

The Plywood Girls: Women and Gender Ideology at the Port Alberni Plywood Plant, 1942-1991

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The Plywood Girls: Women and Gender Ideology at the Port Alberni Plywood Plant, 1942-1991

Susanne Klausen

Question: When you started working [at the plywood plant in 1957], did it seem to you at all a funny thing for you to do as a woman?

Answer: No, I don't think so. But there had been enough women there before men, and I'd had four sisters already working there, and cousins and friends. It did not threaten my femininity.¹

ON 18 JANUARY 1942, a plywood factory opened in Port Alberni,² rushed into existence in order to help the war effort — plywood was in demand for ammunition boxes, Mosquito warplane components, and other war supplies.³ Facing a labour shortage as local men joined the armed forces, management at Alberni Plywoods Ltd. (commonly called ALPLY) sought women sixteen years and older to come to Port Alberni and work at the plant. Women responded in droves. For the duration of the war, 80 per cent of the approximately 350 workers were female, women affectionately known throughout the community as the "Plywood Girls."

Few historians of the British Columbia (BC) forest industry have utilized a gender-sensitive approach to research this topic.⁴ This blindspot perpetuates the

¹Interview #13, 12 August 1995.

²Port Alberni is a town of 20,000 inhabitants located on Vancouver Island, 300 km northwest of Victoria. It is a "forestry town," meaning that historically (since 1860) its economy has been dominated by the forest sector.

³John D. Welsh, "Plywood Preferred," *West Coast Advocate*, 13 January 1944. Some of the Mosquito warplane components cited in the article include door, window, and bomb inserts, camera hole rings, and aerial mast rings.

⁴Scholars neglect to focus on women who work in the industry (past and present), as well as the ideology and practices that are central to reproducing the industry as a male domain.

myth that forestry, a major sector of the provincial economy, has always been a "man's domain" and so, the myth implies, it shall remain.⁵ In the ongoing downsizing and restructuring of the BC forest industry, the assumption that unionized, "family wage" forestry jobs are naturally and rightfully "men's jobs" has barely begun to be questioned.⁶ In the development of a feminist critique of forestry's gendered ideology and practices it is crucial to recall examples of female workers like the Plywood Girls whose very existence is a fundamental challenge to the tenacious myth that women are unsuited to forestry. Therefore, one objective of this study is to contribute to the "empirical recovery"⁷ of the lives of working women in Canada.

Historians of women's participation in World War II manufacturing industries have demonstrated national governments', policy-makers' and private industry's view of women as a "reserve army" of labour to be tapped as a temporary replacement for absent male labour power for the duration of the war only.⁸ In the Canadian context, Pierson uncovered the federal government's and policy-makers' commitment to prewar sex segregation during wartime labour processes. In addition, she explained that the Canadian government's National Selective Service's strategy of channelling single (and eventually married) women into war industries was motivated purely by desperation for female labour power and not out of

See Gordon Hugh Hak, "On the Fringes: Capital and Labour in the Forest Economies of Port Alberni and Prince George Districts, British Columbia, 1910-1939," PhD dissertation, Simon Fraser University, 1986; Martin Robin, *The Rush for Spoils: The Company Province, 1871-1933* (Toronto 1972); Donald MacKay, *Empire of Wood: The MacMillan Bloedel Story* (Toronto 1982); Richard Allan Rajala, "The Rude Science: A Social History of West Coast Logging, 1890-1930," MA thesis, University of Victoria, 1987. Rajala's study focuses on the American westcoast (Washington and Oregon) forest industry but the same critique applies.

⁵In Port Alberni itself, the community's collective memory had forgotten about the war-era Plywood Girls. As a consequence, my research on the topic generated significant interest on the part of the town's newspaper the *Alberni Valley Times*, and the Alberni Valley Museum.

⁶Patricia Marchak's pathbreaking study *Green Gold: The Forest Industry in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1983) is still the most thorough, useful examination of the gender division of labour in contemporary forestry and forest communities in British Columbia. For more recent examples, see Brian Egan and Susanne Klausen, *Female in a Forest Town: Women and Work in Port Alberni* (Victoria 1996); and, CS/RESORS Consulting Ltd., *Women and the Forest Industry* (Vancouver 1997).

⁷Karen Offen, Ruth Roach Pierson, and Jane Rendell, eds., "Introduction," *Writing Women's History* (London 1991), xxx.

⁸Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations and the Status of Women During World War II* (Connecticut 1981); Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex During World War II* (Chicago 1987); Sheila Tobias and Lisa Anderson, "Whatever Happened to Rosie the Riveter?" *MS*, 2 (June 1973), 92-4.

commitment to women's right to well-paid employment.⁹ But efforts to examine Canadian civilian women's wartime work experience from the perspective of the women themselves are few in number, and while extremely valuable to historians, more often anecdotal than analytical in substance.¹⁰

The following case study assesses the impact of the wartime employment of women at ALPLY, on both the women themselves and on female workers that followed after the war and until the mill's closure in 1991. It is based primarily on interviews with female and male workers and managers of ALPLY (see Appendix for note on oral history methodology). I have privileged the women's oral narratives and utilized additional historical sources to interpret and cross-check the events and experiences they indicated were of importance. Further sources drawn upon are contemporary newspaper reports; International Woodworkers of American (IWA) local 1-85 archival material; and H.R. MacMillan Export Co. Ltd.'s company magazine, *Harmac News*, and other literature. Oral history is an invaluable methodology for rendering visible women's participation in recent history and presupposes that women are "agents whose very presence transformed our understanding of the social world," and whose experiences are inherently valuable and need to be recorded.¹¹ Furthermore, as Sangster points out, oral history is "especially useful [for] probing the subjective areas of experience and feeling."¹²

Of course, oral narratives and the work based upon them are not unmediated representations of past reality. Neither is consciousness divorced from a social context sufficient for understanding history. While, like Sangster, I assume experience is a lived reality, I have attempted to analyze women's consciousness in the context of their "actual social existence," by framing their memories about their lives within the ideological and material structures that shaped their experiences.¹³ The challenge of thus situating and interpreting oral narratives is formidable indeed. As has been widely discussed, problems inherent to the methodology of oral history cannot be ignored by its practitioner nor audience. Just a few of those include: the inevitability of present material and emotional conditions shaping memories of the past, the inescapability of social environments constraining both

⁹Ruth Roach Pierson, "Women's Emancipation and the Recruitment of Women into the Canadian Labour Force in World War II," *Historical Papers* (Ottawa 1976); Beth Light and Ruth Roach Pierson, eds., *No Easy Road* (Toronto 1990); Ruth Roach Pierson, "They're Still Women After All," *The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto 1986); Ruth Roach Pierson, *Canadian Women and the Second World War* (Ottawa 1983).

¹⁰Barry Broadfoot, ed., *Six War Years, 1939-1956: Memories of Canadians at Home and Abroad* (Toronto 1974); Light and Pierson, *No Easy Road*; Sara Diamond, *Women's Labour History in British Columbia: A Bibliography, 1930-48* (Vancouver 1980).

¹¹Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., "Introduction," *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York 1991), 2.

¹²Joan Sangster, "The Softball Solution," *Labour/Le Travail*, 32 (Fall 1993), 168.

¹³Joan Sangster, *Earning Respect: The Lives of Working Women in Small-Town Ontario, 1920-1960* (Toronto 1995), 12-3.

subject and researcher during interviews, the unavoidably partial presentation of oral narratives, edited to conform to the conventions of academic literature, and the relatively more powerful position of the interviewer (in relation to the interviewee) who shapes the meaning of the narrative through the process of choosing certain aspects for an argument and laying aside others.¹⁴ Yet similar problems of interpretation confront any historian utilizing traditional historical methodologies and so it follows that the Plywood Girls' oral narratives are equally valid — and problematic — a source as, for example, a census or union archive.

When setting out to capture women's work experiences at ALPLY during World War II, I brought a hopeful expectation to bear upon my research, namely to discover that the women had been radically transformed by their experience as Plywood Girls. Presupposing such a transformation to have occurred, I sought examples of how working in forestry, the quintessential male industry, led women to question the sexual division of labour that characterized work at ALPLY (and in their lives beyond); to rebel against management's sexist practice of paying women 74 per cent of the wage paid to their male counterparts; or to resist leaving their jobs at the war's end, as had occurred elsewhere.¹⁵ But this transformation did not occur. Instead, most women accepted the sexual division of labour at ALPLY during the war and agreed, if reluctantly, that women should step aside for men after the war. Facing this unexpected result, the project inadvertently became more than simply a documentation of the Plywood Girls' experiences in forestry, but also a study of the tenacity of the ideologies and practices of occupation segregation by sex and occupational sex-typing.

In the post-war era, throughout Canada, there was a resurgence of the ideology of domesticity and its partner, the concept of the male breadwinner, which together reasserted that married women belonged in the home. In Port Alberni, the return of this prewar combination choked off women's access to jobs at ALPLY by the late 1950s. Yet women, buoyed by the historical memory of the Plywood Girls, always resisted the post-war push out of the mill and managed to maintain a strong foothold there until it closed in 1991. I briefly examine the post-war struggle among women, management and the union over women's place at ALPLY. It is, in fact, in women's sense of entitlement to work at ALPLY during the decades after the war where we find the radical transformation in women's consciousness, a consequence that I argue is the legacy of the Plywood Girls.

The paper is organized as follows. The first part examines women's experiences at the plant during the war. Interviewees' memories have been organized

¹⁴Gluck and Patai, "Introduction," 3. See also Joan Sangster's insightful overviews of theoretical and methodological issues related to the practice of oral history in *Earning Respect*, 10-3; and "Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History," *Women's History Review*, 1 (1994).

¹⁵Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Boston 1982); Milkman, *Gender at Work*.

around specific themes: their poverty and desperation for well-paid employment; the sexual division and hierarchy of labour at the factory; and the collective, positive identity of Plywood Girls forged amidst shared work and leisure. Part two analyzes the employment of women at ALPLY from 1945 until the mill's closure and discusses the struggle over women's place at ALPLY in the context of the post-war resurgence of conservative gender ideology, the interests of management, and Local 1-85 of the International Woodworkers of America (IWA).

Women at ALPLY during World War II

"It was just a job ... Patriotism came later."¹⁶

During World War II, Port Alberni's local newspaper the *West Coast Advocate* periodically printed stories about the crucial contribution of local lumber production to the war's infrastructure program.¹⁷ Local lumber went into the construction of airplane hangars, troop barracks, drill halls, bomber airplanes, and other military necessities in Great Britain and Canada. The newly opened plywood plant was an important part of this overall contribution to the war effort. Located two miles outside of town on the Alberni Inlet, ALPLY was owned by the H.R. MacMillan Export Company and built as a war production facility.¹⁸ The federal government helped establish the mill by designating delivery of its machinery a high priority. By April 1942, ALPLY was shipping two rail carloads per week of mainly 4' x 8' plywood panels for war production on the E & N railway line that had been extended directly onto mill property.¹⁹

When the mill opened in January 1942, approximately 150 women and men were employed, all but fifteen of whom were locals.²⁰ Production quickly expanded: by April a second eight hour shift was added "bringing employment up to

¹⁶Interview #2, 27 August 1995.

¹⁷Articles include "Great Interest in Timber Picture," *West Coast Advocate*, 22 August 1940; "Confidence in Lumber Outlook: H.R. MacMillan Urges No Curtailment by Operators," *West Coast Advocate*, 16 October 1940; "Training Plan for Men, Women: Would Boost Production of War Industries," *West Coast Advocate*, 30 January 1941; "Port Alberni's War Contract Facilities Under Close Review: Board of Trade Hears of Boat Building, Pre-Cut Houses, etc." *West Coast Advocate*, 13 March 1941; "Lumber Continues Important War Role: Housing Requirements Urgent Demand," *West Coast Advocate*, 21 March 1941; "B.C. Loggers Exempted from Military Duty," *West Coast Advocate*, 3 September 1942.

¹⁸In 1952 the H.R. MacMillan Export Company Limited merged with Bloedel, Stewart and Welch to form MacMillan Bloedel Limited. The plywood plant was called the Alberni Plywood Division of MacMillan Bloedel Ltd. until its closure in 1991.

¹⁹"Plywoods Start New Shift," *West Coast Advocate*, 9 April 1942.

²⁰"Canadian Transport Commences Operation," *West Coast Advocate*, 21 January 1942. Fifteen men were brought over from MacMillan's Vancouver plywood plant (VanPly) to operationalize ALPLY.

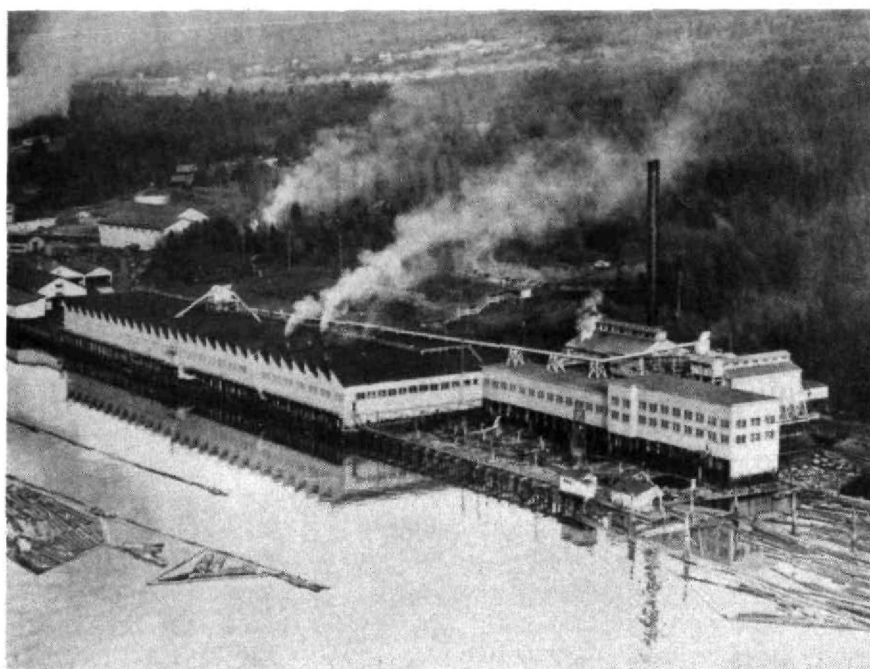


Figure 1. Alberni Plywoods as originally constructed in 1941-2. In 1952-3 the mill doubled in size and equipment. It underwent additional major expansions and modernization in 1964 and in 1979-80.

100 men and 100 women,"²¹ and more women were urged to apply for work. Response was immediate,²² yet by August, as increased numbers of men left for the armed forces, an urgent demand for increased production of plywood led to further calls for female labour²³ and women continued to stream into Port Alberni.²⁴ The rapid growth in population caused a new predicament for the community, namely a shortage of suitable and affordable housing for young women arriving in town.²⁵ By the end of 1942 a third shift was added, starting a 24 hour a day production schedule, and the number of employees had risen to approximately 250,

²¹"Plywoods Start New Shift."

²²In June 1942, "by a peculiar coincidence the number of employees now on the list at the plywood stands at 280 and it is equally divided between men and women," "Alberni Plywoods Operate Latest Type Joiner," *West Coast Advocate*, 11 June 1942.

²³"Require More Help at Plywoods," *West Coast Advocate*, 13 August 1942.

²⁴All interviewees were single during the war, but many referred to married women working at the plant.

²⁵"Another Problem Grooms Management of Local Plywoods," *West Coast Advocate*, 20 August 1942.

with women comprising 80 per cent of the labour force.²⁶ The need to secure female labour at ALPLY led factory and municipal authorities to accommodate their safety and transportation needs. By August 1942, City Council had approved a request from ALPLY management to build a sidewalk, complete with lighting, from the mill parking lot to the city limits, a distance of a few miles. Council felt that a sidewalk and lighting would "be much appreciated by the women working at the plant."²⁷ By October, a bus service had been set up for the employees, "particularly [because of] ... the case of girls going a long distance from their work."²⁸

Most of the war-era female workers interviewed migrated with their families from the Prairies in the late 1930s and early 1940s to Port Alberni in search of work. Pierson and Light have described how by 1930 the loss of world markets for Canadian exports combined with years of drought on the Prairies, "ushered in a decade of hard times for hundreds of thousands of Canadians";²⁹ by the beginning of the war 900,000 workers were registered as unemployed out of a total workforce of 3.8 million in Canada.³⁰ Since unemployment was defined as a "male problem"

²⁶George McKnight, *Souvenir Booklet: Mill Closure April 30, 1991*, 11. This booklet was published by MacMillan Bloedel Limited (Alberni Plywood Division) upon the closure of ALPLY and distributed to all former employees as a souvenir. The fact that the booklet was assembled and hundreds distributed free of charge is testimony to the sense of community among workers that had developed at the plant over the decades.

It is impossible to cross check the number and names of women who worked at ALPLY during the war as personnel records were destroyed by MacMillan Bloedel when the mill was closed in 1991. Ray Morris, former Manager of Human Resources for the Alberni Pacific Division, MacMillan Bloedel, telephone interview, 28 August 1996. The archive of the IWA, Local 1-85, located in Port Alberni, has ALPLY records dating back to 1953. Examination of seniority lists and interviews with former union leaders revealed the numbers of mill workers from 1953 onwards.

January 1953: 443 workers. "MacMillan and Bloedel Limited Alberni Plywood Division. Divisional and Company Seniority." Box 4/File: Alberni Plywoods Division — General.

1956: 908 workers. Harry Kendall, Shop steward in 1956, interviewed 10 September 1996.

27 June 1972: 632 workers. "MacMillan Bloedel Limited. Seniority Lists," Box 20/File: Alberni Plywood Division — Seniority.

6 May 1981: 488 workers. "MacMillan Bloedel Limited. Alberni Plywood Division. Departmental Seniority List," Box 83/File: ALPLY Seniority, 1981.

14 November 1989: 339 workers. "MacMillan Bloedel Manpower — Alberni Plywood. Manpower Recording. Department Seniority Listing. Division Seniority Sequence," Box 127/File: Alberni Plywood Division, Seniority, 1989.

April 1991: 382 workers. Dave Steinhauer, First Vice-President of IWA Local 1-85, interviewed 16 September 1996.

²⁷"Plywoods Will Construct Walk to Parking Lot," *West Coast Advocate*, 27 August 1942.

²⁸"Bus Service for Plywood Employees," *West Coast Advocate*, 29 October 1942.

²⁹Pierson and Light, *No Easy Road*, 16.

³⁰Pierson, "Women's Emancipation," 142.

at the time (and by historians since), the plight of unemployed women, such as the subjects of this study, generally went unreported.³¹

Without exception, the young women were anxious, if not desperate, to get a job at the plywood factory. Many had experienced poverty in the Depression years, and all had been shaped by it. Some came from families in which the fathers were too ill to work, or had abandoned them, leaving mothers to raise as many as five children on welfare relief. One woman recalled, "[the mill] was a lifesaver for all of us girls. The idea of the wages. We were so damn poor that to have a little of our own money, ahh."³² Women already living in town learned about job openings through word of mouth; women from elsewhere received news about ALPLY from family in Port Alberni. For example, one woman's brother wrote to her in Saskatchewan to say that work was to be had for women in the new plywood plant. She arrived in Port Alberni on 17 August 1942, and the very next day her brother took her, along with a sister, down to the mill to apply for work. They were hired on the spot and she was "just glad to know I was going to be getting a job that quickly." When asked why she replied, "Because I like to eat!"³³

Most interviewees were hired within weeks of the mill's opening for production. They were young and single, varying in age from 15 to 23 years old when they began. In the words of one woman,

All the kids in town were down there practically. Most of the women that were down there were older. I lied about my age. I kept going down there for months. ... Every time I'd go in there they'd look at me and say, 'You're too small.' I'd say, 'But I'm strong.' You had to B.S. I kept going back and back and back, finally they just got tired of me. They said, 'We'll let you come in. Try you out, see if you're any good.' ... I was happy. I thought, 'I'm on my way now.'³⁴

Two women were hired at fifteen by lying about their ages (the legal minimum age for employment was 16), and management, as desperate for female labour as the women for jobs, neglected to ask for registration cards certifying their age.³⁵

Prior to the war, alternative employment for women in Port Alberni, as it was for women across Canada, was scarce, poorly paid, and restricted to the service sector. Prior to joining ALPLY, all the women had worked elsewhere performing domestic labour as nannies (live-in baby-sitters), waitresses, live-in housekeepers and cooks, part-time housekeepers, kitchen help at the local hospital, or chamber-

³¹Pierson and Light, *No Easy Road*, 16.

³²Interview #9, 24 August 1996.

³³Interview #6, 14 August 1996.

³⁴Interview #2, 27 August 1995.

³⁵Interview #3, 16 August 1995; interview #2, 27 August 1995; interview #8, 16 August 1996.

maids.³⁶ They expressed dissatisfaction with their previous jobs either because the pay was poor, or the work dull and confining. When asked why she kept pestering the mill to hire her, one woman answered, "Household help was about all that was available ... I certainly wasn't going to look after babies, looking after household help, the rest of my life."³⁷ Another woman worked at the local hospital kitchen but disliked the split shift: "... To ride a bike from [home] to the hospital was quite something. I had to do it early, early in the morning, and then I'd come home around ten, maybe, and then go back for the night shift. I didn't like that at all ... [the plywood mill] ... was real good money."³⁸ Another interviewee worked for the family of Jack MacMillan, ("one of the bigwigs from the mill,"³⁹) as a live-in housekeeper and cook, but found the job constrictive. In explaining why she left this job for ALPLY she referred to the number of other young women seeking work there, which suggests the importance of knowing that she would be working alongside women:

I'd get every second Thursday off. And you know you're young. Saturday and Friday night I don't get out of that damn place till ten — eleven o'clock at night. ... I thought, I don't want to stay in this the rest of life ... Got to be something better than that. Then they were accepting here [at ALPLY]. Till that opened up, and now they're taking all these girls, hiring women. I thought that would be a different experience. There was a lot of girls applying for jobs.⁴⁰

In contrast to previously available employment, the plywood factory offered an opportunity that many women found challenging and interesting. And for those who didn't care for the work, the starting rate of pay of thirty-seven cents an hour was too good to resist.

Jobs at the factory meant more to the women than a regular paycheck. Many felt they were doing their part to help the war effort, a consciousness manipulated and nurtured by propaganda.⁴¹ All the interviewees had brothers in the service; two

³⁶The same limited choices before the war were listed by an anonymous woman in Broadfoot, *Six War Years, 1939-1945*, 357.

³⁷Interview #3, 16 August 1995.

³⁸Interview #4, 25 August 1995.

³⁹Interview #5, 25 August 1995.

⁴⁰Interview #5, 25 August 1995.

⁴¹One woman felt she was part of the "army on the homefront" and recalled propaganda circulating promoting the sentiment: "... it showed a woman looking down her nose at this woman with a kerchief — we had to wear kerchiefs in those days to keep our hair out of machinery, a kerchief and slacks ... that's where this army on the home front [came from]." Interview #3, 16 August 1995. Pierson has pointed out how this campaign was imbued with gender ideology in the promotion of the idea that looking after the "domestic" front was a women's duty, while their men were overseas fighting for the safety and security of the "homefront."

interviewees each had four brothers in the military. Concern for the welfare of their brothers was intrinsic to feelings of patriotism. As one woman put it,

We were all so patriotic. We thought, we got to do this for our country, and the boys are gone. I was worse than any of them, I only had five brothers. Mind you, my oldest one got exempted on the farm. Then I had cousins, and I was writing and sending parcels. A lot of us girls were doing this. You were sort of thrilled to be patriotic. We were doing it for our country.

(You saw working in the factory as part of the —)

Yeah. Part of something you needed to do, and they needed all this [plywood] if they were making planes or whatever the hell it was. So, you change in your thinking from younger to older. But at the time, we were all very much patriotic. Because I had brothers in the service, cousins in the service, some that didn't come back. I think this makes you patriotic. Maybe now, I think I'd take my boys and hide them up in the mountains. To me wars are senseless. So many of these boys were over there, and the next — Well, boys we knew. Oh my God, we'd hear Eddy's gone, we heard this one was gone and this one. And it just knocks the heart right out of you.⁴²

That the mostly female ALPLY employees won the first Three-Star Pennant in the Alberni district of the Fifth Victory Campaign for "boosting the sales of victory bonds" by 143 per cent of their quota is proof of their patriotic fervour.⁴³

The sexual division of labour

The pre-war sexual division of labour was reproduced during the war at ALPLY. While war necessitated reorganizing the sexual segregation of workers in order to accommodate women in the factory, the more striking point to note is that the division itself went unquestioned. Moreover, from the outset, occupations were gendered female or male. Sex-typing specific tasks as "suitable" for women feminized and devalued women's labour while justifying the sexual segregation of workers. In a 1942 newspaper story aimed at recruiting women into ALPLY, the sexual division of labour is explained in terms of men's superior physical strength and women's propensity for assembly line occupations.⁴⁴ Harry Berryman, the mill's manager during the war, enticed women to work at the plant by promising excellent wages and special treatment. Berryman stated, "[t]he work is pleasant and all conveniences are available for the women at the plant, together with the

⁴²Interview #5, 25 August 1995.

⁴³"First Three-Star Pennant to Plywoods — Have Subscribed 143% Of Their Quota," *West Coast Advocate*, 28 October 1942.

⁴⁴"While the heavier duties are performed by men it has been found that women are very adept at handling the product in its various stages of manufacture with the result that a large portion of the workers are drawn from the ranks of single girls and married women between the ages of 18 and 25." See "More Women Required in the Plywood Plant," *West Coast Advocate*, 28 May 1942.

services of a matron to attend them."⁴⁵ The emphasis on "pleasant" work and a matron to meet unspecified female needs underscored the exceptionality of women's employment in forestry.

The sexual division of labour organized the workers into a hierarchy with "skilled" male labour and foremen above "unskilled" female labour. Male employees were machinists, electricians, and foremen, while female employees staffed the various positions along the production assembly line except for the "green end"⁴⁶ and positions involving the control of machinery. Women lifted veneer and layered it into sheets, repaired flaws in the faceboards at the finishing end, bundled the plywood, and loaded the boxcars, sometimes alongside men too young or ineligible for war service.⁴⁷ A woman described how assembly line production was a female affair: "The gotchie was run on all girls, the dryers start feeding on all girls. Mind you we had a guy boss over us ... and then they put Maggie and I on the green chain, and golly, there was girls feeding the dryers. There was girls on everything. With a few men, but damn few."⁴⁸

Occupation segregation by sex at ALPLY was neither a spontaneous nor a predetermined development but rather a historically contingent one. Milkman argues that, "an industry's pattern of employment by sex reflects the economic, political and social constraints that are operative when that industry's labour market

⁴⁵"More Women Required in the Plywood Plant."

⁴⁶The green end was the first stage of the production process in which logs were lifted out of the log boom, brought into the plant then debarked and peeled by lathes. It was considered men's work because it involved heavy physical labour.

⁴⁷The process of assembling plywood was described in the local newspaper the week ALPLY opened its doors:

The logs [floating in the boom] are first cut by a drag-saw to a length the same as the sheet to be made, usually 8 feet, and are then raised from the water to a position behind the lathe. Here they are placed between chucks and revolved against a barker, which chips off the bark down to the sapwood, making a perfect round of the log. From the barker the round barked logs are attached to the lathe, and the veneer peeled from them just as an ordinary lathe takes a shaving.

The lathe is adjustable to the thickness of veneer required, which peels away in great sheets like an unbroken ribbon. From the lathe these travel over rubber belts to different stages, so that storage behind the lathe can be sufficient to ensure a constant supply. Next up is the trimming process, in which edges and defects in the sheets are trimmed out, this being done automatically, an operator simply pressing buttons to control the machine.

The trimmed sheets are then sorted for sapwood and hard wood before they go to the dryers, the types of drying being different. At some dryers they are fed through a chamber on slowly revolving rollers, the complete passage taking eight minutes. Thence they go to the glue room, and finally to the press, where they are squeezed into plywood of various thicknesses [of 3, 5, or 7 ply] and laminations." See "Canadian Transport Commences Operation. New Plant Goes Into Operation This Week," *West Coast Advocate*, 21 January 1942.

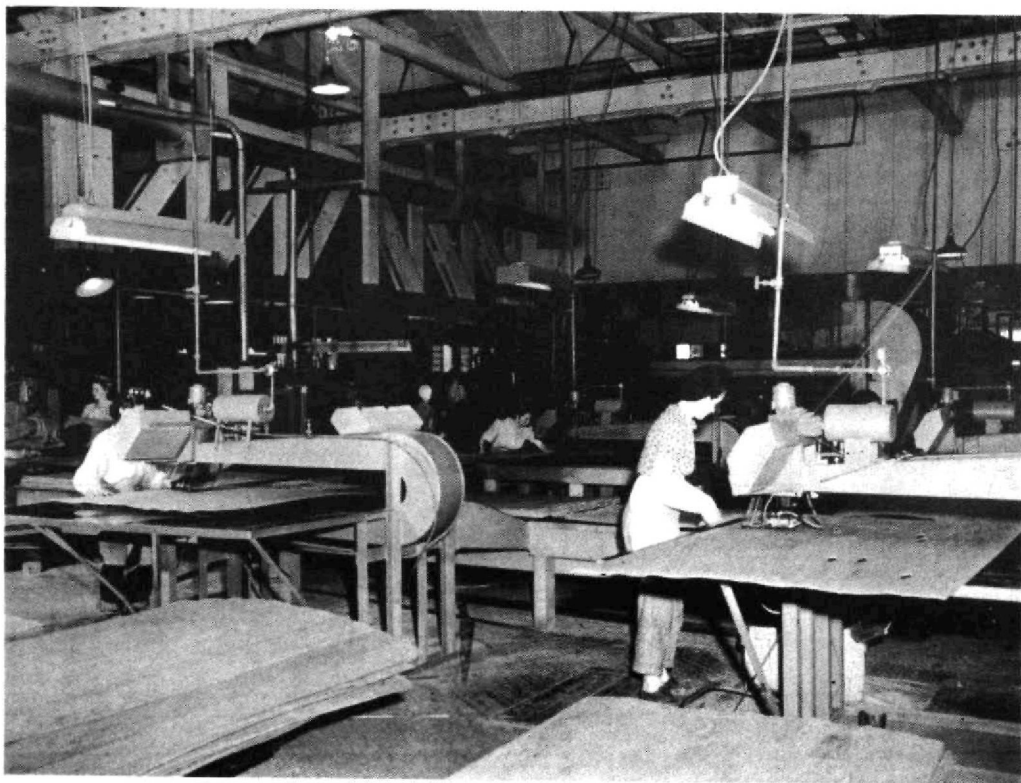


Figure 2. A woman is operating the “boat patcher” in the finishing end. She is replacing knots and flaws in veneer face-boards with boat-shaped wooden patches, c.1943.

initially forms."⁴⁹ Once an industry's labour force has been established neither employers nor workers themselves are inclined towards a fundamental reorganization. Ideology is key to sustaining structural inertia, explaining the reproduction of the sexual division of labour once it has occurred.⁵⁰ While the plywood factory was opened during the exceptional labour conditions caused by war, the forest industry had 80 years of history in Port Alberni predating this unique context. The establishment of ALPLY with a female-dominated labour force created a historical opportunity to eliminate the boundary demarcating women's work from men's work, but the total absence of a feminist consciousness or movement to demand fundamental change allowed the moment to quickly pass.

Within the range of assembly line positions available to women there was great mobility, and many women held a variety of jobs. As they became more experienced and wanted better pay, or grew bored with a particular task, they sought a more interesting or manageable alternative. But as the war progressed, more men from the plant were called up for war duty, opening up previously male-defined tasks to women and expanding the range of "women's jobs" in the production process. For example, one woman became a "cutter," (the clipper-operator responsible for cutting flaws out of veneer), a position of status and higher wages previously held by men:

A lot of men got called up for the war, that worked there, and as you were there for a length of time, you improved your job. I ended up on the cutter, to cut the [veneer]. It comes from the green end, where they roll it off, and it comes up a chain. And it comes through, and then you have to look at it and decide where you're going to cut.

(Where the knots are, basically?)

Not so much the knots, but bad spots in it. To cut them out.

(Was that a prestigious job to have?)

Yeah, it was. ... We had good logs, so there was really no big effort to it. You knew what you had to cut out, and you did it. As long as the girl across from you was doing her job, you had no problems. She had to see that everything went through straight.⁵¹

By 1945, another woman managed to move into the high status position of core-layer (the person who pushed veneer through the glue machine before assembling the layers into plywood). This woman (who never married) spent the majority of her twelve years on the factory floor in this job, an exceptional achievement of which she was proud. Her extended work experience, combined with her "failure" to marry,⁵² led her to demystify the gendering of labour:

⁴⁸Interview #5, 25 August 1995.

⁴⁹Milkman, *Gender at Work*, 6.

⁵⁰Milkman, *Gender at Work*, 124.

⁵¹Interview #4, 25 August 1995.

⁵²At about age forty, this woman had a nervous breakdown and took an extended leave of absence from work at ALPLY. The reason for her illness, she reported, was the realization

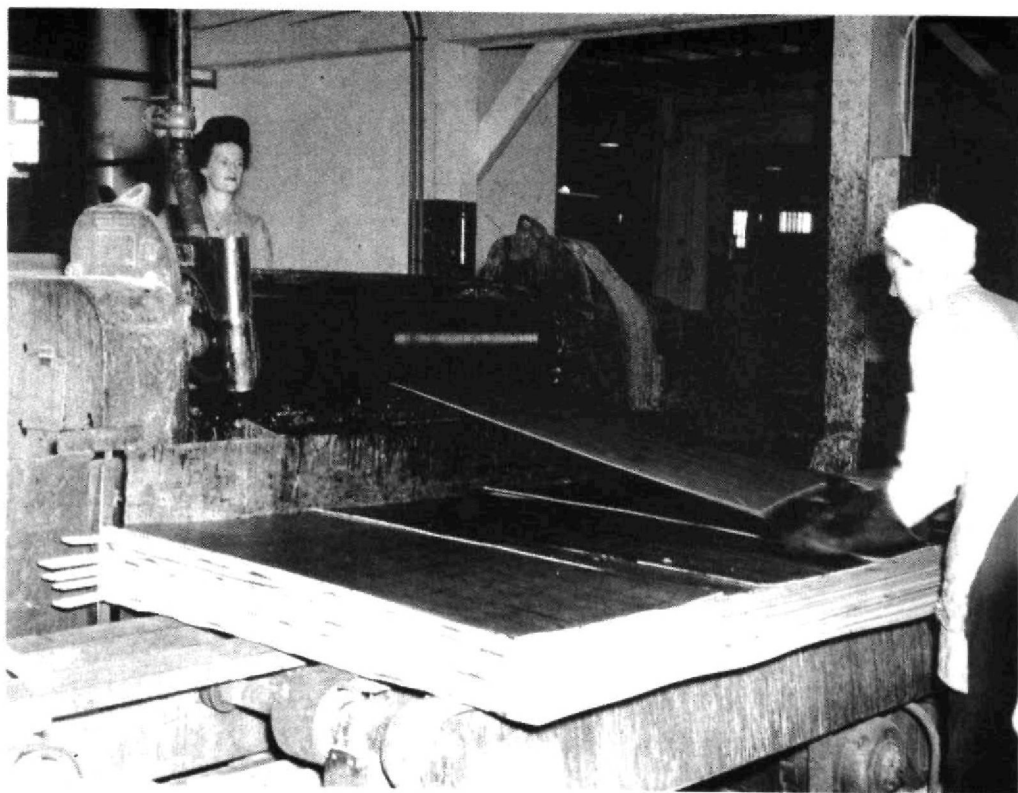


Figure 3. A female core-layer (right) pulls freshly-glued core out of the gluer. Next she will set it down onto the veneer, and another sheet of veneer will be placed on top. Afterwards, the layers will be pressed together in a hot press. Plywood consisted of three, five or seven layers of veneer and core. C.1944.

I think a lot of women, including myself, you always felt the men went away and worked so hard ... a man was the breadwinner, and the women look after everything else. And, "don't bother him, he's quite tired." After I worked, I thought I'm working hard, because it was hard work. Fast, and some of it was heavy. I sort of realized, if this is how hard my father works, where's the big deal? This is good exercise.⁵³

However, this woman was unique in her analysis: none of the other interviewees questioned the gender division of labour at ALPLY or in society in general. Moreover, all but one of the interviewees reported uncritical acceptance of the differential wage. The women's wage of 37 cents per hour (compared to men's wage of 50 cents per hour)⁵⁴ was a blatant example of the devaluation of female labour. All but one interviewee reported she didn't mind the wage differential. The women accepted it as "normal," and were just grateful to have a job. Women's unquestioning adherence to the dominant ideology that subordinated them to men in ALPLY and devalued their labour signifies its hegemony, and the lack of an alternative, critical consciousness in circulation in Port Alberni during the war.

Collective identity as Plywood Girls

A dominant theme to emerge from interviews was the pleasure these young and single women derived from each other's company at work and during leisure. In repeated references to good times and camaraderie, the appreciation they had for women's companionship shines through. Some found it wonderful to be in the company of so many women their own age after having grown up on relatively isolated Prairie farms attending one-room schools with few girls of similar age. When asked what she thought of the factory on her first day on the job one woman replied, "[a]s always, when you're with a whole bunch of other ladies it's going to be great. ... We were happy. We had a lot of fun in that place."⁵⁵ Another remembers, "you met a lot of nice people ... we worked hard ... and then we could sit and talk,"⁵⁶ as six or eight women would meet at the back of the factory and visit. She also described how co-workers held potluck dinners in the plant lunch room during the night shift, and how working at the mill was a very happy time in her life because of the friendships she forged there.⁵⁷ Another woman recalled, "It was an exciting time somehow. I think I mentioned before, you'd go to work sick because you didn't want to miss out on the fun ... [and the] camaraderie. I enjoyed

she would never marry as she had always expected to do. When she returned to ALPLY, she agreed to become a first aid attendant, a solely female occupation, in her view a step up from a blue-collar to white-collar occupation.

⁵³Interview #3, 16 August 1995.

⁵⁴McKnight, *Souvenir Booklet*, 11.

⁵⁵Interview #5, 25 August 1995.

⁵⁶Interview #1, 9 August 1995.

⁵⁷Interview #1, 9 August 1995.



Figure 4. Two Plywood Girls out of a group of five who held a picnic after their shift at ALPLY. Note lunch bucket with "Albion Plywood" written on it. Woman on the left still has her kerchief in her hair. C.1945.

being there."⁵⁸ Clearly sociability was an important attractive feature of work at ALPLY.

Women's socializing at work spilled over into leisure activities as well, such as women's softball and community dances. One interviewee remembered that when women "got off work we walked from the Plywoods over to Alberni to attend dances."⁵⁹ Another summed up the women's desire to stick together: "We girls were a big clique. We had our own baseball team, and we had a lot of fun as girls. I can remember, we would walk two miles to go to a dance, a whole bunch of us. Laughing and giggling ..."⁶⁰ And: "once the Army camp was in town, they had dances. So you'd go to the dances, not necessarily as a couple, but a whole bunch of girls would go. There were three dances a week."⁶¹

In interviews the women represented their young selves as unruly, free-spirited and fun-loving. Their self-descriptions conform to the stereotype of young factory girls as the symbol of "new found independence and freedom for womankind."⁶² Financial independence was certainly gained through working at ALPLY, but outright freedom was beyond their grasp. However, while there was little measurable change in their subordinated status at ALPLY, women recounted experiences that point to both the potential for radical change that existed in the largely homosocial work environment, as well as a modification of power relations at the plant. For example, confidence derived from group solidarity empowered some women to resist management's control over their labour at work, and, more intriguing, to police the sexual behaviour of at least one male authority figure in the plant.

In separate interviews, a number of women referred to an event that evidently has come to symbolize the moxie and courage of some Plywood Girls. A foreman at the plant who had been exempted from military service was known to be having an affair with the wife of a soldier overseas. This situation was deemed intolerable by a group of eight young female millworkers who decided to "teach him a lesson." Instead of targeting the married woman involved, they chose to punish the man who was relatively more powerful both in terms of gender and status at the mill.

⁵⁸ Interview #3, 16 August 1995.

⁵⁹ Interview #1, 9 August 1995.

⁶⁰ Interview #5, 25 August 1995.

⁶¹ Interview #3, 16 August 1995.

⁶² Judy Lown, *Women and Industrialization* (Minneapolis 1990), 43. Lown suggests that in mid-19th century England, the stereotypical perception of unruly and high-spirited factory girls was more of an image than a reality. Her conclusion appears apposite to the Plywood Girls. Female factory workers, Lown argues, did take pride in their work and "realized strengths and powers of their own" at the workplace, but the attractive stereotype actually highlights "the way in which any 'freedom' ... was perceived only in relation to the even greater poverty and insecurity of women not employed in the mill." Lown, *Women and Industrialization*, 61-2. See also Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia 1986).



Figure 5. Image of a proud Plywood Girl. Note nail polish on left hand and Alberni Plywood lunch bucket under right arm. This woman was also a longstanding member of the women's softball team from ALPLY. C.1943.

The women reasoned this man should not benefit from avoiding war duty when many local men (including their brothers) were risking their lives at war. One description of the event also conveyed the women's desire to humble this man whom they also found vain. A woman who took part in the event described it thus:

We did some crazy things during the war. We didn't like fellows that wouldn't go overseas, that got exemptions because they were a foreman or something. Is this going to be publicized?

(... You don't have to name any names. Tell me a few things that you did.)

... we used to get back at some of these fellows.

(Exemption guys ...?)

They were foremen, some of them were ... going around with some fellow's wife that was overseas, and meanwhile they were getting exempt from the war. We didn't like that because these women's husbands were over there, so we thought we'll just do a little nice thing to them.

(Tell me a few lessons you taught them. What did you do?)

Cars and stuff.

(I've heard other stories from ____ and also I think ____ told me about painting a guy's car yellow.)

We didn't paint it yellow, ____'s got it wrong, she wasn't even there.

(This is a story that circulates, she didn't tell me she was there.)

It always gets built up.

(You tell me, if you were there, what happened?)

We went up there and put a white feather on the seat of his car [to signify cowardice], then we put sugar in the gas tank, then we put some jam on his seat, a few things.

(You put sugar in his tank, then you put jam on the seat?)

Uh-huh ... I'll tell you, the next day when we got down to work, you wanted to see a bunch of women that were a little bit nervous, because there was about eight of us in on it. And the head grader was one of them. [That night] we made her take her shoes off because, this is how crazy we were, we were acting like commandos. We told her to take her shoes off.

(Why?)

Because she was making too much noise, she was a big girl. I said, 'Take your shoes off, or they're going to hear us.' He was in a garage at the back of a boarding house, and there was a lot of people there.

(You didn't do this at work, you did it at some guy's house?)

At his house, well where he boarded.

(Then what happened?)

She couldn't find her shoes after, she had to go home barefoot ...

(What was it like when you went back to work? What did he say? What did he do?)

The next day, there was one girl that was always with us, her name is ____, she lives in ____ ... and she was a nervous wreck. She peed her pants that night, when we were doing it ... The police came down to see if they could find any clues or anything. I think he knows who did it. He lives down in ____ now, I hope I don't run into him. I think he has an idea.

(What was he like the next day, did he look the same?)

He was a little bit upset. I would have been too. I'd have been rather perturbed.

(If this guy was seeing a woman, why didn't you teach the woman a lesson? You saw it more than anything as his problem?)

It was the idea that he was getting off from going into the Army, that's what did it more than anything. Then to go out with a married woman whose husband was overseas ...

(... Was he good or bad as a foreman?)

He was all right, but he was a good looking fella and he knew it. We didn't like that either.⁶³

By vandalizing their foreman's car, the women avoided a direct confrontation with a man they held in contempt for his alleged cowardice and vanity. Yet, it is likely that the act, which remained unsolved by police, caused the foreman to feel less secure in his position of privilege at the plant or in the community. By damaging his property, and possibly unsettling his confidence, the women at the very least succeeded in their goal of punishing his behaviour. But more than that, the shared experience gave the women confidence in an arena ruled by men, and further contributed to their pride in their identity as Plywood Girls.

The same woman quoted above, who clearly stood as a leader among the faction of young female workers with bravado, described ways in which women resisted management control through playful behaviour. They disrupted the production process by defacing veneer (by chewing liquorice and spitting at the newly dried veneer as it moved down the "dry chain") and simply avoided work by taking bets on daring feats of bravery (by pulling stunts such as riding a bicycle down the dry chain or running on the log boom). The importance of all of these apparently minor acts of resistance lay in recognizing the radical potential for change inherent in these shared activities. Their indirect challenges to male and mill authority signified burgeoning confidence, nurtured by their collective identity as Plywood Girls, to act on feelings of rebelliousness and anger. While the cessation of war stifled the potential for change (see below), incidences of vandalism and unruly behaviour were evidently so potent to the women themselves that they continue today to invest them with great significance in oral narratives. This potency accounts for the persistence of memories about such stories. Moreover, the pleasure derived from an identity reinforced by the collective memories of shared events, whether acts of vandalism or potlucks at work, or in leisure pursuits such as softball and dances, sustains present-day connections among war-era Plywood Girls.⁶⁴

⁶³Interview #2, 27 August 1995.

⁶⁴In one case, while trying to arrange an interview, one woman offered to contact three other former Plywood Girls and meet me as a group. She was in regular contact with them in any case, she said, and had already informed them about my interest in their story. In another case, a woman who had played softball with other female co-workers during and immediately after the war organized a reunion for team members at her home a year before I contacted her. Another softball team reunion was held in Campbell River this past summer.

Post-World War II to 1991

1945-1959: From Plywood Girls to Plywood Bags

Pierson, Milkman, and others have shown that, contrary to popular belief, World War II did little to change attitudes towards women's "proper role" in society.⁶⁵ In the post-war era and until the late 1970s, Port Alberni's forest-based economy soared and the town experienced decades of unsurpassed economic prosperity, as did Canada generally.⁶⁶ Despite this, public opinion quickly reverted back to the prewar belief that married women belonged in the home performing domestic work and tending their children while their husbands earned a "family wage."⁶⁷ Moreover, single unemployed women were channelled into traditional female occupations which needed filling: domestic service, nursing and teaching.⁶⁸ The Plywood Girls themselves adhered to the dominant ideology. Their experience as workers at ALPLY, in the majority of cases, did not alter their conventional perspective on the gendering of labour. Although women wished to keep their jobs at ALPLY, they believed that when men returned from the war the jobs at the plant were rightfully theirs for the asking. One woman remembered the common assumption that returning men would need jobs — and should get them, too. She and others fully expected to be expelled from ALPLY, but instead discovered to their relief that single women who wished to remain could do so. She recalled:

As the men came into the plant some of the women left. They didn't make the women leave, but they did not hire more women as far as I recall. They'd hired only men ...

(Was this an issue at all, that only men were going to get hired?)

I don't think at that time it was. Because I think it was more surprising we were still there, as it was. Even in those days, it was logical that once the men came back that they would have to work. ... We expected to leave.

(Would you have thought that would have been fair?)

⁶⁵Pierson, "Women's Emancipation," 141. Milkman, *Gender at Work*; Marsha Courchane and Angela Redish, "A Century of Women's Work in British Columbia," unpublished paper, 1993, 4.

⁶⁶Forestry production during this period was organized along Fordist lines — large number of workers were employed in the mass production of commodity forest products (for example, market pulp, paperboard, newsprint, dimension lumber). Taylorist labour relations were characterized by a strict division between production and management. The production workforce was strongly unionized and, despite relatively low levels of education and training, enjoyed high wages. For many years, Port Alberni forest workers earned some of the highest incomes in Canada. For example, in 1975 Port Alberni had the third highest average income in the country. In 1978, the town ranked fourth in Canada for average income (this ranking included only cities which had a population of 12,700 or more tax filers).

⁶⁷Pierson, *They're Still Women After All*, 12-3.

⁶⁸Pierson, "Women's Emancipation," 165.

Not really, but on the other hand, for the guys who went and fought a war [it] would have only been fair they have a job to come back to ...

(You would have left if they said 'women go'?)

Yeah, if everybody had to go ...⁶⁹

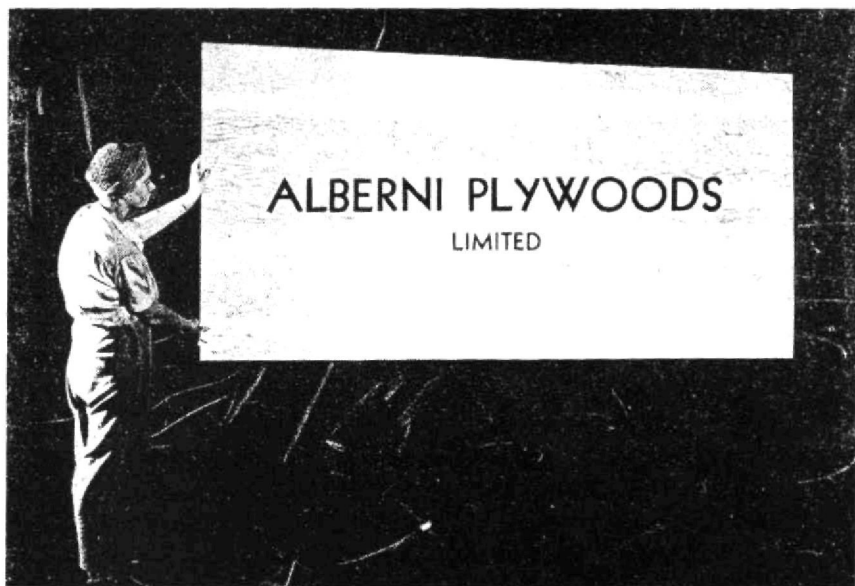


Figure 6. In the immediate post-war period, women were still closely associated with ALPLY. This image of a female mill worker holding a sheet of plywood is from the cover of an H.R. MacMillan Export Company pamphlet on ALPLY. Undated. C.1948.

In Port Alberni, this ideology translated into the belief that married women should quit their jobs at ALPLY, and most did.⁷⁰ Representations of single female plant workers in the company magazine *Harmac News* during the post-war era reflected and reinforced their image as feminine or sexual beings ripe for romance or marriage. Two interviewees did not marry and continued to work at ALPLY. One recalled the reaction against married women working there after the war:

... there was a stage there later on where there was a fair amount of resentment about the married women working.

(Do you remember when that might have been ...?)

It might have been right away. I kind of think that. I guess maybe that was where some of the fallout came from the public. 'Why should married women be working when their husband is working.' Like part of the war, single women looking for jobs, there's none available because the married women are holding them. At that time there was not too much,

⁶⁹ Interview #3, 16 August 1995.

⁷⁰ Two interviewees quit their jobs to marry in 1945; one in 1947; and two in 1948.

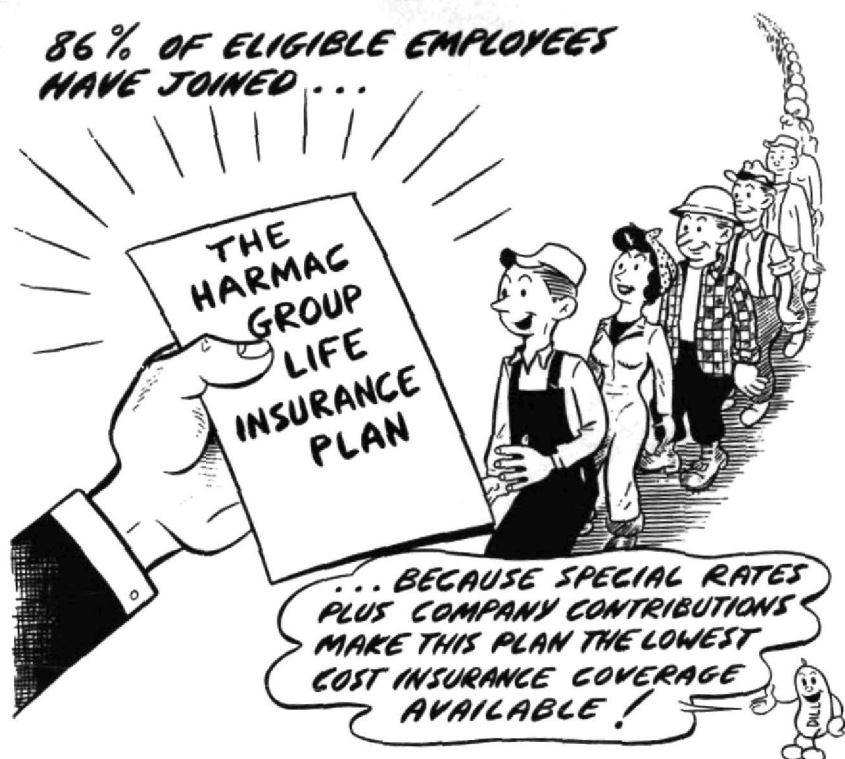


Figure 7. In a 1950 cartoon of H.R. MacMillan Export Company employees, a Plywood Girl is second in line. *Harmac News*, 4 (Feb. 1950), back cover.

but a fair feeling, "She's got a husband working, why can't she stay at home and let a single person take the job." ... It didn't affect me because I was always single. Therefore, I wasn't one of them.⁷¹

Gender relations at ALPLY quickly changed after the war. As male labour arrived at the factory, resentment against women's presence soon followed. One woman recalled that, "when the boys came back, a lot of them had a bad attitude," and she gave an example: "[a male employee] said he didn't fight in a war to come to this, to take orders from a damn woman ... (Was it you that he was taking orders from?) Yes. I said, 'When you learn to do this, I'll gladly give it to you.'"⁷² Men returning to Port Alberni evinced a sense of entitlement to ALPLY jobs that the women who had actually worked there lacked.

⁷¹Interview #3, 16 August 1995.

⁷²Interview #5, 25 August 1995.

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MARCH, 1949

HARMAC *News*

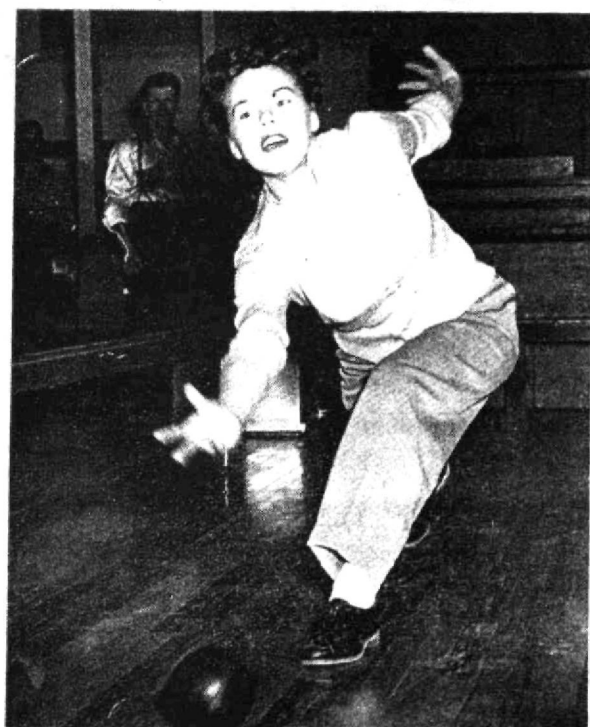


PHOTO BY SPARSHATT & BARR
PORT ALBERNI

ALBERNI PLYMAKER

(See Story Page 24)

A Magazine For Employees Of
H. R. MacMILLAN EXPORT COMPANY LIMITED
And Operating Subsidiaries

Figure 8. Image of a female ALPLY employee in a company league bowling match. Female mill workers were represented as sporty, fun-loving, young and single after World War II. *Harmac News*, 3 (March 1949), front cover.



Left to right: Attendant Mary Ivezich, retiring Queen Doreen Arsenault, newly crowned Lumber Queen Betty Cooley, attendant Phyllis Paquette.

ALBERNI PLYWOODS LIMITED

Plymakers in Royal Role

All four members of the charming group in the picture above work at Alberni Plywoods.

The occasion was the crowning of Lumber Queen Betty Cooley at the "Paul Bunyan" celebrations of Labour Day at Port Alberni. This popular annual event is held under the auspices of the Joint Labour Council.

The new queen is chosen each year by a popularity poll tied in with ticket sales to finance the celebrations. Ticket holders have a chance to win prizes and an opportunity to cast their votes for their favourite candidate for the lumber "throne."



Everett Young, shift foreman, caught one of the largest tyee salmon taken from the Alberni Canal this year. It is certainly the largest salmon caught this year by a Tyee Club member and it won for Ev the \$25.00 weekly prize. It also puts him in the running for the grand prize.

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Figure 9. The 1948 "Lumber Queen" and her attendants, all female plywood mill workers. *Harmac News*, 2 (Nov. 1948), 16. Note contrast of feminine Plywood girls with male mill worker who is noted for his winning performance in the masculine sport of game fishing.

Women who stayed at ALPLY long enough to compare work before and after the war recalled a change in work patterns once men were hired on in significant numbers. The distinction between male and female tasks was again redrawn. While men continued to hold management and machinist positions, greater numbers of them began to work alongside women on the assembly line and, as a result, the range of production line positions formerly designated "women's jobs" narrowed while the range of male tasks widened. Positions still appropriate for women from about 1948 onward were dry-chain operator and veneer patcher. Tasks previously performed by women but now designated as male jobs included green chain operator, finishing end "trimmers" and dryer-feeders.⁷³ Women remarked on this shift to one another, but it went unchallenged. The contraction in both the number of female employees and the range of activities open to women appears to have been viewed as inevitable by women who stayed on at the mill.⁷⁴ The situation worsened until the 1970s, when a small group of young women began to exercise their union seniority rights and bumped male co-workers with less seniority in order to acquire train-

⁷³One remarkable exception to this generalization was a woman named Mary James who worked at ALPLY from 1948 until the early 1980s. Mary James was deaf yet she became the first and only female towmotor (forklift) operator at ALPLY. See McKnight, *Souvenir Booklet*, 25; and interview #17, 11 September 1996.

⁷⁴Interview #6, 14 August 1996; interview #4, 25 August 1995; interview #3, 16 August 1995.



Betty Greenlaw models a simple one-piece swim suit to good advantage.

1948 Models

... Interesting Spare Time Vocation of Two Plywood Girls

FROM WORKING in the plant at MacMillan Industries Limited to modelling new creations at fashion salons in the Hotel Vancouver is a frequent transition for two personable girls at Plywoods, Betty Greenlaw and Myrna Harwood.

Betty, a core feeder, and Myrna, a dry chain offbearer, studied the techniques of professional modelling at the Tonia Charm School. They are now putting their talents and training to profitable spare time use modelling new creations for out-of-town buyers and working as models for professional photographers.

Jim McGinnis of the Vancouver Daily Province, who knows a good

story when he sees one, recently wrote a feature article describing Myrna as a "teen aged quick-change artist who daily doffs millworkers' jeans for milady's latest fashions—a successful millhand and model combined."

When asked by the Daily Province reporter why she didn't make a full time career of modelling, Myrna replied, "I like both jobs equally well . . . Besides, there isn't enough demand for models in Vancouver to keep me busy all year."

That last remark seems to indicate that besides being pleasingly endowed with charm, poise and personality our modelling misses know how to keep both feet firmly on the ground.



Professional photographers lie awake at nights thinking up new ways to pose pretty girls. Whatever ideas are dreamed up, so long as the model is as attractive as Myrna Harwood the result is bound to be pleasing.

Harmac News

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Figure 10. Two female plywood mill workers (a core-feeder and a dry-chain offbearer) from H.R. MacMillan Export Company's Vancouver plywood plant who modelled when not making plywood. Depiction and description highlight their sexual attractiveness. *Harmac News*, 2 (Dept. 1948), 11.

ing necessary for promotions.⁷⁵ The union seniority system was a mechanism this younger generation of Plywood Girls used to claim their right to equal status at ALPLY in the 1970s and 1980s.

The reemergence of conservative gender ideology after the war is exemplified in changes in language: the war-era designation of "Plywood Girls" (which women apprehended to be a term of respect and claimed with pride) was debased to "Plywood Bags" by the early 1950s. The term had a negative connotation of sexual promiscuity and was a manifestation of the backlash against even single women working at ALPLY. Unlike with "Plywood Girls," women experienced the new label as shameful and insulting, although apparently worse terms were also in circulation at the time (see quote below). "Plywood Bags" was also a sexual term of derision: by marking working women from ALPLY as sexually available, the community was expressing a belief that they were morally deviant. Women who worked at the plant in the 1950s explicitly linked the term to classism because it was used by middle-class women, which suggests growing class tension in Port Alberni. But it was also used by working-class wives of men employed at ALPLY which suggests resentment and jealousy towards single women who were still able to obtain work there. Significantly, interviewees did not remember their male co-workers using the term, suggesting that the day-to-day reality of working side by side at the plant displaced myths about their female colleagues' sexuality. Finally, one interviewee, a French-Canadian woman, linked the term to one more possible negative meaning, anti-French sentiments. Overall, the term can be seen as a means to distinguish and reinforce difference (whether it be class, gender, or ethnic) in a hateful way. One woman described what the term meant to her circa 1950:

((Re: Factory uniform] You wore this cap even when you weren't at work? You wore it in stores?)

Coming home from work. You didn't want to take it off, you hair's a mess ... you were in your plaid shirt and your blue jeans and your Plywood cap, and different ones that go around giving you the old nose-in-the-air type of thing.

⁷⁵Three female employees began in the mid- and late-1970s to apply for new positions at ALPLY that until that time were held by men. One woman described how irritated she felt when men with less seniority were applying for more interesting and better paying positions. She began putting her name in for newly opened senior positions and used her bumping rights to secure them. In the process, she encountered two obstacles. First, was a sexist supervisor who harassed her incessantly during her training period until she warned him she had spoken to a lawyer. He voluntarily transferred to another department as a consequence. Second, while she was being trained for hot-press operator, other women with more seniority became inspired. The result: this woman was herself bumped from her trainee position by another woman with more seniority. Three successive times she began training for better-paid positions — clean-up crew, chipper-operator, and stud-mill workers — and was bumped by other women. In 1979, this woman ran for and was elected shop steward. Interview #16, 15 September 1996.

(Why was that?)

We were known as the Plywood Bags. Then there was different ones that had different names that weren't even nice.

(... Was it still "normal" to work there if you were a woman?)

Oh no. Oh no. Once you started working there, you got the sense of it pretty fast. Even though you were the same age as school kids, you got resented. ... Summertime, when college girls would come to our regular dances at the Athletic Hall, we used to have weekend dances just about every week with a live band. They knew how to make you feel "less than" — Women were the worst ones.

(Other women your age?)

Yes, but from college, or high school, starting to come to these dances.

(How did they make you feel "less than," do you remember?)

With little comments, and snippets ...

(Do you know why they looked down on girls your age who worked in the factory?)

Class structure was still around very strong. And, I'd grown up in a French family, in a community where we were just about the only French family.⁷⁶

A woman who began working at ALPLY in 1956 recalled a similar scenario. When asked if it was acceptable to the community that women worked at the plywood plant she replied emphatically:

No. Plywood Girls were supposed to be "fast girls" or something like that. But, it was mostly them good yack-yack-yack ladies: "Women should not be working in mills." To me they didn't say this, but what they meant is, "They might look at our husbands, probably do them a favour." I don't think anybody worried too much about it, but there was bad attitudes a little bit.

(Mainly from other women, wives of workers? Do you remember anything specific?)

I'm just thinking of the fifties, by the time I was back in the seventies it sure didn't bother me. But, in the fifties, some young guys would try to approach you, and if you didn't give them too much attention: "Aw, come on now, the Plywood Girls are easy. What are you trying?" That sort of thing. That wasn't everybody, because we worked alongside [men]. I don't think it was big thing to worry about.

(... When you started [in 1956], and it was about 30 per cent women, did that seem at all interesting or special to you? That there was a large group of women up there ... ?)

I think it probably sort of was. It's kind of like nurses working at the hospital, people work here, you were a Plywood Girl. Plywood Bags I think we were called. We didn't take it as disrespectful, even being called that.

(It was something you were kind of proud of?)

Yeah, we were Plywood Girls, I never did hang my head in shame about it. I kicked people in the shins sometimes, if they didn't like it.⁷⁷

Note how this woman immediately reclaimed the identity of "Plywood Girl," a term that signified pride in her identity as a female mill worker. In sum, public

⁷⁶Interview #14, 9 August 1995.

⁷⁷Interview #13, 12 August 1995.

perception of women who worked at ALPLY had shifted from admiration for aiding the war effort, to intolerance during the post-war era of resurgent conservative gender ideology.

1958: Local 1-85 of the IWA and the boycott against hiring women

After 1956, with peak employment at 908 workers, MacMillan Bloedel began to restructure ALPLY and eliminate jobs in the process. By 1959, management decided that men, deemed the family breadwinners, had a right to preferential access to the dwindling number of entry-level jobs. Consequently, management implemented an informal but effective policy against hiring women at ALPLY. But management was not solely responsible for this development — its determination to hire only men was strengthened by the IWA. At the 1958 annual Convention union delegates voted “to eliminate the sub-standard wage rates for females in the plywood section of the industry,”⁷⁸ thereby eliminating management’s incentive for hiring women. A former manager of ALPLY recalled that when the “woman’s wage” was eliminated, management thought “we might as well hire men.”⁷⁹

The reason why the union, led by the Port Alberni local,⁸⁰ pushed for an end to the discriminatory “woman’s wage” is unclear. There are two possibilities. Either the IWA set out to build solidarity with its female members by pushing for wage parity, and ignorantly underestimated the extent to which women were valued for their enhanced exploitability. Or, the union, sparked by fear that male workers would be substituted with cheaper female labour, intentionally set out to eliminate the management’s incentive to do so. Given the union’s unimpressive record regarding their female members’ concerns, the second possibility appears more probable, in spite of the union’s heroic self-perception of their role in the process.⁸¹ In either case, with the achievement of wage parity management ceased hiring women, and so began the fourteen year drought during which only men could obtain work at the mill. The idea of the male as the family breadwinner was invoked to rationalize the deliberate policy of hiring men over women.⁸² Women at ALPLY also accepted the family breadwinner argument. For example, one woman who worked there from 1952 to 1991 recalled: “I think there was so many more women

⁷⁸See “Delegates Unanimously Demand Ten Per Cent Wage Increase,” *B.C. Lumber Worker*, 4 (February 1958), 5.

⁷⁹Interview #21, 15 September 1996.

⁸⁰Interview with George McKnight, 16 August 1996.

⁸¹In a telephone interview with then president of Local 1-85 Dave Haggard in September 1996 during which I asked him his opinion about the Local’s record on women’s issues, Haggard immediately referred to the 1958 elimination of the women’s wage as an example of the Local’s solidarity with its female members.

⁸²Interview #21, 15 September 1996.

than men [at ALPLY], there was a lot of men unemployed, and I think they wanted to break [the work force] evenly. Because, let's face it, the men is usually the breadwinner of the family."⁸³ For the women who were already employed at ALPLY before the hiring boycott, the workplace atmosphere became less accommodating. An interviewee remembered,

We [women] were considered whiners and complainers. Looking back today, we kind of went along with it, "Yeah, women are whiners and complainers." We were really sort of going along with it. At my age now, as I look back, the three times I went back, we sure noticed, I don't know if the supervisor noticed ... we seen the same thing happen when the men were on the women's jobs.

(What happened? Did men whine you mean?)

Yes, whine and complain. Oh, bellyache, oh boy.⁸⁴

The union did not challenge either the discriminatory treatment of women by male co-workers or the hiring boycott by management —until pushed to do so by a woman years later.

1972: Another labour shortage and an end to the hiring boycott

Not all women accepted exclusion from ALPLY without a struggle. The hiring boycott remained unchanged until 1972 when the rehiring of a woman named Ellen Smith⁸⁵ generated a breakthrough for women. Smith had worked at the mill from 1953 until 1964, at which time she quit to have a baby. When her husband died in 1966, she immediately put in an application at the plant personnel office but was bluntly informed "it was against plant policy to hire women," despite the fact that "women did better work anyhow ... women worked harder and made better plywood it seemed to me."⁸⁶ Smith sought out Walter Allen, then president of local 1-85, and enlisted his help in challenging the boycott. Allen, together with other male union leaders, promised to raise her complaint with management. A total of six years later (during which time she raised her son on welfare and gave up on getting back into ALPLY) the union called and told her to go down to the plant personnel office and apply for a job. She was rehired, and within months word was out that management was rehiring women with previous experience at ALPLY. Smith's assertiveness in seeking union support in challenging management over the hiring boycott grew out of her earlier work experience at ALPLY. Her claim to a job was the legacy of the war-era Plywood Girls: the continuous employment of

⁸³Interview #12, 12 August 1995.

⁸⁴Interview #13, 12 August 1995.

⁸⁵Not her real name.

⁸⁶Telephone interview #15, 7 September 1996.

female workers at ALPLY from 1942 established a tradition which evolved into a sense of entitlement to work at ALPLY in the following generation of women.

The union's role in this turning point for women is again unclear. Ostensibly its position was supportive, and evidence suggests it was in fact instrumental in securing Smith a job. Yet, judging by the union's own records, and the length of time between her initial complaint with the union and her reinstatement, the boycott was far from a priority for local 1-85.⁸⁷ Moreover, by 1972, labour at the plant was again in short supply which likely explains why management was "waiting [for an] opportunity to hire women"⁸⁸—and suggests that Local 1-85's leadership only took action to assist Smith when women would pose no threat to men's jobs at ALPLY. Numerous interviewees have offered the same explanation for the change in personnel policy: a labour shortage. In the early 1970s, the forest economy underwent another phase of rapid growth and consequently management was having a difficult time securing a stable workforce. Given the ubiquity of forestry jobs available, male labour was extremely mobile forcing management to hire young male workers who repeatedly engaged in dangerous behaviour on the shop floor. There was also a high rate of worker absenteeism and turnover—all of which combined to disrupt production.⁸⁹ One long-time male employee gave an example of a young man "horsing around" at work by spending "a whole evening kicking a bleach bottle around the mill like a soccer ball. He kicked it into a woman's head."⁹⁰ One woman who rejoined ALPLY in 1975 was clear about the motive behind the rehiring policy: "They couldn't get the men to work. In the '70s there, the young men really did get lazy, and you couldn't get them to work."⁹¹

By 1971, women had been all but removed from the plant: there were only thirty women out of a total of 600 workers,⁹² and most worked on graveyard shift.⁹³ After Smith had been rehired, the company realized that women brought to the factory floor both an impressive work ethic and a positive socializing influence.⁹⁴ Furthermore, rehiring women with previous experience in plywood production saved MacMillan Bloedel the time and expense necessary to train new workers. As for the women, they appreciated the economic stability that jobs at ALPLY

⁸⁷In the minutes from a meeting between union and company representatives on 20 March 1972, the following is stated: "Item 2. *Hiring of Women*. Union asks when are we going to get an answer to this. Company had agreed to this some time ago. Company waiting opportunity to hire women." See "Meeting Held at ALPLY," Box 37/File: Alberni Plywood Division—Minutes 1972. IWA local 1-85 Archive, Port Alberni.

⁸⁸See fn. 87.

⁸⁹Interview #13, 12 August 1995; interview #15, 7 September 1996; interview #18, 16 August 1996.

⁹⁰Interview #18, 16 August 1996.

⁹¹Interview #13, 12 August 1995.

⁹²"Major Industry in Port Alberni," *Vancouver Sun*, 13 September 1971.

⁹³Interview #18, 16 August 1996.

⁹⁴Interview #15, 7 September 1996; interview #18, 16 August 1996.

afforded them and their families. An interviewee recalled that by the early 1970s the economy was growing and male workers frequently moved to new jobs for better pay or conditions. Women, she said, were different:

Coming into the seventies, the women wanted to work there, they wanted to work for a reason, to stay there ... [J]obs were available all over the place. Some of the guys would come in for six months, then they'd quit and take off. Go work someplace else. [Women] were settled here, so they would rather work there, at the mill making good money, as to work in the store and making less money. ... I think the married women they rehired, they were basically going to be more long term than just a short stay. Less retraining. ... A lot of the guys used to go up in the bush [logging]. Some of the guys worked at the mill, and they don't want to stay there because it wasn't the job they would like. They'd like to be out in the open more, and in a mill you're closed in.⁹⁵

Married women, and women with family responsibilities, were now valued for their long-term commitment to their jobs. As a consequence, the company hired roughly even numbers of women and men until the devastating recession of the 1980s that ultimately led MacMillan Bloedel to close the mill in 1991.

Upon her return to ALPLY in 1975, a woman who had worked there in the 1950s was struck by how the factory had been transformed into a male-dominated worksite:

I went back in March of '75, and [rehiring women] was just trickling. It was mostly us old ones from the '50s that they were calling back. Of course, we were experienced. It was a strange world again, there was a lot of changes.

(Machinery changes?)

That, and them darn men on the women's jobs. It was really strange. And men in the women's lunch room. That's one thing in the fifties, women had their own lunch room, and their own bathrooms upstairs. To come back in '75, these men in the women's lunchroom, it was a mixed lunchroom. It worked out fine, but it sure felt strange.⁹⁶

Despite the fact that male workers had overtaken previously female-designated space and occupations, female employees reported that gender relations in the 1970s were pleasant and cooperative. They repeatedly referred to the positive atmosphere that prevailed in the 1970s, and many used a family metaphor to describe the nature of the plant's labour force. For example, one woman remembered her co-workers as: "kind of like a family, there was good days, there was bad days. There was some you'd like to kick, and some you didn't mind seeing. That's the way it was. ... We were just all brothers and sisters, fellow workers."⁹⁷

⁹⁵Interview #12, 12 August 1995.

⁹⁶Interview, #13, 12 August 1995.

⁹⁷Interview #13, 12 August 1995.

The harmony was not to last. Starting in 1980, the forest industry began another phase of restructuring (which is ongoing) that resulted in massive layoffs⁹⁸ and severe distress for hundreds of workers and their families.⁹⁹ Adding to the atmosphere of uncertainty that prevailed in the plywood mill in the 1980s were rumours circulating that the mill would close.¹⁰⁰ One woman described the fear workers had for the future of their jobs as "a ten year weight on our shoulders."¹⁰¹ Soon the "family" of ALPLY employees became dysfunctional: once again gender relations at the mill were strained as male co-workers asserted their resentment for having to compete with women for threatened jobs. Interviewees reported that during the economic downturn and the ensuing competitive atmosphere at ALPLY, married

⁹⁸In Canada and elsewhere, this year marked the beginning of a long period of economic crisis and stagnation. Across the nation, unemployment rates soared in the first half of the 1980s as widespread job losses occurred in both the public and private sector. BC's forest industry was deeply affected — forest products firms began to lose money, production levels were cut, and lay-offs followed. In Port Alberni and elsewhere, MacMillan Bloedel began to transform its forestry operations.

Of particular significance was the reorganization of the workforce: to minimize labour costs, companies shed employees. This was a top down process, involving minimal consultation with workers and unions; and faced with catastrophic job loss, unions and workers were unable to mount an effective opposition to restructuring. Between 1979 and 1982, over 21,000 jobs were lost in the province's forest industry. By 1982, unemployment in the forest sector was 19.2 per cent, compared to just 6.4 per cent three years earlier. Port Alberni's economy suffered dramatically — during 1982 and 1983, approximately 2,000 MB employees in the area lost their jobs. In 1985, just as the provincial economy and the forest sector were beginning to emerge from the recession, Port Alberni's unemployment rate remained high, at 17.1 per cent (*Census Canada* 1986). By the late 1980s, Port Alberni's economy had recovered somewhat and a few years of relative stability ensued. However, this stability was short-lived as the early 1990s brought a new round of restructuring. In 1991 and 1992, more than 1,000 workers were laid off in MacMillan Bloedel's Port Alberni operations. Mill closures, including at ALPLY, meant the permanent loss of many hundreds of jobs.

⁹⁹The recession of the early 1980s had a devastating impact on the community. While Port Alberni residents were accustomed to "boom and bust" economic cycles associated with a forest sector dependent on international markets, in the past the downturns were relatively mild and short-lived and, once they passed, jobs that had been lost were regained. The recession of the 1980s proved different: it was more severe and, once the economy began to recover, it did so only very slowly. For analysis of the impact of restructuring on the community, see Elizabeth Hay, "Recession and Restructuring in Port Alberni: Corporate, Household and Community Coping Strategies," MA thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1993.

¹⁰⁰By the early 1980s, the demand for plywood began to dwindle as relatively inexpensive aspenite and other flake boards (made out of cheaper wood species) entered the market. Moreover, the large "peeler logs" used for plywood since the 1940s, and which were once so common to the westcoast, were becoming depleted, requiring smaller, lower grade logs as substitutes. These are two factors commonly cited to account for the loss of profitability in plywood manufacturing. See McKnight, *Souvenir Booklet*, 19.

¹⁰¹Interview #13, 12 August 1995.

women once again became the focus of hostility¹⁰² of "scared and frustrated men."¹⁰³ The economic downturn interrupted the steady gain women had been making at ALPLY since 1972. When MacMillan Bloedel closed ALPLY, 382 workers lost their jobs, of whom 53 were women.¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

Alberni Plywoods was opened in Port Alberni at a time of a severe shortage of labour during World War II. The problem led management to take the unprecedented step of recruiting a female labour force "for the duration" of the war only. This solution had radical potential to disrupt the sexual division of labour in this forestry operation, and to transform the consciousness of the women and men who worked at ALPLY under the unusual circumstances. But in the absence of an explicitly feminist critique of the labour process the opportunity quickly evaporated. The majority of war-era Plywood Girls interviewed did not question the division of labour, and when the war ended, all the women employed at ALPLY deferred to men's sense of entitlement to the factory jobs.

Yet the radical potential that failed to revolutionize labour at ALPLY can be detected still in the oral narratives of women who merrily and proudly recount stories of shared work and leisure activities. From potlucks at work and dances in Port Alberni, to acts of vandalism against the property of a male authority figure at the factory, it is clear that the shared identity of Plywood Girls that was forged in the homosocial environment in which they worked and played empowered young women to challenge authority and control. The opportunity for fundamental change was even further diminished by the post-war resurgence of conservative gender ideology which was intolerant toward women who worked at ALPLY, as exemplified by the coining of the derisive term "Plywood Bags." Yet despite the hostility, which culminated in the discriminatory hiring boycott against women enacted after 1959, women consistently struggled to obtain work at ALPLY. Here we see the legacy of the Plywood Girls: the employment of a majority of women at ALPLY during World War II had a radical effect on the consciousness of many women who joined the plant until it was closed in 1991. Many women who sought work at ALPLY from the 1950s onward felt a sense of entitlement to plant jobs, a subjectivity that was borne out of knowledge that women, often family members, had constituted the original labour force. As one woman who began at the plant in

¹⁰²For example, one woman reported, "Later on the atmosphere changed, it was cutthroat ... like that late '70s and '80s. 'Why the Hell don't you stay at home where you belong,' and all this stuff. (Who would say that?) Mostly the men that didn't work too hard. (Why would they do that do you think?) ... They were threatened, their jobs were threatened, naturally they're going to take it out on somebody else." Interview #2, 16 September 1995.

¹⁰³Interview #16, 15 September 1996.

¹⁰⁴Interview with Dave Steinhauer, First Vice-President, IWA Local 1-85, 16 September 1996.



Figure 11. Women who worked at ALPLY during the war (and after) who attended the opening of the Plywood Girls exhibit I curated for Women's History Month at the Alberni Valley Museum, October 1996. All women who had worked at ALPLY were invited to attend the exhibit's opening. I'm flanked by many of the women who took part in the study. Photo by Don Gill.

1956 said of the original Plywood Girls, "there [at ALPLY], the women went into the non-traditional work during the war. By '56, it wasn't pioneering quite, it already was established ... there was that sense of 'Yes, give a woman a chance, she can do it' ... and we did."¹⁰⁵ By the 1970s, the sexual division of labour encountered challenges from women who wanted into the factory, like Ellen Smith, and demanded equal status once they were there.¹⁰⁶

For the 49 years that the mill operated it passed through many phases of expansion. The labour force reached a maximum of 908 workers (approximately 30 per cent female) in the mid-1950s; by the time the mill closed in 1991 "downsizing" had reduced the work force to 382 workers. Throughout these cycles ALPLY remained a mainstay for the town's economy and a much needed and valued work site for hundreds of workers and their families. In addition to its economic value, former employees emphasize how special a work site the mill was, and often described the mill as having had a family atmosphere. The camaraderie and sense of family among workers that took shape at ALPLY over the decades evolved from its unique beginning. The legacy of the Plywood Girls is clearly visible in the decision by MacMillan Bloedel to rehire women during the labour shortage of the 1970s. Comparing a male-dominated to a mixed gender work force brought about the recognition that diversity of workers in terms of sex and age cultivated an atmosphere of cooperation and respect — which was good for production.¹⁰⁷

The closure of ALPLY in 1991 has yet to be completely comprehended by some local residents, and the pain and anger it caused will never totally fade away. One woman put it this way: "It's like losing an arm. It's like losing part of the family, I mean that place had one of us in there since we've hit town. ... Losing the Plywood was like losing a member of the family, and it was a very well-liked member."¹⁰⁸ Rumours of its reopening continued to circulate for years, although with far less urgency as mill equipment was sold and the City of Port Alberni sought a demolition contractor. Finally, ALPLY was demolished in spring 1997.

¹⁰⁵ Interview #13, 12 August 1995.

¹⁰⁶ Interview #6, 14 August 1996; interview #4, 25 August 1995; interview #3, 16 August 1995.

¹⁰⁷ One interviewee reported a conversation she had had with a manager from Alberni Pacific Division of MacMillan Bloedel (a lumber mill located next to the plywood plant) in which he compared the cooperative nature of relations between workers at ALPLY to the less social atmosphere at the lumber mill. He attributed the positive work environment at ALPLY to the fact that there women and men had worked side by side, whereas at the lumber mill, women had always been relegated to administrative and office support. Interview #16, 15 September 1996.

¹⁰⁸ Interview #14, 9 August 1995.

Appendix: Oral History Methodology

In the summers of 1995 and 1996 I interviewed 26 people for this study: 12 women who worked at ALPLY during the war (of whom two continued to do so long afterwards); 6 additional women who worked there between 1948 and 1991; 3 men who had each worked at the plant for forty years or more; 2 former plant managers and 1 former personnel manager; and, 2 contemporary senior executives of IWA Local 1-85, former president Dave Haggard and First Vice-President Dave Steinhauer.

Interviews with women occurred most often in their homes, in two cases by telephone. Face to face interviews followed a set of 30 questions, but follow-up questions were common and spontaneous. Interviews averaged one hour in length. I mailed transcripts of interviews and the first draft of this essay to each woman in order to allow her an opportunity to review my treatment of their oral narratives. One woman retracted a statement she had made about a family member that she felt was traceable back to her. Clarification was done by telephone.

Interviews with male workers, managers and union representatives, were less structured. In the case of management, interviews were by telephone and limited to certain key events or themes I thought were crucial to explore from management's perspective. I interviewed Dave Haggard by telephone, and Dave Steinhauer in Port Alberni regarding the union's position on the "women question" in Local 1-85. Interviews with two male employees occurred in their homes, and one at ALPLY where he was caretaker after its closure. This man, angry and bitter about the plant's impending destruction, had a heart attack on the day the demolition crew destroyed his office inside ALPLY and he died a few days later. His death is viewed by many as symbolic of the pain inflicted on the community by the closure and destruction of the plywood plant.

First and foremost I wish to thank the former employees of ALPLY for sharing their memories of working at the plywood plant with me, and for their generous hospitality. I am also grateful to Carol Williams for her enthusiastic and insightful criticisms of an earlier draft of this paper. Finally, thanks are due to the anonymous reviewers at Labour/Le Travail for their helpful comments.

REVIEW

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