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Volume 21, numéro 2, spring 1992

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad21\\_2art04](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad21_2art04)

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Morton, S. (1992). Women on Their Own:: Single Mothers in Working-Class Halifax in the 1920s. *Acadiensis*, 21(2), 90–107.

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## Women on Their Own: Single Mothers in Working-Class Halifax in the 1920s

WHEN HER HUSBAND DIED IN December 1919, Jessie Muir of Halifax had seven children under the age of 14 and was pregnant again.<sup>1</sup> Left without the earnings of her husband, Mrs. Muir faced the future with almost \$2,200 in personal property and a six-room house in the working-class neighbourhood of Richmond Heights.<sup>2</sup> The house would be an important source of income for Mrs. Muir, and throughout 1920-2 classified advertisements appeared in the *Evening Mail* offering board, furnished rooms and lodging at 14 Stairs Street.<sup>3</sup> In addition to her own efforts to support her family, Mrs. Muir received assistance from her community. During the late winter and early spring of 1923, a card social and dance, and a card social, dance, and pie social were held to raise money to assist the widow and her large family.<sup>4</sup> Jessie Muir thus survived the way most widows did before the welfare state: she used her home to generate income, and perhaps also accepted occasional day work in the critical period before she could depend on her children's labour.<sup>5</sup>

Few historians of the working class and the family have examined the ambiguous position of single women with families. With the important exception

1 "CNR Employees and Halifax Explosion", Vol. 19265, RG 43, National Archives of Canada [NAC]; *Evening Mail* (Halifax), 6 December 1919; St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church Baptismal Register, Micro: Churches, Halifax, Public Archives of Nova Scotia [PANS]; *Mail-Star* (Halifax), 1 June 1972; Probate Court, f. 9537, Halifax, Nova Scotia. All surnames of neighbourhood residents in this study are fictitious.

2 "City Assessments, 1917/1920", MG 36, R.1864, Halifax Relief Commission [HRC], PANS; Ward Six Assessment Field Cards, RG 35-102, City of Halifax, V. 19, H 9-12, PANS; Court of Probate, f. 9537, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

3 *Evening Mail*, 26 June, 2, 5, 29 July, 9 October, 3 November 1920, 5 April, 15 August, 19 November 1921, 27 January, 23 May 1922.

4 *Evening Mail*, 22 February, 18 March 1922.

5 In 1925, her eldest son, John, was working as a call boy with the CNR. The fact that he was able to find employment in a period of layoffs with the company that had employed his father suggests one way that informal community networks were utilized to assist distressed families. In the same year, Mary, the eldest girl, was also employed as a cashier. Circumstances for the family must have improved further by 1927, when the second son was employed as a clerk. While the older children may have had no choice about leaving school and earning for the family, Mrs. Muir, unlike other women in her circumstances, does not seem to have expected all her children to work as soon as possible. Teresa, born in 1914, was able to attend St. Patrick's High School.

Suzanne Morton, "Women on Their Own: Single Mothers in Working-Class Halifax in the 1920s", *Acadiensis*, XXI, 2 (Spring 1992), pp. 90-107.

of Bettina Bradbury's work, these women rarely appear on the Canadian historical landscape, except as passive recipients in the story of the development of the welfare state. American historians such as Tamara Hareven and Susan Kleinburg include widows as a life-cycle stage but do not look at deserted or separated women. Even the inclusion of widows can be problematic. Although both Hareven and Kleinburg note that widowhood was a life stage that did not conform strictly to age, widows appear in Hareven's discussion of "Later Life Transitions" and in Kleinburg's section on "Aging, Widowhood, and Death". The association of female household-heads and old age — or worse, death — denies the accomplishments and marginalizes the life experiences of women such as Jessie Muir, who lived for 50 years without a male breadwinner following her husband's death.<sup>6</sup>

The death or departure of a spouse affected men and women alike, regardless of class, but had a particularly devastating economic and emotional impact on working-class women. Society defined the ideal family as a male-headed household supported by a male wage, but families led by women that did not fit this model constituted a significant proportion of households. Most women-led households were headed by widows, but women who were deserted, separated or married to migrant workers also composed important groups of those left temporarily or permanently in charge. Women who found themselves temporary or permanent heads of households were economically and socially vulnerable. Their circumstances reveal some of the inequities resulting from a male family-wage economy. First, the disparity in male and female wages meant that it was almost impossible for women to earn sufficient wages to successfully support themselves, let alone their children. Second, women were caught between the social ideal of a mother removed from the public labour market and the economic reality of life without access to an adult male wage. Respectable working-class culture was firmly based on the expectation of a high male wage capable of supporting a family. And the contemporary definition of family was restrictive, supported by assumptions of natural roles, duties and obligations. Female household-heads therefore posed a challenge to the existing economic system and ideological framework.

While attesting to the flaws in an economic system that encouraged dependency on a male family wage, female-headed households also exhibited the strength and

6 Bettina Bradbury, "Surviving as a Widow in 19th-Century Montreal", *Urban History Review*, XVII, 3 (February 1989), pp. 148-60, and "The Fragmented Family: Family Strategies in the Face of Death, Illness, and Poverty, Montreal, 1860-1885", in Joy Parr, ed., *Childhood and Family in Canadian History* (Toronto, 1982), pp. 109-28. For example see Veronica Strong-Boag, "Wages for Housework: Mothers' Allowances and the Beginnings of Social Security in Canada", *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 14, 1 (Spring 1979), pp. 24-34. Recent work by Margaret Little on single mothers and the welfare state provides insight into the actual female recipients as well as state policy. Margaret Hillyard Little, "'A Fit and Proper Person': The Moral Regulation of Single Mothers in Ontario, 1920-1940", paper presented to the Canadian Women's Studies Association, June 1991, Kingston, Ontario. See also Tamara Hareven, *Family Time, Industrial Time: The Relationship between the Family and Work in a New England Industrial Community* (Cambridge, 1982), and Susan J. Kleinburg, *The Shadow of the Mills: Working-Class Families in Pittsburgh, 1870-1907* (Pittsburgh, 1989). Women-led households in the early 19th century are examined in Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Urbana, 1987).

courage of individual women, and the flexibility of the household unit. The necessity for these women to move beyond traditional gender roles and the strain they placed on existing survival strategies and networks compelled the state to intervene. Concern was expressed for their economic vulnerability and poverty, but fear for their moral vulnerability, as sexually active women who now lived outside marriage and male supervision, was seldom far from the surface. These women clearly did not fit any of the contemporary categories used to label women, and their presence was regarded as an awkward social problem.

The ambiguous position of this large group of women and their various strategies of survival can be explored by detailing the experiences of a representative group of women in one particular working-class neighbourhood. Richmond Heights was a district ten blocks long and three blocks wide located in the north end of the Halifax peninsula. The population of this neighbourhood was concentrated in a rental housing development known as the Hydrostone District, built after the 1917 Halifax Explosion by the Halifax Relief Commission (HRC) to house the homeless and generate long-term pension income for Explosion victims through rent. The neighbourhood contained approximately 370 dwellings, but during the 1920s there were occasional high levels of tenant turnover and vacancy. Male wage earners in Richmond Heights were employed in the highly volatile shipyards, in transportation and in the growing service sector. Women engaged in wage labour had little opportunity for factory work and were increasingly found in clerical and service occupations.<sup>7</sup>

Between 1921 and 1931 approximately 16 per cent of all Halifax families with children were headed by a single woman. Of the 1,506 female-headed families in 1931, some 1,131 were led by widows.<sup>8</sup> Many of the children in these families were 16 or older but this did not mean they had access to decent wages. Boys learning trades did not earn sufficient funds to maintain themselves, let alone contribute to the family coffers. For example, in the case of an Agricola Street widow with two sons aged 22 and 16, the older son was apprenticed as a printer for \$12 a week while the younger son brought home \$3.50 a week as an errand boy.<sup>9</sup> Without access to the manuscript census, there is no way of knowing either the number of these women living in Richmond Heights or the ages of their children; however, within this neighbourhood 30 widows appeared on the municipal voters' list between 1920 and 1929, and 115 widows were listed in the city directory.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the Halifax Explosion, there was not an unusual number of widows residing in the city by 1921. In other Canadian cities with a female age breakdown similar to that of Halifax, such as Hamilton, Ottawa and Moncton, widows composed the same percentage of the total female population.<sup>11</sup> The First World

7 For a detailed description of Richmond Heights see Suzanne Morton, "Men and Women in a Halifax Working-Class Neighbourhood in the 1920s", Ph.D. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1990.

8 *Census of Canada, 1931*, Vol. 5, pp. 1188-9; *1921 Census*, Vol. 3, Table 26, pp. 88-9.

9 Ernest H. Blois to Professor McKay, 1 February 1918, Case 3237, MG 20, Halifax Rotary Club, Vol. 1979, f. 35, PANS.

10 City of Halifax, 8, A.6, Card Index File of Voters, Ward 6, 1920s-30s, RG 35-102, PANS.

11 Seven per cent of all women in Halifax, Hamilton, Moncton, and Ottawa were widows. *Census of*

War, disease and industrial accidents in particular were common causes of widowhood. In 1926 alone, 13 fatalities in Halifax County were covered under the Workmen's Compensation Act, and this number did not represent all work-related fatal accidents.<sup>12</sup> Richmond Heights women not protected under the Workmen's Compensation Act included Elizabeth Docherty, whose husband was killed in an American construction accident, and Maude Kenner, whose husband drowned at sea.<sup>13</sup> In contrast to the sudden news of a workplace accident was the death of the wage earner after a long period of illness that interrupted regular income and drained any savings on household and medical expenses. Tuberculosis was a long and expensive disease that forced families either to pay for costly sanatorium treatments or witness a slow death at home, where wives could not undertake day labour because of nursing responsibilities. At the time of the July 1929 death of James Walker from tuberculosis his family was already in considerable debt, as he had been ill for a year and unable to work.<sup>14</sup>

In such vulnerable circumstances, insurance and property were the only means young families had of protecting themselves against the sudden, impoverishing loss of the primary male wage earner. In most cases, these means would prove either impossible to adopt or inadequate in their provisions. Life insurance was one way of making the future less uncertain. In her study of Italian and Jewish women in the Lower East Side of New York City, Elizabeth Ewen noted that the American working class carried life insurance on every person from the age of two up as the expense of funerals made coverage a necessity.<sup>15</sup> Three Nova Scotia widows who appeared in the Boston case notes of a 1910 study of widows and charity all had insurance regardless of their financial situation. The first widow's husband was killed in an industrial accident and left her with five children under ten years of age. The woman received \$280 from her husband's life insurance, \$100 from the insurance of her husband's employers, and a collection of \$94 from her husband's fellow employees. Of the total \$474, over one quarter, or \$143, was spent on the funeral. In the second case another widow with five children under the age of 14, whose husband died of Bright's disease, was left \$240 in life insurance and spent \$140 on funeral expenses. The final case mentioned involved a woman with two children under three years of age, whose husband's life insurance of \$100 did not manage to meet outstanding debts. The funeral expenses had to be covered by a charitable organization.<sup>16</sup> Insurance was just as important in Richmond Heights. Minnie Smithers, wife of a dining car waiter for the CNR, explained in an undated note to the HRC that her rent would be delayed as "We had forgotten about the Insurance coming due and I never like to leave it over as something might happen

*Canada, 1921*, Vol. 2, pp. 45-64, 224. In 1931 the percentage of widows in the female population remained at seven per cent. *Census of Canada, 1931*, Vol. 2, Table 30, p. 290.

12 Nova Scotia, *JHA*, 1927, Appendix 10, "Report of the Workmen's Compensation Board", p. 23.

13 *Evening Mail*, 4 February 1928; Vacated Balances, 1919-29, MG 36, HRC, R.1855, PANS.

14 Vacated Balances, 1919-29, MG 36, HRC, R.1855, PANS.

15 Elizabeth Ewen, "Immigrant Women in the Land Of Dollars", Ph.D. thesis, State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1979, p. 144.

16 Mary Richmond and Fred S. Hall, *A Study of Nine Hundred and Eighty-Five Widows Known to Certain Charity Organizations Societies in 1910* (New York, 1913 [1974]), Cases Number 41, 42, and 52, pp. 53, 54, 55.

and I would lose everything".<sup>17</sup> Like the nameless widows in Boston, much of the insurance benefits was absorbed by the funeral. A proper funeral seriously depleted limited resources, supporting the conclusion of a 1920 Nova Scotia government report that life insurance alone was inadequate as "it was found in practically all cases sufficient only to cover funeral expenses, doctors' bills, and clothing or at most to tide over a temporary period of adjustment when the real struggle would be faced".<sup>18</sup>

While insurance alone would not suffice, the same 1920 Nova Scotia government report found that in cases where savings had been invested in a home "a number of fatherless families were found to be self-supporting".<sup>19</sup> Property ownership excluded most residents of Richmond Heights. Tenants in the rental development of the Hydrostone, such as widow Ida Davis of Stanley Place, may have owned property before the Explosion; but during the 1920s all residents rented.<sup>20</sup> In the owner-occupied houses on the extension streets, however, widows were listed among property owners. By 1929, at least 12 properties on these streets had been or were currently owned by widows, most of whom had been widowed in the decade after resettlement. Thus property ownership was only available to a relatively small proportion of the residents of Richmond Heights, and even the widows who did possess their own homes were usually saddled with a large mortgage. Since both insurance and property were found wanting, or in the case of property unattainable, most widows had to rely on alternative survival strategies.

The supposedly ideal family-based survival strategy was home ownership with one or two older children working, but most women had to accept less satisfactory alternatives. These included the options of wage labour, the use of the home to generate income through boarders and lodgers, and the early school-leaving of children. As Bettina Bradbury wrote on the 19th century, widows usually engaged in wage labour if the children were young, and in these cases preferred employment opportunities that kept them in their own homes. Alternatively, when young children were involved and work inside the home was not possible, children were temporarily or permanently surrendered.<sup>21</sup> One of the obvious impediments to wage labour was the problem of child care. The Jost Mission operated a downtown crèche but it would not have been convenient for women in Richmond Heights.<sup>22</sup>

17 34 Cabot Place, MG 36, HRC, R.276, PANS.

18 Nova Scotia, *JHA*, 1921, Appendix 34, "Report of Commission on Mothers' Allowances", p. 10.

19 Nova Scotia, *JHA*, 1921, Appendix 34, "Report of Commission on Mothers' Allowances", p. 10.

20 Rental accounts by street with section on wooden houses, 1919-27, MG 36, HRC, R.1869, PANS. This low level of property ownership might not have been unique to this particular working-class neighbourhood as home-ownership levels in Halifax were unusually low. Richard Harris, "Working-Class Home Ownership and Housing Affordability Across Canada in 1931", *Histoire sociale/ Social History*, XIV, (May 1986), pp. 121-38, and Jay White, "Working-Class Housing in Halifax, 1905-1939", unpublished manuscript (McMaster University, 1989), {MG 100, Vol. 177, 22, PANS}.

21 Bettina Bradbury, "The Fragmented Family: Family Strategies in the Face of Death, Illness, and Poverty, Montreal, 1860-1885", in Joy Parr, ed., *Childhood and Family in Canadian History* (Toronto, 1982), p. 119.

22 Christina Simmons, "'Helping the Poorer Sisters': The Women of the Jost Mission, Halifax,

The decision to surrender a child was the last line of survival strategies — an option for only the most desperate, such as deserted wives. In fact, desertion was the primary cause of surrendering children to the Children's Aid Society. In 1925, the desertion of 24 fathers meant that nearly 60 children in the city were removed from their homes.<sup>23</sup> But the Children's Aid Society did not handle all surrendered children. Throughout the 1920s, local newspapers ran adoption columns in their classified sections. While inserts with box numbers might have been placed by the Children's Aid Society, others gave private north end addresses. Many of the advertisements — such as "Adoption — home for baby girl eight month, 833 Robie", "Home wanted for a baby girl six months old. Apply 76 Maine", and "Healthy Baby girl for adoption, aged one year. Apply evenings between 7 and 8, 49 Bilby" — suggest family dislocation or tragedy.<sup>24</sup> An offer of "complete surrender" of a four-month-old baby boy of "refined parentage" and an advertisement specifying the religion of prospective parents are evidence of the desperate choices some women had to make. And women were not the only ones faced with the dilemma of surrendering children. The following 1920 advertisement from a father suggests a conjuncture of several family crises. Perhaps the death or desertion of the mother, in combination with the dismal economic conditions in Amherst, forced the father to contemplate out-migration, which he could not manage accompanied by two young daughters.

Home wanted Good Christian home for two bright pretty girls, age 7 yrs and 12 yrs, oldest one good singer, Would like to have them in one home. Religion Baptist or Methodist preferred — Will give them away absolutely. Bedroom suite goes with them, also clothes for a year or two and \$250 in cash to each one. Apply N.D. Atkinson, father of the girls, P.O. Box 532, Amherst.<sup>25</sup>

We may never know if the \$500 promised came from the sale of his Amherst possessions, but the wording of the advertisement expressed concern for the girls' future and pride in their qualities. These feelings may have been shared by the many women who could not be so generous in their search for their children's new home. The surrendering of children was one of the tragic aspects of life for women on their own in a male wage economy.

Mothers looking for private homes to board their children also advertised in the adoption column. One woman asked, "Will you give an eight month old baby a good home and mother's care for \$12 monthly?"<sup>26</sup> Another wanted board for a seven-month-old baby girl, stating that she was willing to pay a reasonable price, while another was more concerned that the home should be "loving".<sup>27</sup> Offers to

1905–1945", *Acadiensis*, XIV, 1 (Autumn 1984), pp. 3–27.

23 Nova Scotia, *JHA*, 1927, Appendix 28, "Report of the Superintendent of Neglected and Delinquent Children", p. 24.

24 *Evening Mail*, 19 June 1924, 3 February 1920, 15 May 1922.

25 *Evening Mail*, 16 September 1920.

26 *Evening Mail*, 23 June 1922.

27 *Evening Mail*, 26 June 1920, 11 November 1921. Children could be boarded at the city's orphanages or in private homes for approximately three dollars a week.

board children "cheap" also appeared, suggesting another house-based survival strategy by which women could generate income.<sup>28</sup>

There were not many options available to women for generating income. Employment opportunities for older women were not plentiful during the 1920s and with a few exceptions were restricted to domestic service. The expanded female employment opportunities in the service and clerical sectors were largely restricted to young, single and attractive women.<sup>29</sup> Clara Brown, a tenant on Sebastian Place who was behind in her rent, was labelled in the housing records with self-explanatory comments as "widow in strained circumstances working for Dr. McDougall as [an] office cleaner".<sup>30</sup> Domestic service was characterized by low wages and the case of Hennessey Street resident Melinda Graham, the matron of one of the railway piers, might have been typical: she was unable to keep out of debt and in September 1925 found herself \$484.50 in arrears on her mortgage.<sup>31</sup> In fact, with the sole exception of a widowed teacher, the death or absence of a husband did not open up occupations for Richmond Heights women other than the limited opportunities available to their married counterparts.

Limited employment prospects for widows had little to do with community stature or respectability. Emma Ingram, a member of "a prominent North End family", was employed as a matron at the old north end railway terminal after her husband's death.<sup>32</sup> Regardless of a woman's reputation in the community, there was a general prejudice against wage-earning mothers. The Nova Scotia Commission on Mothers' Allowance reflected this position in its criticism of "Day work", "Service" and "Boarding House" widows for destroying family life. The report expressed concern for the children of "Day work widows" who were left unsupervised, and children in "Boarding House families" who were exposed to boarders and lodgers — "a real menace to normal family life and not in the best interest of the children".<sup>33</sup> At greatest risk were the children of widows in service who paid for their children's keep in institutions or "scattered about with relatives who could provide a home as long as the mother could contribute from her earnings towards their support".<sup>34</sup>

With poor employment prospects and limited child care and assistance available, remarriage for widows may have appeared an attractive alternative. Marriage records at Saint Mark's Anglican Church show that 11 of the 135

28 *Evening Mail*, 8 January 1927.

29 Joanne Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago, 1988), p. 37.

30 Vacated Balances and Rent Ledger, 1919-25, MG 36, HRC, R.1854, PANS.

31 10 Hennessey Street, MG 36, HRC, R.791, PANS.

32 *Evening Mail*, 1 March 1926.

33 Nova Scotia, *JHA*, 1921, Appendix 34, "Report of the Commission on Mothers' Allowances", p. 11. See Tamara Hareven and John Modell, "Urbanization and the Malleable Household: An Examination of Boarding and Lodging in American Families", *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 35 (1973), pp. 467-79.

34 Nova Scotia, *JHA*, 1921, Appendix 34, "Report of the Commission on Mothers' Allowances", p. 11.

weddings performed in the church between January 1920 and December 1929 involved widows.<sup>35</sup> These women were young, ranging in age from 22 to 38, with the mean age 30. Most women could not count on the prospect of remarriage and the support of another male wage earner, and when they could not manage by themselves they turned to others for assistance.

Extended families were the most important support and survival network for women on their own. Mary Gracie of Cabot Place moved in with her brother's family after the death of her husband.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, when fellow Cabot Place resident William Tilley went to the United States in search of work, his wife lived with her sister on nearby Kane Place until her husband was established in Rhode Island. Shortly thereafter the assistance was reciprocated when the sister's husband died, leaving the Kane Place widow with three small children. The widow sold her furniture and moved to Rhode Island, where her sister's family was newly established. The desertion of a husband also left women dependent on their families. When Thea Buckles of Stairs Place charged her husband for non-support in February 1930, she and her four small children were relying on the generosity of her mother. According to a HRC report, Thea Buckles' mother had "put in the winter's coal and also provides food to stave off absolute want".<sup>37</sup> Upon the family's eviction from the Hydrotone, a married sister provided shelter.

The poverty which most women without access to an adult male wage endured made them particularly dependent on their children's earnings, no matter how meagre. The change in Christmas school holidays affected one widow as she wrote to the *Evening Mail* describing her circumstances:

I am a widow with a family of six young children. My oldest is 15 and she goes to school on week days and works Friday and Saturday evenings, and the weeks of Christmas vacation. The money which she earns is the only source of buying toys for the children. Now I read in the papers that the school children are only having two days holidays before Christmas Day. That means that my girl can only work for the two days and there will not be enough money to buy the toys for the children.... I do not want my girl to miss her school, but I need the money. What am I do?<sup>38</sup>

Few children of female-headed households continued in school beyond the age of 15. In 1931 only 225 of the 1,850 children of widows in Halifax, or about 12 per cent, 15 years of age and over attended school.<sup>39</sup> This was significantly different

35 Saint Mark's Anglican Church, Marriage Register, 1920-29, Micro: Churches, Halifax, PANS.

36 Vacated Balances and Rent Ledger, 1919-25, MG 36, HRC, R.1854, PANS.

37 30 Stairs Place, MG 36, HRC, R.1411, PANS.

38 *Evening Mail*, 13 November 1928.

39 *Census of Canada, 1931*, Vol. 5, p. 1343. This responsibility perhaps fell unevenly upon the older children as in Jessie Muir's family. A contemporary Maritime fictional account in which the eldest son in a working-class family in Rington (Sydney) must support the family after the death of his father appears in Rev. D.J. Rankin's *On This Rock* (Ottawa, 1930).

from the total population, in which approximately 25 per cent of children 15 years of age or older living with a parent remained in school. Early school-leaving meant entry into wage labour, or perhaps for some young women full-time assistance at home. Between 1920 and 1925, property-owning widow Melinda Graham of 10 Hennessey Street had four women and one male with the same surname living with her and working at Moirs. In addition to what appears to be her five children, Melinda Graham also housed a boarder employed at the same confectionery factory. While the wages of children might provide enough to survive and keep the family together, unless the widow could depend on the full or combined wages of adult sons, they did not compensate for the lost wages of a male worker.

In addition to family, the community also played an important role in helping women get by. Trade unionists and work mates might offer generous assistance, such as the \$1,300 collected by employees of the Halifax shipyards for the widow of James Slater, secretary of the Electrical Workers Union Local 625, who had been electrocuted in a workplace accident.<sup>40</sup> The generosity in this particular case was noteworthy as the collection occurred during a strike that economically devastated many of its participants. A shipyard walking party in November 1925 attracted 200 people and raised \$50.<sup>41</sup> Weekly dances and card socials held in the Mayflower Hall on Agricola Street also raised money, which was distributed to community cases of need.<sup>42</sup>

The churches played a role in assisting families within their parishes. During the depression of the 1930s, Father Curran of St. Joseph's covered the rent for at least one of his Hydrostone parish members.<sup>43</sup> The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul was also active at St. Joseph's and presumably assisted local families. Beginning in January 1923, the members of United Memorial Church began contributing to an extra collection each Communion Sunday, the proceeds of which were to be distributed by the minister to needy families.<sup>44</sup> While the session minutes note success as the fund collected \$61, a number of parcels and an order of groceries during a "Poor Fund Gift Sunday" in December 1927, the same minutes also indicate that in January 1926 a motion was passed that the wine for Communion "be paid for out of Poor Fund".<sup>45</sup> The diversion of "poor funds" from their original purpose raises many questions about commitment to the problem and probably reflects the ambivalent attitude held towards charity.<sup>46</sup> This mixed public perception surrounding charity was carried into public policy in the development of early government assistance programmes.

A new survival strategy available to Richmond Heights widows was pension

40 *Morning Chronicle*, 10 June 1920, *Citizen*, 14 May 1920.

41 *Evening Mail*, 5 November 1925.

42 *Evening Mail*, 4 August 1927.

43 13 Kane Place, MG 36, HRC, R.842, PANS.

44 United Memorial Church, Session Minutes, 3 January 1923, Micro: Churches, Halifax, PANS.

45 United Memorial Church, Session Minutes, 29 December 1927, 11 January 1926, Micro: Churches, Halifax, PANS.

46 The spending of funds on non-assistance items was not the result of any lack of need. At this point, several prominent members of the congregation were in serious difficulty.

income made available through the HRC, the Department of Soldier's Civil Re-establishment, and the Workmen's Compensation Act. Bertha Flynn of 31 Stanley Place subsisted solely on pension earnings. The HRC, like the elaborate pension scheme established by the Board of Pension Commissioners, became an avenue by which a government body intervened in the lives of ordinary Canadians. Like the military's, the HRC's widow's pension was based on the earnings of the deceased husband. The link between the deceased husband's wages and the widow's pension was particularly significant in a working-class neighbourhood where many of the widows would have been at the lower end of the scale. For example, under this scheme the widow of a ship's captain who had earned \$170 a month might receive a pension of \$60, while a labourer's widow who had been managing her home on \$45 a month would receive only \$25.<sup>47</sup> These female-headed households with children in full-time school attendance received additional payments for children who suffered injury or the loss of a parent. On 1 January 1920 the HRC was paying pensions to 198 widows; by 1946, this figure had declined to 76 women.<sup>48</sup>

Throughout the 1920s, the possibility of a new state-administered pension for widows hung over the community as an unfulfilled election promise. In 1920 a government commission presented a report on the establishment of mothers' allowances. Five Canadian provinces, including Manitoba, Alberta, Saskatchewan, British Columbia and Ontario, had already instituted what the commission described as "a system of granting government aid to indigent mothers with young children deprived of a father's support".<sup>49</sup> In Nova Scotia, mothers' allowances would only be made available to "one class in particular as unquestionably deserving of state aid, the indigent widow with two or more children to support". Support for the families of disabled men "would be open to abuse". While the commission acknowledged that families of men who had been institutionalized in mental hospitals were deserving of support, families in which the father was in prison "although recognized under some schemes, [are] of more or less doubtful character, particularly as prison labour with remuneration for the wife and dependents is being strongly advocated in many quarters and seems the more reasonable remedy". Deserted women were likewise not considered for state support as the commission felt that the legal process should be strengthened to ensure that the absent father fulfilled his "natural obligations to his family".<sup>50</sup> No public money would be distributed to unmarried mothers; it was left to the legal system to establish paternity and financial responsibility.<sup>51</sup> The commission's restricted

47 Diane Duke, "An Analysis of the Pension System for the Victims of the Halifax Explosion, 1917", essay prepared for legal history course, Dalhousie Law School, 1988, p. 11.

48 "Notes and Explanations of Items on Financial Statement", Department of Finance, RG 19, Vol. 4885, file 5743-04-03, p. 7, NAC. Access to pension records of the HRC is restricted and it is impossible to determine which Richmond Heights residents were receiving support.

49 Nova Scotia, *JHA*, 1921, Appendix 34, "Report of the Commission on Mothers' Allowances", p. 1.

50 Nova Scotia, *JHA*, 1921, Appendix 34, "Report of the Commission on Mothers' Allowances", p. 13.

51 Nova Scotia, *JHA*, 1921, Appendix 34, "Report of the Commission on Mothers' Allowances", p. 14.

vision of who would be entitled to state aid, and its tendency to recommend legal changes, ensured that even the limited help it offered would have no impact. The commission's recommendations remained largely intact in the Mothers' Allowance Act, which was finally implemented in October 1930.<sup>52</sup>

The findings and recommendations of the commission had no immediate effect on the lives of the women it set out to assist, except to reaffirm the status quo. Research was carried out by the province's teachers, who submitted names and addresses of all widows with whom they had contact — indicating from the beginning of the study there was no intention of including women other than widows. In Halifax County, which included the city and its rural environs, commission research found that there were a total of 303 widows with 775 children under the age of 16 and that 78 of these widows and 234 of their children needed assistance.<sup>53</sup> Seventy-three of the total number of widows had only one child. However, the commission adopted the general principle, also accepted by the Children's Aid Society, that mothers should be able to support one child without public aid.<sup>54</sup> With this conclusion, the commission demonstrated the same faulty logic as the rest of society. While wage labour outside the home and taking in boarders by mothers was regarded as inappropriate by the commission, the same group accepted the belief that a mother should be able to support at least one child. How a woman without access to a male wage was to do so without engaging in wage labour or taking in boarders was never explained. Not surprisingly, economic reality won over ideal definitions of motherhood, but in doing so the commission ensured that there was no way that these women could achieve the contemporary ideal of a good mother.

The initial report of the commission on mothers' allowances was not only contradictory, exclusive and rigid, it was also parsimonious. The report recommended an average pension of \$35 a month, a sum below the pension granted under the Workmen's Compensation Act.<sup>55</sup> The meagre pension proposed, the restrictions placed on recipients and the ten-year delay in implementation make the intention of the government and its commission questionable. Widows might be

52 Nova Scotia, *Statutes 1930*, chapter 4, "An act to provide for the payment of Allowances towards the Maintenance of the Dependent Children of Certain Mothers". The delay in the legislation was at least in part the result of poor provincial finances, with all social programmes throughout the 1920s deferred until the repeal of prohibition in December 1929. See Ernest R. Forbes, "Prohibition and the Social Gospel in Nova Scotia", *Challenging the Regional Stereotype: Essays on the 20th Century Maritimes* (Fredericton, 1989), p. 38.

53 There were 73 widows with one child under 16; 102 with two children; 61 with three children; 37 with four children; 17 with five children; ten with six children; two with seven children and one widow with eight children. Nova Scotia, *JHA*, 1921, Appendix 34, "Report of the Commission on Mothers' Allowances", p. 22.

54 Nova Scotia, *JHA*, 1921, Appendix 34, "Report of the Commission on Mothers' Allowances", p. 12. In the case of the Children's Aid Society, they had a policy of leaving at least one child with the mother, to ensure she did not escape her responsibility of motherhood.

55 Nova Scotia, *JHA*, 1921, Appendix 34, "Report of the Commission on Mothers' Allowances", p. 22. The Workmen's Compensation Act allowed \$30 per widow and an additional \$7.50 per child to a maximum of \$60 a month. Nova Scotia, *JHA*, 1921, Appendix 31, "Report for 1920 of Workmen's Compensation Board", p. 7.

the most "deserving" of the poor, but their ambiguous position meant that they were not above suspicion.

While widows such as Jessie Muir epitomized respectability, evoking community sympathy for their unfortunate circumstances, other widows were subject to careful community scrutiny. The Mothers' Allowance Act of 1930, sensitive to public opinion, further restricted those who could benefit by declaring that the act would only assist the mother who was "in every respect a fit, proper, and suitable person to have the custody and care of her children" and only make payment to legitimate offspring.<sup>56</sup> HRC pensions could also be suspended for immoral behaviour. When a man was seen leaving Emma Lawson's home late in the evening, the man's wife filed a complaint that resulted in Emma Lawson's pension being temporarily discontinued. Another widow, Lillian Kennedy, was permanently suspended after an illegitimate birth, her immoral behaviour reinforced by the fact that she had taken in boarders of "undesirable character".<sup>57</sup> Such interference probably also occurred with widows receiving military pensions, as similar morality guidelines applied.<sup>58</sup> The conviction that the Mothers' Allowance Act, the HRC and the military should only support respectable women reflected general prejudices. Neighbours spied on widows and passed judgement on their activities. A Sebastian Place woman, for example, was concerned about the widow who was subletting the house next door and wrote the HRC to inform them that Mrs. Canning was keeping

a proper cat house I guess you know what that is. now that Mrs George that you put out last fall moved in this morning, they have partys nearly every night including Sunday evenings and they get drunk vomiting over my veranda and backyard....<sup>59</sup>

Widows had to be particularly careful of their reputation as public opinion was fickle, with little middle ground between compassion and condemnation.

It was not always possible to distinguish between widowhood and a broken marriage. The situation of deserted or separated women did not differ greatly from the plight of widows. Certainly in this mobile community, some of the women who claimed to be widows probably were not. A separated woman who testified under oath at a Halifax divorce trial in 1923, when asked directly if she was a widow, responded, "Married woman; I am the same as a widow".<sup>60</sup>

Desertion, which the Halifax Welfare Bureau described as "The Poor Man's Divorce", was the most common form of marriage breakdown. The Children's Aid Society and the Superintendent of Neglected Children, later Child Welfare, regarded

<sup>56</sup> Nova Scotia, *Statutes 1930*, c.4, s. 1.

<sup>57</sup> Duke, "Pension System", p. 27.

<sup>58</sup> Desmond Morton and Glenn Wright, *Winning the Second Battle: Canadian Veterans and the Return to Civilian Life, 1915-1930* (Toronto, 1987), p. 53.

<sup>59</sup> 22 Sebastian Place, MG 36, HRC, R. 1358, PANS.

<sup>60</sup> Supreme Court, Halifax Divorce Court, Vol. 31, Case 389, 1924, RG 39, 'D', PANS.

it as one of the most crucial problems they faced.<sup>61</sup> Within the community of Richmond Heights there were many examples of its devastation. Howard Wilson of 17 Cabot Place deserted his wife, leaving her with back rent owing. Another husband, James Bowden, abandoned his wife who was ill with tuberculosis, leaving her to be supported and nursed by friends and charity.<sup>62</sup> Desertion was sometimes temporary. In August 1929 George Bart, a debt-ridden 33-year-old shoemaker who lived at 29 Stairs Place, disappeared for six days. Upon his reappearance at his sister's home, George Bart "claimed to have been doped and robbed of \$50".<sup>63</sup> Similarly George Paul, a waiter on the Maritime Express who lived at 1 Livingstone Place, "disappeared" for a few days after picking up his pay cheque in May 1929.<sup>64</sup> At the time of George Paul's departure, he was at least \$145 in arrears on rent. The economic pressures of supporting a family in hard times would have made the possibility of escape attractive; and the disappearance of a wage earner must have sent panic through the entire family.

Sometimes separation was involuntary. Emma Jones, a woman with two sons renting 60 Stairs Street for \$12 a month, became a single mother when her husband was imprisoned at Rockhead. Her poverty and reputation were evident, for when authorities appeared in October 1925 to evict the family she was accused of "bluffing the sheriff" by claiming to be ill in bed.<sup>65</sup> Other patient histories of the Halifax Visiting Dispensary, a charity organization which provided medical services for the city's poor, also reveal the devastating impact of desertion on the family unit. In case after case, the cause of poverty in the family is noted as "Father not with family" or "Husband left her, does not know where he is", linking the desertion of primary wage earner to collapse of the family unit.<sup>66</sup>

The HRC was reluctant to accept deserted women as tenants in Richmond Heights as they felt it placed with them responsibilities "we should not be called upon to carry". During the high vacancy period of the spring of 1925, the Halifax Welfare Bureau proposed the HRC accept a female tenant, whom they were providing with \$60 a month, at a special reduced rent of \$15 a month. The woman's husband had left her with their seven children in the summer of 1924 while he found work as a carpenter in Albany, New York. Until December of the same year, he regularly sent \$25 a week for the support of his family, but since that time had not been heard from. According to the report made to the HRC, the deserted wife was keeping the family together by taking day work in wealthy homes in the south end of the city, but this created an "awkward circumstance in that the children are young and leaving them alone all day presents a problem from

61 *Evening Mail*, 12 January 1928; Nova Scotia, *JHA*, 1920, Appendix 28, "Report of the Superintendent of Neglected Children", p. 7.

62 Vacated Balances and Rent Ledger, 1919-25, MG 36, HRC, R.1854, PANS.

63 *Evening Mail*, 7, 9 August 1929.

64 *Evening Mail*, 27 May 1929.

65 Halifax Visiting Dispensary, Registry of Calls, MS 2, Vol. 240, Dalhousie University Archives.

66 Halifax Visiting Dispensary, Record of Patients, 1924-37, MS 2, Vol. 240, Dalhousie University Archives.

our point of view".<sup>67</sup>

This example was in no way unusual. The 1925 report of the Halifax Children's Aid Society described the case of a man with eight children, the eldest a sickly girl of 17, who had

been an average husband and father, supporting his family until about a year ago, when he lost his job. He searched in vain in Halifax for work, and then left for the U.S. Since last February he has not written his family. Through social agencies we learned that he secured work, but moved from place to place. This mother, who is very fond of her children, tried to support the family by day work, leaving the daughter of 17 years in charge of the house. The children became undernourished, through insufficient food and unruly because of the absence of the mother.<sup>68</sup>

In this example, the mother surrendered three children to the Children's Aid Society and took out a warrant for the arrest of her husband.

Deserted women did not stand helpless in their fight for survival. In October 1928 George Swan, a former resident of Merkel Place, was sued by his wife for non-support.<sup>69</sup> Thea Buckles of Stairs Place also sued her husband for non-support in February 1930, but the action was too late to delay her family's eviction in April of the same year.<sup>70</sup> The wife of Guy Thompson of Stairs Place and Hennessey Place succeeded in convicting her husband of both using profane language towards her and non-support.<sup>71</sup> If the deserting husband remained in Halifax, he could be forced to fulfill his financial obligations. In a period of high local unemployment, however, many men left to find work in the United States, and crossing international or even provincial boundaries made disappearing men much more difficult to trace and hard to prosecute.<sup>72</sup> Obviously, not all women were familiar with their legal rights, but questions regarding the legality of desertion did appear in the newspapers, and agencies such as the Halifax Social Service Bureau did press women to exercise their legal rights.<sup>73</sup> In fact, women used legal means not only to force their husbands to fulfill their financial responsibilities but also to control physical abuse. A former resident of Stanley Place was summoned to court in April 1929 when his wife charged him with assault.<sup>74</sup>

67 28 Sebastian Place, 2? April 1925, MG 36, HRC, R.1364, PANS.

68 Nova Scotia, *JHA*, 1926, Appendix 28, "Thirteenth Annual Report, Superintendent of Neglected and Delinquent Children", p. 30.

69 Vacated Balances, MG 36, HRC, R.1855, PANS.

70 20 Stairs Place, MG 36, HRC, R.1411, PANS.

71 *Evening Mail*, 18 August 1923.

72 After June 1922, desertion was an extraditable offense, but there was still tremendous difficulty in tracking down the guilty culprit. Canada, Department of External Affairs, *Treaties and Agreements affecting Canada in force between His Majesty and the U.S.A, 1814-1925* (Ottawa, 1927), p. 504.

73 *Evening Mail*, 21 January 1919; 28 Sebastian Place, April 1925, MG 36, HRC, R.1364, PANS.

74 Vacated Balances and Rent Ledger, 1919-25, MG 36, HRC, R.1854, PANS.

Women were not always the "victim", as separation could come about by mutual agreement or female-initiated dissolution. Self-divorce — the mutual dissolution of an unsuccessful marriage — may have remained as a popular solution in spite of repudiating dominant mores.<sup>75</sup> Public notices appeared in newspapers announcing the names of wives who had left their husbands' "bed and board" and whose husbands declared they would no longer be responsible for any debt contracted.<sup>76</sup> Bessie Lewis' husband could not be held liable for her unpaid rent on Duffus Place as they were living apart at the time the debt was incurred.<sup>77</sup> For a Cabot Place resident whose wife left him the consequences meant giving up independent housekeeping, as he was a navy cook and often away for long periods of time. The desertion of a wife may have been inconvenient or embarrassing, and may even have made it impossible to maintain a household, but it did not create the same financial chaos as the departure of a husband.

While desertion was relatively common in Halifax in the 1920s, divorce was not. Nova Scotians had perhaps the most liberal access to divorce in the country; cruelty was designated sufficient grounds for termination of marriage.<sup>78</sup> But the 1931 census only lists 17 men and 17 women in the city of Halifax as divorced. Certainly the number of divorces must have been greater as we can assume remarriage in some cases, but the total number of divorces would not have been large. However, the number of people personally touched by divorce might explain the perceived threat it posed to the institution of marriage. There could not have been many people in Richmond Heights who were not a relative, a neighbour or an acquaintance of someone involved in a legal separation. If this circle were enlarged to the people who knew someone, most of the community would have felt involved. In one case, involving a 22-year-old widow of a Hydrostone family who had married a 25-year-old widowed machinist in April 1919, both parties continued to reside in the neighbourhood after separation. Four months after the marriage the new husband had been found guilty in the City Stipendiary Court of fathering an illegitimate child. Between the court's decision and the 1926 divorce, Edna Farmer lived with her parents in Richmond Heights.<sup>79</sup> At least two other Richmond Heights couples both from "old North End" families were involved in divorce proceedings, though the first case seems to have been discontinued.<sup>80</sup>

Divorce was relatively infrequent, but female-headed households were more regularly created as men left Halifax in search of employment. Men working "away" were a fact of life in Halifax. Some occupations by their nature meant that

75 John R. Gillis, *For Better, For Worse. British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 209-10.

76 Two such examples appeared in the *Morning Chronicle*, 5 August 1920 and the *Evening Mail*, 9 April 1926.

77 Vacated Balances and Rent Ledger, 1919-25, MG 36, HRC, R.1854, PANS.

78 James Snell, "Marital Cruelty: Women and the Nova Scotia Divorce Court, 1900-1939", *Acadiensis*, XVIII, 1 (Autumn 1988), pp. 3-32.

79 Supreme Court, Halifax Divorce Court, Vol. 35, Case 487, 1926, RG 39, 'D', PANS.

80 Supreme Court, Halifax Divorce Court, Vol. 21, Case 159, 1919 and Vol. 31, Case 389, 1924, RG 39, 'D', PANS.

long periods of time had to be spent away from home. During the winter, men in the merchant marine sailed out of the port and in the summer were usually laid off. The economic crisis of the 1920s accentuated this trend, and while many entire families left the city, often just the men left. This seasonal interruption of employment forced migration from the city to find work. Ellen Conley of Columbus Place, whose husband was employed by the Canadian Government Marine, wrote in March 1923 that her husband had found work in Ontario and "if all goes well" would earn \$75 a month until October.<sup>81</sup> The case of Ellen Conley illustrates the importance of family assistance in keeping the house together while one's husband searched for work, as she claimed access to her father's pension cheque and her sister's earnings as a means of settling her own debts.<sup>82</sup> A husband sailing out of port could also mean a long period without any knowledge of his whereabouts. Sarah Shupe had to explain to the HRC, "My husband is gone away to sea, where, I dont know yet".<sup>83</sup> The annual Harvesters' Excursion to the Canadian Northwest was another example of seasonal employment that took men away. Every August men left Halifax, the attractive one-way fare to Winnipeg set at only \$26.10 in 1924.<sup>84</sup> In November 1920, 115 lumbermen were recruited by a New Brunswick firm<sup>85</sup> and many Halifax men must have been involved in large construction projects such as the Sheet Harbour hydro-electric development, which temporarily employed 300 men along the isolated Eastern Shore.<sup>86</sup>

Men also left their families for employment elsewhere for reasons that did not reflect the demands of their occupation but were the result of few local opportunities and large-scale layoffs. The layoffs at the Halifax shipyards, a large employer of local labour, were devastating as the payroll dropped from over 2,000 in the spring of 1920 to a low of less than 100 in 1927.<sup>87</sup> The departure of a husband in search of work could mean an immediate expense for the remaining household. Mrs. Sears of Merkel Place explained her failure to pay rent as "Mr Sears has gone to the States to look for employment and I gave him all the money I had".<sup>88</sup> Remitted wages would not have been generous as the male wage earner was placed in a position where he had to support two households.<sup>89</sup> Sometimes the separation was only temporary as the family followed upon the establishment of a new home. One example of this two-stage migration was that of Mrs. Sewell and family of 12

81 Vacated Balances and Rent Ledger, 1919-25, 19 March 1923, MG 36, HRC, R.1854, PANS.

82 Vacated Balances and Rent Ledger, 1919-25, 1 December 1922, 19 March 1923, MG 36, HRC, R.1854, PANS.

83 33 Columbus Place, 12 May [no year], MG 36, HRC, R.424 (2 files), PANS.

84 *Evening Mail*, 12 August 1924.

85 *Evening Mail*, 2 November 1920.

86 *Evening Mail*, 7 June 1924.

87 *Evening Mail*, 25 March, 22 September 1927.

88 Vacated Balances and Rent Ledger, 1919-25, MG 36, HRC, R.1854, PANS.

89 Canada, Department of Labour, *Royal Commission on Industrial Relations*, Minutes of Evidence (Microfilm), Reel 4, p. 4416; Mark Rosenfeld, "'It was a Hard Life': Class and Gender in the Work and Family Rhythms of a Railway Town, 1920-1950", *Communications historiques/Historical Papers* (1988), p. 251.

Stairs Street who left to join her husband in Massachusetts in October 1924 after he had settled into a permanent position there.<sup>90</sup>

The decision to go away in search of work must have been as difficult as it was at times almost inevitable. Mrs. Armstrong dreaded the future prospect of her husband, a laid-off employee at the shipyard, leaving Halifax, writing to the HRC, "I hope and trust there may be a job come in, before he starts to move".<sup>91</sup> Once the decision had been made, a husband working away might take the form of an annual migration. Owen Isnor, a carpenter who owned a set of flats at 7 Hennessey Street, was back and forth to Boston with great regularity. The *Evening Mail* social column noted in March 1926 that having spent the winter with Mrs. Isnor and family in Halifax, he had returned to a permanent position in Boston.<sup>92</sup> At times these migrations were unsuccessful, as an undated memo in the HRC rent book noted: on one occasion Owen Isnor had been back from the United States for three months and was without work or money.<sup>93</sup> While carpenters might follow the seasonal nature of their work, family tragedy could also bring men home. In May 1926 John Mahar returned to his Livingstone Street home from Detroit, Michigan, to attend the funeral of his only child.<sup>94</sup>

It is difficult to comprehend the impact of long absences on family life. In June 1924 a former employee of Hagen and Co. who had found work in Chicago visited his wife and children after a 12-month absence.<sup>95</sup> Similarly in November 1923 the north end social column in the *Evening Mail* remarked that a local woman had "returned home from an extended visit to the U.S. where she remained with her husband who is working in Massachusetts, near Boston".<sup>96</sup> Mark Rosenfeld, in his work on the railway community of Allendale, Ontario, has suggested the difficulty women faced keeping a house and raising children on their own while managing the emotional stress of re-adjustment they faced with the absences of their husband. Separation probably increased tension in the home, both before, during and after the husband's absence. The closeness of kin would have relieved part of the loneliness, but would hardly have compensated for the absence of a husband.<sup>97</sup>

In March 1924 Ellen Conley hinted at the risks involved in husbands working away by concluding a message with the information that he would be returning to Halifax in eight months "please god".<sup>98</sup> Sometimes men did not return, the result of desertion or death. In February 1928 Frank Docherty died in a construction accident in Bath, Pennsylvania, leaving a widow and four children at 34 Merkel Place. Frank Docherty had worked at the Halifax shipyards but for the two years

90 *Evening Mail*, 7 October 1924.

91 26 Hennessey Place, MG 36, HRC, R.776, PANS.

92 *Evening Mail*, 29 March 1926.

93 Mortgage and Rental Records, Accounts Payable, 1920s-40s, MG 36, HRC, R.1879, PANS.

94 *Evening Mail*, 20 May 1926.

95 *Evening Mail*, 12 June 1924.

96 *Evening Mail*, 15 November 1923.

97 Rosenfeld, "It was a Hard Life", pp. 252-4.

98 13 Columbus Place, 18 March 1924, MG 36, HRC, R.404, PANS.

preceding his death had been employed throughout the United States, largely in Florida.<sup>99</sup> With Frank's death, Elizabeth Docherty suddenly went from temporary to permanent household-head.

The devastating loss of a partner and breadwinner, as well as the personal loss of identity as someone's wife, was somehow overcome by the surviving family. Yet the social position of these single women who headed families was so ambiguous that, according to Linda Gordon, between the years 1890 and 1920 female-headed households were identified as a social problem.<sup>100</sup> Society's inability to reconcile the role of mother with that of wage earner led to social assistance, in which we can see evidence of the nascent welfare state. As a stop-gap response to this problem, pensions were not only difficult to obtain and inadequate, but their very introduction and existence was a means to maintain women in a economically disadvantaged sphere. Women did not have to earn a wage equal to men's, as this meagre income supplement could stave off absolute want — as long as they were willing to conform with restrictive moral regulations. In the absence of a male breadwinner, rigid adherence to the ideal of the male family wage as the best means to preserve the family could result in women and children engaging in low-paying wage labour and the sacred home being shared with outsiders.

Despite an economic and ideological structure that allowed few options, women put up a heroic struggle every day to meet the rent, put food on the table, burn fuel in the stove and keep their families together with as much pride and dignity as possible. Although women did not choose their roles as household-heads, their very presence was an affront to the social order and raised questions concerning society's responsibility for family support. Only reluctantly did society question an economic and social system that denied women access to fair wages and to the assistance with child care which might have placed them in a better position to support their families on their own.

99 *Evening Mail*, 24 February 1928.

100 Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence, Boston, 1880-1960* (New York, 1988), p. 83.