until they left home. While most girls who cared for their siblings must have resented their tasks, at least sometimes, most reported having done this duty matter-of-factly, and seem to have shared with sisters of earlier generations the notion that child care was a 'given' of female childhood.

The round of activities involved in family meals probably comprised the most frequent of "inside" chores. Girls set the table, prepared, or helped prepare, the food, washed and dried the dishes, emptied the water pan under the icebox, filled the stove's hot-water reservoir, fetched apples, potatoes, and other items from basement and root-cellar bins, and, for a time after World War II, worked colouring into margarine. Seasonally, girls also helped can fruit and vegetables, and make jams and pickles. A Kerrisdale woman reported that, following her after-school play-hour, she "would help her grandmother with the vegetables and set the table." A middle-class woman stated that as a preschool child she helped with the dishes. By the time she was in primary school, she "did the dishes without help" and later learned to cook. Another woman explained that her *working mother* "left supper ready, and I was expected to cook it."

Many girls probably shared the sentiments of one middle-class informant who reported that "I enjoyed cooking but hated housework." One can easily understand such distaste. Although Vancouver became cleaner over the years, even in 1960 it remained a fairly dirty city. Grime entered houses, borne by smoky, soot-laden air, dusty and dirty fuels, and family shoes and clothing. Only constant effort kept it at bay. Girls of both classes usually made their own beds, and sometimes those of other family members as well, and tidied and dusted rooms. Weekly chores tended to be more elaborate and time-consuming. A Kerrisdale woman explained that "Every Saturday was a whole house cleanup . . . vacuuming, dusting, windows." An east-side woman remarked that "While Mother ironed on Saturdays, it was my

<sup>17</sup>Jack M. Cobbin, "Emotionally Disturbed Teen-Age Boys in a Group Living Residence: An Examination of Children's Aid Society Wards. With Special Reference to Movement Shown After a Period in a Group-Living Institution," MSW thesis, University of British Columbia, 1955, 27.



responsibility to scrub floors and bake bread. It was an all-day chore for a week's supply of eight to ten loaves." A working-class man recalls his father telling his sister that "I want the toilet and tub immaculate!"

Women's recollections of the heavy labours of wash day and its follow-up activities are especially vivid. A Cedar Cottage woman explained that "Washing was a big chore since we had no wash tubs. It involved three stages, a round tub on two chairs, an oval boiler, and 'blueing' in the sink." Then she "ironed it all with flat irons when I came home from school. I hated those things. They were always getting cold." Another working-class woman reported that "Many-a-time, I'd come home and do a tub full of laundry. You had no washing machine, you'd use a scrub board." A third reported that "I did the laundry, and I didn't have a washing machine. I had a scrub board," used with boiler and wooden plunger. And, finally, one Kerrisdale woman could remember no time when she "didn't help with the washing and ironing. Wash day was always Monday . . . [and was] a complicated and strenuous procedure" employing a wooden tub, a hand-wringer, and big copper tins for blueing and rinsing. "It was nothing," she concluded, "to iron twenty-four shirts on a Monday night." Gradually, electric washing machines and irons took over some of these tasks and reduced the drudgery of others. However, until the invention of the modern washer, washing involved using a hand-turned or electric wringer after each of the three stages.<sup>18</sup>

Prior to the widespread use of refrigerators and automobiles, shopping for groceries and other household needs was a frequent and time-consuming affair. Families could buy some usually more-expensive goods from peddlars, and those with telephones could order groceries for home delivery. Nonetheless, and in order to ensure that limited finances went as far as possible, most families found it expedient to undertake daily or alternate-day shopping expeditions. Mothers who worked full-time in their households undertook this task, travelling on foot and often pushing a baby buggy or pulling a wagon. Preschool children accompanied them, and found themselves carrying parcels, watching siblings, and helping in other ways. "I can remember," a woman recalled, "walking into Kerrisdale when I was six and helping her bring home groceries." Parents also called on school-aged children to assist with shopping. Many found themselves sent out after school to pick up items that had not been procured on the main shopping expedition. Girls in large families, or whose mothers worked outside the home or were ill, found themselves at surprisingly-early ages conducting most or all of the shopping. One woman recalled: "I did the shopping every day, and would buy the meat for supper." Such girls set out regularly with baby buggy, wagon, sled or bicycle, in which they stowed their purchases and, sometimes, a younger sibling or two. "I had a wagon," explained one woman, "and my brother was only little, but I can remember taking him by the hand, and . . . we used to go down to the ice place and get your block

<sup>18</sup> As Veronica Strong-Boag remarks, "No wonder most Canadian women appeared to hate wash day with a passion few other chores evoked . . ." *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-1939* (Markham 1988), 135.

of ice and bring it home." Another vividly recalled "one trip when the bag broke and all the cans went rolling down the street."

A few mothers were able to employ "girls" to assist with the housework, while others called upon sons to help.<sup>19</sup> A Kerrisdale woman explained, for example, that "I don't know whether I was asked to do it, or whether I just liked to wipe the dishes for the maid . . . We'd talk." Customarily, mothers employed their sons only if they had no daughters available and not always even then. As the youngest son in a family of three boys noted: "We didn't do that much in the kitchen, I must say. I think Scottish mothers generally spoiled their sons, anyway."<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, a few informants from backgrounds in both social classes reported that as boys they had helped around the house. One from a Cedar Cottage family of three sons reported that "each week one of us would be doing dishes." Another explained that, "After school I'd start the fire, boil potatoes, and prepare ahead of time anything that needed to be done for dinner." A middle-class woman said that she and her brother "took turns getting up ... getting Daddy's breakfast, our own, and [their ailing] Mother's on a tray .... [They also] took turns setting the table, clearing the table and washing and drying dishes." Some fetched groceries and even did a certain amount of shopping. "My grandmother was very fussy; she sent me to the butcher shop on Broadway and would tell me to order two steaks, the butcher was to trim off the fat, and then he was to grind them into hamburger for grandfather's favourite shepherd's pie," reported a working-class Vancouver man. "On Saturday morning," said a Halifax man, "I would take my cart and list of groceries, pick them up, and bring them home [which was] a fair distance." A few cared for younger siblings. The son of a deeply-disturbed mother not only learned early to fend for himself, but also "carefully protected his younger sister as best he could."<sup>21</sup>

The fact that some boys did housework and shopped should not, however, mask real differences between the sexes. First, and despite some contrary examples, most boys did little or no work in the traditionally female sphere. Second, when parents did call on sons to do housework, they usually did not expect the same standard of performance required of daughters. Third, housework contributed to the different "gender identities" of each sex. Since parents and sons alike looked on boys' housework merely as a chore, boys saw it as but a temporary phenomenon

<sup>19</sup>In 1938, a survey of 1135 self-supporting Canadian families of "British origin," with husband and wife present and with one or more children, showed that less than three percent had "regular domestic help". Of those with the highest incomes, only 6.5 percent of homeowners and 13.3 percent of tenants had regular help. "Urban Wage-Earner Family Housing 1938," *Canada Census*, 1931, vol. 12, ch. 10.

<sup>20</sup>Italian-Canadian mothers also indulged, and indulge, their sons. Even now, according to Lia Pichini, "Cursed are the households without any female children, for the mothers would never dare ask their sons to lift a finger to help them. For them, this would not seem right." "Two Generations in Conflict: Sex Role Expectations Among Italian Canadian Women," *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme*, 8 (Summer 1987), 22.

<sup>21</sup>Edwin Francis Watson, "What Happens to Children in Later Adolescence? A Study and Evaluation of the Adjustment of Thirty-One Wards of the Superintendent of Child Welfare for the Province of British Columbia, Who Have Been in Foster Care, and Who Reached Eighteen Years of Age During the Year January 1, 1954 — December 31, 1954," MSW thesis, University of British Columbia, 1955, 51.

in their lives. Parents and daughters, on the other hand, looked on girls' housework both as chore and much more. For them, housework formed an essential part of their daughters' practical education which, in turn, played a major role in introducing them into the culture of women. In other words, both girls and boys learned in one patriarchal system how they would be expected to behave in another.<sup>22</sup>

Custom assigned to men and boys all the tasks involved in heating and maintaining the house, and looking after the grounds and garden. Although some of these tasks could be very time-consuming, they generally were less so than the constant round of indoor duties. In families which had no daughters, or which had an age-appropriate range of both boys and girls, boys did assume the major responsibility in these areas. In families of both classes, however, parents generally asked daughters and sons alike to help with the "outside" chores. Thus, "inside" chores belonged to girls, but "outside" ones to all the children.

The host of activities clustered around providing heat for warmth and cooking were the most important and time-consuming of "outside" chores. In Vancouver, until after World War II, most stoves, hot water heaters, space heaters and furnaces burned wood, wood and coal, coke, or sawdust. (Table 1) Middle-class and working-class Vancouverites alike lived in uninsulated, wood-frame houses. Space heaters warmed houses that had no basements; hot air furnaces heated those which had partial or full basements. People recall that they "didn't have a furnace, only a pot-bellied stove in the only warm room in the house," and remember "huddling around the stove," especially in the morning. Since wood and sawdust were much cheaper than coal, the latter was used sparingly. During the 1930s, some middle-class families installed coal stokers or oil stoves, space heaters, or furnaces, but none of these expedients were common until after World War II.<sup>23</sup> Except for those families who foraged for their coke or coal, most fuel-related chores undertaken by children involved wood in a variety of forms.

In late spring or early summer, families who could afford to began to organize their wood supply for the following winter. Many Vancouver sawmills sold "slabs," "edgings," "inside fir," and other byproducts of the milling process, along with the trimmed ends of kiln-dried lumber (known colloquially as "kindling wood"). Kindling wood and dry inside fir were luxury items that most often found their way into middle-class rather than working-class basements and woodsheds. Wood was sold by the cord, in wagon- or truck-loads. Vancouverites recall that "East Indian people would come around selling wood. We bought it by the cord," that "Father bought seven or eight cords of wood in the summer," and that "It took six double

<sup>22</sup>Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review*, 91 (December 1986), 1053-75; "Editorial: Culture and Gender: The Separate Worlds of Men and Women," *History Workshop Journal*, 15 (Spring 1983), 1-3; Strong-Boag, *New Day Recalled*, ch.1. I propose to deal with this matter more extensively in my forthcoming paper on children and their families, 1920-1960.

<sup>23</sup>For example, in June 1940, one could buy the "new Hi-Ideal sawdust burner, completely installed with new patent features ..." for \$20, while automatic coal stokers, installed, sold for between \$150 and \$250. *Vancouver Province*, 5 June 1940, 15.

cords to heat our house in the winter." If there was a lane, drivers dumped the wood behind the house, otherwise in front. Since such loads blocked lanes, sidewalks, and roads, neighbours expected householders to move the wood out of the way promptly. As a matter of course, both boys and girls helped move the wood and many soon found themselves with the primary responsibility for it. Families shifted kindling and other dry wood directly to a covered space, generally in the basement or a wood shed. Children meanwhile identified and salvaged bits that might make good blocks to play with or serve in the construction of forts. Since the wood was dry, light, and had considerable recreation potential, few children strongly objected to moving it.

Only a day or two out of the Fraser River or False Creek, loads of fir "edgings" and "slabs" arrived soaking wet. Sawdust adhered to each piece. In most families, children and parents neatly stacked this wood to dry. By the time a family had put away a full winter's supply, tidy piles of drying wood traced their way along back and side fences, the outside walls of woodsheds, garages, and the house itself. Parents insisted the wood not actually touch fences or walls, demanding that wood-piles be stacked carefully enough to be free-standing. Most children found this work "tedious." There "were splinters in it." If one had gloves, they soon became soaking wet. One man concluded: "It was a good thing to get out of but there was no getting out of it."

For those families who could not afford a full year's supply of wood or who lacked storage space, procuring wood for fuel proved considerably more onerous. Small loads of wet wood arrived intermittently in the winter. Children stacked it as best as they could out of the weather. They frequently had to move it from yard to space under porches, onto porches, or even to make small piles to dry right inside the house, in hallways or under beds. It was common for such families to run out of dry wood, and both heating and cooking became very difficult tasks for parents and children.

Sawdust — a fuel used in British Columbia from the mid-1930s onward — involved a different set of initial chores. Fuel companies delivered wet sawdust in bulk, by the sack and, later, by blowing it through a flexible tube into basement sawdust bins. Since bulk-delivered sawdust cost less than sacked sawdust, many families bought their fuel in this form.<sup>24</sup> And because bulk sawdust also blocked lanes and roads, got even wetter if rained upon, blew away if it dried out, and, in its large piles, constantly tempted local children as a place to play, parents insisted that the job be done as expeditiously as possible. A Cedar Cottage man reported: "They used to sell sawdust in bulk .... We used to organize [other youngsters] to help us move it into the basement." A middle-class Kerrisdale woman spoke for many children of both classes when she reported that she "hated bringing in the sawdust. You used to get it in your fingers and I didn't like that."

<sup>24</sup>For example, in June 1940, Vancouver fuel companies advertised a "unit" — 50 sacks — of sawdust at \$1.75 per bulk unit and \$2.50 per sacked unit. A "load" of sawdust usually consisted of at least 2 units and up to as much as a family's sawdust bin held. See *Vancouver Province*, 5 June 1940, 15.

Tasks associated with the foraging for or delivery of fuel merely initiated year-round duties. First, as soon as wood had dried sufficiently, families cut as much of it as could be stored in woodshed or basement. One man reported: "in summer time ... I cut a hell of a pile of wood." Another explained: "Me and my brother would split the wood and bring it into the basement to dry." Next, children undertook the daily and weekly chores that accompanied its use. In most homes, the day began with lighting the kitchen stove. In many homes, children prepared for this task the night before. "You had to cut firewood," reported one man, "and you had to cut kindling for lighting the fire in the morning." Another explained: "I had to make sure that there was paper, kindling wood, and a scuttle of coal for the morning before I went to bed." In houses equipped with wood- or coal-burning ranges, the first person up — usually a parent but sometimes an older child — shook down the ashes, removed and emptied the ash receptacle (taking care not to spill ashes on the floor), laid in paper and kindling, and lit it with a wooden match. When lighting oil ranges, one had to adjust a dial carefully, or the kitchen would fill with pungent black smoke and the characteristic odour of stove oil. Kitchen sawdust-burners required that the dry fuel be laid carefully on the paper, and not in such a way that the feed suddenly smothered the flames.

While one parent or child took care of the kitchen stove, another lighted the space heater or furnace. Again, one had to shake down ashes, and remove ashes and clinkers. The person undertaking this chore had to be especially careful because furnace clinkers and ashes often were warm or even hot. Later, those whose chore it was carried the ashes to the yard or garbage can. If sawdust furnaces had been stoked and closed up carefully the evening before, one merely needed to shake down the ashes, open the damper and fill the hopper. Stoves, space heaters and furnaces needed regular tending. Children cut wood and kindling, and also filled woodboxes, coal scuttles, and sawdust storage boxes before leaving for school, as well as when they came home at lunch-time and after school, before and after supper, and before they went to bed. People vividly recall all phases of their routines. Thus, "on an average day," one boy would get up, "stoke the coal and wood furnace ... [and] bring up three five-gallon pails [of sawdust] on each arm for the [kitchen stove]." Another "used to come home from school and bring the wood in and make kindling," and a third explained that, "On Saturday, we'd go out and split wood. Then you'd take a wheelbarrow and wheel the wood into the basement ... woodbin. Every morning before school you'd take out an armful and put it in the woodbox behind the stove."

Sawdust plagued its child attendants with special problems. It attracted cats looking for a dry lavatory. It could become infested with fleas. Since it was a dusty fuel, children cautiously moved it from storage bin to furnaces or to kitchen storage boxes and then to the stove. Sawdust stoves and furnaces had a tendency to "blow back" — especially when someone was adjusting the flow, clearing obstructions, or peering in to find out why it was not burning properly. Speaking for many, a middle-class woman reported "I was scared to death of it .... You had to put sawdust

in the top and then you had to stand back and it would blow." Another woman reported that she "purposely" never learned to deal with the sawdust furnace, leaving it to her brother because "you only need to get one backfire in the sawdust burner and you've got soot absolutely everywhere ... so just one of those and they never trusted me again — I hated that hopper."

Changing house-heating technology gradually reduced children's seasonal and daily fuel chores. (Table 1.) Before World War II, these changes mostly affected middle-class children. After the war, they spread to working-class youngsters as well. Increased use of gas, oil, or electricity for cooking purposes sharply cut into the need for children to cut kindling and fill fuel boxes and buckets with wood and sawdust; it also reduced the amount of nagging that mothers had to do. As home-heating sources shifted from wood and coal to oil, gas, and electricity, the summer routines of moving, cutting, and piling wood began to disappear. By the late 1950s, only a minority of children would have understood the old saw about wood's ability to warm one twice.<sup>25</sup>

Parents (especially working-class parents) called on their children to help with all phases of the family gardening and other agricultural activities. Until well after World War II, there were empty lots and even larger tracts of vacant land in most Vancouver neighbourhoods. Thus, on the East Side of Vancouver, and in South Vancouver both before and after it became part of the city, many working-class families conducted intensive agriculture on a substantial scale.<sup>26</sup> Working-class families often raised chickens, pigeons, rabbits, turkeys, ducks and even cows. A Cedar Cottage family operated a small dairy, had two barns, and also had "chickens and ducks and a henhouse." A woman from the same district noted that "Dad had a chicken coop that took up the whole backyard"; another explained that "our backyard was big, so we had a small chicken farm, and rabbits." Across town in Kerrisdale, even in the 1950s one working-class family "grew pretty much all of what we ate. We had turkeys once, geese and rabbits." Middle-class families, however, generally confined themselves to gardening, and rarely raised animals. One Kerrisdale salesman developed two lots; built a house on one, and on the other put in "a lovely garden with fruit trees and vegetables"; another Kerrisdale father "took up the whole of the back yard with his garden but the front yard was for us."

The lament uttered by a middle-class man — "I hated weeding," — was echoed by his working-class counterpart who "never volunteered to work in the garden. I hated gardening." On the other hand, one working-class Halifax boy had a backyard garden — "my kingdom" — where he grew potatoes, carrots, and other vegetables

<sup>25</sup>By 1961, of Vancouver's 118,500 occupied dwellings, 106,000 were heated by furnaces, 10,500 by space heaters and the other 2000 in some other way. In the same year 10,000 of the dwellings were heated with coke or coal, 3500 by wood, 64,000 by "liquid fuel" (fuel oil mostly), 36,500 by piped-in natural gas, and the remaining 4500 by some other means, such as sawdust or electricity. *Canada Census 1961: Housing*, v.2.2, tables 47, 52.

<sup>26</sup>For an account of how families of an earlier generation supplemented their wage income, see Bettina Bradbury, "Pigs, Cows, Boarders: Non-Wage Forms of Survival Among Montreal Families, 1861-91," *Labour/Le Travail*, 14 (Fall 1984), 9-46.

TABLE 1  
How Vancouver homes were heated, 1941, 1951, 1961\*

	Heating System					Heating Fuel				Cooking Fuel			
	Occupied Dwellings	Steam or Hot Water Furnace	Hot Air Furnace	Stove, or Space Heater or	Coke or Coal	Wood (including Sawdust)	Oil	Gas	Other (including Electricity)	Gas or Electricity	Wood	Coal	Coal Oil or other
Total occupied Dwellings, 1941	71,116	13,939	39,540	17,637	16,001	46,653 <sup>1</sup>	7,538	853	71	36,766	29,158	1,138	4,054
Owner-occupied Dwellings, 1941	35,603	4,272	24,674	6,657									
Tenant-occupied Dwellings, 1941	35,513	9,802	14,667	11,044									
Total occupied Dwellings, 1951	101,330	19,240	60,765	20,100	41,425	28,255	29,525	1,210	615	63,310	22,300		11,445
Owner-occupied Dwellings, 1951	63,885	7,000	46,375	10,250	26,205	19,540	17,030	695	415	31,185	14,410		8,340
Tenant-occupied Dwellings, 1951	37,445	12,240	14,390	9,850	15,435	8,715	12,495	515	105	25,125	7,690		3,105
Total occupied Dwellings, 1961	118,404	28,922	77,027	12,455	9,568	3,474	64,095	36,894	4,373				

<sup>1</sup> 29.9%, or about 13,950, of these wood-heated dwellings used sawdust.

\*Source: Canada, *Census* (1941), vol. 9, 54, 58, and 62; (1951), vol. 2.2, 22-6, 30-6, 38-6, 26-6; (1961), vol 2.2, 48-1, 53-1

and kept hens "for their fresh eggs." Each spring vegetable gardens had to be dug, raked, and old plants and roots removed. "It was," reported one man, "hard work getting the ground ready because we did all the work by hand." Families grew vegetables, berries, fruit, and some annual and perennial flowers. One mother, for example, "grew peas, beans, beets, carrots, swiss chard, spinach, corn and squash . . . With five people in one house we went through a lot of fruit and vegetables." During the late spring and summer, children found themselves hilling potatoes, killing insects, and endlessly weeding. In the words of one, "It was up to me to weed, hill the potatoes, do the watering, and things like that." Summer and fall brought the harvest both of the "free" crop of berries which grew abundantly in and around Vancouver, and of family-grown fruit and vegetables. Children would "go and get blueberries and huckleberries," would "pick blackberries in Foxy's field" or "cranberries at Burnaby Lake." One woman has "vivid memories of hay cutting, piling it and carting it to the barn," and a man recalls that "We used to dig up the potatoes and bring them home [from the allotment] sack by sack in a wagon." Animals involved chores all year round. One girl "fed the chickens before school [and] collected the eggs at night"; another "would pluck [the chickens] but wouldn't watch them being killed."

Through activities that were often described as "scrounging," many working-class children made an accepted, required, and sometimes essential contribution to family economies.<sup>27</sup> And, although more-affluent neighbours might scorn those who indulged in these activities, recourse to such practice certainly was not confined to poor families. A woman from a working-class Cedar Cottage family, in which "father felt that respectability was very important," reported that when fir logs were unloaded from the train, "there'd be pieces of bark left behind [and] we'd go with sacks and take bark to burn in the stove." A man from a 'respectable' working-class Halifax family explained that on Saturdays, he would scour the lanes for wood, cut it into kindling, and sell it for five cents a bag.

'Scrounging' children probably made their most important contribution by providing or supplementing family fuel-supply. In cities and towns across the country, and especially where winters were colder than on the West Coast, and fuel was less plentiful and more expensive, families with limited means or storage space searched along lanes and around building sites for wooden packingcases and other scrap wood, and around the coal gas plant for partially-unburnt coal. People reported that the "boys went to the train tracks for coal all summer long. They would get enough for the winter." Such informants explain that "We'd torment firemen so they would throw coal at us," and "We used to bring old railway ties and cut them up for firewood." In and around Vancouver, driftwood from the Fraser River provided abundant fuel for families living near it, but people in Vancouver and Halifax generally tried to avoid driftwood from the ocean because of its harsh effect

<sup>27</sup> According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word "scrounge" appeared in the years immediately after World War I. It seems likely that it was invented by the troops in that conflict, and quickly passed into civilian usage after the war.



on stoves and chimneys. In Vancouver, some families cut cordwood from second-growth timber in the district's large tracts of "bush."

Children also scrounged for their families' animals and gardens. They cut grass on boulevards, vacant lots and in neighbours' yards to get feed for rabbits, cows, or horses. In Vancouver's East End in the 1920s, Elisa Martini Negrin and other children gathered hay from vacant lots, boulevards, and the Great Northern Railway "flats." She reported: "We would start at 6 o'clock in the morning and we'd go on until 8 or 9 at night, until it got dark."<sup>28</sup> Since no urban informants reported that their families or neighbours kept pigs, health authorities had probably succeeded in eliminating this traditional budget-supplement in Vancouver's suburban neighbourhoods. Although trucks gradually replaced horse-drawn drays in transporting large goods, until the 1950s horse-drawn carts carried milk and bread and collected junk on residential neighbourhood streets. Both middle-class and working-class parents valued the "droppings" of delivery-van horses for gardening purposes. Thus one child "had to go out with a shovel and get the manure." Many youngsters found this an embarrassing chore. It was difficult enough if one's mother sent one out at lunchtime or after school to pick up droppings left close by. It was far worse to be sent up and down the streets with one's wagon and shovel to search for them.

Children also disliked a form of scrounging that virtually cast them into the role of beggars or thieves. Parents sent their youngsters to ask the green-grocer for stale vegetables "for our rabbits," or to offer the baker a penny or two for stale loaves, or to the butcher for a bone "for our dog." Thus, explained one person, "We could get a bag of bones free for soup." In Vancouver, "Kids collected gleanings from ships at the docks — bananas and stuff. Some we sold, some we took home." In Halifax, men "unloading mackerel kept count by taking one fish out of each bucket. Kids would steal their 'counts.'" At Hallowe'en in Lethbridge during the Depression, some children "came round to the doors with large sacks hoping not for candies, but for donations of food which they could take home to their families." In Vancouver in the 1950s, five children in a single-parent family on welfare "would steal from a local supermarket ... [and] mother would just have to not acknowledge it at all."<sup>29</sup>

Children also scrounged for (or, to use the term they began to employ towards the end of World War II, "liberated") other items abandoned or put out as garbage. They patrolled lanes, vacant lots and dumps for bottles (especially reusable ones), scrap metal, old car batteries (for lead), and any other items which they could sell. Some would "collect old medicine bottles, bring them home and wash them, and take them back to the druggist. You would get a dime for a dozen of them." Others "collected junk for a cent a pound. Brass, copper, and lead were worth more." Since junk dealers rarely asked about the source of such items, children involved in this sort of scrounging sometimes stole, rather than found, their wares.

<sup>28</sup> Daphne Marlatt and Carole Litter, eds., *Opening Doors: Vancouver's East End* (Victoria 1979), 106-7.

<sup>29</sup> Sheila Baxter, *No Way to Live: Poor Women Speak Out* (Vancouver 1988), 215-6.



*Toronto children picking over cinders, discarded by the Gas Company, for use as fuel: 31 August 1923. (John Boyd/NAC)*

Children whose parents owned small businesses or shops customarily put in long hours working in these establishments. Their unpaid, or virtually unpaid, labour often provided the margin that kept such enterprises afloat. A Cedar Cottage man reported that from age six years, he "delivered bread every day [from his father's bakery] after school and on Saturdays .... I was given a dollar every week but was expected to use it to buy my clothes. I saved enough money to buy my own bike." Another baker's son reported: "I was the delivery boy, father baked, and mother worked up front." "Really," reported Tadao Wakabayashi, "we had no time to play, because Dad was in business and any spare moments we had to work. And after we finished work, then we sat down and tried to do our homework, two homeworks, the Japanese and the English."<sup>30</sup> A Cedar Cottage woman whose mother had a small grocery "had to deliver groceries after school .... In those little stores, you're there all the time. And so us kids learned to do all the housework and cook and everything else before we were knee-high to a grasshopper." A west-side woman reported that after her father, a banker, died, her mother opened a nursing home where, as well as attending school, she "helped with the cooking, washing, ironing, and supper trays. At age 13 I was considered a full adult with adult responsibilities."

In addition to the relatively common chores discussed above, parents in both social classes set children to a great range of other tasks. If a job needed doing that was within their capabilities, girls and boys generally found themselves undertaking it. They swept or cleaned basements, especially around coal and sawdust bins. They took fathers' and boarders' lunches to workplaces. One real-estate developer's son helped his father clear land and build a house for their family. As automobiles became more plentiful, and especially after World War II, boys and girls washed them. Others helped in home decorating. One woman's father "wasn't much for keeping the house up, so I'd get the calcimine brush and paint around." One man's family "would get together and paint the inside of the house, room after room. That was drawn out and depressing." Some prepared the family's toilet paper from catalogues and other sources. Even after World War II, one man explained that "at Christmas we saved all the Japanese orange papers and I straightened [them] out." One father raised birds for a hobby, and his children "used to have to clean the cages and feed the birds." One boy regularly accompanied his father on fishing expeditions to places that could be reached by streetcar. They fished for a wide variety of fish — rock cod, tommy cod, lingcod, and sturgeon: "It all helped financially since Dad didn't work too much." During the Depression while his father was laid off, a Kerrisdale boy sold eggs, laid by his family's chickens, from door to door: "We not only lived on eggs, we sold them." Middle-class children of both sexes reported that they did a lot of lawnmowing and leaf-raking. A brother and sister "had to mow the lawn ... rake leaves ..." and "helped in the garden," and a man noted that "sometimes in the summer time when the grass was growing we'd

<sup>30</sup>Marlatt and Iter, *Opening Doors*, 96.

cut the lawn." Postwar affluence gradually turned "taking out the garbage" into a real chore. Ever-proliferating forms of packaging, and the ever-thickening newspapers that were no longer needed to light stoves and furnaces, combined into enough waste-material to make wrapping and carrying out the daily garbage, and care of the area around garbage cans, into a regular chore, especially in middle-class homes.



*A boy helping to mend fishing nets. (Vancouver City Archives)*

As they grew older, many boys and girls of both social classes began to work at regular and irregular part-time jobs. Although they spent their earnings differently, young people of both classes found similar sorts of jobs, as baby-sitters, as delivery boys, as sales clerks, and in other forms of unskilled work. Boys, who usually had more time to devote to work outside the household, found a much wider range of opportunities to work, and considerably more jobs in total, than did their sisters. If by doing (or not doing) housework, boys began to develop notions of what they would not do as adults, their employed work reinforced what they had begun to learn through their outside chores about what men in a patriarchal society do. Thus, in going beyond the home to work for pay, boys could see themselves taking a major step on the road to becoming "breadwinners."

Many boys began work as delivery or errand boys as early as their eighth or ninth year. One man explained that he "worked from the time I was nine years old delivering groceries for a grocery store"; another noted that "from age eleven I always had a job." They delivered for grocery and produce stores, drugstores, and fish-and-chip shops; they distributed hand bills, and sold magazines door-to-door.

Employers tended to pay delivery boys on a piece-work basis, and occasionally in merchandise. Sometimes they paid after each job, but more often at the end of each week. Many boys in east-side Vancouver, for example, worked at one time for one of the small chain of Curry's grocery stores.<sup>31</sup> During the day, housewives shopped for, or telephoned in, their orders. If they paid in cash on delivery, they also told the clerk what money the delivery boy needed to bring to make change. Clerks packed the orders into boxes that fit into a bicycle carrier. Right after school, Curry's delivery boys rushed in to work; the first arrival took the box with the shortest distance to go, or the one bound for a customer who was known to tip. Later arrivals "sometimes ... had to go a mile or more." Some older or bigger boys insisted that the preferred deliveries belonged to them by right, but usually the grocer enforced a first-come, first-pick rule. After collecting his "change," which usually contained at least one nickel or dime to encourage tipping, the boy rushed off with his box. If he was lucky, he might get in two more deliveries before all the boxes were gone, but most made only two deliveries each day. On Saturdays, deliveries proceeded throughout most of the day. When the day's rush was over, the grocer paid the boys at the per-delivery rate of ten cents. With the customary average of 15 deliveries a week, a boy earned \$1.50 to add to whatever he had already collected in tips. Thus one lad "made about two dollars per week ... \$1.50 for delivering groceries [for Curry's] and fifty cents for delivering hand bills."

In other shops, boys' jobs tended to include inside work as well as deliveries. In one hardware store, "the worst thing was unpacking china from barrels in which it had been packed in wood shavings and washing the shavings off in cold water." An 11 year-old who "had to go to work in a butcher shop," reported: "I tried to clean out chicken guts, which I didn't like and wasn't good at, so I made sausages instead." Another man explained: "if I was lucky I could get a job on Saturday with [the breadman]; I would get to feed the horses, hold the reins and got all the left-over bread free." In the late 1940s, an east-side boy delivered items throughout a large area, including sacks of flour which occasionally "overweighted and over you went." He was paid twenty-five cents per hour for two to three hours after school. Another boy "worked [in a drugstore] after school, sweeping up and stocking shelves." One boy stole "some pencils ... but [the druggist] let me back to work even after that." Unlike most stores, drugstores stayed open evenings and their delivery boys often worked until 9:00 p.m. or later.

Most delivery jobs required youngsters to provide their own bicycles. As one man noted, for a delivery job, "all you had to have was a bicycle" and a typical newspaper advertisement called for "Boy with wheel for meat market; good wages."<sup>32</sup> When one east-side boy acquired a paper route, he "got a bike handed down from my brother. It was double-framed, weighed 55 pounds, and had a carrier on the front." A Toronto boy bought his balloon-tired delivery bike "for a dollar

<sup>31</sup>In 1944, there were six Curry's Grocery stores in east side Vancouver. Vancouver, *City Directory*, (1944), 596.

<sup>32</sup>*Vancouver Daily Province*, 21 January 1920, 16; 26 June 1930, 21.

down and a dollar a week." Parents often made, or helped their sons make, this capital purchase so that they could take such jobs. One father, employed as a longshoreman, bought his son "this bike; he wanted me to earn some money." Since a bicycle could be used for recreation as well as work, girls often resented what they saw as parental favouritism. Thus one girl, "upset when my older brother got a bike when he became a delivery boy ... [was] told I couldn't have one because I was not a delivery boy."

The market provided a hierarchy of jobs in magazine and newspaper sales and delivery. Young boys — and a few girls — began by selling Christmas cards or magazines, especially *Liberty* and *The Saturday Evening Post*, to friends, neighbours, and door-to-door. "During the Depression," reported one man, "I used to deliver *Liberty* .... You were lucky if you made two dollars a month." Most boys, however, wanted to become regular sellers or "carriers" for a daily newspaper. In the 1920s, some still sold papers in the traditional way. "When I was about nine years old," one man reported, "I had a corner where I sold the morning paper ... I was there at five every morning. The fog was terrible. The cold air went right through me." Since such boys were more likely to be late for school, or to skip school altogether, than those who had regular delivery routes, they were the particular targets of those trying to get children out of the street trades. By the end of the 1920s, school attendance regulations and attendance officers had reduced sharply the ranks of newsboys and other youthful street pedlars.

In these circumstances, newspapers adopted the "route" method of circulating their product. In cities with more than one newspaper, most boys aspired to deliver the one with the largest circulation. Until the long, bitter battle between *Vancouver Daily Province* and the International Typographers Union began in 1946, this newspaper had the largest circulation, and Vancouver boys thus wanted *Province* routes. After *The Vancouver Sun* achieved dominance of the Vancouver market in the 1950s, it naturally became the most popular paper with delivery boys. As a morning paper over part of this period, the *Vancouver News Herald* provided both the advantages and disadvantages that came to boys who delivered morning papers anywhere in Canada. Those who so wished could deliver their papers before going to school, then take other part-time work after school, or participate in sports or other recreational activities. However, since the *News Herald* had the smallest circulation in the city, its routes covered fairly long distances. *Herald* carriers also had to rise early and do much of their work in the dark. As one reported, "to deliver the *News Herald*, I used to get up at 4:30 in the morning."

In Vancouver, the *Sun* and *Province* delivered their papers "to the local newspaper shack." Here, under the direction of a sub-manager — a former carrier who had done well on the job and was now a senior high-school student — boys picked up their "daily draw," and on Saturday "stuffed" them with the weekly "funny papers" or other supplements, and headed out on their rounds. Boys who wanted routes turned up regularly at the shack, helped other boys, covered the routes of those who were ill or absent, and gradually worked themselves to the top

of the waiting list. Particularly during the Depression, some never made it there. Shacks often provided a rough initiation. As one victim explained, "they gave me a rough time ... and the shack manager wasn't much better ... he would hit out at times ... [and] was very loud-mouthed." A Chinese Canadian boy so suffered at the hands of companion paperboys that "he and another boy [went] early to the supply hut so that they avoid the bigger boys who intimidate them" and took their papers home to fold.<sup>33</sup> Throughout these years, once paperboys acquired good routes, they tended to hold onto them until they left school.

Newspaper routes ranged in size from about forty papers to just over a hundred. One boy "got up at 4:00 a.m. and had forty papers to deliver", another "had about 80 to 90"; a third "delivered in apartments, with approximately 100 subscribers." Most boys had to show the sub-manager that they had a bicycle with a large metal carrying basket or carrier before they could get a delivery route. In fine weather, boys found their task a pleasant one, with opportunities to chat with friends and customers. When it rained or snowed, however, they "wrapped their papers in brown waxed paper" and worked through their routes as quickly as possible, often returning home soaked to the skin.



*Carriers await their papers at a newspaper 'shack': New Westminster, 1933.*  
(Vancouver City Archives)

<sup>33</sup>Mary Thompson, "The Social Worker in the School: An Experimental Study of the Liaison and Service

Newspaper companies did not actually employ their paperboys. Instead, they treated them as independent "businessmen" who bought their newspapers wholesale and retailed them to subscribers. At the end of the circulation period, the companies presented a bill to each carrier which he had to pay within a few days. The carriers, in turn, collected subscription payments from their customers. The difference between what a boy owed and what he rightfully could collect constituted his profit. Even in areas where most people had regular jobs, boys found it difficult to collect all that they were owed. One boy "delivered along a good route with well-to-do people but these people were hard to collect from." Boys had to call at some homes many times before they collected what was owed to them. If the subscriber went two or three months in arrears, or "skipped," the sub-manager, or even the district manager, was supposed to help collect the money, but not always to any effect. As one man lamented, "lots of people skipped out and the money came out of your pocket!"<sup>34</sup>

Newspaper firms obliged their carriers to take part in formal and informal efforts to increase their circulation. District managers exhorted them to keep a close watch for people moving into the neighbourhood and to call on them right away. Newspapers gave out cash awards or prizes to carriers who secured a certain number of new subscriptions, and sometimes penalized those unable to do so. One carrier "was fired because the rule was that paperboys had to get two new subscribers a month and [I] failed to do so." Newspapers also conducted subscription campaigns in which all the carriers in a shack called on every non-subscribing home in a selected area. As one reported, "We had drives on Wednesday and Friday nights. I neglected my homework [but] won some campaigns .... I got a trip to Keats Island."

Although most boys earned their money in delivery jobs, some searched out other forms of employment. Snow provided an irregular but welcome source of income. When it fell in Vancouver and in other parts of Canada, many boys headed out with shovels to earn money clearing sidewalks and driveways. After a big snow, one man reported, "I got up [but] nothing for breakfast was in the house so I went off without anything to eat .... As I was shoveling snow I got weak and passed out. Another kid came along, brought me to, and finished shoveling for me. He wouldn't take any of the money." Some enterprising boys would even create work with the snow. One reported: "We would pile up snow at points where cars got stuck, and help dig them out and be tipped, and then put the snow back again." Some boys found work in bowling alleys as pin setters, on golf courses as caddies, and as part-time helpers on milk and bread wagons. In the late 1940s, a working-class boy

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Functions of the Social Worker in a Vancouver Elementary School," MSW thesis, University of British Columbia, 1948, 111.

<sup>34</sup>See the discussion at the Vancouver Trades and Labour Congress meeting, 21 August 1928, of the unfair treatment of newspaper delivery boys "whereby they have to stand the loss of money owing from subscribers moving away." Vancouver Trades and Labour Council, "Minute Book," 20 July 1926, 2 October 1928, Special Collections, University of British Columbia Library.



"earned good money. I worked from 7:00 to 10:30 four nights a week [in a bowling alley] and earned between \$60.00 and \$70.00 a month!" During summer holidays, a few boys, most near school-leaving age, found full-time work in factories or canneries or on farms. In 1927, for example, the provincial labour department "found four boys, one in a boiler shop, two in a cold storage plant and one in a woodworking plant."<sup>35</sup> In 1928, the department permitted 17 children under age 15 years to work in canneries; in 1929, 24 children, and in 1930, 18 children.<sup>36</sup> When he was nine years old, Sing Lim began to spend his summers working full-time on the farm run by one of his father's friends. "I was probably more a nuisance than a real help that first summer," he reported. "We worked from 6:30 in the morning to 7:30 at night every day except Sunday, when we finished at noon."<sup>37</sup>



*Waiting for work at a public golf-course 'caddy shack': Vancouver, April 1927.*  
(Vancouver City Archives)

Most girls who found part-time work were hired to tend other families' children. A surprising number began by working without pay, partly because they liked babies or young children (or felt they were expected to like babies and young children), and partly to gain experience. A Kerrisdale girl, for example, from age 8 onward, after completing her own chores, often helped the mother of three who

<sup>35</sup> British Columbia, Department of Labour, *Report*, (1927), L64.

<sup>36</sup> *Report*, (1928), J53; (1929), L52; (1930), E54.

<sup>37</sup> Sing Lim, *West Coast Chinese Boy* (Montreal 1979), 35.

lived next door: "When I got to be about 11 I would bath them and take them out for a walk while their mother prepared supper." Another reported that before she started paid babysitting, she "had pushed babies out in their carriages for free." As such girls got older, they moved on to more-regular work as "child-minders" or "mothers' helpers," as they were customarily called until after World War II. In working-class neighbourhoods, families employed child-minders only out of absolute necessity, to enable mothers to go out to work, to shop, or to deal with sickness or some other family emergency. As one Cedar Cottage woman explained, "people didn't go out in that neighbourhood much"; another noted that "nobody had any money for babysitting; I never heard of babysitting" of the sort that came of parents going out for recreational purposes. One young worker there made lunch for a little girl, and took another "for a walk for fifteen cents an hour."

Increasing prosperity after 1945 enabled more families in both classes to employ babysitters as a matter of choice rather than as a matter of necessity. The greater availability of this work also brought about the shift in terminology from "child-minding" to "babysitting". A Kerrisdale woman outlined the pattern of a babysitting career as it was towards the end of the 1950s. "I started about ten ... being a mother's helper .... I remember taking the neighbour's kids for a walk so the mother could be free .... I was not left alone at night. [Later, at about age 14] I babysat ... for five boys and I'd go away with them in the summertime ... [and] I babysat for another family." Like other child workers, babysitters could be exploited by their employers. One woman explained that "the woman I sat for was known for not paying regularly. Often she would say she hadn't enough change, [but] the next time I babysat I didn't have the courage to ask for the money owed me." Another remembered one family with "about six or seven kids that I used to have an endless fight with, but I think I got what was equivalent to twelve and a half cents an hour" when the prevailing rate was twenty-five cents.

Some girls found other sorts of part-time work. During the summer holidays, and over the whole of these years, many girls (and some boys) could find work picking berries and hops on farms near Vancouver. Thus, in June 1930, Lakeshore Farm of Hatzic wanted "girls for raspberry picking": and in June 1940, a Burnaby farm wanted "10 girls to pick raspberries."<sup>38</sup> While some advertisements for pickers specified "girls over 15," most did not mention age.<sup>39</sup> If employers checked ages at all, they did so perfunctorily. In turn, the children told them what they wanted to hear. A Cedar Cottage girl no more than 13 years old "used to go out picking berries. And we'd start off with strawberries ... and we'd pick raspberries, loganberries, and we'd end up picking hops. So I was always two weeks late coming back to school." Somewhat-older girls (nearing or beyond school-leaving age) worked as part-time sales clerks in neighbourhood or downtown stores. A Kerrisdale girl got "my first job at 'Sweet Sixteen' when I was just thirteen." An east-side girl, whose father was a small merchant, worked from age 15 onward at part-time

<sup>38</sup> *Province*, 18 June 1930, 15; 29 June 1940, 18.

<sup>39</sup> *Province*, 26 June 1930, 21.

jobs at Woodward's, Famous, and the Sally Shop: "I had to put myself through." At Christmas in the late 1940s, one Grade Eight girl worked in a "15-cent store" and "quite enjoyed the experience"; from then on she "worked on Saturdays." One enterprising Kitsilano girl at age 14 or 15 used to beachcomb for logs from a rowboat. "I used to bring the logs back to Barnacle Bill .... He gave me \$3.00 a log."<sup>40</sup>

Especially in the 1920s and 1930s, children's earnings were an important, and sometimes essential, part of family economies. The part-time earnings of working-class children often stood between their families and real hardship, and occasionally helped avert complete economic collapse. And whatever the family circumstances, until after World War II, most working-class children turned their earnings over to parents. As one put it, "Our money was pooled in the family pot, not kept for personal use." In the 1920s, a Cedar Cottage boy whose father had a regular job, reported: "I had a paper route ... I made twenty or twenty-one dollars a month. I would get to keep some of it." Another from the same area "delivered papers for four years but didn't get to keep the money. I had to turn it over to Mother and got an allowance of twenty-five cents." An east-side boy, whose family had some income, worked in the mid-1930s from age 12 to 14 as a delivery boy from 4:00 to 6:00 pm weekdays and 10:00 am to 6:00 pm Saturdays, kept 25 cents of his \$1.75-weekly earnings, and gave the rest to the family. In 1934, the Depression drove a family from Winnipeg to Vancouver. The father, a bookkeeper, found only occasional work to support his wife and five children. The eldest, then 12 years old, found himself "thrust into responsibility very young in life ... I had two sometimes three [paper] routes, 70 papers in one, 112 in another ... I gave ten dollars a month to Mom; eight for rent, \$1.50 for light ... I kept what was made above ten dollars." One boy, whose father had been laid off during the Depression but got work again in wartime, "worked all day on Saturday delivering [meat] all over the Kerrisdale area .... I gave all my money to my parents except a dollar for pocket money" to help pay off the mortgage. His two brothers and two sisters also contributed by working part-time.

The postwar period's high levels of employment and rising standard of living permitted many working-class families to allow their children to keep some or all of their earnings. In the early 1950s, a Cedar Cottage boy, earning about twenty dollars a month on his paper route, "spent most of my money on junk; pop, ice cream, etc." Another, a millwright's son, found his own job at age 12 as a drugstore delivery-boy. "It was totally my own decision that I should look for a job ... and I could keep the job ... as long as my marks and grades didn't get into trouble .... Economically I was somebody ... and it gave me a great sense of independence and freedom to have ten or fifteen dollars ... to go and say I'm going to buy a shirt or whatever." In the late 1940s, a Cedar Cottage girl held two part-time jobs from age 14 onward and "was the only one in the family with a bank account ... [which she held] to save to go to Europe."

<sup>40</sup>Jacqueline Hooper, interviewed 8 April 1985 for the False Creek Oral History Collection of the Vancouver Historical Society, Special Collections, UBC Library.



*A family hand-picking cranberries at the Smith farm, Richmond, B.C.*

(Mrs. A. Smallwood/Richmond Archives)

As middle-class children gradually assumed responsibility for the cost of some or all of their clothes, school supplies, and entertainment, their earnings often substantially reduced pressures on tight family budgets. However, except for a few families in the worst part of the Depression, children's income rarely made the difference between a family having, or not having, enough money to provide themselves with the bare essentials of food, clothing and shelter. A Kerrisdale girl who babysat ("not on school nights") and then worked part-time at Woodward's in the late 1940s, "didn't save any money, I spent it [often on] things I was forbidden to have," such as "high-heel shoes, makeup, and even cigarettes." Another Kerrisdale girl "made lots of money babysitting." She saved most of it. Her father (employing a very common middle-class practice) would "buy the standard [jacket] and if I wanted to make up the difference I could have the other one." A middle-class Kerrisdale man, who received a small allowance, reported that "if I wanted anything extra special I worked for it. My sister had polio and needed many operations." Another delivered the *Province* "which sold for \$1.00 a month, with thirty cents for myself .... Thirty dollars was big money." In the 1940s, an east-side minister's daughter spent her babysitting and other money on clothes because otherwise, as "was fairly common then," she had "had one new outfit a year that she wore every day."

Contrary to legal constraints, some children entered the full-time work force before their fifteenth birthdays.<sup>41</sup> Particularly in the 1920s and 1930s, a few employers even advertised for children of legal school age.<sup>42</sup> Census takers in 1921 reported only 117 Vancouver children under age 15 in full-time work, while their successors in 1931 found a mere 48.<sup>43</sup> Although other evidence suggests that there were more children in full-time work than census takers discovered, it does not indicate that the number was large. In a study during the 1929-30 school year, the Vancouver School Board found "that over four hundred pupils of compulsory age withdrew, and that most of these were not granted exemption in the usual way." The "chief reasons ... were economic, lack of ability to do and of interest in school work, and a desire to go to work."<sup>44</sup> Most, indeed, appear to have been almost old enough to leave school legally.

What sorts of full-time work did these children do? To authorities like the truant officers, those in the street trades, especially newsboys, were the most conspicuous group.<sup>45</sup> In the 1920s, provincial factory inspectors "found an occasional child under the age of 14 working in a factory," but by 1932, the labour

<sup>41</sup>For a survey of child labour in Canada in the early 1920s, see Helen Gregory MacGill, "The Child in Industry," *The Labour Gazette*, (October 1925), 983-91. See also Department of Labour, *Employment of Children*, 41.

<sup>42</sup>Two advertisements in the "Wanted" columns of the *Province*, 18 June 1930, 15, for example, called for "Boy about 14" and "Light housework by young girl, 14, in good home."

<sup>43</sup>Canada, *Census* (1921), vol. 4, xlvi; (1931), vol. 6, Table 41.

<sup>44</sup>Vancouver School Board, *Report* (1930), 32-3.

<sup>45</sup>In 1921, 114 British Columbia boys and girls under fifteen reported themselves "in trade." Department of Labour, *Employment of Children*, 66-7. See also Vancouver School Board, *Report* (1919), 77; (1923), 94.

department claimed that child labour was "almost unknown" in British Columbia.<sup>46</sup> In 1931, among the children aged 14 and under in full-time work, 13 of the 32 boys were messengers, and 10 of the 16 girls were in service.<sup>47</sup> As full-time child labour declined across Canada, some children evaded, or tried to evade, school and labour regulations to go to work outside the family.<sup>48</sup> A Cedar Cottage man reported that in 1920, "at the start of the summer holidays my mother ... heard that [a downtown company] ... wanted a delivery boy. It was ten dollars a week for a 45-hour week ... I gave my mother the ten dollars every Saturday and she'd give me 50 cents spending money ... and she bought my car tickets .... Well, at the end of August ... that ten dollars was such a big help to my parents that I was told to keep the job." School authorities took no action in his case, probably because he turned 15 toward the end of October.<sup>49</sup> Another man explained that, in February of his Grade Eight year, at age 14, he went to work in a rope factory, where his first job was to "spool up wire onto bobbins."<sup>50</sup> In the early 1930s, when Phyllis McMillan of Aiyansh was 12 years old, she joined her family in seasonal work at Port Edward's North Pacific Cannery. Under the "Chinese contract system", she was hired to "shoot cans" from the can runway into baskets and take them to the "hand fillers". She worked 12 "very boring" hours every day. "Our pay was eight cents an hour."<sup>51</sup>

Although census figures report that more boys than girls entered full-time work before they legally were old enough to do so, the actual situation was probably the reverse. Both because of their superior home-making skills and the fact that boys could get paid work more easily and earn more than their sisters, girls rather than boys stayed home in cases of domestic necessity. These working girls tended to be invisible to census takers and truant officers. Older daughters of large families missed much or all of their schooling to help their busy or ailing mothers. Agatha Raso, born in Italy in 1911, came to Canada in 1921, the oldest of six children. She "started to go to school a little bit." Soon, however, she "had to stay home and help my mother with the boarders. Believe me, I had only two years of education ... I wanted to go to school, but I couldn't go."<sup>52</sup> A native woman, born in the 1920s,

<sup>46</sup>British Columbia, Department of Labour, *Report* (1920), P541; (1932), G51.

<sup>47</sup>Canada, *Census* (1931), vol. 6, Table 41.

<sup>48</sup>Gainfully occupied 14 year-olds in the Canadian work force declined steadily from 20,745 in 1921 to 13,716 in 1931 to 12,394 in 1941 to 10,179 in 1951. M.C. Urquhart and K.A.H. Buckley, eds., *Historical Statistics of Canada* (Toronto 1965), series C37.

<sup>49</sup>Thus, in May 1923, the South Vancouver School Board permitted a boy who had "no chance of passing the Entrance Examination," and who would be age 15 in September, to leave school. In September of the same year, however, it insisted that at least five 14 year-olds continue with the new school year. City of Vancouver Archives, South Vancouver School Board Minutes, 16 May 1923; 18 September 1923; 26 September 1923.

<sup>50</sup>Walter B. Dubberley, interviewed 9 February 1985, for the False Creek Oral History Collection of the Vancouver Historical Society, Special Collections, UBC Library.

<sup>51</sup>Caption, photograph of Phyllis McMillan, North Pacific Cannery Village and Fishing Museum, Port Edward, B.C.

<sup>52</sup>Carmela Patrias, "Passages From the Life ... An Italian Woman in Welland, Ontario," *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme*, 8 (Summer 1987), 70. In Percy James' "semi-autobiographi-

reported that she had "no education except how to look after my mother's babies, and housework."<sup>53</sup>

Young girls whose families could not afford to care for them, or whose potential earnings were needed, often went into domestic service. A Cedar Cottage girl, who had skipped one grade and thus finished Grade Eight at age 13, went to work for "five dollars a month and my board as a mother's helper ... you just worked in the house and you were there all the time .... It was wonderful, three months later, I got eight dollars a month .... I got married about 17 and kept on working till I was 19 .... I worked for four or five different families." Newspaper "help wanted" columns contained many advertisements for girls for "general housework" or to "assist with children."<sup>54</sup> Some specified that the girls would "sleep out," while others, such as one for a "strong girl for scrubbing," would "sleep in."<sup>55</sup> Of more than 40 such advertisements appearing in the *Province* on six different days during September and October, 1935, 20 did not specify a rate of pay.<sup>56</sup> Of the rest, one offered \$5.00 a month for a "young girl, mother's help; room and board," two others offered \$8.00 a month for the same services, three offered \$10.00 for "housework," five offered \$12.00 or \$12.50, seven offered \$15.00, and one offered \$20.00 a month. Given this range of rates, it seems most likely that only the least-experienced and under-aged would work for \$5.00 to \$8.00 a month.

Girls placed in foster homes by such agencies as the Children's Aid Society, and those assisting pregnant girls, often found themselves working especially hard. One boy reported that his parents acquired a 13 year-old "foster sister" for himself and his two brothers — aged 5, 3, and 1 — who in fact became a full-time house servant and nanny. "She had an awful life, with real chores, hard work. My father never spoke to her and wouldn't even look at her." After she had given up her baby, a 13 year-old was placed in a home where the foster parents needed a lot of help "which at first she willingly gave. But as time went on [she] resented the household chores."<sup>57</sup> In another case, in her twelfth foster home, and one in which the pregnant foster mother had a 7 year-old step child, a 5 year-old step child, and a year-old infant of her own, the foster mother wanted the 13 year-old girl to be a "mother's helper," but the youngster "just did not see the work to be done."<sup>58</sup>

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cal" novel *House of Hate* (Toronto 1976), 60-1, set in "Milltown" (Corner Brook), Newfoundland, "Flinsky" was "plucked out of school" in her thirteenth year, becoming "the household drudge, working seven days and five or six nights a week without pay and with never a word of praise or appreciation to lighten her burdens."

<sup>53</sup>Baxter, *No Way to Live*, 85.

<sup>54</sup>*Province*, 2 June 1930, 13.

<sup>55</sup>*Province*, 10 June 1930, 14; 18 June 1930, 15.

<sup>56</sup>*Province*, 9 September 1935, 17 September 1935, 25 September 1935; 3 October 1935, 11 October 1935, 19 October 1935.

<sup>57</sup>Theresa Kaufman, "Child Mothers: Social Circumstances and Treatment Problems of Unmarried Mothers of School Age," MSW thesis, University of British Columbia, 1962, 97.

<sup>58</sup>Audrey Mary Coppock, "Children in Group Homes: A Survey of Wards of the Children's Aid Society Living in These Units, Vancouver, 1954," MSW thesis, University of British Columbia, 1955, 78.

World War II brought something of a boom to those children old enough to work outside the home, whether full- or part-time. In the words of one informant, "you could always get a job in the 1940s." The expanding economy, at first more civilian than military, and then an increasingly war-directed one, drew off many of the older girls and boys who had clung to delivery jobs past the usual age. Men and women moved out of the most menial and low paid of full-time jobs and were, in turn, replaced by those who had just left school, and by under-aged youngsters. As the labour shortage intensified, governments formally and informally began to ease legislative restriction on child labour.<sup>59</sup> Thus, in the early 1940s, a 12 year-old Cedar Cottage girl started full-time work in a laundry. "I was the oldest so I went to help the family. We needed the money; twelve dollars went a long way. I liked the idea that I could help my Dad [a soldier who owned a car] if I wanted to." She was not alone; the women who customarily worked in the laundry and similar occupations had gone to the shipyards, "so the companies turned to kids." At about the same time in Halifax a boy aged 12 or 13 years went to work one summer as a boiler chipper, scaler and bilge cleaner. "In one of the little compartments just big enough to squat in, with a bucket and clean rags I would mop up oil and water off the floor, fill the bucket and pass it back via the crew behind. The smaller you were, the closer to the front you worked. I worried about a short circuit in the [power] line. It was very hard on the nerves." At the end of the summer, his family insisted he continue work and he did so, cleaning up the railroad yard, sweeping out box cars, and doing other "dirty work."

The end of the war, which also saw the introduction of family allowances, marked the end of full-time child labour as a widely-perceived social problem in Canada. In July 1945, the federal government sent out the first family-allowance cheques to mothers whose children were 15 years old or younger. Since children working for wages or improperly absent from school were ineligible for family allowances, school attendance among older children improved markedly.<sup>60</sup> In all of British Columbia, the 1951 census found only 437 boys and 70 girls under age 15 in full-time work.<sup>61</sup> The attention of society and school authorities had shifted to school "drop-outs," a group made up of those who went to work, legally, before they completed high school.<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, school-attendance officers and social workers discovered a few children still worked virtually full-time, especially in domestic situations. A financially hard-up family in which both parents worked for wages often kept one of its three sons home from school to care for his four-year-old

<sup>59</sup> Child welfare workers expressed their concern about the long-term consequence to the sending of "children out to work, neither physically, emotionally nor mentally equipped to be permanent wage earners." See, for example, Nora Lea, "The Protection of Our Children," *Canadian Welfare*, 17, 7 (January 1942), 49 and "Child Labour and the War," *Canadian Welfare*, 17, 8 (February 1942), 17-21.

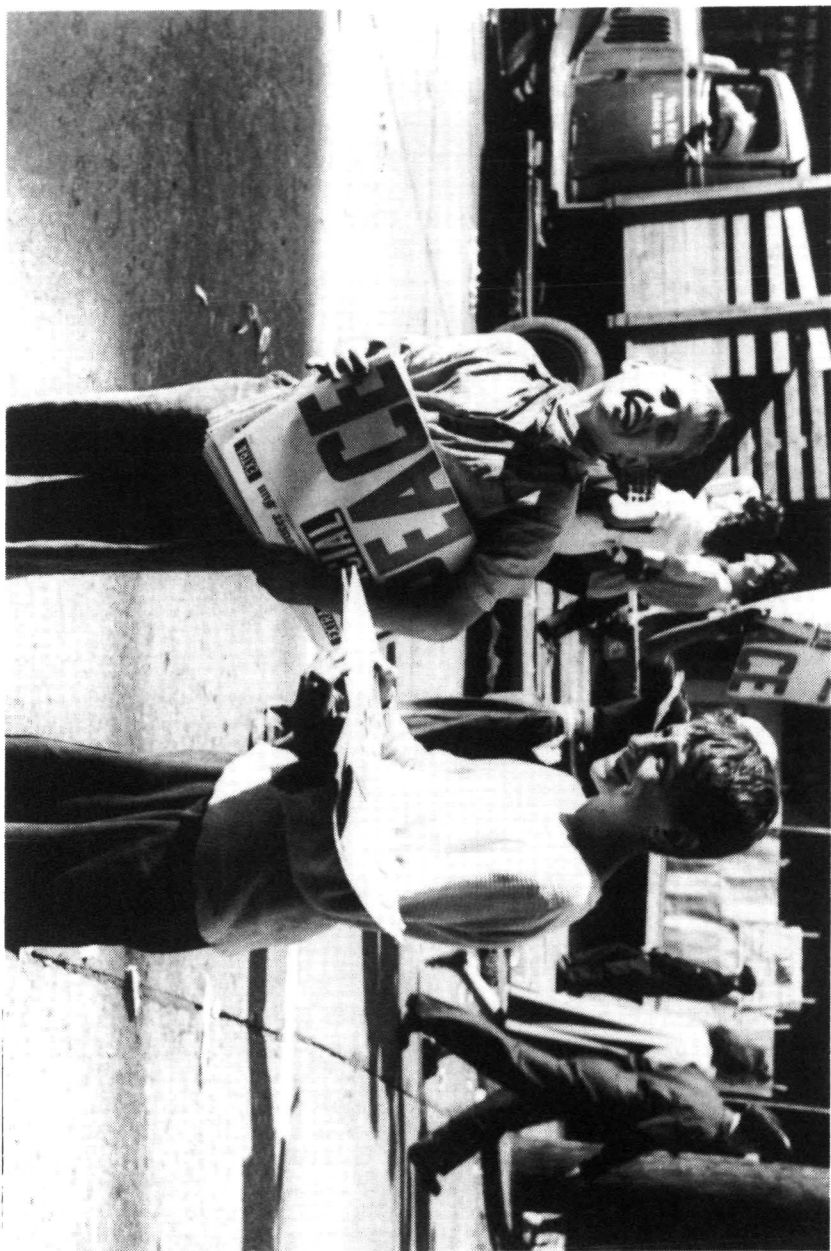
<sup>60</sup> Canada, Department of National Health and Welfare, *Report*, 1946, 79-80. In 1959-60, the Department suspended allowances for less than 7,000 of the 6,220,000 children receiving them. *Report*, 1959-60, 3.

<sup>61</sup> Canada, *Census*, (1951), vol. 4, Table 3.

<sup>62</sup> Helen Des Roches, "Early School Leavers," *Canadian Welfare*, 38 (15 September 1962), 217-8.



*Selling the VJ Day "Extra": Vancouver, 8 August 1945.*



(Vancouver City Archives)

sister.<sup>63</sup> In another case, a 12 year-old boy worked 25 to 30 hours a week helping his widowed mother with her small street-vending candy business.<sup>64</sup> After being reported for frequent absences from her Grade Six classroom, one girl poignantly described her family situation. "There was a new baby at Christmas time and 3 year-old twins. Her mother had been ill and she had to stay with the children while her mother went to the doctor ... and did her shopping." When she did go to school, she found "a lot of work to do" when she came home. "She would like to go to bed at 8:30 but it is often 10:00 or 10:30 before she does ... [and] she has the responsibility of waking the family in the morning."<sup>65</sup> Many such children unwillingly evaded school attendance legislation; by the 1940s and 1950s attending school for the required number of years had become so much a matter of social custom and of law, children themselves felt that attending school was a necessary part of their lives. This "pale, thin, and worried-looking" girl, for example, didn't "want to fail as all her relatives have passed ...."<sup>66</sup>

Why did children work? The answer to this question is more complex than might be first apparent. First, obviously, they worked because families, and especially mothers, needed their help. Virtually until the end of the study period, most working-class and many middle-class, families operated within extremely tight budgets. Continued solvency demanded a very cautious creation and husbanding of resources by means of the domestic labour of all family members. As well, in all but the most affluent households, which could hire help, a reasonable amount of domestic comfort also required a lot of work; inevitably, parents insisted that their children share in this labour. Parents, of course, exercised almost-unlimited authority over their children and, both unilaterally and with state support, the power to enforce this authority. In this context, children accepted household duties as a 'given' of their lives. As one woman put it: "We always had things to do"; the sentiment was echoed by the man who reported: "Whatever there was to do, you did it."

Second, parents of both classes deeply distrusted idleness in their children, and were keen to keep them busy. Even those who did not believe literally that "the devil found work for idle hands to do" did so figuratively. As one said, "There is nothing for nothing." Parents' own experience substantiated the cultural ideology: in their own childhoods they themselves had worked both inside and outside their homes.<sup>67</sup> Childcare experts and others in authority supported the conventional wisdom on the merits of chores. As one of the "Little Blue Books" argued, "children ... want to 'Help Mother' and 'Help Father' .... Let them help, and let them keep right on all through life .... The useful people begin young!"<sup>68</sup> A mental hygiene

<sup>63</sup> Mary Thompson, "The Social Worker in the School," 52.

<sup>64</sup> Thompson, "Social Worker," 57.

<sup>65</sup> Thompson, "Social Worker," 67.

<sup>66</sup> Thompson, "Social Worker."

<sup>67</sup> See Bullen, "Hidden Workers," Syngé, "The Transition From School to Work," and Sutherland, *Children in English-Canadian Society*, Part I.

<sup>68</sup> Canada, Department of Health, *How to Take Care of the Father and the Family* by Helen MacMurchy (Ottawa 1925), 9.

clinic blamed "spoiling" at home for the poor performance of a Grade One pupil. "He has received no training at home in jobs and responsibility which indicates that he has had little encouragement to grow."<sup>69</sup> When an "incurable" 14 year-old boy's therapy sessions conflicted with his paper route, social workers "decided that the paper route was of more value than continued play therapy."<sup>70</sup> John Calam's account of how, when he was newly-arrived in Canada from England in the early 1940s, he took on a paper route and bought the necessary bicycle on credit, amusingly highlights a common attitude. His Canadian uncle had to intercede with his father, who argued that "No son of mine is going to make it appear I don't support him."<sup>71</sup> To the uncle (and Canadian parents generally), to take on such a task showed that a child was sensitive to family needs and was helping out. It also showed to Canadian parents (and their friends and neighbours) that their children had the required amount of Canadian "get up and go". As well, many working-class parents believed that their children had a duty to contribute to the family economy in partial repayment of costs the family incurred by rearing them. The matter-of-fact way in which children turned over most or all of their earnings to parents perhaps suggests that they, too, accepted the legitimacy of this notion.<sup>72</sup>

If children worked because they had to, they also worked because they wanted to. Many felt they had a duty to contribute their share to family maintenance. A Halifax woman reported picking blueberries "all day" and feeling "pretty bedraggled by the end," but "You felt you were doing your part." One woman explained of her work helping her mother in the garden, and in canning, that "I really appreciated that cooperative spirit of doing something together. I really liked the family togetherness." A boy whose family was in dire straits "quit school in order to work and maintain his mother."<sup>73</sup> A 10 year-old foster child, "exceeding anxious to please," insisted "on chopping wood and digging in the garden, etc."<sup>74</sup> Adults who express resentment over burdens placed on them as children are usually those who believe their parents treated them unfairly by demanding contributions of time or effort that exceeded community norms. One man reported that he and his brother had to spend all their after school, weekend and summer vacation time working in their father's extensive garden. "We used to see the other kids go by and really hated our father for the way he kept us from ever playing with them."

Making a contribution also added to children's sense of self-worth and gave them the feeling that they were moving toward independence. Thus children who

<sup>69</sup>Thompson, "Social Worker," 72.

<sup>70</sup>Coppock, "Children in Group Homes," 101. Despite this decision, the boy soon returned to the Industrial School.

<sup>71</sup>John Calam, "Discovering B.C. Education: A Personal Retrospect," unpublished PDK Address, 19 March 1980.

<sup>72</sup>See Syngé, "The Transition From School to Work."

<sup>73</sup>Donald Garth Homer, "A Survey of Wards Not in Foster Homes: A Study of the Group Who Severed Contact With the Agency (Children's Aid Society, Vancouver), MSW thesis, University of British Columbia, 1956, 76.

<sup>74</sup>Cobbins, "Treatment of Emotionally Disturbed Teen-Age Boys," 37.

earned money, even if it went for family rather than personal purposes, could view their activities as a step in the process of freeing themselves from the enormous power and authority of their parents. (Although in his pioneering study on the history of the family, Friedrich Engels noted that, in the family, "man ... the earner, the breadwinner of the family ... is the bourgeois, the wife represents the proletariat," a more accurate description would state that "the woman and their children" formed the proletariat in the family, or in modern terminology, that a patriarchal structure subordinated them both.<sup>75</sup>) For example, the income of the boy who supported his family during the Depression with two and sometimes three newspaper routes, made him an important authority figure in the family, contemptuous of his unemployed father and, although fond of his mother, not above small displays of power over her as well. In a less-extreme way, those girls who did not have bicycles, unlike their delivery-boy brothers, were acutely conscious of their relative lack of power, and of the measure of freedom enjoyed by those with a "wheel". As one reported, "I threw the first tantrum I ever had when my brother got a bike when he became a delivery boy."

Finally, children worked in the household and family economies because of the role that this work played in making them into women or men of their times. Although the ways in which children of this era acquired their sense of gender identity, and their membership in the separate cultures of men and women, lie mostly outside the scope of this paper, chores and paid work alike contributed to a process rooted in relationships within the family and in the culture of childhood. Most children, even if they in some sense apprehended what was going on, would not have been able to articulate it. When interviewed, few adults stepped outside of themselves far enough to sense what was transpiring in this aspect of their childhood. Nonetheless, one Cedar Cottage woman came close. She explained that, because her separated mother worked, "there were certain chores I had to do. I had to have the wood in and the wood split. I was the boy, eh, in the family, so it seemed to me all my life was splitting wood, and bringing in wood, and I had the fire going, the vegetables on cooking when my mother came in the door."

Between the end of World War II and the end of the 1950s, traditional patterns of children's work underwent a cluster of changes. Interviews and other evidence show that some children of the 1950s — especially among the severely disadvantaged and immigrants from war-devastated areas — worked as hard as had their predecessors, and at similar tasks. Nonetheless, such children formed a decreasing proportion of the total. Changes in Canada's demographic profile, and a rising

<sup>75</sup>Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, (New York 1972 [1884]), 81-2. Economists investigating notions that envisage people as the embodiment of human capital have considered children in this context. In a formulation that they believe applies mostly in poor countries, such economists see children "in a very important sense the *poor man's capital*." On the other hand, parental investment in children in "rich" countries is "in many ways akin to the investment in home-grown trees for their beauty and fruit." Theodore W. Schultz, "The Value of Children: An Economic Perspective," *Journal of Political Economy*, 81 (1973), 53.

standard of living, combined to reduce the role of children in the domestic economy and transformed their role in the family.

As it had throughout the 20th century, family size continued to decline in the postwar era.<sup>76</sup> With fewer children to look after, mothers could devote more attention to the upbringing of each individual child, with less need to call on older siblings to look after younger ones. Smaller families, with children born more closely together in time, also meant a shorter period of responsibility for the care of children. In working-class families particularly, as Jane Synge has explained, as children reached late childhood or adolescence, many women entered the part-time work force, and their earnings replaced, to a degree, what the family had forfeited when it allowed children to spend their part-time earnings on themselves.<sup>77</sup>

A rising standard of living both in middle-class and working-class families permitted these people to take advantage of technological change which only the well-to-do previously had been able to afford. As families adopted electricity or gas for cooking, and gas or oil for home heating, the long connection between children and the provision of fuel came to an end. As the means of cleaning homes and clothing changed, children's work diminished much more than did that of mothers. For the latter, new "labour-saving" gadgets often encouraged them to set ever-higher standards for themselves. New standards in clothing cleanliness, however, did not call for daughters to carry water from stove to washtub, or to turn wringers. Refrigeration, both in the home and in the store, sharply reduced the number of shopping trips a family needed to make. The consolidation of shops into larger units that were further away from home shifted shopping duties from children to parents, and again especially to mothers. The automobile was central to this change, for families gradually came to convey the week's groceries home in the family car rather than in the baby buggy, wagon, or bicycle carrier. Increasing affluence, together with stricter enforcement of municipal bylaws, also cut back on urban family agricultural activities. Many families replaced the produce of their vegetable garden with the relatively inexpensive and more varied items from local and California farms. New housing on previously vacant land, together with more-vigorous enforcement of municipal health and zoning regulations, effectively eliminated all domestic animals except pets from the city.

The rising standard of living also reduced the family's need for the part-time income of their children. Most boys continued to find part-time work outside their home and, with a reduced load of domestic duties, more girls also worked at part-time jobs. The "consumer revolution" affected children as well as parents, expressing itself in the increasingly-felt need to conform to standards set by peers. While few youngsters achieved absolute freedom in the way they disposed of their earnings, as they took financial responsibility for some of their increasingly-varied

<sup>76</sup>The number of children ever-born to ever-married women declined from 4.2 to 3.1 between 1941 and 1961. Ellen Gee, "Fertility and Marriage Patterns in Canada, 1851-1971," PhD dissertation, University of British Columbia, 1978, 240-2.

<sup>77</sup>Synge, "The Transition From School to Work," 250.

and more-expensive clothing, sports equipment, school supplies and entertainment, parents allowed them considerable choice in these matters. Such changes, in turn, provide some evidence about a broader dimension of social change. Bryan Palmer has argued that in the 1920s and 1930s, mass culture, consumerism, and such other classless concerns as "individualized family-centered activity" dissolved what had been a distinctive working-class culture in Anglophone Canada.<sup>78</sup> In these decades, the experiences of working-class and middle-class children alike in the elementary school classroom and in the culture of childhood had much in common, and what they had in common came mostly from the new, classless elements Palmer has identified. Nonetheless, such practices as scrounging, intensive urban agriculture (including the keeping of animals), together with parental collection of their children's earnings, point to the persistence of distinctive elements of working-class culture until after World War II.

In both classes, some of the characteristics of traditional child labour persisted into the postwar era. Parents continued to need their children's help with many household tasks. Parents continued to believe that idleness was dangerous and that work built character. Mothers continued to find more for their daughters to do than for their sons. With the parental encouragement of their parents, children of both sexes found part-time work. Finally, both boys and girls continued to construct their adult identities in part through their work. Children of the 1950s, and even more recently, still found that they "had things to do."

<sup>78</sup>Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800-1980* (Toronto 1983), 196. Glen H. Elder's description of the work of children of "deprived families" in Oakland, California, in the 1930s suggests that they, too, remained in a distinctive culture. *Children of the Great Depression* (Chicago 1974), 64-82.

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